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2 No One Gets Past This GATEKEEPER

The Unwanted Warrior Guards His New Post



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“My apologies—
I arrived late.”

“Sieg...”



Fam
Fifth Squadron Member
Archer

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Chapter 1: My Job as a Gatekeeper

My name is Sieg. I used to be a part of a famous party called the Crimson Fangs, until one day when the party leader, Nacht, kicked me out. Suddenly unemployed, I ended up having the Adventurers' Guild receptionist arrange a job for me as a gatekeeper—at the Royal Capital, of all places.

Based on that info alone, one might think it was easy work, just standing there in front of a gate. However, that assumption would be dead wrong; my cushy-sounding job was actually inordinately backbreaking.

Today, my fellow city guards and I stood before the gate facing a pack of gargoyles—stone statues in the shape of birds, animated and given a will of their own by infusing the statues with magic. They wielded swords and spears; they had most likely been sent out as a reconnaissance team.

“Reporting for backup, Sergeant!” called out the line of guards, who had come rushing to assist after receiving a report from the watchtower. They had their own swords and spears, raised and pointed toward the enemy.

Standing in front of the gate to Astaroth, the Royal Capital, we were ready to confront the enemy. We couldn’t afford to let them through; the city was home to many ordinary citizens, not to mention the nobles and the royal family. And, most importantly of all, it was where the Orb of Light was being kept in a treasure vault within the royal castle.

The Orb of Light. The Demon King, who had once nearly brought the entire world to ruin, was sealed within this object. If it somehow fell into the hands of demons and their minions, the seal would be broken. We had to protect it with our lives.

Letting out monstrous roars, the gargoyles attacked, their stony eyes flashing red.

“Bring it on!” shouted one of the guards as he dodged a spear attack, following it up with a sword strike of his own—however, the blade bounced

harmlessly off the beast's stone body.

"Wha—?! I can't hurt this thing...!"

Gargoyles, being made of stone, had naturally high defense power, meaning plain old attacks typically wouldn't have any effect.

As the guard reeled from the deflection, his opponent began to attack with its spear—but before the tip could skewer his heart, I activated a skill that pulled aggro from all nearby opponents and redirected it to me: *Iron Target*. This forced the gargoyle's attention over to me instead, and as it approached, I cleaved it in two with a flash of my blade. Its severed head fell to the ground, and the red magical energy in its eyes faded away.

Looks like that finished it off. They might be stone statues, but apparently if we deal heavy enough damage, they can't sustain their vital functions.

"Listen up, everyone! These things have incredibly high defense! You won't be able to do much with striking or slashing attacks! Use piercing or crushing weapons that focus heavy damage into a single point!" I called out to the guards.

"That sure is a great thing to tell us right after you obliterate one with a plain old sword..."

"We can't let Sieg show us up, though. Let's do this!"

The guards, their morale heightened, moved to engage the gargoyles; however, the enemy, being airborne, had the terrain advantage. A barrage of cannon fire was unleashed from atop the wall encircling the city, but the swift-moving gargoyles dodged every last shot. There was just no way to catch up to them.

First off, we've got to find a way to pull them down to the ground...

As I was pondering how to go about that, a rain of arrows fell down upon the gargoyles from above. Cutting through the air, the projectiles shot straight through the beasts' wings. Of all parts on their hard stone bodies, their wings were the weakest defense-wise, so once those had been pierced by precise arrow shots, our enemies fell to the earth.

That must be—

A subdued giggle rang out. “You can’t escape my arrows, silly things.”

I turned my eyes to the top of the castle wall, where a young silver-haired woman stood poised with a bow and arrow. Her small, slender body made her look almost childlike. A brilliant sharpshooter, she was shrouded in a pitch-black outfit that helped her blend into the background. Her name was Fam—a member of the Fifth Squadron, which was under my command.

Growling bestially, the other gargoyles all immediately switched their aggro target to Fam. Their red eyes began to glow brighter, as if to match their intensified anger. However, their target did not lose her cool demeanor.

“I really wish you wouldn’t be so angry at me. I’m not used to strong emotions like that,” she said, a nihilistic smile on her face.

However, monsters wouldn’t be monsters if they just stopped after being asked to; the gargoyles leaped straight toward Fam’s location atop the castle wall.

“I guess I have no choice. If asking nicely won’t work, I’ll just have to silence you by cutting your emotions off at their source.” One after the other, she started nocking arrows to her bowstring and releasing them with blinding speed. In that critical situation, even one miss would’ve meant allowing an enemy into her range—however, every one of her arrows found their mark and pierced through the gargoyles’ wings, sending them crashing down to the ground. There, the guards were waiting to deliver follow-up strikes to the fallen creatures.

Thanks to Fam clipping the enemies’ wings, the battle had taken a huge turn in our favor; the dire situation we had been in up until that point seemed like a distant mirage.

“Looks like it’s over,” I said, looking over the crumbled pieces of fallen gargoyle before me. None of them moved; now that they’d lost their wills, I sensed no more magic in the stone statues. “That’s the third attack today. Who would’ve thought we’d get more monster visitors than human ones? Looks like this place is becoming a popular tourist destination for those things.”

If the Orb of Light were to fall into the hands of the demons, the Demon King would be resurrected—and if that happened, the entire world would no doubt be engulfed by chaos.

I won't let that happen. As a gatekeeper, I will defend this city with my life.

Upon refreshing my resolve, I called out to the person who was probably hiding somewhere next to the gate. “Nice work out there, Fam. We finished them off nice and quickly thanks to your bow support—as always, your skills are impressive.”

I heard a light chuckle. “Why, thank you,” Fam said, silently emerging from the shadows. “I’m surprised you knew I had come back, though. I was sure I had concealed my presence. Are you clairvoyant now?”

“Of course not. You were a pivotal player in the battle earlier, so I figured you’d probably want to hear me sing your praises.”

“That makes sense. You know me quite well, it seems,” she told me, giving a slight smile. “I’m the type who really shines when they’re praised. There’s no need for a stick with me; all you need to do is keep giving me carrot after carrot. Now then, go right ahead.” She extended her arms to me with a flourish.

“Go right ahead and what?”

“Give me a thorough praising, of course,” she responded, looking up at me expectantly.

“So you’re demanding that I compliment you,” I muttered. “It doesn’t make you happier when I say that kind of thing voluntarily?”

“It doesn’t matter whether the carrots I eat are picked from the wild or farm-grown—they’re all going to the same place.”

“Well... I guess if it’s all the same to you, that’s fine by me, then.”

What choice do I have, really? I suppose rewarding the people under your command is just part of a Squad Sergeant’s job description.

“This battle would’ve taken much longer to wrap up if you hadn’t been here, Fam. I couldn’t help but be impressed by your archery skills.”

“Heh. That’s no surprise, really,” she said in response to my words of

appreciation, puffing out her slim chest and flaring her nostrils in a smug grin. She seemed rather pleased with herself; she normally always kept a cool facade, but when it came to things like this you could almost call her naive.



“Hey, you two. Great job out there.”

The person complimenting our performance was Bolton, commander of the Guard Corps. Apparently he had just rushed to the scene with additional backup forces in tow.

Commander Bolton rubbed the stubble on his chin and spoke. “I came a-runnin’ as soon as I heard there were enemies about, but it looks like it’s over already. Guess that’s what happens when our ace guardsman is involved, though. You’re something else.”

“No—it took everyone’s support to make this happen,” I responded. It wasn’t an achievement I could claim for myself—just like when I was in the Crimson Fangs, I wasn’t the only one out there fighting.

“Fine, fine, if you say so,” the commander said with a wry smile, then took a look around. “Now that you mention it, I don’t see the other members of the Fifth around, just you and Fam. Where are those two, they get hurt or something?”

“Spinoza and Seira are out on patrol in the city. We only need two gatekeepers when there’s not a full-on monster raid.” We didn’t need four people just to handle visitors; having two of us patrol the city could better maintain public order.

“What’s taking them so long, anyway? We were under attack—shouldn’t it be common sense to rush straight to the gate as soon as you’re notified?” He let out a deep sigh. “They’re skipping out on work, aren’t they?” he grumbled, rubbing the back of his neck in disappointment.

“Commander Bolton...that’s a baseless accusation,” Fam murmured quietly in defense of her teammates.

“Huh. Well, that’s a new one,” I said. I had always thought Fam didn’t get along too well with Spinoza, but it seemed like despite my misgivings, she had some measure of trust in her after all.

“The only one skipping out is Spinoza... Seira is just being dragged along with her. So technically, you should say ‘she’s’ skipping out on work, not ‘they’re.’”

Never mind. She only trusted Seira after all.

“Ah, that makes sense. Seira isn’t the type to voluntarily slack off on the job, anyway—I can see her getting dragged around by Spinoza,” the commander agreed right away.

Speaking of a lack of trust in Spinoza... It truly speaks to the generosity of the Guard Corps that they haven’t fired her yet for the way she acts. Though...the more likely explanation is that they’re just starved for manpower.

“It just happens to be time for us to swap positions, so we’ll go look for them. I’ll make sure to give Spinoza a good talking-to.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

Off we went to locate Spinoza and Seira.

Chapter 2: Former Companions

Spinoza and Seira had been out on patrol in the city. That meant that they should have still been somewhere within the city walls, so we found ourselves walking around looking for them.

“Where exactly is Spinoza goofing around this time?” I grumbled.

“Probably at a pub or a casino,” Fam replied. “Gambling and drinking are the only things that occupy her waking mind.”

“In that case, should we check the casino first, then?”

“Why bother going out of our way to find her? We could just set up a net with a liquor bottle in it by the side of the road, and she’d probably come right to us.”

“Do you honestly believe we could just catch her like some kind of bug?” I asked, then stopped myself. “No, wait... Knowing her, it’s not entirely outside the realm of possibility—which kind of scares me.”

Alcohol was very near and dear to her heart, after all. If she had blown her money at the casino, she wouldn’t have been able to drink, and the chances that she’d be desperate enough to fall for a trap like that weren’t exactly zero.

It feels kind of depressing to say that out loud...

At any rate, as we were starting to walk toward the casino, I heard voices call out to me from across the street.

“Sieg!”

“Hiya, Sieg.”

Looking closer, I saw two of my former companions headed in my direction: Haruna and Irene, who used to be in the Crimson Fangs with me.

I stopped walking and turned to face them. “Hey there, you two.” I had had a bit of a falling-out with the two of them in the past, but it had all been cleared up. By the point we were at, our relationship was good enough that we could

speak to each other face-to-face without any issues.

"You really look right at home in that gatekeeper outfit now, you know?" Haruna said.

"You think so?"

"Totally. It looks great on you. You look super cool," Irene added cheerily.

"I don't really know how to react when you say that to my face," I admitted, forcing a smile out of reflex. "What about the two of you? Found any work yet?"

Our former party's base of operations, Estahl City, had been destroyed by Nacht, leaving the two of them without jobs or any place to go. They had ended up coming to Astaroth, more than likely in search of work.

"I sure have. I'm a part-time instructor at the magic academy," Haruna explained.

"Hey, way to go!"

"Well, when you've got as much talent as I do, getting a new job is a walk in the park!" she said proudly, pinching the brim of her tricorn hat.

Haruna had originally been our party's mage. She had made a name for herself as a super heavy-hitting caster with zero defense, who was usually a sitting duck for any attacks.

"Oh, yeah! Right now I'm helping to set up a barrier around the city too."

"Oh really?"

"With help from a brilliant mage like me, we'll have a barrier that won't break no matter what type of monsters come after us!" she went on, letting out a proud and nasal laugh. "It should make *your* job a bit easier as well, I bet."

"That'd definitely be a big help," I said, then turned to Irene, our former party's archer. "How about you?" I asked.

"Still looking here. Probably gonna take it easy for a little while longer. I still have a little bit saved up from when we were adventurers, y'know."

"I see."

“Hmm, maybe I should join the Guards? Then I might end up with you protecting me, Sieg. It’d be like a Crimson Fangs revival there. Sounds like fun, right?” Irene said. I couldn’t tell whether she was joking or being serious.

“Unfortunately for you, joining the Guards wouldn’t mean you get to work under him. Our squadron is full on members right now,” Fam, who had been hiding behind me, said in a subdued voice.

“And who are you?” asked Irene.

“This is Fam, a coworker from the Guard Corps. She’s a member of the squadron I’m in charge of right now. She’s not good around strangers, but she’s an excellent archer.”

“Hmmm,” Irene responded, peering at Fam’s face. “Worried I’ll steal your position or something?”

Fam grunted in annoyance.

“You and I have overlapping personalities and roles, after all,” Irene continued. “The gloomy type and the cool, silent type. Afraid I’ll pull it off better than you?”

“Hmph,” Fam responded. “I was wondering what kind of nonsense you’d spout. There’s no chance I would ever lose to you. The position of the Fifth Squadron’s mascot is all mine.”

“Fam... You consider yourself our mascot?” I asked. I definitely could’ve seen that in a way, considering how small she was.

However, I decided to change the subject. “Anyway, what’s with those flowers you’re holding to your chest, Haruna?” I asked, looking back over to her and Irene.

“Oh, these? We’re going to leave them on Nacht’s grave.”

“Nacht...”

Nacht had been our leader while we were in the Crimson Fangs; after he had fallen and turned into a demon, he had destroyed Estahl City, then attacked us here at the Royal Capital, where he had perished in a confrontation with me.

“He may have been a jerk, but he was our friend too. The least we could do is

give him a proper send-off. He'd probably tell us he couldn't give a rat's ass about flowers, though."

"Probably, yeah," I agreed. "Though I bet it'd still make him happy."

"I'd hope so," Haruna said, giving an unexpectedly gentle smile. In her eyes I saw a hint of loneliness; perhaps she was reminiscing about the old days of the Crimson Fangs. Soon, though, she cast her gaze downward as if to free herself from the past, then plastered a brave and cheerful forced smile onto her face, patting me on the back. "Well, we'll let you get back to work. Just give us a shout if you need anything; you know we're good to help you out."

"Sure thing."

We exchanged farewells and went our separate ways. After walking a while, Fam looked up from beside me and asked me something.

"I don't get it."

"Get what?"

"They did nothing but disrespect you in the past, right? Even if things were normal starting out, the more famous your party got, the more that fact went straight to their heads and whatnot."

"You sure know an awful lot, considering I don't remember ever talking about it."

"I'd thank you not to underestimate my intelligence network," Fam said. "What those two did to you...I'd call that backstabbing. Normally people would harbor ill will because of that, but you just accept it."

"We've already made up with each other," I explained. "Besides, there's not a single person out there who doesn't make mistakes. What's important is how you live your life. If they've realized that what they did was wrong, that's good enough for me."

Our past troubles were exactly that—in the past. I was able to have a peaceful relationship with them by that point, and that was all that mattered.

Fam paused briefly before responding. "If you keep that up, though, you could get the rug pulled right out from under you someday. It might be a

devastating blow for you.”

“I’m not worried about it. I’ve just got to be strong and find another place to put my feet.” Then my lost footing would no longer be lost. And even devastating blows can’t stop me if I’m sturdy enough.

Fam couldn’t help but let out a light giggle at my response.

“Hm? What is it? Did I say something weird?”

“Oh, no, I was just reminded that you really are an entertaining person, that’s all,” she explained, chuckling softly in amusement.

Chapter 3: At the Pub

We arrived at the casino and asked a staff member there whether Spinoza had stopped by.

“Oh, Spinoza? Yeah, she was here. She was on a major winning streak, apparently—she had this huge grin on her face when she headed out to go drinking with her swordswoman friend.”

Apparently our predictions had been right on the money—Spinoza had gone right to the casino. It was a simple, predictable behavior pattern, like a moth gathering around a flame.

“To think that she was winning, though... How unusual,” Fam mused.

“Well, at least we’ve got a solid idea of where she’s going now. There’s only one place she’d go if she managed to get her hands on some money.”

Thanking the staff member, we left and headed toward Spinoza’s favorite pub. I had heard she had been banned from every other establishment, so that definitely had to be the place.

When we arrived at the storefront, we could hear a commotion coming from inside. We opened the swinging doors to find a wild party going on, full of social misfits who were deep into a session of day drinking.

“Drink up, everyone! It’s all on me today!”

A chorus of drunken cheers erupted.

The particularly conspicuous social misfit who was taking the lead in riling up all the other social misfits was none other than Spinoza. We saw Seira there next to her as well, pulling on Spinoza’s arm as she emptied mug after mug, trying to talk her down.



“Spinoza, we’re in the middle of work! Let’s head back now, okay?”

However, the woman in question seemed to have no intention of leaving. Just as she finished chugging the contents of the mug, Spinoza finally noticed us. “Whaddaya know, it’s Sieg!”

Seeming in good spirits, she walked over to me with a wide grin. Her cheeks were flushed ever so slightly, and she looked at me with glassy eyes. It wasn’t because she harbored romantic feelings for me or any other such bittersweet nonsense, though—she was just straight up drunk.

“Sieg! Sarge! Um, about all this...” Seira began to stammer out a panicked explanation.

“Don’t worry about it, Seira,” I said, stopping her. “I have a pretty good idea of what’s going on here.” Turning to the culprit, I continued sharply, words laced with sarcasm, “Spinoza. You seem to be in an awfully good mood.”

She had been caught skipping out on work by her superior officer. At that point, most people would really start to sweat; however, Spinoza was not exactly the type of respectable individual who showed any remorse for their actions.

“Oh, is it that obvious? Heh heh. Actually, I just so happened to win big today, for a change! I musta really gotten on Lady Luck’s good side or somethin’!” she explained, puffing out her chest triumphantly.

My sarcasm had zero effect on her.

“Bein’ on my best behavior musta really paid off, huh!” she spouted, paying zero heed to the fact that she had quite literally abandoned her post mid-shift.

Nothing fazes her, huh.

“Anyhow, have a seat, let’s drink! Everything’s on me today,” she offered, putting an arm around my shoulder.

She reeks of booze.

Fam, who had been watching all this unfold, offered some constructive criticism. “If I remember correctly, you have unpaid bills at a lot of other pubs, don’t you? If you pay for everyone’s drinks here, will you even be able to pay

those off?"

"Oh, you don't gotta worry about that. All I gotta do is win big again!"

It was exactly the type of thing a chronic loser would say.

"Right now I feel like I'm in the front row seat for a morality play about people who ruin their lives, but in person..." Fam said, shrugging her slender shoulders.

"Spinoza, you do realize you're on duty right now, right?"

"Aw, c'mon, don't be a spoilsport. Nothin' wrong with a little bit of fun. Life is survival of the funnest, right? So let's enjoy this moment to the fullest!"

"Sure, but all that has to come *after* doing your actual job," I chided.

"There was a monster raid while you were out playing," Fam added in a biting tone.

"Probably a bunch of trash, right? Sieg can take care of stuff like that, no problem. I can't get fired up unless it's something bigger, anyway."

"Big or small, it's a guard's job to come running when that happens. You can't just not participate in battle because you don't feel like it," I said, staring at her, until she finally looked away awkwardly.

"Fine, fine... I got it. I'll be more careful," she promised, reluctantly giving in to my demands.

"Please do."

"You got it."

"Oh, and don't forget to pay your tabs too," I reminded her.

"Will do, next time I win at the casino," she said, turning her wallet upside down. "Already completely blew today's winnings here."

She used it all up in no time flat, apparently. Big spender.

"Sarge, what happened with Spinoza was my fault for failing to supervise her properly. I should've warned her more sternly and dragged her away from the casino!" Seira said, bowing apologetically to me. She had probably apologized to save face for others far more than she had apologized for her own wrongdoings. I felt nothing but pity for that poor soul.

"That's fine, just be careful from here on out. Though, if we're being honest... It was my fault for assigning you to Spinoza in the first place."

Seira had a strong sense of responsibility, as well as the compassion to be able to empathize with other people, but she completely lacked the strictness to be able to discipline them—so she would just let them do whatever they want, meaning hopeless slackers like Spinoza would walk all over her.

"Let's get back to the barracks. I've got to give Commander Bolton a report, anyway—Hey, quit drinking. We're getting out of here," I said, pulling Spinoza up out of her seat by the arm. The four of us started to head out of the pub, when suddenly, a loud explosion-like sound from outside took us all by surprise, eliciting gasps all around.

What just happened...?

We went outside to check on the situation and saw an avalanche of townspeople rushing toward us. Tracing the path of the fleeing people backward, on the right side of the street I saw a huge man roaring wildly, swinging his thick log-like arms around in a rampage, destroying everything in sight.

"That...doesn't seem like your average drunkard, does it," I observed. Something was off about him; obviously he wasn't in his right mind, but the strength he packed was downright insane. It was as if his limits as a human being had been removed—

"Look, Sarge! His eyes are red!" Seira pointed out, shouting.

I had seen eyes like those before... They reminded me of Nacht's after he had turned into a demon.

"Did this guy turn into a demon too?" I wondered aloud.

"Wh-Why is he doing this...?!" a voice rang out from another man nearby, his face pale.

"Hey, do you know that man?" I asked.

"We're drinking buddies. We were hanging out and having fun drinking together earlier, but then he just suddenly freaked out and started going

berserk..."

"Whoa, there. Nothin' wrong with drinkin' alcohol, but once you let it drink you, you're finished."

"That sure is convincing coming from you, Spinoza," Fam quipped.

"But this is on a totally different level than a drunken brawl," I commented.

Suddenly, the man remembered something. "Oh, that's right... The last thing I saw him drinking was wine. A little while after he finished his glass, his eyes started turning red."

"Maybe there was something mixed into the drink?" I wondered.

"Do you think it might've been poison?" Seira asked.

"I don't know. But it must have been some kind of foreign substance." I didn't know if that was the direct cause, but it was something I'd have to look into afterward.

Either way, the man was going around trashing the city; we couldn't let that keep happening. I was about to head over to stop him when Spinoza put her hand in front of me, blocking my path.

"Let me handle this, Chief. I just happen to be soberin' up finally. Gotta make up for the work I missed."

"Will you be all right on your own?" I asked.

"Who do you think I am? One arm is more than enough to wipe the floor with this chump," Spinoza said, cracking her knuckles as she walked toward the rampaging man. Her steps were slightly off-kilter. "Whoops!" she said as her legs got twisted up for a moment, causing her to stumble.

Is she really going to be all right...?

The man caught sight of her approaching. Having found a new target to destroy, he let out a bestial roar and came swinging toward her, his arm unleashing a blow with his full body weight behind it. However, Spinoza blocked it effortlessly with a single hand. Shaking, the man pushed harder with his fist, trying to force his way through, but the woman did not budge.

"Heh, is that all you got? This is nothing—no balls behind it whatsoever," she taunted with a snort. "Oh well. My turn now!" she said, pulling back her free right hand for a punch.

The man's eyes widened and, perhaps sensing extreme danger, he put up both his arms in a defensive position. The next moment, Spinoza let out a battle cry even louder than his had been, unleashing a full-power straight punch which pierced right through his guard like a bullet and slammed into his face. It was a strike that focused her entire body's energy into one point; the man was flung backward and slammed into a stone wall with such great force that giant cracks formed in it. When he fell to the ground, his eyes were rolled up into the back of his head and he was foaming at the mouth.

"Bah. I ended up using two hands after all," Spinoza said, clicking her tongue briefly in annoyance and spitting on the ground. "Oh well, I got 'im, anyway." She turned to me and grinned. "How was that, Chief? Tough enough for ya?"

"Spinoza, that was amazing...!" Seira said with an envious stare.

"Just like a gorilla," Fam muttered in disbelief.

She didn't care if she came in late every morning, she skipped out on patrol at every opportunity, and to top it off, she was a hopeless alcoholic and gambling addict. Normally, all that would put her out of a job on the spot, but the reason she was still a guard wasn't just because we were starved for manpower (though that was also true), but because she was an undeniable force to be reckoned with.

Chapter 4: Medical Examination

Seira had insisted that we couldn't just leave the poor man there—so at her urging, we had carried him over to the infirmary.

"I see, I see. We've figured out what made him go crazy," the infirmary doctor, an older man, said quietly, turning his chair around. The man who had been on a rampage was lying prone and restrained in a nearby bed, letting out groans of pain from time to time.

"So what was it?" I asked the doctor.

"It appears his body has been contaminated with demon blood."

"Demon blood?" Seira confirmed.

"That's right. When demon blood gets inside a human being, they fall into a state of frenzy. For us humans, it's almost like a poison," he explained, gesticulating with his finger. "As for the empty mug he was drinking wine out of that we had you bring in: we detected traces of demon blood inside it."

"So someone put demon blood in the wine, then," I murmured.

"Who would do something so cruel...?" Seira wondered.

"According to the man who was with him, there were a number of people whose enmity he had earned for various reasons. They could have poisoned him as payback," Fam offered.

"That's some crazy stuff," Spinoza said.

No kidding. There's nothing as frightening as the grudges harbored by man.

"When people are afflicted by this state of frenzy, their eyes turn red, and they gain extraordinary strength. In exchange, though, they lose their ability to reason," the doctor explained matter-of-factly.

"But when Nacht became a demon, he still had his sense of reason," I said.

"Turning into a demon and being contaminated with demon blood are two

different things. Your former comrade had probably turned completely into a demon and was no longer human at all. The reason he retained his human memories and faculties may well have been because he had extraordinary mental fortitude.”

At the time, Nacht had been driven by a powerful obsession. If only he had been directing that energy toward something else, things might’ve turned out differently...but it was no use feeling bad about it.

Then, the doctor looked as though he had suddenly remembered something and spoke up again. “Oh, that reminds me. I said earlier that when demon blood enters a person’s bloodstream, they fall into a state of frenzy—but actually, sometimes that doesn’t happen.”

“When, for example?”

“One example is when the person has antibodies that counteract the demon’s blood. The other is when the person already had demon’s blood inside them all along.”

“You mean a person who is half human and half demon?” Seira asked.

“Precisely,” the doctor responded with a nod.

“Is that even possible?” I questioned.

“In extremely rare cases, yes. If the human in a human-demon relationship has demon blood antibodies in their system, there is a possibility it could happen,” the doctor said. “There have been documented cases of this, as well—people who are human in appearance but have the characteristic red demon eyes and markings engraved on their bodies.”

“Wow... A love that transcends species. How romantic...!” Seira said with an enraptured look on her face, holding her hands to her cheeks. She *might* have been a bit of a hopeless romantic at heart.

Hearing this, the doctor smiled grimly. “I wouldn’t exactly call it a good thing. Humans and demons naturally oppose each other as races; if a child was born through their union, both the parents and the child would end up detested by both races. In the one example I know personally, the parents were torn to bits by demons, and the child was murdered by humans. Humans and demons

joining together like that will not end happily ever after; it will more likely lead to a quick death.”

“That’s awful... Neither the parents nor the child did anything wrong...” Seira lamented.

“Yeah... I guess that’s just how it goes. Though I personally wouldn’t give a crap whether someone was a mixed breed—betcha I’d even get along pretty nicely with another outcast like me,” Spinoza chimed in nonchalantly.

What would I do if I encountered a mixed-blood? What if they were a good person, and their life was being threatened? Would I be able to protect them?

It was noontime by the time we got back to the barracks, and the sun had risen high overhead. After we finished giving Commander Bolton an overall report and were about to leave the room, before we had a chance to open the door, we heard his voice call out from behind us.

“By the way, you guys don’t need to report in for work this afternoon.”

“What?! Are...are we being fired?!” Seira squawked immediately.

Fam responded without missing a beat: “It’s not outside the realm of possibility, considering Spinoza’s attitude toward work. They could be planning on eliminating all of us troublemakers at once.”

“W-Wait a moment!” Seira pleaded, putting her hands on Commander Bolton’s desk. “Spinoza is never on time, she drinks on the job, and she can be greedy with money, but she’s a good person!”

Hold on a sec. You need to actually say something about what makes her a good person—the rest of that just makes her sound like a loser through and through.

“Whoa, now. Calling her a ‘good person’ isn’t gonna just make her flaws disappear,” the commander joked.

“If Spinoza gets fired from the Guard Corps, all she’ll have left is debt! The rest of us might be able to find other jobs, but no matter how you slice it, I can’t imagine any other place would be willing to employ a complete social outcast

like her!"

She really just came out and said it.

"Hey... Is that really what you think of me, Seira?" Spinoza asked, seeming a bit shocked. Hearing such harsh words coming from someone who was normally so kind to everyone must have really stung.

Commander Bolton relaxed his expression in an effort to put Seira at ease. "Relax. Nobody's getting fired. No matter how bad the behavior, letting go of our ace guardsmen would only bite us in the ass."

"Huh?" Seira responded. "Then why do we not have to..."

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad. Apparently the royal family was pleased with your outstanding performance in the battle with the undead army and the confrontation with Nacht and his monsters. They told me they want to award the Fifth Squadron with medals."

"M-Medals?!"

"Yeah. Apparently it's pretty unorthodox for them to give medals to the Guard Corps rather than the Knight Corps."

"Hm, medals, huh... But they're not gonna give us any money, right?" Spinoza pondered.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Seira gasped. "Receiving a medal is a huge honor! I can hardly believe they'd bestow such things upon us..."

"Honestly I'd be happier if they gave me a bottle of fancy liquor or somethin'."

"The difference between your attitudes is kind of amazing," Fam muttered to herself.

"Look, it's not like getting a medal is a bad thing; you might as well just take 'em," Commander Bolton said, then gave a wicked grin. "Personally, I'm looking forward to seeing the disgruntled looks on the Knight Corps's face!"

The Knight Corps, who were under the employ of the royalty and nobility, looked down upon the Guard Corps and had treated them quite rudely up to that point. It seemed the good commander would be getting an opportunity to

enjoy some comeuppance.

“In that case, we’ll go ahead and accept the medals,” I said. Not that I particularly wanted one either, but if they insisted on giving them, it wouldn’t have been wise to refuse.

“Appreciate it. Oh, I may as well warn you, though, you’ll be in front of royalty. Make sure you don’t accidentally do anything disrespectful, got that? Worst-case scenario, instead of putting medals around your necks, they could end up separating your heads from ‘em instead. If it comes to that, even I wouldn’t be able to save your asses.”

“We’ll be careful. That being said, having been an adventurer most of my life, I’m not exactly confident when it comes to court etiquette,” I admitted.

Good behavior was not a required trait for adventurers whatsoever. An arrogant but strong individual was considered a more valuable resource than a courteous but weaker one—it was a world of pure meritocracy. Having been immersed in that world for such a long time, there was a very real danger that I was lacking the common courtesy most people would’ve naturally acquired by my age.

“Don’t worry too much. Long as you don’t do anything really crazy, they’re not gonna condemn you or anything. You might be awkward, but just come across as respectful and you’ll be fine. If you want, you could always get Seira to show you the ropes.”

“Seira?”

“Yeah. Unlike the rest of us boors here in the guards, she’s got the manners thing down pat. Doesn’t matter where you throw her, she knows exactly how to behave properly.”

“That’s quite kind of you to say,” Seira said, seeming uncomfortable with the praise.

“Say, where’d you learn to act like that, anyway? Maybe you came from one of them nicer families or something?”

“No, I just learned how by reading books. I can’t help but look up to higher society, with the beautiful dresses they wear and their elegant manner of

speaking..." she said, gazing off into space ever so dreamily. Perhaps her mind was filled with visions of glamorous balls.

"Yeah, sounds about right. Anyone born into a good family would never end up a guard," Commander Bolton admitted, then moved on. "Anyway, you all go out there and do me proud," he told us firmly.

Chapter 5: Summons

That afternoon, we set out toward the royal castle to be awarded our medals.

The Royal Capital of Astaroth had two castle walls. One was the wall we had been guarding, which surrounded the entire capital; the other was set up on the inside, surrounding the royal castle and the nobles' ward. This meant that the castle, which housed the Orb of Light, was protected by two layers of walls; therefore, if we wanted to get into the castle, we needed to get through the inner wall as well.

When we arrived at the gate, the knights who were standing watch called out to us; that gate was under the jurisdiction of the Knight Corps rather than the Guard Corps.

“Hey. What business do you have in this area?”

“This isn’t a place guards like you can just waltz into.”

“What terrible manners...” Fam mumbled in annoyance.

“We’re here because we’ve been summoned to the castle,” I explained.

“What?!”

“They’re supposed to give us medals or somethin’,” Spinoza said, and the knights’ expressions changed suddenly.

“M-Medals...?! For guards...?!”

“You can take your ridiculous jokes elsewhere!”

“It’s the truth! Go and check!” Seira insisted.

“So nobody told you that they were gonna be giving us medals, then?” Spinoza mused. “The knights sure ain’t doin’ a good job of educatin’ their low-rankers.”

“Go and tell your superiors that the Guard Corps’s Fifth Squadron has arrived, please,” I said.

“Wait right here...” one of the knights said, and ran off toward the castle. After a while he returned, and both sides of the massive gates opened noisily.

“Very well...you may pass,” the knights muttered, giving us bitter stares.

“Shoulda just done that to begin with, dumbasses,” Spinoza scoffed.

“Thank you so much! We’re glad you were so understanding,” Seira quickly added.

“However, we’ll be accompanying you, just in case. You guards can be savages, and we can’t rule out you trying something funny.”

“Well, we don’t plan on doing anything strange, so go right ahead,” I offered. We continued walking, the knights following closely behind us; they were certainly less than pleased.

“You know...” Fam wondered, “Security seems awfully tight here. They even put us under surveillance. Do they really trust us so little?”

“Well, the Orb of Light isn’t the only thing being guarded in the royal castle. The princess, who is also an Oracle of Light, lives here as well, so everything must be under strict protection,” Seira explained.

“An Oracle of Light? What’s that?” Spinoza asked.

“What? You don’t know about them?”

“That’s not something I’d expect to hear from a guard...”

“Ugh,” Spinoza grunted, wincing at Seira and Fam’s words of disapproval, then turned to me. “How about you, Sieg? You know anything about this?”

“Maybe a little basic info, at least,” I responded.

“Seriously...?”

“It’s common knowledge, after all,” Fam asserted.

“You at least know that the Demon King is sealed within the Orb of Light, right?” Seira asked.

“Well, yeah...”

“To keep a being as powerful as the Demon King sealed away, you need

power equal to his. Originally, the Orb of Light had enough power to maintain the seal on its own; however, as the years passed, that power gradually started weakening, until the Orb alone no longer provided sufficient energy to preserve the seal. If nothing had been done, the Demon King would've come back to life.”

“Sounds like bad news...”

“That is why we have Oracles of Light. They have within them the same sealing power that the Orb does. They compensate for the missing portion of the Orb’s sealing power by channeling holy energy into it, thus maintaining the seal on the Demon King.”

“Huh.”

“By the way, apparently the princess of Astaroth is currently the only living Oracle of Light in the world,” Seira added.

“So what does that mean? If the Oracle of Light or whatever kicks the bucket, then all hell will break loose?”

“That’s right. If the princess, who is an Oracle of Light, were to pass away, the dwindling power of the seal would no longer be replenished by holy energy, and the Demon King would eventually be resurrected.”

“So the Orb and the Oracle could almost be considered one and the same, then,” I chimed in.

“Exactly.”

“No wonder security is so tight. We can’t afford to lose humanity’s trump card, after all.”

Makes total sense.

“So then, if there’s only one Oracle of Light, why don’t they just make more?” Spinoza went on. “If she has some kids or somethin’, any chance they’d have the same power?”

“It’s not that easy to make their power manifest,” Seira explained. “I’ve heard they must enter a cloister at a young age, and only at the culmination of their grueling training can it finally be acquired. None of the other royal sons were

able to manifest that power like the princess could, supposedly.”

“Huh. The Goddess is stingier than I thought. It’s not like having that kinda power is a bad thing. Why can’t she just give it out like candy or somethin’?”

“It isn’t some kind of shopping sale...” Seira said with a bitter smile.

“So it sounds like the demons would end up plotting to eliminate the Oracle of Light just as often as they’d be going after the Orb... Maybe even more so,” I surmised.

“Yes. That’s why everyone is showing such an abundance of caution, I think. The princess is humanity’s treasure, after all.”

In the middle of all of our talking, we had arrived at the castle. As one would expect from a place where royalty lived, it was a truly luxurious place. There was another checkpoint in place, and they lowered a mobile drawbridge for us. We entered the castle and proceeded, the knights leading us, and eventually made our way to the top floor.

“The royal chamber is just ahead,” advised one of the knights who had been guiding us. Before us stood a huge double door. “Try not to show any courtesy,” he warned.

“You heard the man!” Seira said to Spinoza emphatically.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I got this,” Spinoza responded, putting a hand to her chest. “I actually do know a thing or two about manners, y’know,” she asserted, stifling an alcohol-induced hiccup.

“I have concerns...” Fam said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We should probably make our peace with the possibility of getting fired.”

Chapter 6: Oracle of Light

As we stepped into the royal chamber, we saw a vast open space before us. A luxurious carpet adorned the path from the door to the throne, and knights carrying swords and spears lined the path on either side. We even saw the commander of the Knight Corps, Sir Gregor, among them.

In the back, on a raised area several steps above the rest of the room, there were two thrones adjacent to each other, upon which sat the king and a young woman whom we presumed to be the princess.

“Welcome, members of the Fifth Squadron.”

Hearing the king’s dignified voice addressing us, we knelt on the spot. All of us except one, that is, who stood there sticking out like a sore thumb.

“Spinoza! We’re in front of the king! Kneel, please!”

Upon being called out by Seira, Spinoza unsteadily dropped to a knee as well, albeit after a slight delay.

I’m already concerned for our future...

“I understand you gave an outstanding performance in the recent battle against the demons. Thanks to your defensive efforts, the Royal Capital remained unscathed. I give my thanks.”

“We are unworthy of your praise,” I said. “You honor us greatly.”

All right. So far so good, no massive flubs yet... Hopefully our luck holds out and we receive the medals without a hitch.

Just as I was mulling over our prospects, the knights surrounding us suddenly started looking somewhat agitated.

Hm? What’s going on?

“Hey... Do you smell liquor?”

“Yeah. The smell is coming from *them*.”

Oh no...!

They had caught wind of the fact that Spinoza had been drinking before we arrived.

I had made her drink lots of water before we left to try and sober her up, but considering she had already downed over ten mugs, it was like a drop in the ocean to her. It hadn't been a big deal when we were out in the open air, but once we were indoors, the smell of alcohol on her was impossible to hide.

"Don't tell me you were drinking before you came here? You're about to receive a medal! If so, that is an insult to His Majesty!" a knight called out.

The king must have noticed the commotion with his knights; he fixed his keen, piercing gaze in our direction. "Tell me, do my knights speak the truth? Did you appear before me to receive medals under the influence of liquor?"

"Of course not! We were just cleaning up after an incident at the pub before we left—we had some liquor spilled on us while we were there!" Seira explained, looking over at Spinoza to back her up. "Right, Spinoza?"

"Hm? Oh, y-yeah," Spinoza responded vaguely after a few moments' pause.

Is she getting sleepy or something...?

"I really wish you wouldn't do that, Seira..." Fam murmured quietly. "If anyone is going to be purged from our group, I'd rather it just be Spinoza. I refuse to take any responsibility for her."

"That reminds me, Fam. Why are you hiding behind me?" I asked. The rest of us in the Fifth were kneeling next to each other in a line, but for some reason Fam was hiding behind my back, clutching the hem of my outfit nervously.

"That's because it's embarrassing to be visible in front of so many people."

Fam truly was an extremely shy individual.

"Hey, you there! It's disrespectful to hide yourself in front of His Majesty!" Commander Gregor said in a raised voice.

"She has no hostility or ill will toward anyone," I explained. "She's just uncomfortable around strangers."

“Ridiculous! You think we would believe such an excuse?”

“Gregor,” the king said. “This is a special occasion. Let us forgive such trifling discourtesies. Besides, it is not expected that guards such as they would be versed in our etiquette. They live in a different world than we, after all.”

I certainly have some thoughts about what he just said, but it's a relief that he's willing to overlook our issues. It looks like nobody's going to get purged after all.

No sooner had I breathed a sigh of relief, though, than I heard Spinoza start to mutter.

“Urgh. Crap. Changin’ positions all of a sudden like that is makin’ me feel sick...” My eyes widened as she started to cover her mouth with her hand.

Um...?

“Uh, Spinoza...?” Seira said.

“Your face looks awfully pale...” Fam observed.

“Hey. Don’t tell me you’re...”

As the three of us were entering a state of dread, at that moment, tragedy struck.

HUUUUUURGH.

All the liquor that Spinoza had been drinking earlier came flowing from her mouth, sparkling like a waterfall—along with everything else that had been in her stomach. For a brief moment, the atmosphere gave off the illusion that we were in a pub bathroom—but no, we were inside the royal chamber, no doubt about it.

“Whoa! She threw up?!”

“How dare you?! In front of His Majesty, no less!”

“Knave! This is nothing short of blatant impudence!”

Naturally, the knights were in a furor, and the royal chamber fell into chaos—it was a scene straight out of hell.

To my side, Seira stared upward in a daze, silent. Fam, at a loss for words,

merely pressed her palm against her forehead.

Welp. We're done for.

As those words came into my mind, we were surrounded by the knights. They gave us hostile glares as they raised their swords and spears, pointing the tips toward us. Then, Commander Gregor spoke.

"Your extreme disrespect today will absolutely not be tolerated. We, the Knight Corps, shall purge you for your insolence!"

Yeah, no surprises there. Showing up drunk in front of a sitting king and then vomiting is way beyond what anyone would consider "slight" disrespect. To think we came here to get medals, and we'd end up purged instead... This must be what it's like to be cast down from heaven to hell.

Just as the knights were about to move in on us, a voice rang out.

"Everyone, put up your swords."

The beautiful, dignified voice echoed throughout the royal chamber with enough power to gain control over the tense atmosphere. The source of the voice was the young woman seated next to the king—the princess, the Oracle of Light, who had not said a single word up until that point.

"But Lady Sonia..."

"Mind who gave you this order. Tell me, Sir Gregor—what is the purpose of the Knight Corps?"

"Yes, Your Highness—our role is to serve the royal family hand and foot, protecting its members with our lives."

"Correct. Now tell me, do hands or feet ever possess their own wills and take action of their own accord? Know that you are overstepping your bounds."

"M-My sincerest apologies..." Commander Gregor said with a respectful bow, then called the knights off. The tips of the swords and spears that had been pointed at us receded like the tides.

Sonia, the princess and the Oracle of Light, looked quietly down upon us as we knelt. Her eyes were cold and seemed utterly devoid of emotion.

That was the first time I had been able to get a good look at her: a beauty who looked as if she had just stepped out of a painting. She was probably still somewhere in her mid-teens, but she commanded a presence that far transcended her apparent years; it was as if her spirit had far more life experience than her body.

Kneeling opposite her, I felt my body tense up automatically. Her every move seemed to have a gravity that attracted the full attention of those around her.

I see... So this is the presence of the Oracle of Light, who personally shoulders the responsibility for the seal on the Demon King.

“So you are the Guard Corps’s Fifth Squadron. I commend you for your military achievement in the recent battle. Things such as etiquette are meaningless in the face of overwhelming power. What is needed in order to protect humanity from demonkind is refined swordsmanship, not proper behavior.”

“Well, whaddaya know... The princess here actually knows what she’s talking about,” Spinoza, who had been kneeling next to us, said, a fearless smile on her face. She must have been feeling better after puking her guts out.

“Spinoza... *Shh!*” Seira said, urging her to silence. She had probably come to the decision that we couldn’t afford to let her speak freely any longer.

“It is truly an honor to hear you say that, Your Highness. Thank you very much,” I said from my kneeling position, also having decided not to let Spinoza say anything else.

Sonia nodded solemnly and spoke again. “I have come to a decision. You shall step down from the Guard Corps and, from this day forward, serve me faithfully as members of my Imperial Guards.”

Her words took us completely by surprise. Gasps of astonishment escaped from everyone in the room: my entire Fifth Squadron; Commander Gregor and his knights; and even the king himself, who was seated next to her.

“Princess Sonia, what on earth are you saying...?! Appointing a lowly guard to the position of Imperial Guard is completely unheard-of!” Commander Gregor said in dismay, hoping to persuade her otherwise.

Regular guards being appointed as Imperial Guards, needless to say, was a completely unprecedented situation.

“Are you saying people should only do things that have past precedent? I have no desire to touch things that have been overused by others,” Sonia responded, her tone unwavering, before continuing on: “Sir Gregor, I am told that in the same recent battle these guards participated in, you and your knights merely looked on in envy, doing nothing.”

He let out a brief choking noise. “Well, about that...”

“Keeping the stronger, more competent individuals at my side seems like a rational decision to me. If you have any counterargument for that, then speak, though I have no intention of heeding your advice.”

Overwhelmed by the princess’s words, Commander Gregor backed down. He furrowed his brow deeply and clenched his fists tightly in humiliation.

Shifting her gaze away from the knight commander and back to us, Sonia spoke again. “I shall pay you ten times what you are currently earning in the Guard Corps. You will dedicate your lives solely to protecting me, the Oracle of Light. Do we have an agreement?”

“Please wait just a moment, Your Highness,” I said. “It would be a great privilege to serve you—however, we cannot accept your proposal.”

Hearing that, Sonia’s expression changed for the first time. “And what, pray tell, would make you say that...?”

“I am a guard. I wish to protect not only Your Highness but everyone else in the city as well. Should I join your Imperial Guard, that wish will no longer be within my reach.”

“You seem to be misunderstanding something. The lives of the townspeople can be replaced, but my life cannot,” she explained, holding a hand to her chest. “Think of my life as equivalent to the lives of every human being on this earth. Then you will understand where the priority lies.”

“With all due respect, it is Your Highness who is misunderstanding something,” I countered.

“S-Sieg?!” Seira squeaked—but I had to continue, and I wasn’t going to let her stop me.

“There is not a single life in this world that is replaceable. The lives of the townspeople and Your Highness’s life are both equally important to me.”

The princess’s eyes narrowed; she turned to my companions and spoke. “I will ask the others, then. Shall I take his stance as the collective will of the Fifth Squadron?”

Having been asked that, Seira and the others looked at each other, and each of them quietly nodded.

As the group’s representative, I gave our response. “Regrettably, we are not able to obey Your Highness’s orders.”

After a moment of silence, Sonia finally spoke again. “Very well. Then you may all leave. Let us forget the discussion of medals for the Fifth Squadron.”

With those words, she turned her gaze away from us, rose from her throne, and disappeared into a room in the back.

Chapter 7: An Important Task

Back at the barracks, Commander Bolton's eyes went wide with amazement when he heard my report.

"Huh? You turned down an offer to be an Imperial Guard, and your medal deal got canceled?!"

"Yeah, pretty much."

The cigar he had been puffing on fell out of his mouth and landed in his lap. He yelped in shock, hastily wiping away the hot ashes.

"Damn it, why do you gotta freak me out by saying crazy things like that?!" the commander cursed bitterly. "Are you guys morons...? Do you have any idea how much money and fame you'd be rolling in as Imperial Guards compared to what you've got now? What reason could you have possibly had to refuse?"

"I'm a Guard of Astaroth. I don't want to protect only the royal princess; I also want to protect the townspeople, my colleagues, and the entirety of the Royal Capital."

"I feel the same way," Seira said in solidarity with me.

"I honestly didn't think the gig sounded half bad," Spinoza admitted. "Coulda gotten tons of money... What else? Oh, coulda gotten tons of money... Woulda been able to drink up like a queen every night without worryin' about my tab!"

"Then you should've just taken the job," Fam said.

"No way. I hate dealing with all that formal crap."

"That makes sense. Being a regular guard means you can keep your current lifestyle and work ethic, but the moment you become an Imperial Guard, they'd definitely force you to clean up really quick."

Fam isn't wrong. A fish that's used to dirty water might not be able to survive in a cleaner environment.

"Sheesh. I swear, being weirdly righteous like that is the biggest way for

people to ruin their lives,” Commander Bolton muttered. “You realize it’s way easier to live by just bending yourself in whatever direction life takes you, right?”

“That’s not all that different from not being alive at all,” I said.

“Heh. Well, by your standards, I guess that makes me a dead man walking,” he retorted with a self-derisive smirk. “You know there’s no way I’ll be able to cover for you guys on this one.”

“We were ready for that from the outset, sir.”

The commander had just clicked his tongue at my response and put down his cigar on the ashtray as his expression suddenly warped into one of annoyance. He pointed his gaze directly behind us. “And what the hell do you want...?”

At the receiving end of his sharp glare was Sir Gregor, commander of the Knight Corps. I wondered what on earth had made him come all the way out to the guard barracks.

“You needn’t look so agitated, Bolton, I haven’t come for you. My only business is with the Fifth Squadron there.”

“What...?”

“Well, to put it more precisely... I am not the one who has business with them,” Commander Gregor said, flashing a sudden grin in our direction. “Her Highness Princess Sonia has requested your presence at the castle.”

“The princess...?”

I thought the medal thing was off the table. What could she possibly want with us now?

The knight commander let out a subdued chortle. “The lot of you showed great disrespect toward Her Highness earlier, so I’ve no doubt she wants to hand down a formal punishment,” he continued with a twisted smile.

“Hey,” Commander Bolton interrupted. “If that’s what’s going on, take me along with ‘em. As their commander, I take full responsibility for whatever they did.”

“Hmph. Mind your own business, insect. You insult Her Highness—you have

exactly zero say in this matter.”

“Say what...?” Bolton glared.

“It’s all right, Commander. I made this bed, so I’ll go and lie in it,” I declared. I had said what I said to the princess being well prepared for the fact that I’d probably be punished for it; I wasn’t going to let the good commander get caught up in it as well. Besides, the way things were going, he was liable to start taking swings at Gregor.

“Then, let us proceed to the castle. Oh, and don’t even think of trying to run—my knights have the barracks surrounded, after all.”

“You sure have put a lot of effort into this,” I said. “Don’t you have anything else you should be allocating your manpower to? The Knight Corps seems to have a surprising amount of free time on its hands.”

“How dare you mock us...!” Commander Gregor said, casting me a downright frightful glare, but then he quickly remembered that he already had the upper hand on me. “It would be simple enough to cut you down right here, but so be it. Instead, I shall be a rapt audience as ruination is brought down upon the lot of you.”

Escorted by the knights, we made our way to the Royal Castle once again. Eventually, we arrived at the royal chamber.

“Welcome back, members of the Fifth Squadron,” Princess Sonia—the Oracle of Light—said to us in greeting. This time, the king was not present on the throne next to hers. “Thank you for bringing them, Sir Gregor. You may leave.”

Commander Gregor, followed by the rest of the knights, grinned maliciously and left us, heading over to the corner of the room. From there, the pack of them stared at us like hyenas waiting for fresh meat.

Princess Sonia looked down upon our kneeling forms with a glare. As we braced ourselves, wondering what kind of punishment she had in store, the words she spoke took an unexpected turn:

“Do you know what the role of the Oracle of Light is?”

“Huh? Y-Yes... The Oracle of Light is one who imparts energy into the Orb of Light to maintain the seal that keeps the Demon King locked away,” Seira responded.

“That is correct. Half correct, at least,” Sonia said, continuing. “Upon the Festival of the Goddess, on the night of the full moon, I, the Oracle of Light, must purify myself in the waters of the Sacred Spring in order to maintain the sealing power I impart unto the Orb.”

That's the first I've heard of that.

“However, the Sacred Spring is in a location far from the Royal Capital. It should come as no surprise that demons shall target me during this journey.”

That would certainly be a golden opportunity for the demons to seize. The Oracle of Light was normally heavily guarded within the safety of the Capital, but if she were to come out into the open like that, no doubt they'd use every trick in the book to try and strike her down.

“I called the four of you here today for precisely that reason: on the night of the next full moon, I would have the Fifth Squadron journey with me to the Sacred Spring as bodyguards.”

“Huh?” came a chorus of voices.

We had all thought the axe was coming down on our heads in some manner for our behavior earlier, so to us her words seemed to come completely out of nowhere. And apparently, the same held true for the knights as well.

“Princess Sonia!” Commander Gregor erupted, no longer able to contain himself. “We haven’t been made aware of such an arrangement...!”

“Of course you haven’t. This is the first I have spoken of it.”

“But why...?”

“Why, you ask?” Sonia responded with a scornful smile. “Let me ask you, instead, why would I have any need to ask your counsel?”

Commander Gregor let out a faltering choke at her response, and I took the opportunity to speak to the princess.

“Your Highness, I apologize, but we...”

“I am not asking you to become my Imperial Guards,” she interrupted. “You would be accompanying me on my travels as members of the Guard Corps, just as you are now. I trust you will have no objections with that arrangement?”

I honestly had not expected her to make any kind of compromise.

“No, we would certainly have no objections, in that case. But why would you choose us for the job now, after our earlier display of courtesy...?”

“To put it quite briefly, because I’ve taken a liking to the lot of you,” Princess Sonia said with a subtle grin. “You aren’t tempted by fleeting money or power; you do not fear being disciplined; you even declare, fully earnest, that you want to protect every single person in our city. Yours is a brand of foolishness I do not dislike. Not to mention, you have already proven your abilities in the recent battles.”

Her clear, penetrating gaze fixed itself upon me.

“Your names.”

“Huh?”

“Now that I think about it, I have yet to ask your names.”

“My name is Sieg. These are Seira, Spinoza, and Fam; they each have their quirks, but they’re all undeniably skilled guards.”

“Sieg, Seira, Spinoza, and Fam. I have now committed your names to memory,” she said, then took on a solemn tone. “So, Sieg, will you travel with me as bodyguards? You would be protecting the entire world and, by extension, the people of our city.”

“If that’s the case, we will humbly accept.”

“Very good.”

“Please, wait!” Commander Gregor interjected. “Taking lowly guards with you on your divine journey is...simply unprecedented...! Besides, do you not already have us knights as bodyguards?”

“I have no need for traditions or customs—they are worthless relics of a bygone age. I must be protected at all costs, and any rules that run contrary to that are wholly unneeded.” Sonia stared directly at the knight commander. “Or

are you saying you take issue with my decision?"

"N-No, nothing of the sort..."

"Then all is in order. This matter is not open for discussion; regardless of what you and yours may say, I am appointing these people as my bodyguards. Father has already given his approval." Brushing off Commander Gregor's argument without allowing any chance for rebuttal, the princess cut off eye contact with him; finished with the conversation, she departed the royal chamber.

Dissatisfaction was plain on Gregor's face as he gritted his teeth, nearly growling. Once Princess Sonia was out of sight, he delivered a solid punch to a nearby column.

"Damn it!"

The cracks that formed seemed to mirror his fractured pride.

"Well, guess we weren't as doomed as we thought we were, huh?" Spinoza quipped.

"If things had gone south, I was ready to run off on my own, but I suppose I was worried about nothing," Fam agreed.

"Hey, guy. What a shame you didn't get to see 'ruination brought down upon us,' huh? Though it looks like *you* sure ended up getting taken down a peg or three!" Spinoza called with a belly laugh, taking the perfect opportunity to rile Sir Gregor up with full force.

"Wh-Why you...!"

Satisfyingly, the knight commander had completely lost his cool. I wouldn't have been surprised to see him draw his sword and come after us at any moment.

"Spinoza, you mustn't provoke Commander Gregor like that!" Seira hissed at Spinoza as if she were her guardian, then turned to Gregor himself to apologize. "I'm so sorry, I promise to keep her in line in the future!"

Her deep emotions were bared for all to see.

"At any rate," she continued, turning back to us, "I can hardly believe we've been entrusted with such an important task: to be the princess's bodyguards!"

What an amazing honor...!"

Who would've thought this would happen? The fate of all humanity rests on the protection of the Oracle of Light. We cannot let our guards down; we must defend her with every fiber of our beings.

Chapter 8: The Operation

Several days passed, and it was soon the day before the Festival of the Goddess. With the full moon coming tomorrow night, I was preparing a carriage for our journey to the Sacred Spring, northwest of the Royal Capital.

“Sieg,” I heard a voice call out. It was the vice-commander of the Knight Corps, Eleanor—a talented woman who rose to her position at a young age, and whose swordsmanship was so amazing that it had earned her the nickname “Ice Princess.” In terms of raw ability, she was said to be on par with or possibly even above Commander Gregor.

“Ah, Eleanor.”

“I heard the news. So it seems you’ll be accompanying us. Failure is not an option for this mission; it will be reassuring to have your team at our side.”

“You might be the only one who feels that way,” I said, looking around. Gregor and the other knights were glaring at me in indignation, some of them making crass spitting sounds with their tongues within earshot of me. It was plain as day that I wasn’t welcome there.

“They are all captives of their own prejudice,” she stated. “The Guard Corps is subordinate to the Knight Corps, so they do not believe that any guards could possibly have skills superior to theirs.”

“And they can’t accept that people like us are accompanying them on an escort mission to guard Her Highness the Princess.”

“That’s right. However, your abilities are beyond question. The Fifth Squadron of the Guard Corps is composed of the finest skilled warriors in the Royal Capital.”

“Heh, at least someone understands,” Spinoza chimed in with a grin. “You sure are a step up from those other tin cans, aren’t ya?”

“The idea that they are the chosen people is so entrenched into their minds that they develop tunnel vision for anything else. It is something that must be

changed, soon," Eleanor agreed.

"Don't worry. If anyone out there can reform them, it'll be you," I assured her.

Eleanor's eyes widened. "To think that you believe in me that deeply... Whatever shall I do? I can't stop myself from smiling...!" She pressed her hands against her faintly flushed cheeks, then twisted back and forth in embarrassment. "And I will be journeying together with you this time—overnight, even. It would not be an exaggeration to call this a pre-wedding trip together, in the form of a mission...!"



“No, that’s definitely an exaggeration,” I said. “I’m fairly certain it’s an escort mission to protect Her Highness the Oracle of Light, and nothing more.”

“I understand. As a guard, you have no choice but to say that as your official stance. I am not so inconsiderate as to be unable to grasp those feelings.”

“It’s my *actual* stance, though...”

“All of you, get over here. Now,” Commander Gregor called out to us.

“Huh? Whaddaya want?” Spinoza responded.

“I’m going to explain the details of our journey,” Gregor said and, without any attempt to conceal his reluctance, began a high-intensity explanation for us as he pointed at the map. “First of all, we predict that the demons will launch an attack on us during this expedition. This is a golden opportunity for them, and they will gather suitable forces for the task. Now, are the lot of you aware that there are two routes that lead to the Sacred Spring...?”

“Um, well, one of them is the road that cuts through the Coral Plains... Huh? Was there some other way to get there?” Seira cocked her head to one side in puzzlement.

“Hmph. It seems you’re nothing but lowly guards after all—lacking in education,” the knight commander said, taking the opportunity to assert his dominance. “Allow me to inform you, then. The other path—”

“The other is crossing the Valley of Resentment, right?” I said, cutting him off. “The Valley of Resentment is said to be an area reduced to ashes by the Demon King—a harsh environment that can’t sustain life of any kind. However, it’s not impassable.”

“Wow, Sarge, you sure know a lot! I hadn’t heard about any of that!”

“Back when I was an adventurer, I heard that there was a valley where even monsters can’t survive—where anything resembling a living creature had been completely annihilated.”

Apparently, after the Demon King put it to flame, the Valley of Resentment remained a scorched wasteland even to this day, and supposedly one could still hear cries of resentment coming from the valley’s dead, or something like that.

“Tch...” Commander Gregor spat, grumbling in annoyance. “Well, it seems you’ve at least come to the table with *some* knowledge.”

“Thanks.”

“It is as you say. The Valley of Resentment is engulfed in a scorching heat that even monsters cannot approach. If they stay too long, their bodies will be reduced to cinders—and the same goes for us, as well,” the commander explained. “Therefore, the demons will certainly be lying in wait at the Coral Plains, in anticipation of us traveling that path as well. In fact, we sent men to scout the area, and they have already reported back that the demons have large-scale forces in place on the plains.”

“I see. So what do you plan to do?” I asked.

Will we just try to break through the demonic forces head-on? Or...

“The Knight Corps only has about a hundred members in total. Our men may be skilled, but even we would be put at a disadvantage before a full-fledged demon army. A head-on clash would be ill-advised; therefore, we shall send Eleanor and our main forces to the Coral Plains as a diversion. While that is happening, we will take a minimal number of troops and push through across the Valley of Resentment,” Commander Gregor declared. “It will be an arduous journey, but the demons will be unlikely to anticipate us crossing the valley, so we should be able to avoid risking an all-out battle with them.”

Apparently the intention was to outmaneuver the demons by using their assumptions against them—the assumption that there was no way we would try to pass through in that location. If all went well, we could reach the Sacred Spring without having to do battle whatsoever—provided we were able to cross the Valley of Resentment, that is.

“Huh? What the hell, we’re just gonna run away? C’mon, it just won’t *feel* right if we’re not obliterating our enemies,” Spinoza said.

“Aren’t you misunderstanding our mission objective...? Our goal this time is to deliver the princess safely to her destination,” Fam pointed out.

“She’s right. I understand how you feel, Spinoza, but our highest priority is to accompany Her Highness to the Sacred Spring,” Seira said, chiding the battle-

hungry woman.

“Feh. Fine. Even if we make it through the Valley, there’s still a chance those demon bastards will show up at the Sacred Spring, right?”

“*Hmph.*” Commander Gregor sneered in amusement.

“Huh? The hell’re you laughing at?” Spinoza growled threateningly in response.

“There are no concerns about that. The area around the Sacred Spring is under the protection of the Goddess. Demons are unable to get anywhere near it,” Gregor explained pompously. “Once we make it out of the Valley of Resentment, we will already be within the bounds of the Goddess’s protection. If we make it to the Spring, our victory is assured. Make sure not to be a hindrance... The very existence of humanity depends upon this mission.”

Chapter 9: Predicament

The carriage carrying Sonia, the Oracle of Light, departed for the Sacred Spring.

We were only taking two carriages to cut through the Valley of Resentment. Our team wasn't anticipating doing battle, so we were specialized for swift movement. In an apparent bid to outwit the demons, Princess Sonia was riding in the same carriage that carried the Fifth Squadron—as our foes would no doubt assume that she was traveling in Commander Gregor's carriage.

After a while, we came to the crossroads where the paths to the Coral Plains and the Valley of Resentment met.

"This is where we part ways," Eleanor said.

"Be careful out there, Eleanor," I replied.

She chuckled. "Thank you. Hearing those words from you fills me with the strength to fight forevermore. With the power of love at my side, I fear nothing at all," she said with a faint smile. "Say, Sieg, when this is over, I think I would like to get married..."

"You should stop right there. I can't quite put my finger on why, but I feel like saying things like that will make your chances of surviving drop dramatically."

"All will be well—I will ensure our diversion is a success. We will rendezvous again afterward; I will pray that fortune is on your side as well."

"Thanks." The two of us shared a glance, until Eleanor suddenly averted her gaze as if it were too much for her.

"I'm hopeless... Whenever our eyes meet, I am unable to control the excitement that wells within my chest," she said, then chuckled once again. "My face feels as if it were on fire. I fear it may even distract me during battle."

"Please, try to focus," I pleaded.

With that, Eleanor and the main force of knights headed off toward the Coral

Plains. The carriage containing Sonia and us, along with the one Gregor was in, continued along the path to the Valley of Resentment.

Before long, we arrived at the valley. The ground everywhere around us was dark and ashen, like the remnants of an ancient inferno. Parts of the terrain here and there were still smoldering as if they had been ablaze only recently.

“Ow, ow... What’s the deal with this place? It’s hotter ‘n hell...! This place ain’t fit for human beings...!” Spinoza complained wearily as she walked alongside the carriage. All of us, save the driver and Princess Sonia, were traveling outside the carriage to protect her in case of emergency. Had we been riding in the cargo area, we wouldn’t have been able to react as quickly.

“Just like I said, this place can’t sustain life,” I replied dryly.

“That, and this place gives me the creeps, for some reason. It feels like just being here is slowly whittling away at me, both physically and mentally...” Seira said.

“That’s probably due to the dense miasma in the air. If we stay around here for too long, we’ll probably expire long before we end up fighting any demons.”

“Booze... I wanna drink some booze... Ice-cold booze...”

“Silly woman... If you drank alcohol, you’d just get dehydrated and slow down even more,” Fam pointed out.

“I’m still doing fine with the heat on my end, thanks to this outfit...” Seira said. “How are you, though, Fam? Doesn’t the heat get trapped inside all those clothes?”

“Looks to me like she’s doin’ just fine, don’t it?” Spinoza said.

Even dressed in all black, Fam hadn’t broken a sweat; her expression was cool and collected. However, I had noticed something.

“Actually, I don’t think that’s the case,” I chimed in. “She’s had her tongue sticking out constantly; that’s probably how she’s regulating her body temperature.”

“What is she, a dog?” Spinoza responded, then changed the subject. “Anyway, what about you, Sieg? You don’t look run-down at all. You tryin’ to lose weight

or somethin'?"

"I'm fine. I'm used to enduring things."

I'd been standing at the front lines of parties and enduring attacks from all sorts of monsters since the day I first became an adventurer; I wasn't about to let a bit of heat take me down.

"You gotta be kidding me. You're a monster..."

"Don't push yourself too hard, though. Make sure to hydrate frequently. You won't be able to keep marching if you get heat stroke," Seira advised, then offered words of consideration to Princess Sonia, who was seated in the cargo area, as well. "Please make sure you drink some water too, Princess!"

"Of course. Though it will not be necessary. I do not have so fragile a spirit as to buckle in an environment such as this," she responded firmly.

"Whatever. All you gotta do is sit there, anyway," Spinoza tossed back.

"Spinoza!" Seira pushed Spinoza's head down and started apologizing profusely to the princess. "I'm so sorry! I'm so very sorry!"

Seeing this take place, Fam sighed in exasperation. "Do you just *have* to say things like that to make you feel better? That's not a very smart way to live; you're the type who will probably die young."

"Heh. I've decided to live life hard and live life fast—I'm gonna drink as much as I want and say whatever the hell's on my mind," Spinoza declared confidently, without an ounce of shame. It would've seemed like a refreshing attitude—if she hadn't been down on her knees, looking like she was about to start begging for her life.

"It's a good thing we didn't encounter any monsters, though. It would've been miserable to fight in a situation like this," Seira said, looking relieved.

The awful environment of the Valley of Resentment was utterly unsuitable for battle. If monsters had attacked, we would've been at a complete disadvantage.

"I'm so glad Commander Gregor's plan worked!" Seira beamed.

"Normally the pompous bastard just bosses us around all the time, but naturally he's got book smarts. Guess that jerk comes in useful sometimes after

all,” Spinoza admitted.

“Apparently not, unfortunately,” I interjected.

“Huh?” Seira and Spinoza said in unison, and everyone turned to look at me.

“What do you mean, Sarge?”

“Look at the top of the cliff,” I said.

Steep cliffs towered above both sides of the road our carriages were traveling along. Amid the thick miasma floating there, innumerable shadows stood lined up.

I squinted—and saw that it was a pack of monsters.

Chapter 10: The Fifth Squadron in Action

Atop the cliff stood rows of muscular orcs—monsters that shouldn't normally have been present in our location.

“Huh?! What on earth?!“ Seira let out a panicked yelp. “There weren’t supposed to be any monsters living in the Valley of Resentment...!”

“There’s a simple explanation—they don’t live here at all,” Fam said. “It seems they were lying in wait for us.”

It did indeed seem that way; they *knew* we would be coming through here.

“Hey, this wasn’t supposed to happen! What the hell’s going on?” Spinoza shouted at Sir Gregor and his men, who were riding in front of us.

Gregor, for his part, seemed even more perturbed than the members of the Fifth Squadron. “Impossible...” he spouted in disbelief, eyes wide. “Why are they here...?! Was our plan leaked somehow...?!” He clutched the back of his head, unable to hide his dismay.

Even monsters couldn’t stay for long in such a harsh environment; they would expire while waiting for us to arrive. That was why we’d chosen the route we were on in the first place. Yet they were waiting for us nonetheless, with numbers that seemed to indicate they had never even considered we’d try to go the Coral Plains route.

In other words, they didn’t just make a lucky guess—they somehow knew both the route we were going to take and when we were going to arrive. That was the natural conclusion one would come to.

Gregor scowled. “No...! We can’t face them here, we’re at too great a disadvantage...!”

“Ah! Look up there!” Seira shouted, raising her head and pointing at the top of the cliff. The rows of orcs were holding on to giant boulders even larger than they were.

"Whoa, you don't think they're gonna—" Spinoza gasped.

"I do think they're 'gonna,'" Fam groaned.

"They're going to drop boulders on us?!" Seira shouted. "That would be bad news—there's not enough room on this narrow path to dodge them!"

That had been their plan all along, obviously. They really knew what they were doing. Perhaps there was a demon controlling the group of orcs and feeding them ideas. Monster brawn with actual brains behind it was truly a terrifying combo.

"We'll all be crushed!"

"Commander Gregor, your orders!"

The knight commander growled. "We're out of options, though...!"

The knights were in a complete panic at the unexpected situation they found themselves in, and Princess Sonia, no longer able to simply watch, finally stood up from the cargo area.

"Calm yourselves!" she shouted in a clear, authoritative voice.

Silence fell across the area, the air seeming to resonate with the power of her words. Once she had gained everyone's attention, Sonia began to speak solemnly.

"Have you forgotten why you are accompanying me on this journey? Your role is to protect me; all you should think about now is fulfilling that duty."

Her tone left no room for argument.

"Easy for you to say," Spinoza muttered bitterly.

"I would not order anyone to perform tasks outside of their capabilities. I had each and every one of you accompany me on this journey precisely because I believed you capable of success."

The princess's words of confidence instilled courage into everyone there; her assertive tone seemed to inspire them to believe that they could indeed succeed.

With a roar, the orcs heaved the first boulder over the edge.

“Here it comes! What do we do?!” Seira shouted.

“If we do nothing, we’ll be crushed flat,” Fam added.

“Then we’ll have to do something. Spinoza,” I commanded, “I’m going to toss you up into the air, and I want you to do whatever you can to smash that boulder to pieces. Think you can do that?”

“Damn right I can. Leave it to me!” she responded, rolling up her sleeves enthusiastically. “But what happens after that? Even if I bust that thing up, the pieces’ll still be pretty huge. We’ll be in serious trouble if they hit the horses or carriages.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let that happen—I’ll handle it somehow.”

“Hah, whatever *that* means!” she replied with an incredulous grin. “Though if you say it, it’s worth bettin’ it’s true. I’ll put my life on the line for ya, then—it’ll be the biggest gamble I’ve ever made!”

“I’ll make sure it pays off,” I replied.

I then grabbed my sword from my waist and held it outward horizontally, sheath and all, and Spinoza positioned herself atop the weapon. “All right... Here goes!” I said.

Spinoza responded with an affirmative yell. I gathered my strength, then flung my sword into an upward position with all my might, sending her hurtling high into the air as if she were defying gravity.

Undaunted by the giant boulder right before her eyes, she let out a fierce battle cry and unleashed a swing with her giant war hammer that was as large as a person, focusing the attack on a single point.

A perfect hit.

Her blow found its mark, hitting the boulder right in the center and shattering it into bits.

“Hell yeah! You see that?”

“Spinoza, another one’s coming!” Seira shouted, and Spinoza pulled back her hammer for another attack. The second massive swing shattered the next boulder—but right behind it, a third one was already on its way.

“Ah, shit!” she yelled; having just followed through with her second blow, she didn’t have time to ready herself for another swing. Her expression tensed as the boulder was about to hit her head-on, when all of a sudden, a *fwip* sound rang out.

An arrow hurtled through the air and penetrated into the boulder.

The next moment, it broke apart as if it had been a giant clod of dirt.

“Unbelievable. You sure don’t think much before you act, do you?” Fam huffed, another arrow already nocked in her bow. “Pulling on the reins of a wild boar like you is exhausting.”

“That was awesome, Fam!” Seira exclaimed.

“She shattered a boulder with a bow and arrow...?!” Commander Gregor sputtered in disbelief.

“Everything has its weak point. Even a single arrow can break a boulder if you pierce it in the right spot,” Fam explained, grinning boldly as she readied her bow. “There was never any need to hurl this woman into the air.”

“What the hell! You makin’ fun of me, runt?” Spinoza shouted.

“No, I’m just pitying you and your terribly inconvenient muscle-headed method of fighting. My bow and arrow can both stay on the ground and soar through the air at the same time.” With those words, Fam pulled back another arrow and fired it at the next oncoming boulder. Her shaft struck the rock’s weak point with pinpoint accuracy, compromising its structural integrity and causing it to break apart.

“I’m not gonna let you just show me up like that!” Spinoza shouted, intercepting another falling boulder in midair. Between the two of them, the giant stones began to shatter one after the other—but that didn’t resolve the problem entirely.

“Sieg, the rock fragments!” Seira shouted.

Pieces of the broken boulders began to rain down toward the carriages like falling stars. Despite having been broken, the pieces had picked up a great deal of velocity by falling such a great distance, and they had more than enough

force behind them to have devastating effects on a human body. If we didn't do something, Princess Sonia's carriage would be crushed.

"I've got this. I'll keep the princess safe," I said, then climbed up onto the roof of the carriage's cargo area and spread my arms out.

"Iron Shield!"

The skill I activated was one that erected a shield around me with a radius of several square meters and blocked all attacks dealt within that area. It would've been difficult to deflect the intact boulders due to the massive force they carried, but once the boulders had been shattered, it became possible to protect the entire carriage from the fragments. The skill wouldn't stay active for very long, but it was enough time to last while the debris fell.

Rock chunks rained down upon the area, gouging great holes into the earth—but the area around the carriage I was protecting remained the very picture of calmness, as if we were in the eye of a storm.

Sir Gregor stared at the scene before him, dumbfounded. "You defended the entire carriage all by yourself...?!"

Suddenly, a scream erupted from nearby. Pieces of the boulder were falling down toward the forward carriage—and I wouldn't be able to make it away from the princess's carriage in time to defend them.

That's when I heard Seira belt out, "I'll protect you all!"

She let out a wild roar as she leaped into the air in front of the knights and began striking down the rock fragments with her sword. The bikini armor she wore provided her with little defensive power, but she made up for it with incredible attack power and agility.

"Knight Corps, is everyone all right? Are there any injuries?" Seira asked.

"W-We're fine. Thank you."

"Why did you save us, though? We've treated you guards awfully in the past. You should have no reason to protect us."

"Because all of us have the same duty right now: to protect the princess!" Seira stated, then added: "Besides, no matter how you may have treated us in

the past, I'll still help you. There's no such thing as a person who isn't worth saving."

"What a benevolent spirit...! Is she some kind of avatar of the Goddess...?"

"I feel as if the impurity in my heart is being cleansed!"

The knights were completely won over by Seira's compassionate heart.

Before we realized it, the rain of rocks had subsided; the orcs had probably exhausted their supply of boulders and had fallen back to regroup.

Looks like we're in the clear for now.

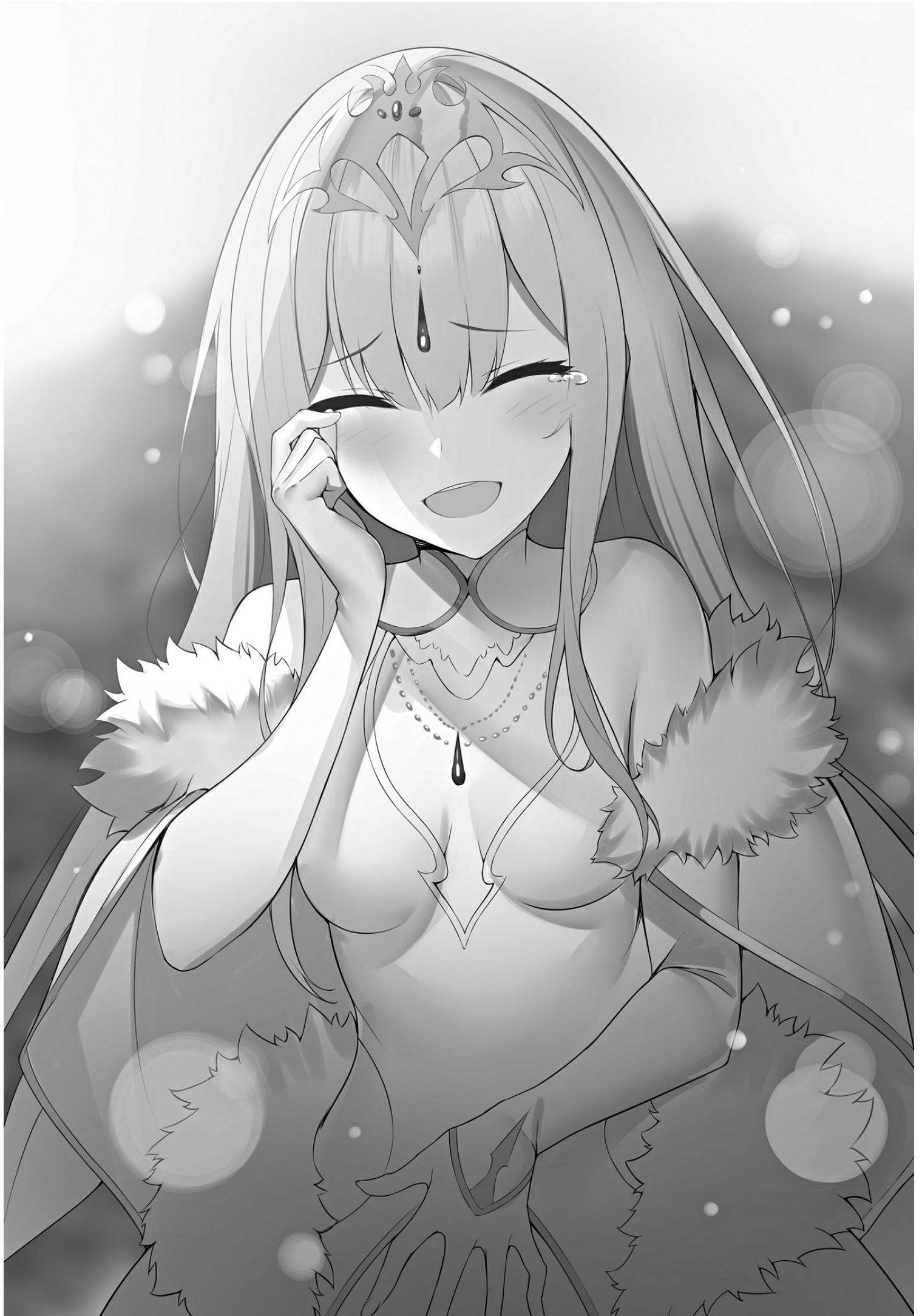
"Magnificently done," Princess Sonia said from her seat in the carriage. "This was the first time I have seen you do battle...and you have impressed me. I could not have fathomed how skilled you truly are."

"Thank you very much," I replied politely, bowing my head. "Though from my point of view, Your Highness, your own courage is also impressive. Even in the face of such great danger, you hardly flinched."

At those words, the princess couldn't help but let out a giggle, which slowly erupted into full-fledged laughter. I merely stared at her in confusion, wondering if I had said something to offend her.

"So you call me, the Oracle of Light, 'impressive.' You truly are the remarkable person I presumed you to be, Sieg."

She certainly seemed to be amused; she had tears in her eyes as she laughed, holding her stomach. For the first time, a smile had surfaced on her normally expressionless face—one filled with the innocence of a young girl.



After her laughing fit was over, a satisfied look came across her face. "For me, death is not a distant fear—it hovers by my side at all times. That is why even great danger does not cause me to waver."

By that point, her princess-like expression had already returned.

That made things feel all the more strange, however. She didn't seem to be putting on a front—deep down, she truly believed that the reaper was right next to her, holding its scythe in wait.

Had she resigned herself to so grave a duty at such a young age?

Chapter 11: Falling Down

Our carriages traveled up the mountain slope. On both sides of us were sheer cliffs of such height that nobody would stand a chance if they fell from them. Turning around was not an option either, because the path had been blocked by rocky debris—and trying to clear the rocks out would likely just end up getting us surrounded by monsters. So in the end, we decided to move forward.

“Ugh... It’s so damn hot, and monsters keep attacking us... This sucks! We shoulda just gone through the plains like normal people!” Spinoza grumbled wearily.

“Um, could you please not just come out and say the things we’re all thinking? Do you enjoy bringing down the mood of everyone around you that much?” Fam responded in annoyance.

“Whatever. Who was it who suggested we cut through the Valley of Resentment though, anyway? What a total war criminal. He usually acts so smug too.”

Sir Gregor grunted at the biting remark, contorting his face. A tense atmosphere hung around us.

“Let’s not dwell on the past. We need to think of a plan,” I said, doing my best to change the subject.

“Sieg’s right! We’ve got to think positive! In the face of oppressive heat like this, just pretend you’re getting a free trip to the sauna!” Seira said, clenching her fists in front of her chest, in an attempt to encourage everyone. Her mental fortitude was truly a force to be reckoned with.

For a moment, everyone calmed down. Then, suddenly, a loud *boom* echoed out, causing us all to jump in surprise and turn our heads toward the source of the sound.

A giant hole had been gouged into the mountainside farther ahead, perhaps by some sort of explosion magic. The crumbling earth had begun tumbling

down toward us at an incredible speed, threatening to swallow us up.

For a brief moment, I saw the shadows of monsters at the top.

Another trap they set for us...

With no time to dodge, we were swept up by the avalanche of debris, our carriage forced off the mountain road—and with high cliffs on both sides, we were sent flying over the edge, horses and all.

Oh, man—this is bad...!

Even if we managed to survive hitting the ground from this height, Princess Sonia, the horses, and the carriage would certainly be done for.

I opened the flap separating the driver's seat and the cargo area. "Please excuse me, Your Highness," I said, and pulled the princess close to my chest.

"Wha—?!" Her eyes went wide in surprise. "Wh-What do you think you are doing...?!"

"Protecting you, Your Highness. Please bear with me for a moment." Holding her tightly to me, I activated my skill, *Iron Target*, which allowed me to take all damage meant for her, the horses, the carriage, and my comrades.

The carriage crashed into the ground, then began tumbling down the sloped surface. All of the damage inflicted onto everyone was dealt to me instead. After a while, the carriage finally stopped its descent.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked the other members of the Fifth.

"Y-Yes," Seira groaned.

"More or less," Spinoza responded.

"Looks like we got away with our lives..." Fam chimed in.

Everyone responded in the affirmative. The horses let out their usual whinnies, and there seemed to be no major damage to the carriage.

Guess we managed to get through that with no serious injuries...

"Are you hurt, Your Highness?" I asked.

"I... I am fine, thank you," Princess Sonia responded in a shaky voice.

"You're looking a bit flushed, though... Maybe you've got an injury somewhere that's causing a fever?" I asked in concern.

The princess gave a shocked look and placed her hands on her cheeks. "N-No, I told you I am fine. More importantly, unhand me. You holding me in such proximity makes me feel strange."

"My apologies," I said, releasing her. She put a hand to her chest and released a breath; her face was indeed red.

"What about you, Sarge? Are you okay?" Seira asked in concern. "You seem to have taken the hits for all of us..."

"I'm fine. I'm pretty tough, after all," I said, brushing the dust off my armor.

"You're a beast, you know that, right?" Spinoza told me.

"As always, I'm glad you're on our side," Fam added. "I'd shudder to imagine you as our enemy."

"What happened to Commander Gregor and the knights?" I asked, changing the subject.

"It seems they weren't caught up in the landslide—apparently the trap the monsters set up was aimed specifically at only our carriage," Seira said.

"So they knew the Oracle of Light was in our carriage, then," I mused.

"But normally anyone'd think the Oracle would be ridin' with the knight commander, right?" Spinoza wondered.

"I can only imagine our internal communications have been compromised after all... Someone is leaking information," Fam offered.

"So someone's an informant? Who the hell is it? I'll find 'em and break their damn face," Spinoza said, punching her palm in a show of anger.

"I wonder if Commander Gregor and the knights are okay?" Seira asked.

"They have training just like we do; I'm sure they can protect themselves. We can probably regroup with them once we reach the Sacred Spring," I said, but then offered a caveat. "Before we can do that, though, we've got to find a way out of our current predicament... Apparently, we're about to be given a warm

welcome."

Everyone else looked around in sudden shock. I had felt the presence of a large number of beings sneaking toward us, and lo and behold, before us stood a creeping group of monsters.

Chapter 12: Resolve

The monsters slunk out from the shadows of the rocky terrain around us: blood wolves, whose mottled coats gave off an appearance of having been spattered with blood; thick-muscled orcs, who had so recently been dropping boulders at us; and highly poisonous death spiders, which also fired sticky webs. Each monster would be difficult enough to handle on its own, but attacking in a group they posed a truly deadly threat. Not to mention, there were only four of us.

"It seems we have no choice," I mumbled. Our carriage was surrounded by monsters, with our backs up against a cliff. There was nowhere to run. To get past this point, we had no choice but to defeat our assailants.

"Nope," Seira agreed.

"Time to tear up every last one of 'em!" Spinoza shouted.

"Their heads will make nice pincushions," Fam agreed.

"I'll draw all of their attacks. Everyone, concentrate on doing damage," I declared, then stepped boldly out in front of the beasts.

With a ferocious roar, one of the orcs lunged, swinging his massive club down at me.

But it was too slow. I slashed through the monster before its weapon could reach me, eliciting an agonized scream and spray of blood as its hulking form sank to the ground.

Before it was even down, a death spider shot its sticky web fiber at me, and the substance quickly affixed itself to my left arm.

I gave a mighty yank in response, pulling my coated arm inward. The spider immediately lost our game of tug-of-war and was sent flying in my direction, where I cut it down in an instant.

The pack of blood wolves had been waiting for an opening, and they chose

that moment to make their move. They zigzagged across the ground as they approached in an attempt to confuse me. As I was busy slaying one, another delivered a claw slash across my body, but by the time I tried to counterattack, it had already put some distance between us.

“Tricky little bastards,” I muttered. In terms of raw speed, the wolves had the advantage—which meant I just had to stop them from being able to move.

The pack of blood wolves regrouped and started running in my direction. With mighty leaps, they came bounding at me in an attempt to dig their fangs into my throat—but I blocked the attacks with my left arm, their fangs sinking into it instead.

“You can have my arm—but in exchange, I’ll have your heads.” Latched on to me, they couldn’t dodge my attacks; with a single close-range slash of my blade, their heads were separated from their bodies.

“Sieg is keeping them busy! It’s time for us to join in!” Seira exclaimed, then charged into the enemy lines and began striking them down with gusto.

“Let’s gooo!” Spinoza shouted, swinging her giant war hammer to mow down monsters left and right. Covered in blood spatter, her eyes were ablaze with the thrill of battle.

“I can’t let the two of you steal all the fun,” Fam whispered, releasing arrow after arrow which pierced the monsters’ foreheads with deadly precision. The beasts’ lives were snuffed out before they could even let out screams of agony.

With me drawing their attention and my allies striking them down while they were distracted, the monsters were slain in no time flat—however, there was a problem.

Spinoza clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“We won’t be able to keep this up much longer...” Fam murmured.

Seira was breathing heavily. “I’m starting to run out of energy here.”

No matter how many monsters we defeated, their numbers never seemed to abate. They could keep sending pawns at us one after the other, but there were only four of us; we had also spent a long time battling in the harsh atmosphere

of the Valley of Resentment, and everyone was absolutely exhausted. My companions were reaching their limit.

“Listen. While I’m drawing the monsters’ attention, everyone needs to get into the carriage. We can’t keep fighting like this—we have to force our way through their lines and out of this trap.”

“Force our way through? But how?!” Seira asked.

“Don’t worry—I have a plan,” I stated firmly, and that seemed to be enough for everyone to believe me; they broke off combat and fell back toward the carriage. As they did so, I let all of the monsters continue to beat on me.

“We’re on, Sarge!”

“Okay, got it. Now start moving,” I called.

Once I was sure everything was ready, I let a web from one of the death spiders hit me, then yanked it and slammed the monster’s body into the ground. The impact kicked up a huge cloud of dust.

I turned around and took a flying leap onto the driver’s seat of the carriage, grabbed the reins, and sent the horses into a furious gallop, taking the carriage straight through the dust cloud. Leaving the confused monsters behind, I accelerated as fast as I could.

“Hell yeah, we’re out!”

“No...not quite yet, it seems.”

“They’re coming after us!”

The monsters immediately started chasing our carriage—a huge number of them. I had no idea there were so many more lying in wait.

“Here they come!” Seira shouted.

The ones that were faster than our carriage—the blood wolves and some flying monsters—were hot on our tail, and they started attacking the vehicle in hopes of destroying it.

“I don’t think so. Seira, I need you to drive!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Iron Shield!”

Handing the reins to Seira, I deployed my skill. All of the attacks the monsters were trying to dish out against the horses and carriage were redirected to me instead.

“Are you okay, Sarge?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine—physically, at least,” I said. “But this skill can’t stay active for very long—the effects will wear off soon, in a matter of minutes, at best.”

“Seriously? Well, shit!”

“I’ll intercept as many of them as I can...but there are so many. Even I have my limits,” Fam mumbled, shooting arrows at our pursuers all the while.

“Spinoza, hand me the map.”

“S-Sure,” she responded, uncertain. Still, she handed over the map nonetheless.

I looked down at the map, which depicted the topography of the Valley of Resentment.

Okay—that’s the spot.

I called out to Seira with a request as she held the horses’ reins: “I want you to head toward this slope right here. Gather as many monsters as you can along the way. Do you think you can do that?”

“Y-Yes, understood! I’ll do my best!” she replied with a nod, then pulled the reins to change course, heading toward the slope I had indicated. The monsters immediately turned to give chase.

Only about ten minutes left on the effects of my skill—this is going to be a close one. I just hope we can manage to hold out...

“There it is, Sarge!”

A slope with a single path on it came into view in front of us, stretching on for so long that it seemed like it would reach all the way into the sky—and to my eyes, it began to look like a path that could take us straight out of this hellhole all the way up to heaven itself. If we could manage to reach the top of the

slope, we'd be within the bounds of the Sacred Spring—holy ground where monsters could not follow.

However, at the rate things were going, we wouldn't be able to make it all the way there. My skill would expire soon, and if that happened, we'd be monster food long before we made it to the top.

"I guess this is our only option, after all..." I said, having come to a conclusion after a lot of thought. Opening the flap of the cargo area, I set my gaze on the monsters that were approaching us.

"Sieg? What are you doing?" Seira asked.

"You all go on ahead. I'll take care of this."

"What are you saying?!" she responded.

"Whoa there, are you crazy? Are you seriously tellin' us to leave you behind here?" Spinoza asked.

"That's what I'm telling you."

"So your intention is to stop all the monsters from chasing us by yourself..." Fam muttered. "I honestly don't think you can take that many on alone, sir."

"We have no other choice, though," I said. "Otherwise, the monsters will destroy the carriage, and it'll all be over. Without our transportation, they'll surround us, and there will be nothing we can do."

"But..."

"My skill might be wearing off soon, but I can at least slow them down. This slope only has one path on it—no one will get past me."

"Sieg, do you plan to die here?" Sonia asked.

"Personally, I don't have the slightest intention of doing so... Though there is the possibility it will turn out that way regardless, Your Highness."

I had accumulated a considerable amount of damage in the previous battles—and in such a harsh environment, with a seemingly endless number of monsters giving chase, I was well aware that I'd be at a huge disadvantage. However...

"If we don't take action, we'll all be killed. Someone has to do something, and

I'm the right person for that job. That's all there is to it."

"Then I'll come with you—" Seira started to say, but Fam held out a hand and stopped her.

"Seira, we need to be considerate of his resolve here."

The other woman fell silent.

"You're sure about this?" Spinoza asked.

"Yeah. I leave the princess under your protection. You guys may behave badly most of the time, but I'm not worried at all about your ability to handle things. Everything will be fine."

At that moment, my Iron Shield skill wore off. The carriage was defenseless.

What perfect timing.

Just as I was about to leap out of the back of the carriage, I heard Princess Sonia's voice.

"Sieg," she stated, looking me directly in the eyes, her tone solemn. "You must live through this and come back. That is an order." There was not a trace of the usual coldness in her gaze; despite it being an order, her expression was fervent, as if she were in prayer.

"Well, if Her Royal Highness has given me an order, I can't exactly disobey, can I?" I responded, and cast a gaze at my companions as if to say *I leave the princess to you.* They nodded in response.

Well, time to go.

I leaped out of the open flap and landed on the ground. The back of the carriage receded into the distance, along with the sound of hooves.

On either side of me were steep cliffs, and in front of me, a huge group of monsters was closing in—so many that the entire landscape before my eyes was filled with their numbers.

I stood to face the horde of monsters, blocking their only path. There were some demons among them as well; they were mostly human in form, but with horns growing out of their heads and crimson-hued eyes. Their bodies were

muscular and purple in color, with sinister-looking magical symbols carved into their skin.

“You think you can stop us by just standing there in our way?” a male demon said, staring at me with a sneer.

“Yup.”

“Hah! An army of this size, all by yourself?! That’s hilarious! You’ll be dead like a dog in less than a minute!”

“We’ll see about that—I’ll never know till I try.”

“You’re an utter fool. Very well, though—if you want to be torn apart so bad, we’ll grant that wish. And after that, we’ll kill every last one of your friends too!” the demon shouted, glaring at me savagely.

“I won’t let that happen.” That was the whole reason I was there.

I was at a clear disadvantage in every possible way. They had an army of at least a few hundred monsters; I was injured and alone. I could barely even hope to slow them down, much less defeat them all. However... I had to act. To protect Sonia, the Oracle of Light... To protect my dear comrades... And to protect all of humanity.

“Not a single one of you will get past me.”

I will do everything in my power to stop them—on my honor as a gatekeeper.

“Enough of your nonsense! We will pass through here—over your corpse, if need be!”

My solitary battle against the horde had begun.

Chapter 13: Checkmate

It had been several hours since my battle had begun. The sun had set, and the Valley of Resentment seemed almost to smolder in the red glow of the gloaming hour.

That same glow illuminated the corpses of countless monsters.

“Checkmate,” I said, holding the tip of my sword to the kneeling demon’s throat. Covered in wounds, he wore a wide-eyed expression of utter bewilderment, as if his soul had already left his body.

“I-Impossible...!” he said, staring blankly. “This must be a bad dream. No single man can rout an army of that size...!”

“Unfortunately for you, this is no dream. It’s reality. The fact that you can feel pain should be proof of that,” I stated, quietly pressing my sword tip ever so slightly deeper into his neck. He hissed in pain that quickly brought him back to reality.

The demon’s spirit had been pretty much broken by the total defeat of his army. He wasn’t shy about glaring at me indignantly, but his will to fight had vanished entirely.

“Nobody told me there was a monster like you among her bodyguards... This wasn’t in any of the reports.”

“What did you say...?” Something felt off about his words. “What reports, exactly? From whom? Where did you get your inside information?”

As I asked this, the demon’s face twisted into a smirk of amusement. “Heh. It’s quite simple. We have an informant among your people feeding intelligence to our side.”

“What?”

So there’s a demon informant among us after all... That would explain how all the info on our plans got leaked.

“In that case, I can’t afford to kill you quite yet. Tell me everything you know about this informant.”

“No can do... Unfortunately for *you*, my time’s up.” With a triumphant sneer, the demon coughed up a huge amount of blood.

The life drained from his eyes, and he crumpled to the ground limply, like a puppet with its strings cut. I went to check his pulse, but he was utterly devoid of life.

“Guess I missed my chance...”

In the end, the identity of the informant remained a mystery; however, having heard the demon’s testimony, at least I wasn’t going away empty-handed. Once I regrouped with the team, we’d need to decide how to deal with that information.

“I hope everyone’s all right...”

In the end, I really didn’t let a single monster past me—and once everyone reached the top of this slope, they’d have been on the grounds of the Sacred Spring, where demons can’t enter, so I imagine they probably made it without any major incident.

I had to meet up with my companions as quickly as I could—but climbing to the top of the slope in my injured state was not going to be an easy task.

That was when I heard footsteps approaching from behind me.

Are those...horse hooves? More monsters, maybe...?

I tensed my body and turned around, only to see a single horse approaching—with Eleanor holding the reins.

“Sieg!” shouted the vice-commander of the Knight Corps, halting her mount in front of me.

“Eleanor? Weren’t you headed over to the Coral Plains?”

“I was. However, we found no monsters there, which concerned me. I sent the rest of the knights onward to the Sacred Spring, then came back here to see how you were faring.”

No monsters had gathered at the Coral Plains. That meant that they had invested the bulk of their forces into the Valley of Resentment. I was reminded of what the demon had told me earlier: *There's an informant among us.*

"Tell me, Sieg, why are there so many monster corpses here? What on earth happened?"

"There were demons here lying in wait for us with an army of monsters. They chased after us, and I stayed behind here so that everyone else could escape safely."

"Stayed behind...? All by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"You defeated every single one of these monsters on your own, then... Just as I would expect from one who has received my approval."

"It sure took a lot out of me, though."

"Then my arrival here was not without meaning—you may join me on my noble steed."

"Sounds good to me," I agreed. "Thanks, Eleanor."

The vice-commander's eyes shot wide open as I spoke, and her face turned beet red.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"O-Oh, nothing. I simply felt my heart flutter for a moment. You thanked me so genuinely just now, despite your usual impassive demeanor," she explained, holding a hand to her breastplate.

She then looked downward and began to mumble to herself, "Does that mean I'm now acting like an official wife...? That his opinion of me is rising rapidly...? We are alone out here on the road, so I may be onto something. What if he starts to touch my body while I'm at the horse's reins? How lascivious...! I would be unable to offer resistance, as I could not afford to lose hold of the reins. Though such a prospect isn't entirely terrible..." she went on, giggling quietly.

I couldn't deny she had gained some points with me for helping me out, but I certainly wasn't going to start feeling her up like a husband sneaking up on his

newlywed wife while she cooked dinner. Not to mention, messing around on a moving horse would be a huge recipe for disaster.

"Let's hurry, Eleanor. I want to meet up with the rest of our group as quickly as possible. I've got some new info I need to discuss with everyone."

"O-Of course. Let us hurry, then," Eleanor replied, wiping the drool from the corner of her mouth after having snapped out of her reverie. Upon making sure I was securely on the horse behind her, she hurried the animal along.

Chapter 14: Regrouping

Once we reached the top of the slope, the area opened into a vast forest that lay within the boundaries of the Sacred Spring. There, the thick miasma that hung over the Valley of Resentment was all but nonexistent, and I could sense no monsters anywhere nearby. It was truly a pristine land under the divine protection of the Goddess.

As we followed the road, a small shrine housing a statue of the Goddess eventually came into view, next to which a number of carriages were parked. There, I caught sight of Sonia and my comrades, along with Sir Gregor and the knights. Everyone was dusty and dirty, but it seemed they had been able to rejoin the other forces successfully.

“Hey, it’s Eleanor!” Seira shouted, having seen our horse approach. Then—the moment she saw my head peek out from behind the vice-commander—her face lit up. “And Sieg’s with her!”

Sonia, Spinoza, and Fam all reacted visibly to her shout.

“Thank goodness you’re all right!” Seira called, tears in her eyes, as she came running up to me.

“Hey, it’s not something you need to cry over...”

“But I was so, so worried...!” She took both of my hands in hers as if to make sure I was really there.

“Hah! Always knew you were a tough bastard,” Spinoza offered, clasping her hands behind her head, her face a mixture of amazement and joy.

“You really have a knack for surpassing my expectations...” Fam added, her expression also seeming to relax somewhat.

“I’m glad you’re all okay,” I said.

We reunited without losing a single person—I managed to protect everyone.

“You have done us a great service, Sieg. My commendations,” Princess Sonia

said, her gaze fixed on me.

“I was just doing my job as a bodyguard. And also...”

“And also...?”

“I wasn’t about to disobey your orders, Your Highness.”

When I said that, Princess Sonia seemed caught off guard at first; then she took on the faintest of smiles, so subtle that one wouldn’t have noticed unless they were looking very closely.

“Of course. That is well, then. Your loyalty is praiseworthy,” she told me.

At that point, I noticed Commander Gregor approaching me wearing a severe expression, seeming to eye me with an antagonistic glare. As I prepared myself for whatever kind of caustic remark I figured he had in store for me, he stood before me—and knelt.

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your diligence in protecting Her Highness the Princess. Without you there, every last one of us might have succumbed.”

I stood there, flabbergasted. That man extending honest gratitude to me was just about the last thing I had expected. My assumption was that he’d feel like we’d stolen the glory of the Knight Corps and dealt them a great humiliation—which may have been not too far from the truth, honestly. But despite that, he had suppressed his feelings and made the effort to thank me.

“I just did what I was supposed to do—it wasn’t something worthy of thanks, so please, stand up.”

“Apologies. I am in your debt,” he said quietly, then lifted his head and rose from his position.

“Now, all that aside, I have something important I need to tell everyone,” I said.

“What is it?” Seira asked.

“Well, I had a fight with a demon—and before he died, he let me know that they have an informant planted among us.”

At those words, shocked gasps erupted from everyone around me.

“An informant...”

“Perhaps he was just spouting nonsense in an attempt to destabilize us?” Sir Gregor offered.

“But they really did know exactly where we were going and what our plans were, didn’t they?” Seira countered. “It’s only logical to assume someone on the inside was leaking information.”

“Well, the five of us are the ones who keep getting tossed into the fire, right? Which means the informant’s probably someone in the Knight Corps, yeah?” Spinoza cast a suspicious glare at the knights. “Is it you? Or...is it you?”

“Of course not! Don’t just accuse random people!”

“We would never betray our country!”

“I’ll not take such an affront lying down—I’ll slay you right here and now!”

The knights were incensed by the suspicion Spinoza directed at them, some even threatening to draw their swords at that very moment.

“Calm yourselves, men,” ordered Sonia, and silence fell upon them immediately. “It matters not whether a rat has slipped into our midst. As long as you continue to protect me with your lives, all will be well.” Upon surveying the area, she then declared, “After a brief respite, I shall begin the ritual.”

After taking a moment to catch our breath, we proceeded onward to the Sacred Spring. From the shrine where the Goddess statue was, we had to climb a long stone staircase—on foot, of course, since carriages could not traverse the path.

Next to me, Fam trudged along; she usually wasn’t the type to let her emotions show, so seeing such a deep fatigue on her face struck me as odd.

“Is something wrong, Fam? You don’t look too great,” I asked.

“I’m not in the best of shape right now...” she muttered, giving me a pained smile.

“Heh, you let a little jaunt like that lay you out flat? Pathetic. Typical frail-ass

shut-ins, man,” Spinoza cut in.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t confuse me with yourself, meathead...” Fam sniped back.

“Please don’t overexert yourself, Fam,” Seira interjected. “Would you like some water?”

“Thanks, please...” Fam accepted the water and glugged it down her slender throat. “That’s much better...” she said, but as she started walking again, she started to sway to the side; the drink must’ve made her lose her balance.

I took hold of her delicate shoulders. “Don’t overdo it. I can carry you.”

“Thanks...” she murmured. “I think I’ll go ahead and take you up on that offer for now...”

“All right.” I pulled her up onto my back; she felt as light as a feather. As the youngest and smallest member of our squad, it wasn’t surprising that being in a harsh place like the Valley of Resentment had done a number on her physical health.

“It’s a little embarrassing to be carried by you...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But...it kind of makes me feel safe,” she whispered, and she gently leaned her delicate body onto me, letting herself relax. I could tell her mind was completely at ease.

“Hey Sieg, I’m feeling pretty pooped myself. How about you carry me too?” Spinoza quipped.

“You can walk on your own.”

“Feh. Cheapskate,” she muttered with a dissatisfied scowl.

She and Seira seemed to still be in pretty fantastic shape. It may have had something to do with their job working on the front lines, but the two of them seemed to be quite tough in both body and spirit.

After walking for a while, we arrived at some sort of pavilion—beyond which most likely lay the Sacred Spring.

“Everyone else shall remain here. Sieg—yours is the only presence I require with me during the ritual,” Princess Sonia said suddenly, surprising us all.

“Princess Sonia, what are you saying...?” Commander Gregor spoke up, clearly flustered. “You would conduct the divine ritual accompanied only by him? That’s an act of madness! What if something were to happen?!”

“Demons cannot set foot in this place. There is no worry of an ambush. And even supposing I am attacked, I would have no fear with Sieg at my side—our earlier march made that abundantly clear,” the princess explained in a matter-of-fact tone. “Besides, if there truly is a rat in our midst, allowing anyone else to accompany me would involve greater risk. Sieg has exhibited true loyalty in that regard, as he protected my life without concern for his own.”

“B-But...!”

“There will be no discussion. This matter has already been decided,” Sonia asserted, in a tone that left no room for argument.

“*Ggh...!* Yes, Your Highness...!” Sir Gregor said in reluctant acceptance, unable to disobey the princess’s orders.

I imagined it must have been almost unbearable for a knight like him to be told that a guard like me seemed more loyal than he did.

Chapter 15: At the Sacred Spring

“Let us proceed, Sieg.”

“Right.”

Princess Sonia and I made our way to the Sacred Spring. At the top of the stairs, the terrain opened up and a circular spring spread across our field of view—a hidden sanctuary tucked away in the forest.

At the far end of the spring stood a statue of the Goddess clasping her hands together in front of her bosom. It was made of stone, yet it held an aura of sanctity that made one believe the Goddess’s spirit might actually reside within. The entire space was filled with a sense of tranquility.

“Shall we begin, then?” Sonia said, then began to remove the clothing she was clad in. She opened her holy raiment, allowing the pure white garment to slip quietly to the ground. The pale light of the crescent moon above made her bare body stand out from the dark of night all the more.



The princess let out a soft giggle. “What do you think?”

“About what?”

“I would know your impressions of my nude form.”

“Well, I would say it’s quite magnificent.”

“My body is well-developed enough for me to take some pride in it.”

Her body was indeed lean and beautiful; her breasts were perky and her figure trim, with no excess flesh whatsoever. She held herself with a practiced dignity that extended all the way to the very tips of her fingers and toes. She certainly had good reason to feel proud.

“You seem to be maintaining your composure quite well too—without even averting your gaze. And here I thought you might show some signs of faltering.”

“I’m your bodyguard. Looking away is not an option.”

The princess chuckled lightly. “You must be either the most diligent man in the world, or the most incorrigibly perverted,” she said, flashing a wide grin of amusement. “I truly do like you. It feels quite the waste to have you remain a guard. If only I could convince you to pledge yourself to me alone as an Imperial Guard.”

“I understand how you feel, Your Highness, but I—”

“You may call me Sonia.”

“Pardon?”

“There is no need to call me by my official titles, things such as *Your Highness* or *Oracle of Light*,” she explained, then pressed a finger to her lips and said in a hushed voice, “I have decided. From now on, you shall call me by my given name. I will allow no one else to do so, but you shall have my special permission.”

“Understood. Thank you very much.”

“Now, let me hear you say it.”

I wasn’t sure what meaning there could possibly be in me doing so, but at that point I felt obligated to comply with her orders nonetheless.

"Understood, Princess Sonia."

"Very good," Sonia responded with a pleased smile. "Now, let the image of my body be burned into your eyes for the duration of the ritual—a privilege reserved for you and you alone," she said in clear amusement, then walked on toward the spring.

She really seems to be misunderstanding my intentions here...

Not a single untoward thought entered my mind as the sacred ritual commenced; my only job as her guardian was to watch over the ceremony and ensure that it was completed without incident. Though no doubt she was well aware of all that already and had just been trying to tease me.

The princess reached the water's edge and slowly touched the surface with her feet. As her white skin came into contact with the blue spring waters, the two colors silently began to meld together. She then proceeded into the spring; upon reaching the center area, she was submerged up to her waist in the water, and her back arched upward from the surface ever so subtly.

In complete silence, Sonia closed her eyes and clasped her hands together softly in front of her chest. As she offered prayer, her body began to take on a faint glow; what appeared to be particles of light started to rise up from the depths of the water. These tiny orbs began to rise into the air like fireflies, filling up the entirety of the Sacred Spring. I couldn't help but gasp in awe at the magical sight.

The princess's visage was as clear as day as she prayed to the Goddess statue. There was not the slightest hint of impurity, stagnation, or outside distraction in her—there was only purity and virtue.

She turned toward me and looked straight in my direction. Enveloped by the light, her clear and steady eyes were quite striking.

"Some time yet remains before the power fills my body completely. I would like to while away that time by conversing with you."

"If you don't mind speaking with me, then by all means."

"Excellent. I like those who are obedient to me." A tiny smile rose on Sonia's lips. "Sieg, there is one thing I have wondered about throughout this journey."

“What’s that?”

“Why is it you are willing to risk your life for others? Why do you insist on protecting me, the townspeople, and the Orb of Light?” she asked. “Is it the heartfelt desire to serve the greater good by protecting all of humanity? Or is it because it is your job to do so? I have taken an interest in learning about who you are.”

“Well...”

The reason I risk my own life to protect others, huh...

“I protect the Orb of Light because it is my duty to do so,” Sonia said suddenly, before I had the chance to open my mouth. “I was born with the blood of an Oracle of Light, so there were no other options available to me. Every aspect of my life had already been decided as soon as I was born. I was placed into a cloister at a very young age and underwent long periods of training in order to awaken the powers of an Oracle of Light within me.”

She had been fated from the moment she was born to live her life as an Oracle of Light. She was forced to live not as Sonia, but as princess—forced to fulfill her role of Oracle that would save humanity from the clutches of the Demon King.

“Consequently, I have no desire whatsoever to protect humanity. It is not desire, but necessity, that has driven me to do so,” she began, then corrected herself. “No, if anything, I would say I hate humanity. Sometimes I even think the Demon King might as well come back and reduce the world to a shambles.”

“Do you really mean that...?” I asked, surprised.

“I am not so vapid a woman as to spout falsehoods merely to capture attention. Any words I speak are nothing apart from my true, honest feelings,” Sonia said, her mouth twisting into a tell-all smile. “I only spoke of this because *you* are the only one here with me. I certainly would not be able to divulge this to anyone else.”

“You aren’t worried that I’ll tell someone else, then?”

“I have come to see many types of people, and you are not the type to do something so boorish. I am certain of that much,” she asserted.

“Royalty and nobility think of nothing but protecting their privileges and lining their own pockets—they are no more than pigs. The lower classes are all fools who place all the blame for their misfortune on others, grumbling and complaining yet never putting any of their own effort in. And the people who live outside the Royal Capital are all aware that we expend our lives in an effort to maintain the seal on the Demon King, yet they continue to live their own carefree lives as they push the entirety of that burden onto us—they merely drape something over the dirty truth and pretend it does not exist. I do not believe any of them are worthy of protection whatsoever.

“However,” she continued, “having been born as an Oracle of Light, I have been charged with the duty of protecting humankind, and therefore I cannot escape my role of doing so. Though I have deemed them to be filth who are unworthy of my protection, my life must still be spent protecting them. You, Sieg, are different. Unlike me, you are free to make choices in your life—should you search for them, no few options would be available to you. So why do you still choose to put your life on the line to protect these people?” Her gaze locked on me. “Answer me, Sieg.” She seemed to be imploring, or perhaps even praying. “Are the people of this world worth protecting...? Are they worth risking our lives over?”

She asked me these questions as if seeking salvation. Her usual firm resolve was nowhere to be seen—instead, she seemed as if she were ready to burst into tears at any moment. She was like an ice sculpture that had started to crack, and might’ve shattered into a thousand pieces if touched too firmly.

Sonia had probably lived with those conflicted emotions for a long time. Despite being born into the duty of protecting humanity, she wasn’t sure whether humanity was worth protecting in the first place. People thought only of themselves, turning a blind eye to the plights of those less fortunate and abandoning them—they were all fools steeped in their own egotism.

“I became a guard because I had been kicked out of my party. I landed this job through the good graces of the Adventurers’ Guild,” I explained. After being chased out of the Crimson Fangs, the receptionist at the guild had told me about the guard job at the Royal Capital.

“Fighting was pretty much my only skill, so if I couldn’t be an adventurer any

longer, being a guard was about one of the only choices I had left. I didn't really feel a sense of purpose or anything—I just figured that if I was being paid for it, I should do the job properly.”

I was desperate for someone to acknowledge my worth so I could make a living—so desperate that I didn't have time to think about anything else.

“So you say you have been protecting them because it is your job, and you wanted to earn your money?”

“That's how it was at first. However, once I started working, I felt a sense of purpose starting to grow in me after all. If I let the enemy invade the capital, the people would be in danger. The Orb of Light might be taken away from us, and the Demon King would be resurrected and humanity destroyed.

“However,” I continued, “now, the reason I'm working as a guard isn't just because it's my job, nor am I risking my life out of a sense of duty to protect humanity.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Right now, I just want to protect those who are important to me. That includes my fellow guard colleagues, my former party members, and the people of the city. They all took me in after I had lost everything, so I want to keep protecting everyone who lives here. That's why,” I said. “There are people out there I dislike and lots of things happening that are beyond the pale. Sometimes I even question whether humanity as a whole is worth protecting. In the end, though, I decided that I'm willing to risk my life to protect humankind from the demons, if that's what it takes to protect the people I care about.”

If humanity were to be wiped out, I would lose the people close to me as well. So, if I wanted to protect them, I would have to do everything in my power to keep the Orb of Light from falling into the hands of the demons—and by extension, that would lead to protecting all of humankind.

“I see. So humanity as a whole is just an afterthought, then. What a curious philosophy—I had never considered that idea before,” Sonia mused, a smile forming on her face. The cloud of torment that had been hanging over her seemed to have disappeared. “You always manage to exceed my expectations.”

At that moment, the lights that had been gathering around the spring winked out.

"It seems the ritual is over," the princess said, darkness having fallen upon the area once again. She then exited the water and walked up to me. "There is one more thing I would like to ask you, Sieg."

"Whatever you like."

"Am I included among the people you wish to protect?"

"Of course you are."

Upon hearing my response, Sonia hesitated for a moment before choosing her next words, which struck me as odd, considering how outspoken and forthright she normally was.

"If, perchance, the powers of the Oracle of Light were to disappear from me...would you still protect me with your life?" she asked, giving me a serious stare. "Not the Oracle, not the princess...just me, Sonia, as a person?"

As she looked at me, anxiously awaiting my response, for the first time I felt as though I was witnessing a moment of frailty that was appropriate for her age.

"I would absolutely protect you. With my life, if you so desired."

"Is that so..." she said, an expression of relief and happiness washing across her face. Then, as if somehow set free from her worries, she offered a light, soft smile that reminded me of flower petals, then put a hand to her chest and spoke in a gentle voice. "Then I, too, shall swear to protect humanity, in order to protect one who is important to me—you, Sieg."

Chapter 16: In the Shadows

Night had fallen on the grounds of the Sacred Spring.

In a secluded location that seemed forgotten by the world, with the moonlight obscured by the canopy of trees above, a man stood before Gregor. Present via communication magic, the man's appearance was phantomlike. He held no real form, but atop his head were horns, indicating his status as a demon.

"Well, Sir Gregor? Did everything go as planned?"

"No... My apologies."

"Well, that just won't do. You're the one who came up with this idea—luring the princess into the Valley of Resentment, where the environment is harsh and there are no escape routes, then finishing her off there."

"There were some...unforeseen elements."

"You mean that guard they call Sieg?"

"That's right."

"I saw what he did—he truly is a thorn in our side. If he hadn't been there, the princess would've been eliminated by all the monsters we had waiting in the Valley." Sieg and the Fifth Squadron had ended up thwarting their plan, though; the entire monster army they had gathered in the Valley of Resentment had been wiped out.

"Demons can't get close to her while she's on the grounds of the Sacred Spring—her guard must be at least somewhat down. Perhaps you can find an opportunity to assassinate her?"

"That's not possible. Sieg is by her side at all times."

"She really seems to have placed a lot of trust in him. Or—perhaps she just no longer trusts you, Sir Gregor."

The knight commander gritted his teeth and grunted in frustration.

“That Sieg is going to be a huge obstacle when it comes to eliminating the princess. If we want our ambitions to come to fruition, we’ve got to make him disappear—at the earliest possible opportunity,” the demon muttered in disgust. “We will kill the princess and claim the Orb of Light. Then, my plan to resurrect the Demon King upon this earth will be unstoppable...!”

The demon then addressed the knight commander. “Sir Gregor, on the dawn of my King’s resurrection, I shall grant you a special position as well—in exchange, you know what must be done.”

“It shall be done.”

“For now, continue to keep an eye on them,” the demon ordered. “We’ll need to get Sieg out of the picture first. After that comes the princess. With an ally like you on our side, Sir Gregor, there’s no way for me to lose. And besides, if push comes to shove, we still have a trump card up our sleeve,” he added, letting out a smug laugh. “Oh, and if things happen to go south, don’t even think about betraying me, understood?”

“I would never. My soul lies in solidarity with the demons,” Gregor replied.

Chapter 17: Respite

With the ritual at the Sacred Spring completed, we returned to the Royal Capital. While the journey to our initial destination had seen us hounded by attacks from all kinds of monsters, the route home through the Coral Plains was as tranquil as could be—not a single beast reared its head. It was possible that the demons had sent the entirety of their forces to the Valley of Resentment.

Upon arriving at the capital, Sonia addressed me and my Fifth Squadron companions.

“Your performance on this journey was outstanding...especially yours, Sieg. Had you not been present, I would likely no longer be on this earth.”

“I was just doing my duty.”

“Also...the words you spoke to me at the Sacred Spring have given me a renewed confidence in carrying out my own duties as an Oracle of Light.”

“I see.” If I had managed to ease the burden on her heart a little bit, then I was glad for that.

“This time, I shall not fail to award you with medals.”

“There’s no need—your kind words are more than enough. Receiving such high praise from you is as great an honor as anything, Princess Sonia.”

“You are just the type of man who would say such a thing.” Sonia flashed a brief smile.

Observing this exchange from nearby, Seira offered a comment: “Your expression seems somehow less tense now, Your Highness.”

“Is that so?”

“Definitely. You give off a completely different impression than you did when we first met. It feels like your humanity is on display now more than it was then.”

“Well...” Fam theorized, “She did mention Sieg said some things to her.

There's a possibility that had something to do with it."

"What do you suppose he said?" Seira asked.

"Based on her demeanor...maybe something that she was happy to hear? Something that made her feel life was worth living."

"Hmm. I don't have the slightest idea what that might be."

"Something she'd be happy to hear? I bet I know!" Spinoza butted in. "He musta told her which slot machine in the casino pays out the most!"

"You're the only one here who would care about that..." Fam muttered.

Seira then let out a sudden gasp of realization. "What if... What if he confessed his love or something?!"

Princess Sonia's face began to burn bright red. "Wh-What nonsense are you spouting?!" she squeaked out, her voice raised. "Do not say such haphazard things! If this happens again, I shall charge you with the crime of *lèse-majesté* and have you executed!"

"Whaaaat?! I-I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Seira sputtered, bowing repeatedly in apology.

"Hah, wow, she's super pissed," Spinoza observed.

"Though that was quite the odd overreaction she responded with," Fam murmured. "Seira's guess might not have been all that far off."

A wry grin spread across my face as I listened to their conversation. I wasn't going to say a word about what the princess and I had discussed at the Sacred Spring; what happened there would stay between her and me.

After parting ways with the princess and the Knights, we returned to our barracks, where Commander Bolton greeted us.

"Oh, you're back," he said. "Good to see you made it in one piece."

"We only just now made it back," I replied in greeting.

"I heard the news—you put in some top-notch work guarding the princess, huh? You're makin' your old commander proud out there," he said, giving me a

joyful slap on the back.

The other guards around us looked on in admiration, offering their excited commentary.

“Wow, that’s amazing!”

“I can’t believe the Fifth Squadron got tasked with guarding the princess, much less successfully carried it out! Maybe they’ll give us Guards a little more respect now.”

“We should totally throw it in the Knights’ faces next time we see ‘em!”

Turning back to us, the commander went on, “Feel free to take the rest of the day off, all of you. After a long journey like that, I’m sure you’re exhausted. Rest up so you can be fit as a fiddle for work tomorrow.”

Spinoza nearly leaped up into the air in a burst of glee. “Awright! Now we’re talkin’!” The moment she learned she was off the hook for work, she had perked up like a fish dropped back into the water. *She’s about as complicated as a rock.*

“I’d be fine to do a shift after this, honestly...” Seira admitted, which prompted an immediate rebuttal from Spinoza.

“Don’t be dumb! A big part of work is knowin’ when to rest your body! The commander’s actually doin’ us a solid for a change—we can’t let this chance go to waste, y’know?”

“Oh, Goddess, why are your eyes so red?!” Seira shrieked, her shoulders locked in the other woman’s firm grip. “Also, you don’t normally call him ‘Commander’ like that!” It was true; Spinoza typically didn’t bother using his title at all.

“That’s just how badly she doesn’t want to have to work,” Fam explained. “If you decide to go in, then she’ll have to as well.”

“Take the day off! *Do it!*”

“O-Okay, okay! I’ll go ahead and take the day off—for your sake, Spinoza.”

“Woo! That’s the spirit!” Spinoza beamed, snapping her fingers victoriously. “Hell yeah! Been working my fingers to the bone lately; time to go crazy partyin’

and lettin' out all this pent-up frustration!" She was quite eager to enjoy herself on her first day off in a long while.

"Don't you already go crazy partying on a normal day?" Fam grumbled.

"Hah! You don't know a damn thing. Partyng while skippin' out on work and partyng when I know I have an entire day off are two totally different animals!"

"Just don't let loose *too* hard," I warned her.

"The whole point of lettin' loose is to do it *hard*," Spinoza said with a smirk. "What about you, though? You gonna *let loose* with the ladies *all day long* today, huh?" she quipped, belting out a degenerate laugh like some middle-aged guy. Perhaps overexcited for her time off, she then placed her hands on her hips and proceeded to thrust her pelvis vigorously.

"Ugh..." Fam groaned in exhaustion.

"Sheesh, you even make middle-aged guys like *me* uncomfortable," Commander Bolton said, clearly put off.

"Um, so what exactly was that supposed to represent?"

"You're better off not knowing, Seira."

I don't want you ending up corrupted like Spinoza. Please, just stay your pure, innocent self forever.

"With her in the Guard Corps, people are likely to start doubting our moral integrity..." Fam muttered, forehead in palm.

No kidding. I agree wholeheartedly on that point.

We left the barracks, each of us going our separate ways. Spinoza headed out for an early visit to the casino, Seira mentioned having something to do, and Fam was suddenly nowhere to be seen. Everyone was no doubt off to enjoy their day of rest in whatever manner they pleased.

"Now... What should I do?"

Chapter 18: Spinoza's Offer

I might've had the day off, but I didn't have any particular plans for it.

"Well, might as well get some training in," I said to myself and made my way over to the training grounds. Some of the other guards were already there.

"Hey, Sieg. I thought you were off duty today?"

"Well, I didn't have anything else to do, so I figured I'd just spend some time training."

"Huh..."

"You can be way too much of a meathead—it really creeps me out..."

For whatever reason, the other guards were all looking at me as if I were some kind of freak of nature. Despite their stares, I went through my muscle training and my sword swings, giving my body a thorough workout.

"Whew... That should be enough for today."

Once I was finished with my training, I washed off the sweat at the guard dormitory. After I was nice and refreshed, I took a look at the clock on the wall. It was still midday—I had plenty of free time left to spend.

"There's nothing left to do..."

With training done, all the tasks I had to take care of were complete. Normal people probably had their various hobbies to fall back on, but hobbies were a bit of a foreign concept to me.

It had been that way for me ever since my days in the Crimson Fangs. For better or for worse, whether I had been an adventurer or a guard, my job duties had always been so rough that I'd never typically gotten a chance to take any time off. Which made me suddenly realize...

"Maybe I'm just really that boring of a person...?"

I've got nothing I can throw myself into besides work. I have zero breadth or

depth as a person... And not having any hobbies at my age is actually kind of pathetic, isn't it?

Suddenly, I started feeling anxious. "No, no, there's got to be something I'm interested in. I've just got to think."

So I thought and thought. But nothing came to mind.

I have no hobbies and no love interests. Take away my work, and there's nothing left to me.

"Guess I'll take a walk..."

If I stay in my room, my thoughts will end up going bad places. Also, I rather enjoy walking; I could almost call it a hobby in and of itself. Staying in my dorm won't do me any favors—while I'm sitting here waxing philosophical, my precious day off will be over before I know it. I can't afford to waste even a single second.

I went outside and headed toward the city.

The main road was bustling, filled to the brim with men and women of all ages coming and going every which way. I had just started walking down an alleyway that was set apart from the road, when I heard a voice call out.

"Oh, hey there, Sieg! Whatcha doing?"

Looking up, I saw Spinoza, hand raised in greeting.

"Exactly what it looks like—taking a walk."

"Huh? A walk...?"

"Yeah. I finished my daily training regimen, and I didn't have anything else to do."

"Man, you must be feelin' down. Y'know, how you decide to spend your free time determines how much you end up enjoyin' life. Want me to teach you how to enjoy yourself?"

"For you, that just means gambling, right?"

"Of course it's more than just that, what do you take me for? There's booze too!"

“Not exactly something to boast about. You probably should’ve just left it at gambling, actually.”

“Forget about all that. Just leave everything to me, my hobbyless pal.”

I stared blankly at her, unconvinced.

Well, it's true that I'm pretty bothered by the fact that I don't have any hobbies. Might as well try something out. Maybe it couldn't hurt to have Spinoza teach me how to enjoy myself.

“All right, then. I leave myself in your capable hands.”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit! Just leave everything to me—I’ll add a splash of color to your dull, gray existence!” she bellowed, grinning and putting her arm around my shoulder. “Your whole life’s gonna be comin’ up roses from now on!”

...I have concerns.

She ended up taking me to one of the city’s casinos.

“I figured as much.”

“There ain’t nothin’ in the world more fun than gambling. No other hobby out there gives ya that massive rush you feel when you hit the jackpot!” She had that addict’s twinkle in her eye. “All right, now which game to play fir— Hm?”

As we had been wandering around the casino, a burst of cheers suddenly erupted.

What the—?

Turning to look, I saw a large group of spectators gathered around a single table. They were all staring at a rather suave-looking man wearing a feathered cap. He was carrying a number of cards fanned out in his hand, and he wore a rather fake-looking smug grin.

“What are they doing?”

“That’s a poker table,” Spinoza explained.

“Poker, huh... I’ve heard of it before. You’re supposed to take five cards and

make combinations out of them, right?”

“Oh, you’ve heard of it?”

“In my adventuring days, some of the other adventurers used to play it at the pub all the time. Sometimes I see some of the guards playing in the cafeteria at night too.” Occasionally they had even offered to let me play as well—but I didn’t know the rules, so I couldn’t join them.

“What’s the deal with that one player?” I asked Spinoza. “Seems like he’s attracted a crowd.”

“They call that guy ‘Feather’—everybody at the casino knows about him. Supposedly he’s never lost a game of poker in his life.”

“That’s pretty amazing. Is he really that lucky?”

“Luck might have somethin’ to do with it too—but the thing that decides a game of poker more than anything else is reading your opponent. Apparently he knows what cards you’re holdin’ just by lookin’ at your face.”

“Huh.”

“Why don’t the two of you try your luck as well?”

Looking at us from his seat, it was none other than Feather himself who made the offer to us—he must have heard our conversation. He pushed up the brim of his feathered hat, revealing his handsome face. “If you manage to win against me, you can have every last one of my chips.”

“Whoa! Look at that, Sieg! He’s got a whole mountain of ‘em! That’s gotta be like a million or so, right...?!”

There was a massive pile of chips stacked up next to Feather; they towered so high, I pretty much had to tilt my head back to see the top.

“There’s no way we could match a bet of that size, though,” I said. Guards didn’t get paid much, after all—if there was one thing I could be fully confident of, it was our relative poverty.

That...actually feels kind of depressing to say.

“Oh, that’s fine. The two of you can just offer up however many chips you

happen to have on hand.”

“For real?! So that means I’d still get a million if I beat you, even though I only have thirty thousand on me right now?!”

“It sure does.”

“Aw yeah! You’re on, buddy!” Spinoza declared boldly, lured in by the bait of a million chips.

“Are you sure about this...?” I asked her. “Thirty thousand is everything you have, right? If you lose it all, how do you expect to get by until your next payday?”

“C’mon, don’t be so narrow-minded. What’s the point in thinkin’ about what to do if you lose before you even start? My plan is to win, y’know.”

Without even an ounce of hesitation, Spinoza took a seat across from Feather.

I really should follow the example of her positivity.

“Yeah! Show me what you got!”

She was really fired up about challenging him to the poker match—but in the blink of an eye, Feather had her dancing in the palm of his hand, delivering her a devastating loss.

“Wha—?!”

“Hah. Your personality is quite straightforward. Your face immediately gives away whether you have a good hand or a bad hand—I can see right through you.”

When Spinoza had a good hand and he couldn’t beat it, he would back off, but when his hand was the better one, he would always go on the offensive. Seeing her emotions on her face might’ve been part of it, but it seemed like more than just reading her expressions; his accuracy was so pinpoint, it was as if he were looking at her cards directly. There was obviously a good reason he was so full of confidence in challenging people.

“Well, what about you?”

I remained silent at first.

Thinking about it rationally, there's no reason to do this. My chances of winning are extremely slim. But, well...

I cast my gaze over at Spinoza, who was passed out, eyes rolled up into the back of her head.

She may have reaped what she sowed, but this guy took her for everything she had—I can't just hang my head and back off.

“All right. I’ll take you on,” I said, taking a seat across from the man.

For my bet, I offered up all the money I had on me—fifty thousand.

If I lose this, I'll be forced into a life of destitution along with Spinoza, up until the next time we get paid. We might even be reduced to eating dirt to keep from starving.

I took a look at the hand I’d been dealt. I had been watching how the last game progressed—so I was pretty sure the cards in my hand weren’t exactly good.

“I’ll bet every last chip on this hand,” I declared, causing a stir among the spectators.

“He’s betting everything...?!”

“Is his hand that good?”

“I see. So you’ve made your gambit,” Feather said, touching his hand to his chin. “Your expression is nowhere near as easy to read as your friend’s was—but just by looking at you, I can sense your heart beating as if I were holding it in my very hand,” he explained, then offered a fearless smile. “Your hand, my good sir, is nothing but trash. You knew it was trash, yet you played it nonetheless. Did you really think that would make me back out?”

“Look at that...!”

“Feather’s going all in?!”

My opponent had bet the entire stack of chips he had in front of him.

“I have to say, I truly do applaud your courage. Unfortunately, though, it

won't work on me. My hand is undoubtedly better than yours."

With those words, he turned his cards around for me to see. "Four of a kind—I have four eights. There are only two hands that can beat this: a better four-of-a-kind or a straight flush. Based on your expression, though, I'm certain there's no chance of you having either. I win," Feather gloated triumphantly.

Well, drat... I had heard the best hands in poker consist of having multiples of the same numbered cards. If that's the case, I'm completely out of luck with this hand.

"Now, show me your hand," he said, turning out his hands with a flourish of encouragement.

"I have to say... Well played," I admitted. However, I still had one last hidden opportunity—though the likelihood of it happening was incredibly low.

I took in a deep breath, prayed, and flipped my cards around.

At that instant, a chorus of voices cried out: "Wha—?!" Feather, the spectators, and even the formerly passed-out Spinoza were stunned, eyes wide with disbelief.

Hm...? Why is everyone gawking like that? Were they just that shocked that I was ballsy enough to bet my entire stack on a hand like this?

"It's a royal flush..." one spectator murmured. "The strongest hand in poker: a ten, jack, queen, king, and ace, all in the same suit. It beats Feather's four of a kind!"

The crowd erupted with excitement. "And since Feather bet everything he had, they can't play another hand! Sieg is the winner!"

"Impossible!" Feather scratched his head, obviously shaken. "Your expression clearly told me you had been dealt a terrible hand! How could you possibly remain so calm after getting a royal flush?!"

"I had heard that you can judge the strength of a person's hand by reading their expression and heartbeat—so I decided to challenge you without bothering to learn the rules of poker in much detail at all. If I wasn't sure what hands were actually good, then you wouldn't get reliable info by reading my

expression either.”

“Wh-What kind of strategy is that...?! It’s insane! Even if the idea came to mind, nobody would use it! Do you realize how low the odds of winning would be?!” the man shouted, struggling to comprehend.

“The odds would’ve been even lower had I challenged you with a full grasp of the rules. Besides, isn’t taking risks at the crucial moment what gambling is all about?”

At my words, Feather crumpled into his seat, dumbfounded. Soon, he adjusted his crooked hat, and a defeated smile appeared on his face. “Hah. To think I’d be the one to learn something from you... I’ve lost. It turns out you were the true gambler.”

Chapter 19: At the Church

“Man, you really saved my ass back there with that win, Sieg! Now I don’t gotta eat dirt after all! I owe ya big time!” With a broad smile, Spinoza squeezed her leather coin purse tightly in her hands, rubbing her cheek up against it lovingly.

“You sure are in a good mood.”

After winning a million gil by beating Feather at poker, I had given Spinoza back all the money she had lost, along with a little extra. Despite having money, I wasn’t really planning on spending much; if it meant Spinoza would actually do what I said, it was a small price to pay.

“But wow, you sure have some crazy luck, getting a royal flush on the first hand! You shoulda stuck around the casino a while longer.”

“It was probably just beginner’s luck. If I got a taste for winning, I’d probably end up getting sucked right into an actual gambling addiction.”

“Huh. Oh well. Anyway, thanks! I’m gonna head right over to the pub and spend some of that money you gave me.”

“Don’t drink too much.”

“You got it!”

As I watched Spinoza head off into the distance, waving her hand, I thought to myself: *She’s definitely going to drink too much.*

There was still some time before sunset, so I decided I might as well wander around town for a little while longer. I left the central avenue and headed toward the city outskirts.

Compared to the street I had been on, the area was pretty much deserted. As I headed around a corner, a young girl who had also been turning the corner from the opposite direction collided with me heavily with a *thud*, eliciting a shriek and sending her tumbling onto her rear end owing to our difference in

size.

"I'm so sorry!" the girl exclaimed.

"Don't worry about it. Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah. I just hit my bottom a little..." she said, and timidly rose to her feet.

That's when I heard another female voice ring out.

"I sincerely apologize! I wasn't paying close enough attention...! Are you hurt?" the woman asked, rushing over to us. She was clad in bikini armor—and was none other than Seira. "Wait, what? Sarge?"

Upon realizing it was me, she simply stared in bewilderment.

"Oh, it's you, Seira," I said, then turned my gaze to the girl. "So you had a kid this whole time? I never realized."

"N-No, she's not mine! These children are being raised by the city church."

"They don't have any family? So they're orphans?"

"That's right. The sisters have custody of them, but they don't have enough people to watch them, so I help out sometimes."

"I see..."

I saw that the girl was hiding behind Seira. Up until earlier, she had seemed rather anxious, but once Seira had shown up, she looked much more at ease. The little one must've really taken to her.

"If you don't mind, would you like to come by the church? I'd like to introduce you to one of the nuns."

"You know, that sounds fine. I don't have any other plans, really." It wasn't going to do me any good to just keep walking aimlessly.

I walked alongside Seira as she held hands with the girl. Eventually we arrived at a vast lot just outside of town, where soon, a forlorn stone church came into view before us. After we crossed the gate, the area opened up into a courtyard, where we saw a number of children around a young woman wearing a habit.

"I'm back, Sister!"

“Oh, my. And who might that be?”

“This is Sieg. He’s my colleague.”

“So you are Sieg?” the nun said, touching her hands together happily.

“You know me, then?”

“Oh, yes, Seira speaks of you quite often. She says you are incredibly strong, act with sincerity, and take great pride in your duty as a guard.”

“I’d say she’s exaggerating.”

The nun chuckled. “She always seems so delighted when she talks about you—she brags about your accomplishments as if they were her own.”

“S-Sister! You don’t need to mention that!” Seira squealed, seeming rather embarrassed.

The children, seeing this, started asking questions.

“Miss Seira, is this guy your boyfriend?”

“Have you kissed yet? Have you?”

“No, he is not! And no, we haven’t kissed!” Seira refuted, turning beet red.

“The children really seem to like her,” I said.

“She visits the church often, to play with the children and to donate.”

“Donate?”

“It pains me to say this, but our church is not particularly well-off. Seira’s donations have helped us a great deal.”

“Is she really able to give that much on a guard’s salary?”

Hearing my doubt, Seira, who had been playing with the children, turned around. “I’m living in the barracks right now, so I don’t have to worry about my rent or food expenses, since they’re taken out of my pay automatically. It’s not really a big deal.”

“That doesn’t really leave any money for you to spend in your spare time, though.”

“I’m content with coming here to play with the children or helping the

townspeople out when I have days off," she explained with a smile. "If I can be of use to others by donating to the church, it's a small price to pay. Seeing the smiles on the faces of everyone at the church is enough to keep me happy."

I fell silent, blinded.

"What's wrong, Sarge? Why are you holding your hand in front of your eyes?"

"Sorry, you're just too bright for me to handle," I said.

Seira merely blinked in confusion.

The sake of the world and the sake of others came before her own. She wasn't forcing herself to act that way either—it came as naturally as walking. It looked to me almost as if she were surrounded by a brilliant halo. *Could she be the Goddess reborn...?*

"Miss Seira, look! I drew a picture!"

"Miss Seira's gonna play hide-and-seek with me!"

The innocent eyes of children can see straight through to the true nature of anyone. The fact that these kids loved her so much meant that she really must've been a woman of pure heart.

"Sister...put this toward your expenses, please," I said, and handed her a leather pouch. When she saw what was inside the bulging sack, her eyes went wide with surprise.

"What?! This is so much... Are you certain?"

"Yeah. It's just some quick cash I landed at the casino. It doesn't really do me much good—it would be put to better use raising these children."

The future of the Royal Capital would eventually be entrusted to the children. So for the sake of that future, it made complete sense to invest the money into the children rather than spend it gratifying my own selfish desires.

"Thank you so very much...! We will put it to careful use...!" the sister said, bowing deeply toward me.

"Thanks, mister!" The children didn't really seem to understand, but they followed the sister's example and gave their thanks as well.

I smiled and raised my hand cordially in response. “Get yourselves something tasty to eat.”

“Are you sure it was okay to give them so much money, Sieg...?”

“It’s fine. I honestly have no idea what I would even use it on. I live in the barracks too, so I’m not really wanting for food or shelter. That, and...”

“And...?”

“Well, I kind of wanted to follow *your* example too.”

“Mine?”

“Yeah. You might’ve told the sister I was strong, but to me, you’re the stronger one by far.”

“But... But I’m not...”

Seira blushed embarrassment, seeming rather flustered, but eventually a gentle smile washed over her lovely face.

“Still, hearing you say that makes me very happy.”

There was a kindness within her, one that sought no reward, and it filled her with the most gentle kind of strength out there.

Chapter 20: In My Room with Fam

It was nighttime. I lay on my bed in my barracks room, my hands clasped behind my head.

“I never ended up finding a hobby after all, huh.”

I hadn’t ended up getting hooked on gambling. I’d had a good time playing with the kids at the church, but I really wasn’t sure that would count as a hobby.

Well, it’s not something I can force. If I keep on trying out different things, eventually I’ll land on something I can call an actual hobby.

“You know, I ended up seeing both Spinoza and Seira, but I never ran into Fam. I wonder what she was up to.”

As I stared up at the ceiling talking to myself, a voice responded from underneath me.

“Did you want something from me?”

I looked down and saw Fam’s face peeking out from under the bed.

“Oh, you’re here, Fam?”

“I’m your shadow, remember? Wherever you go, I’m already there.”

“You’re trespassing, though,” I said with an exhausted sigh. “You weren’t really with me all day, were you?”

“I sure was—both when you were going to the casino with Spinoza, and when you were playing with Seira and the church kids.”

I hadn’t noticed her at all. I had vaguely wondered if she *might* have been there—but realizing that she actually *had* been there made me a bit uncomfortable.

“Don’t you have anything better to do...?”

“My hobby is observing you. My time spent doing so has been very rewarding

—seeing you doing various things gives me a sense of satisfaction.”

“So you’re basically a stalker.”

“I also keep track of the food you eat at the cafeteria to get a broader sense of your eating habits, and I fish through the trash in your room to get more insight into your daily life.”

“So you’re *literally* a stalker.” *One of the nastiest types, at that.*

“By the way, Sieg, do you have any plans to take a lover?”

“What’s this all about?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought that if you took a lover, it might be fun to spy on the two of you making out with each other and have my mind broken.”

“You sure have some messed-up fetishes.” *Is she some kind of pervert?*

“You know, I’ve already started to feel strange inside when I’m spying on other lovers and couples making out.”

Yup, she’s a pervert. Her mind is already broken beyond repair.

“Anyway, why didn’t you just come out? You didn’t have to stay hidden.”

“I’m nothing but a shadow. And besides...”

“Besides?”

“I’m quite sensitive by nature. If I happened to ask to be included but ended up getting turned down, I wouldn’t be able to let it go for a full month. I’d have flashbacks every time I went to bed—I’d bury my face in my pillow and flail my legs in frustration thinking about it every night.”

“You put on such a cool and collected front, but you’ve got some major psychological issues, huh.”

“I really hate being excluded. So rather than get hurt, I choose to keep away from people from the very outset.”

“That’s not really something to be proud of,” I said with a strained smile. “You’re overthinking it. Nobody’s going to exclude you. I’m sure if you approached people, they’d all accept you with open arms.”

“I don’t trust them,” Fam insisted. “People can say anything they want. Words are meant for lying. Besides, even you don’t know what lies in other people’s hearts, do you?”

“I mean no, I don’t... Wow, this is a really deep-rooted issue.” It was almost unbelievable how suspicious she was—she seemed to have some major trust issues.

I had an idea, though. “In that case, let’s put it a different way: if nothing else, everything I said earlier definitely applies in my case. If you approached me, I’d accept you with open arms.” I might not have been able to speak for everyone else, but I could certainly speak for myself. “Do you believe me when I say that?”

“Well... In my experience, you did accept my advances from the very start, when I wanted to play with you. So it might be worth considering,” Fam murmured, resting her dainty chin on her hand in thought.

Then, suddenly, she noticed the hands of the clock on the wall. “Oops. It’s time for me to go to bed.”

“That’s awfully early. It’s only nine.”

“I always get tired around this time.”

Looking more closely, I saw that her eyelids did indeed seem heavy. She let out a tiny yawn reminiscent of a cat’s.

“Well, good night, then,” she said, and started to go back under my bed.

“Wait, why here?”

“I don’t like sleeping in places where I’m all by myself. I don’t normally ever sleep in my own room or bed.”

“You don’t mean...”

“Yes, I’ve been sleeping either under your bed or up in the ceiling this whole time.”

I had no response for this but silence.

So she’s basically been living in my room all along without my permission...

Fam was quite small, so she could probably squeeze herself into pretty much any nook or cranny. Maybe that was also why she hadn't grown very much for her age.

"In that case, use my bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

"Thanks for being considerate, but I prefer where I am. When I sleep in open spaces, I have trouble actually sleeping because I worry too much about enemy attacks."

"You sure are a handful..."

Fam then disappeared underneath my bed.

I fell silent once again.

It feels weird knowing there's another person right beneath you.

Oh well... Maybe I'll just try to pretend I'm sleeping in a bunk bed. Though I feel like that would be one hell of a cramped bottom bunk.

Chapter 21: False Accusation

I woke up the next morning before the sun had quite risen above the horizon. Traces of night still lingered outside the window; the city, enveloped in faint darkness, was still asleep.

I took a peek under my bed but saw no trace of Fam. I wasn't sure if she had gone somewhere, or if she had already secreted herself away into my shadow. Though it didn't really matter either way—I was going to do what I needed to do anyway.

However, I was just about to head out to my morning training when I noticed something.

"Hm? I'm missing a gauntlet..."

One of the gloves of the armor I usually wore was gone—I couldn't find it anywhere.

The gauntlets had been given to me by Haruna back when I was in the Crimson Fangs; they had my name engraved on them. I remembered how she had carved the name in herself, jokingly telling me, "I mean, you've got to write your name on them—what if you lose them?"

Of course Nacht and Irene had cracked up at that, reminding her that I wasn't a kid being sent off to school. It was one of my fond memories from the time period when we were still a functional party.

"Don't really have much choice... I'll have to look for it later." It would be time for work after not too long, and I didn't want to be late.

I finished up and left the room. After about an hour of training at the training grounds, I went back to the barracks and washed up, by which time the sun had risen and it was time for work.

When I arrived, Commander Bolton immediately called out to me: "Hey, Sieg, over here. I need to let you and your team know about something."

What's this all about...? His unusual demeanor left me with a strange sense of unease.

The rest of the Fifth Squadron and I gathered over in the commander's office. He took in a drag of his cigar and, after making sure nobody else was nearby, let out a puff of smoke and spoke to us in a solemn voice. "It turns out the Orb of Light's been stolen, apparently."

"What?!" we all gasped in unison. *The Orb of Light—stolen?!*

"Whoa, what the hell?! The Demon King's sealed in that thing, isn't he? Doesn't that mean he's gonna resurrect?" Spinoza asked.

"No, the Oracle of Light just recently infused the seal with more energy, so he shouldn't come back to life anytime soon—the sealing power she added in should keep him locked up tight," Bolton responded.

"But the power of the seal weakens naturally over time, doesn't it?" Seira asked.

"That's right," the commander confirmed. "So we gotta find it quick, before all hell breaks loose. The Orb by itself isn't gonna keep him in check forever."

"Commander, who stole the Orb?" I asked outright.

"No idea. Apparently the knights on vault watch missed their regular report this morning, and when the other knights went running in to check on 'em, they were unconscious and the door to the treasure vault was open. By the time they went in, someone had already run off with the Orb."

"So those guys who ran in probably did it, right? They're playin' dumb."

"It's certainly common for these things to play out with the first person to discover the problem being the culprit... That's a surprisingly apt guess for you, Spinoza," Fam agreed.

"Right? If we beat the crap outta whoever that is, they might spill the beans!" Spinoza roared.

"No, no violence! And we mustn't doubt our people either! Without any firm evidence, we'd just be jumping to conclusions!" Seira insisted.

"I have to agree with Seira," Commander Bolton added. "Besides, it wasn't

just a single knight who ran in there—there were several. There's no way one of them could've snuck in early."

"For real?"

"First of all, there were a decent number of knights standing guard. There's nobody in the Knight Corps who could incapacitate that many people so quickly without anybody else noticing. So there must've been some third party who infiltrated the treasure vault and made off with the thing. I'm sure the Knights are searching like crazy for 'em right about now," Bolton said, then blew a puff of smoke from his cigar. "They might even reach out to us too—we'll help 'em out, but we're sure as hell gonna make 'em ask *rereal* nice," he added with a wicked grin.

He seemed intent on letting loose some of his pent-up frustrations with them.

Suddenly, though, we were interrupted:

"Commander Bolton! The Knight Corps is here!"

"Speak of the devil," he muttered with a grimace, putting his cigar down. At nearly the exact same moment, the door was thrust open forcefully, and the knights started flooding in.

"Whoa, there. Why so rough, fellas?" Bolton spat sarcastically, his gaze fixed on the man in the lead: Knight Commander Gregor.

Sir Gregor did not even respond; instead, he raised his hand in signal, and the rest of the knights raised their weapons in unison. The tip of each sword and spear converged, focused on a single target:

Me.

"What exactly are you doing...?" I asked.

"Sergeant Sieg, we are taking you into custody under suspicion of stealing the Orb of Light."

"Excuse me...?"

Well, that accusation sure came out of nowhere. So they suspect that I stole the Orb?

"Hey. What's the meaning of this? Explain yourself," Bolton demanded of Sir Gregor, glaring.

"There is nothing to explain; it is exactly as I said. He is under suspicion of stealing the Orb of Light, and therefore we are taking him into custody."

"That's impossible!" Seira declared loudly. "Sieg was with me at the church yesterday! There's no way he could've stolen the Orb!"

Unfortunately, Sir Gregor was quick to counter this. "The Orb was stolen at night. Your testimony is insufficient as an alibi."

"But...!" she protested. "There's no way Sieg would steal the Orb! He's put his life on the line fighting for the sake of the Royal Capital time and time again, hasn't he?! Just like when he protected Her Highness the Princess! Sir Gregor, you understand that as much as anyone, don't you?!"

"It's possible all of that was an act. If he's been conspiring with the demons, putting his life on the line in battle is not sufficient proof of his loyalty."

Seira gritted her teeth. "What you just said is an insult to all the hard work Sieg has put in up until now! There's no way he's in league with the demons!"

"Do not let your emotions cloud your judgment, woman," Sir Gregor said, his cold words as sharp as a knife. "What you say is based on your own preconceived notion and has no factual basis. When people are biased by their feelings, they lose their ability to see the truth."

"But..." Seira stammered, unsure how to respond, when suddenly, another voice rang out.

"Hold on a sec. Sieg, what were you doin' around the time the Orb was stolen, anyway? All you need is someone who can verify that for ya and you're good, right?" Spinoza said, rooting a pinkie finger around in her ear. "So how about it, any luck there?"

"Well, last night, I had retired to my room, and Fam happened to be there."

"Oh, well, then, problem solved, right? If Fam was there, you've got an alibi. She saw ya, didn't she?"

"I, um..."

As Fam was about to respond, I suddenly noticed something: there was a wicked gleam in Sir Gregor's eyes as he stared at us, as if he were anxiously awaiting the moment his prey would fall into his trap.

It was at that point that a certain possibility crossed my mind.

"Hold on a sec," I said, interrupting Fam. "She was definitely there in the room with me, but she fell asleep early on. She wouldn't be able to prove my innocence."

"Huh?" Spinoza grunted, confused.

"Sieg... What are you doing...?" Fam asked.

My allies all looked at me in confusion. I couldn't blame them; I had just stopped someone from verifying my alibi.

Fam was indeed with me that night; she was asleep underneath my bed. She would've been able to testify to the fact that I was in my room. However, she was also a fellow member of the Fifth Squadron—not exactly a perfectly unbiased third party. Therefore, not only was her credibility rather weak when it came to verifying my alibi, it was possible they'd even try to charge her with perjury and take her into custody along with me. That look in Gregor's eyes when Fam had been about to speak up—it was one that I only ever saw on men who were hatching those types of nefarious schemes.

"Well, aren't you the clever one..." Sir Gregor muttered in a barely audible whisper.

"Hmph," he then continued, speaking normally. "I would imagine not. You could not have been in your room the whole night, after all—seeing as we have evidence of your crime right here." With a smile plastered on his face, the knight commander pulled out an item that gave me quite the shock upon seeing it: the gauntlet I thought I had lost.

"We found this on the ground in the treasure vault. It has your name engraved upon it. Tell us, Sieg—is this gauntlet yours?"

"Yes... It is." My name was on it—there was no getting around that fact.

"In that case, this is incontrovertible proof. You dropped this gauntlet while

you were in the treasure vault stealing the Orb.”

I fell silent, considering the situation.

Someone must have stolen the gauntlet from my room last night and ran off with it. Then, they left it in the treasure vault—to frame me as the culprit. That must've been their plan all along.

Sir Gregor really did have us dancing to his tune. Even if Fam had given me an alibi, he was ready to present irrefutable evidence—and if things had gone south, she would've gotten taken in for perjury too. I'd just barely managed to keep that from happening...but it wasn't enough to prove my own innocence.

“It all seems way too convenient, if you ask me,” Commander Bolton cut in. “Someone else had to have set him up to be the fall guy for all this.”

“Spare me your speculations, Bolton. We have evidence. If nothing else, we must bring him in for interrogation,” Sir Gregor said, then turned to his men. “Take him away!”

The knights began to do as they were told, but were interrupted.

“Sarge!”

“Hey, where the hell you think you’re goin’, you bastards?”

“Sorry, but I can’t allow you to haul him off like that...”

The Fifth Squadron was ready to put up a fight. Both sides glared at each other, and things looked as if they could explode at any moment.

At this rate, a fight’s going to break out—and if that happens, my comrades could end up in harm’s way as well.

“Stand down, everyone,” I ordered, before the three of them could draw their weapons. It would’ve been simple enough to defeat the knights and escape from the situation, but we’d immediately be branded as criminals. I couldn’t let them get caught up in the situation as well.

“I’ll be fine,” I explained. “I’ll prove my innocence and come back. I promise,” I said, fully understanding how difficult that would be. Sir Gregor was completely convinced I was the culprit. With me in custody, he would no doubt try to forcibly carry out his sentence in order to keep his honor intact.

That left me with only one way to prove my innocence: find the true culprit—the one who framed me—and bring them in. I wouldn't be able to move about freely while locked up in prison, but I still had to find some way to pull that feat off if I wanted to prove I had nothing to do with the crime.

Chapter 22: Torture

I was hauled off to prison by the Knight Corps.

The prison itself, originally a fortress, was surrounded by a deep moat and was kept under extremely tight security; it was touted as being impossible to escape from. We entered via a drawbridge in front, which was the only entrance.

Once inside, they confiscated all of my weapons and armor, then had me change into a prison outfit and locked my hands up in shackles. I was then taken to a small room within the facility—which just so happened to be a torture chamber. There, well-used devices such as large crosses and wooden horses were out on display, and the iron walls were caked with dark red stains.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” a voice called out.

The person who had been expecting me was a blonde woman clad in a full set of bondage gear. She had a black leather whip grasped tightly in her hand.

“I am Miss Tiara, the torturer. I have been tasked with torturing you today. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“You’re being awfully polite,” I said. “I always pictured torturers as being a bit more coarse.”

Miss Tiara giggled. “I do come from a noble family, so it’s difficult to contain my elegance. I give off an entirely different aura from that of the commoners.”

“Well, now. Why would someone of noble descent choose to become a torturer?”

A torturer was a behind-the-scenes profession—one that was loathed by many. It wasn’t a career path nobles would tend to seek out willingly.

The knights nearby began to speak up in response to my question.

“Miss Tiara is what you’d call a sadist with a capital *S*. I hear she used to subject her servants at home to just about every method of torture possible.”

"She would strip the male servants naked, put them in collars with leashes, and take them on walks around town, apparently."

"She even managed to break the nobleman she was engaged to in the same way. The head of the family didn't know what to do with her, so they arranged for her to work here."

"Which seems to have ended up being Miss Tiara's true calling in life. She's been working as a torturer at this prison ever since."

Apparently she was quite the deviant. "Doesn't really sound like someone I'd want to get involved with," I commented.

"Well, that's a rather heartless thing to say. However, since you're a prisoner here, you and I will be getting to know each other *very* intimately," Miss Tiara explained. "Once someone has fallen into my hands, any information they're hiding is as good as divulged. I could make even a voiceless stone spill every last one of its secrets."

"I've done nothing wrong—I don't have any secrets to spill."

"Heh. We shall see how long that attitude lasts. I'll have you know, I thrive on making spirited men like you crumble before me."

"You're not listening to a word I say, are you..."

Apparently it was no use trying to have a conversation with her.

After stripping the top half of my body naked, they affixed my arms and legs to an X-shaped board. Miss Tiara then stood before me holding her leather whip and, licking her lips, pulled it taut with both hands to let loose a fierce, audible *slap*.

It did seem like quite the vulnerable position to be in. Watching this, the knights went pale.

"Well, we'd better get going, then."

"Miss Tiara's torture is so brutal, I can't bear to watch... Besides, they say if you stay and watch even once, you'll be scarred for life."

They all made a hasty exit out of the room.

“What a shame. It’s so much more exciting with an audience,” Miss Tiara murmured in disappointment and, once the iron door had closed, the sound of leather rubbing on leather squeaked out as she squeezed her whip tightly, smirking.

“Well, then—let’s begin.” With a powerful motion, she struck my upper body with the whip, and a dry sound rang out loudly.

Ka-rack!

I winced, and Miss Tiara’s face lit up with pleasure. “Heh. It’s difficult to bear such agony, isn’t it? I know all about the human body—I’m quite familiar with exactly where to hit you to cause pain.” With that, she raised her whip and snapped it outward again.

Ka-rack!

She let out an elated laugh. “It hurts so badly you can’t even speak, am I right?!” Her eyes were ablaze, and she was breathing heavily. She was squeezing her whip extremely tightly, unable to contain her ecstasy.



“It’s in your best interests to confess as soon as possible,” she went on with a giggle. “Though I don’t plan on stopping the torture even after you do!”

What’s the point in giving up any information at all, then? It’s not exactly a fair trade if you’re just going to get tortured either way.

“Ahhh...! Why is it so enjoyable to make other people suffer? I can feel every cell in my body crying out in delight...!” Her face contorted in exaggerated pleasure as she twitched slightly; I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was completely gone.

She’s taken over the torture entirely for her own purposes... She couldn’t care less about getting information out of anyone; she just wants to beat the living daylights out of someone with her whip.

Oh well... I should take this opportunity to think some things over.

Someone stole the Orb of Light. Then, they tried to pin the blame on me by leaving my gauntlet behind in the treasure vault. The gauntlet had been in my room up until last night—which meant that someone managed to get into my room and get back out with it.

Anyone could’ve gotten into my room—I never keep the door locked. I never leave anything of value lying around anyway, and the other members of the Fifth Squadron come to visit me in my room fairly often.

Fam was in my room that night as well, under the bed. Knowing her, there’s a possibility she saw the intruder. I didn’t let her say anything earlier because there was a chance she’d be arrested for it, but if nothing else I should probably listen to what she has to say.

“You’ve been awfully quiet for a while now. You didn’t die already, did you? The torture has barely even begun.” Seeming none too pleased with my total silence as I mulled things over, Miss Tiara called out to me in a high-pitched voice. “What point is there in torturing you if you don’t cry for me? Go on, cry with everything you’ve got, like a newborn child!”

Ka-rack!

I continued my musings instead.

But even if I wanted to hear Fam out, I don't have any means of contacting her while I'm inside the prison. There's no way Gregor would allow me to have visitors. If only I had some way of establishing communication with people on the outside from in here...

"Hey! You!"

At that point, Miss Tiara had begun shouting at me in a shrill tone. "You haven't said a single thing this whole time! Are you even listening to me?! I haven't given you permission to die yet!"

"Will you *shut up*? I'm trying to think here."

"Wha—?!"

She must not have expected a retort like that. Completely bewildered by my response, she simply stood there staring, mouth opening and closing awkwardly like a pet fish waiting for its next meal. Her eyes went wide; her pride as both a noble and as a professional had taken a serious blow.

"D-Do you even understand the situation you're in right now? You are a prisoner, and I am your torturer! You aren't allowed to talk back to me!"

Ka-rack!

Her whip went aflame as she unleashed a constant stream of blows upon my body, one after the other. When the rain of attacks finally subsided, she looked at me with my head hung, then grinned broadly.

"Heh. It seems you've finally learned your place, haven't you?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, raising my head. "Anyway, how much longer is the torture supposed to last? I'm starting to get thirsty, and I'd like to get some water."

She was stunned—her attacks were having no effect.

Upon realizing that fact, Miss Tiara instinctively lashed out with her whip.

Ka-RACK!

"It would be wise of you to stop putting on a brave face and pretending to be unfazed... I might end up accidentally killing you, you know?"

"I'm not pretending at all, though. There's nothing to be fazed by—and you

couldn't kill me if you tried," I added, offering her a provocative smile. "I haven't been making any noise because there hasn't been any need to."

Eyes wide with shock once again, she bit down hard on her thick lower lip in frustration. Red blood began to ooze down her chin.

"Oh, will you look at that. You have human blood after all," I taunted. "I honestly thought for a second you'd have purple demon's blood."

Miss Tiara looked mortified at my insult, but soon her mouth twisted back into a smirk. "Heh. Very well, let's try this another way," she said, raising a finger emphatically as if she had just come up with the perfect bit of devilry. "If I'm not able to get you to talk, then I'll have your little comrades arrested and put them through torture in your place. Maybe then you'll have something to tell me."

"What did you say...?"

She let out a smug laugh. "That's much better! Finally, you show some expression! Perhaps now you realize who has the upper hand here?" Cackling, she then brought her face up to mine, so close that it felt as though her eyes might pull me right in. "I will torment your companions right before your very eyes—so severely that every moment of living will be pure agony to them."

The moment she said those words, my mind went completely blank, and my blood began to boil. I felt an intense anger welling up inside me. Before I realized it, my hands and feet were free, and the restraints that held them in pieces.

"Huh?!" Miss Tiara's eyes shot open wide with astonishment yet again.

I grabbed the woman by the throat, lifted her up in the air, and threw her entire body up against the stone wall with a *thud*. The impact knocked the wind out of her, and a choked gasp escaped her mouth.

"You can hurt me as much as you like. But," I said, putting my face up close to hers, "if you dare lay a finger on my companions, I won't show you an ounce of mercy. You realize it would only take one tiny squeeze for me to snap your scrawny little neck." Informing her of this in as menacing a voice as possible—which I might not have fully succeeded at—I began to tighten my grip around

her throat, and my fingers sank into her flesh.

The color instantly began to drain from Miss Tiara's cheeks. Her pale white face soon nodded forward like some kind of broken doll, and she began flailing her limbs back and forth in the air, struggling to escape my death grip.

"Le... Let me go...! Please...!" she pleaded, begging desperately for her life.

I released my grip, and she fell to her rear end on the stone floor. She brought her hands to her red, swollen neck as she coughed painfully, her eyes watering. A pungent odor reached my nose, and I noticed a puddle of liquid forming at her feet; apparently she had soiled herself in her state of panic.

All of her feistiness from before had vanished completely—it was as if she had aged rapidly into an old woman.

I cast her a gaze of pity, then turned to walk away.

"Wh-Where are you going...?!" Miss Tiara finally managed to muster the strength to ask.

I turned to face her, and saw her entire body flinch.

"I've had more than enough of this farce. I'm going back to my cell. Hurry up and call the knights."

"Y-Yes, sir."

Chapter 23: A Visitor to the Prison

After that, a prison guard escorted me to my jail cell.

They were keeping me in a special wing located on the top floor of the prison. There were no other cells in the area; I was locked up alone inside a single wide-open room. In the prison guard's own words: "This is the part of the prison where we lock up the people guilty of the most serious crimes. The bars here are so sturdy, even a rampaging dragon wouldn't be able to break through them." Or so he said.

They really are giving me the royal treatment, aren't they.

I suppose that shouldn't be much of a surprise, though, considering they suspect me of stealing the Orb of Light. It'd only be natural to see such an act as not only betraying one's country but betraying all of humanity.

"I sure am bored, though..."

Unsurprisingly, there was nothing at all inside the cell. Normally there would at least be a guard stationed outside, but it was always possible the prisoner might steal the keys, so nobody stayed anywhere near the cell. That meant there was no one to talk to.

Since I had nothing but free time, I decided to get a workout in. I had finished about a hundred one-fingered handstand push-ups, when I heard a noise from somewhere in the dimly lit building where no one else should have been.

Who could that be...?

The sun should be just about to set. Maybe one of the guards is bringing me something to eat? It'll be prison food, though—I doubt I can expect it to be particularly palatable. Still, I'll take whatever protein I can get to maintain my muscles.

Wait... I can't hear footsteps anymore. That's odd—I was sure they were headed this way. Maybe I was imagining things?

As those thoughts were running through my mind, a figure appeared in front of my cell.

“You’re...”

“Hi there. Working out, even in prison? You really never miss a day.”

I had determined it wasn’t a prison guard—instead, it was someone who shouldn’t have been there at all.

Standing there in front of my cell was Fam. Dressed in all black, barely indistinguishable from the darkness around her, the small-statured woman might as well have not been there at all. I could see her right in front of me, but her presence barely even registered.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m your shadow, remember?”

“The security in this prison was supposed to be extremely tight.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate me. As far as I’m concerned, it was an easy mission,” she said. “I’ve been taking great pains to stalk you every day in anticipation of something like this happening.”

“Don’t try to spin stalking into some noble act.” *It’s just your hobby.*

“Although—I have to admit, I intended on making it here without being spotted, but the guards in front of the special wing managed to catch sight of me.”

“You’re not worried about that?”

“Not at all. They’re visiting dreamland at the moment.”

Apparently she had knocked them out—meaning the noises I had heard earlier might’ve been the sounds of a fight.

“Well...? I’m sure you didn’t come here just to check how I was doing.”

Fam nodded in affirmation. “I’m here to break you out.”

Taken aback, I paused briefly before responding. “There’s no need for that. I’ll get out after I prove my innocence. If I break out now, you could end up getting in trouble for it as well.”

“If you’re worried about crimes, I’m already guilty of one. I broke into the jail.”

“If they haven’t found you, they can’t prove you committed a crime.”

“I have to be honest, Sieg, there’s a reason we can’t afford to take our time here. After you were arrested, monsters started attacking the capital.”

“Monsters?”

“That’s right. It was almost as if they were waiting for the exact moment you were no longer around.”

The timing’s too perfect to be a coincidence. Could someone be pulling the strings from behind the scenes? I have no way to know for sure...but what I do know is that monsters are attacking the capital.

Then, Fam told me something that surprised me even more.

“I have more bad news: the monsters have already made it inside the capital.”

“What...?”

So they managed to breach the gates...?

“What happened to the Guard Corps? They met the enemy at the gates, right? And wouldn’t the Knight Corps have joined in as well?” I asked, suddenly getting a bad feeling. “Don’t tell me—was everyone killed?” *Seira, Spinoza, Eleanor...all of them?*

“No, actually, a strange thing happened with the Knights—they all suddenly started going wild and rampaging. It was just like that adventurer we encountered the other day.”

Fam’s words caused memories to ripple to the surface of my mind. *The adventurer with red eyes.* He had exhibited outrageous strength and had lost all control of his faculties, leaving him wandering around on a rampage. It had all been caused by him ingesting demon blood.

“The monsters started attacking while the guards were busy subduing the rampaging knights. They were able to break through because there weren’t enough people on hand.”

The false accusations made against me, the monster invasion, the Knights losing control...

“What’s happening in the capital right now...?”

“I don’t know,” Fam admitted. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea to let things stay this way. That’s why I came here to let you know the situation. I want you to leave your cell and come fight with us.”

With the Orb of Light stolen, if something happened to the Oracle of Light—Sonia—someday, the seal on the Demon King imprisoned within the Orb would break.

Not to mention, my companions were locked in battle with monsters.

Under normal circumstances, I would’ve waited until I cleared my name before leaving the prison. However, the situation at that moment demanded urgency. It wasn’t the time for me to sit in my cell and watch from the sidelines—I had to help.

“...All right.” I had made the decision to leave.

Fam nodded. “I’ll unlock the door, then. Could you wait for just a moment? I’m quite good at lockpicking; it shouldn’t take more than a minute to open this.”

“No, there’s no need.” *In this situation, every second counts. We can’t afford to take our time.*

I walked up to the cell door and grabbed the iron bars.

“Do you plan on destroying the door yourself...? This cell was supposedly made strong enough to keep even a rampaging dragon contained without breaking.”

“So I hear. But it shouldn’t be an issue,” I said, then let out a mighty shout of effort, prying outward forcefully with both arms.

The screeching sound of bending metal echoed out, and soon the vertical bars had been bent out of alignment. There was just enough space for a single person to squeeze between them—and I did exactly that, slipping through the gap without difficulty.

“Now there’s a surprise... I certainly didn’t expect you to be able to force those bars open. You know, I think you might actually be able to beat a dragon at arm wrestling.”

“That’s giving me *way* too much credit,” I said. “Let’s get going. I don’t want to keep the others waiting.”

Chapter 24: Prison Break

After breaking out of the special wing, we continued into the prison proper.

I had no weapons and was wearing only prison clothes—they had confiscated everything on me when they had first brought me in. With a battle against monsters looming in the near future, the first thing I had to do was retrieve my confiscated equipment. The problem was, I had no idea where they were keeping it.

As we turned the corner in the corridor, a surprised voice suddenly rang out. One of the prison guards on their rounds had noticed me.

“Damn... They found us.”

“Sieg... Can’t you walk a little more quietly? This encounter could’ve easily been avoided.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not proficient in stealthy movement like you are—I don’t know how to mask my footsteps or my presence. And besides...”

“Besides what?”

“This works out perfectly. I still have no idea where my equipment is being held—now we can just ask this guy directly.”

“Steel yourselves, escapees!” the prison guard shouted, drawing his sword and coming in for an attack. He brought his weapon fiercely down upon me—or would have, had I not grabbed it before he had the chance.

“Wha—?!”

“Wow, you’re slow. Are they not training you guys enough?”

I pulled the sword from his hands, gave it a quick flip to grab it by the handle, then pointed the business end toward his throat. The sword tip glinted coldly in the dim light.

“Where’s my equipment? Take us to it. Now.”

The guard gritted his teeth and grunted in defiance.

"I should let you know, it won't do you any good to call for backup. Make any loud noises, and we'll slit your throat in an instant," Fam advised.

He fell silent and hung his head in resignation, seeming to have taken Fam's threat quite seriously. "This way," he said, then led us to the room where the equipment was being kept.

My confiscated equipment was sitting in the back of a storage room. While I equipped my armor and gauntlets, Fam tied the prison guard to a pillar with a rope, also fastening a cloth around his mouth to keep him from calling for backup.

"So you've mastered the art of tying people up too?" I commented.

Fam giggled. "It's quite handy, isn't it?" she said, puffing out her chest proudly, before turning her gaze to my gauntlets. "So one of those gauntlets was left on the floor of the treasure vault, then. They look rather old... Do they have some kind of sentimental value to you?"

"I got them when I was first starting out as an adventurer. Haruna—the mage you met not too long ago—wrote my name on them for me. My other companions used to laugh about it all the time—it was like writing a child's name on their mittens—but these gauntlets are a memento of when we used to fight together as fellow party members. That's why I still use them to this day, even though they've gotten old."

"Companions, huh...?" Fam murmured abruptly. "So you protected your companions with those gauntlets the whole time you were together."

"I protected them, and they all protected me. We supported each other. I know it's weird of me to say, but it really was a good party. Up until we got famous, at least."

"You were kicked out, if I remember correctly."

"Yeah."

"The companions you had come to trust so much all suddenly turned on you and started giving you the cold shoulder. You must've felt betrayed, right?" Fam

asked me. “Wasn’t it painful for you? You never thought to yourself, ‘*Why bother having companions at all? Why not just go solo for the rest of my life?*’”

“I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t painful.”

We had all shared meals around the same campfire, yet they had summarily discarded me. When Nacht had made the announcement that I was being kicked out, it had hit me hard. It hurt, and I didn’t understand why they had done it.

“However, it didn’t make me want to just live my life solo.”

“Even though you could be betrayed again in the future?” Fam asked, staring up at me. “If that happened, it would just cause you more pain. If you stay alone forever, though, nobody can hurt you by betraying you.”

“Yes, even though I could be betrayed. I wanted to stay connected with people. I made the decision that I’d rather connect with others than live a solitary life,” I explained. “That’s the reason I ended up meeting you too, Fam. If I had chosen to stay alone, you never would’ve ended up rescuing me like this.”

Fam’s eyes went wide. Seemingly taken off guard, she fell silent for a moment before responding. “Well...if you had chosen the solo life, I don’t think you would’ve been thrown in prison to begin with...”

“Maybe not,” I admitted with a grin.

“You sure are an optimist, though.”

“If I wasn’t, I sure never would’ve chosen to be an adventurer or a gatekeeper.”

“No doubt.” Fam flashed a quick smile. “Sorry... I seem to have rambled on a bit. I’ve already secured an escape route—just follow me, if you will.”

“Of course.” I didn’t have a clear grasp of the prison layout, so it would certainly beat wandering around aimlessly.

We left the room that held my equipment, and I ran closely behind Fam, following her lead. Unfortunately, I wasn’t proficient in stealthy movement like she was.

“There he is! It’s Sieg!”

“This prison is inescapable! We can’t let them get out!”

“You’re not going anywhere!”

Unsurprisingly, the guards ended up spotting us.

Oh well... If they know we’re here, then we just have to push past them.

We ran onward toward the exit, scattering each and every guard that got in our way. Then, as we were dashing through one of the corridors, we began to hear prisoners’ voices call out from the cells around us.

“Get us outta here too!”

“We’ll help ya out!”

“Let’s send these bastards straight to hell!”

The prisoners spewed their vitriol, eyes glimmering with the desire for violence.

Clang!

The bars of the prison cell block housing the men reverberated loudly from my kick.

“I’m only leaving this place so I can protect the Royal Capital. You’re all convicted criminals, so just shut your mouths and stay in your cells!”

The prisoners’ faces went pale, and they fell silent; there was no more chest-thumping whatsoever from the lot of them.

“Let’s keep moving, Sieg.”

“Right.”

We started running through the prison corridors once again, and eventually, the exit finally came into sight. The moment we made it outside, we were assaulted by a bright light; having been in the darkness so long, my eyes had trouble adjusting.

“Take a look over there,” Fam told me.

“Hm?”

The drawbridge at the front gate—the only route that connected the prison

with the outside world—had been raised. Our path into the city had been severed.

“So they locked down the area to keep us from escaping...” I muttered.

Their aim was not to let us leave the premises—however, I had a countermeasure.

“If they’re gonna raise the bridge on us, we’ll just have to put it back down.”

I placed both of my hands up against the surface of the upright drawbridge and began to push.

“You’re not actually trying to lower the drawbridge manually, are you...? I know you’re quite strong, but that would be a bit much, even for you, don’t you think?”

As she said this, a loud rumbling started, and the stationary, vertical drawbridge gradually began to move. As my arms strained, it lowered more and more, until eventually, it lay perfectly horizontal.

“I stand corrected,” Fam murmured with a defeated shrug. “You just reminded me of how grateful I am to be on your side. I can’t imagine anything more terrifying than ending up on the other one.”

Chapter 25: The Royal Capital in Chaos

Leaving the outer-city prison behind, we started making our way toward the city's center.

"What on earth is going on...?"

Monsters were running rampant everywhere. Large groups of the beasts were laying waste to everything they could; buildings were being destroyed, people were running about frantically, and fires were breaking out all over.

As I looked on, there were scattered guards facing off against the monsters as well. Unfortunately, things looked dire. One guard was cornered by a monster spider; he was wounded, and the tip of his spear had already been broken off.

The spider opened its huge maw, ready to consume the man. Right as he was letting out a bloodcurdling scream—

The monster's body was suddenly cleaved in two, and purple fluids splattered everywhere.

Covered in the purple goo, the petrified guard peered out from behind the bisected beast's body—and saw me, sword extended, having just dealt the killing blow.

"Sieg...?!"

"Looks like I made it just in time."

"Wh-What are you doing here...?! Didn't they lock you up?!"

"I'll explain later. Where's everybody else?"

"R-Right..."

Once he calmed down, the man gave a situation report: "Some of us are helping the citizens evacuate, and others are engaging with the monsters—there are just so many of them, though, we can't hold our own. But if you're here to back us up, we still have hope...!"

“Leave it to me. I swear I’ll defend everyone—the Oracle of Light, the townspeople, and the guards as well. Now, about your wounds—how bad are they?”

“I... I think I’ll be okay. I’m injured, but I can make it to the infirmary. Don’t worry about me; just hurry to the castle.”

“The castle?”

The guard nodded. “The monsters are raiding the castle—where the Oracle of Light is. Spinoza, Seira, and the others are on defense, but I don’t know how much longer they can hold out!”

“All right—understood,” I said with a nod, and took off running with Fam.

The path to the castle was littered with monster corpses. As we passed an alleyway, a giant earthworm monster crawled out of it and approached us, wriggling its massive body before attacking.

“Damn, and we’re in a hurry too,” I grumbled, unsheathing my sword to confront the beast, when suddenly—

Kaboom!

A fireball exploded against the earthworm’s body, causing it to stagger. This was immediately followed up by an arrow ripping into the beast’s head like a gust of wind—and the monster sank to the earth, lifeless.

—*Well, then.*

I looked over to where the fireball and arrow came from—and standing there were my former companions, Haruna and Irene. The two of them looked in my direction, and their eyes went wide with surprise upon realizing it was me.

“Sieg! You’re okay!” Haruna called out.

“We heard they locked you up, and we got, like, super worried,” Irene added.

“I’m fine,” I said, casting them a smile. “I’m glad you two are all right too. Were you the ones who took out all the monsters we saw on the way here?”

“Yup. I’ve still got it when it comes to magic skill, don’t I?”

“Even at our worst, we’re still Crimson Fangs, y’know. Taking out a few sad

little monsters like these is totally a piece of cake.”

“Besides, this city took us in—we’ve got to do at least a little something in return,” Haruna explained. “We’ll take care of protecting the people in this area, Sieg. You just concentrate on what you need to do,” she added, offering a pointed thumbs-up.

Matching her cue, Irene popped up a peace sign with her fingers at the same time.

“Hey, hey, Haruna! Wasn’t that awesome? We just totally nailed the cool vibe, didn’t we?”

“It would’ve been even better if you hadn’t said anything about it...”

“Thanks, you two. I owe you big-time,” I said in gratitude, and we parted ways.

Fam and I headed toward the main thoroughfare. Haruna and Irene had cleared the area out, so the two of us didn’t run into any snags along the way.

As we ran along together, I felt I had to say something.

“Fam, you asked me something earlier. You asked if I was afraid my companions would betray me—if it would be easier going it alone.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, feeling you’ve been betrayed doesn’t necessarily mean your relationship ends there. If you can clear up your misunderstandings, relationships can be reforged—just like I did with those two.”

“But...the fact that you’ve been betrayed won’t just go away, nor will the root cause. Are you saying you’re actually able to forgive them for their past wrongdoings?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” I assured her. “That’s what it means to be a friend.”

Fam paused for a moment. “You sure are a strange man,” she finally murmured, then turned to go.

I could see a number of guards guiding the townspeople to safety, and among

them were some who were injured and being carried away on gurneys.

What a terrible sight... We've got to put an end to this as quickly as we can.

There were monsters swarming around in front of the gate on the wall that protected the royal castle and the nobles' ward, doing their best to penetrate the gate and reach the Oracle of Light.

"There they are..." Fam whispered.

In front of us, engaged in a massive melee with the monsters, were two women back-to-back, struggling with all their might. It was Seira and Spinoza.

Frustration and heavy fatigue were more than evident on their faces.

"Seira! Spinoza!" I called out, and they turned to look at me.

"Sarge!"

"Whoa?!"

They both dashed over to Fam and me.

"Thank goodness you're all right!"

"Had a feelin' you'd be comin' sooner or later!"

"Yeah."

"And thank you so much for getting a hold of Sieg for us, Fam! You were the only one who could've done it!"

"You actually come in useful every once in a while, huh?"

"I don't appreciate Spinoza's thank-you quite as much...but I'll accept your words of praise. I do like my carrots, after all," Fam said in a subdued tone, slightly embarrassed.

It was a typical exchange for us.

"You did a great job holding out until we got here," I told my two beleaguered companions. "Everything's going to be all right now."

With those words, I turned to face the monsters. As they continued attacking in their attempt to reach the Oracle of Light, I activated a skill—one that took all of their enmity and focused it onto me and me alone.

I took every enemy strike. Meanwhile, my allies began the process of mowing the monsters down. They didn't need to think about defending themselves whatsoever, which allowed them to unleash their firepower with reckless abandon. Before too long, every last monster had been eliminated, and their corpses littered the area around us.

"Looks like that's the last of them."

"It's like night and day how much easier it is to fight when you're here with us, Sarge. It makes me feel so much stronger!"

"No kiddin', the bad guys pretty much just stand there ripe for the poundin'!"

"However... We can't let ourselves get too reliant on that feeling, or we'll end up blindsided when he's not around," Fam reminded Seira and Spinoza.

That was what had happened to the Crimson Fangs. As soon as I was out of the picture, everything had just fallen apart.

"Anyway, I heard something about the Knights going berserk...?" I asked.

"That's right!" Seira confirmed. "We managed to keep the monsters from getting in, but there are Knights on the inside of the wall who have lost control! Her Highness is still in grave danger!"

I remembered the red-eyed adventurer we had faced previously, who had been wandering around destroying things indiscriminately. He had been about as strong as any monster—maybe even more so—and had certainly been no pushover.

We need to head over and reach Sonia as soon as possible.

Chapter 26: The Oracle of Light's Feelings

The Knights were gathered in the sacred royal chamber. However, it was plain to see they weren't in their right minds; their eyes had turned red, indicating that they had been contaminated by demon blood. All of their hostility was focused on the Oracle of Light—Sonia.

With a cacophony of monstrous roars, the rampaging knights attacked. However, before their swords could pierce the princess's skin, a mighty shout rang out, and Eleanor, vice-commander of the Knight Corps, laid the attackers flat with her own blade.

"Princess Sonia! Please, move behind me!"

"Right," the princess responded with a nod, slipping behind her rescuer's back. "So your mind remains normal too, Eleanor."

"I would like to think so, Your Highness—though in our current situation, perhaps *they* would be the ones considered normal, and we the outliers."

"Perhaps so."

Eleanor stood before Sonia, protecting her from the mad knights' frenzy. Her sword skills, which had earned her the nickname "Ice Princess," were said to surpass even those of her commander, Gregor; ordinary knights, even a large group of them, wouldn't stand a chance against her—under normal circumstances, at least.

"Halt, all of you! Turning your blades against Princess Sonia is an act of utter disgrace for a knight! Do not force my hand against you!"

The knights responded with nothing but beastly roars. Eleanor could only wince in frustration as the attackers began to overwhelm her.

"How is it they're so much more powerful than normal...?! And no matter how many times I strike them down, they rise and attack again... It's as if they feel no pain...!"

With each rampaging knight being so extraordinarily strong and Eleanor needing to focus on protecting Sonia while she fought, all she could manage was defense.

At this rate, I'll be overpowered...!

Besides Sonia herself, the only other person nearby who still had their faculties about them was Eleanor.

Commander Gregor is nowhere to be found. Every other Knight besides myself has lost control of themselves—or been struck down by those who have. I shouldn't expect any reinforcements.

Which meant that if Eleanor were to fall, there would be no one left to protect the princess. And then, the knights would be certain to kill her.

I absolutely must not allow that to happen. Princess Sonia is a light of hope for all of humanity. I will protect her, even if it costs me my life!

Growling loudly, a knight leaped in for the attack. The sight of the man unleashing a brutish blow with his bare hands, while completely ignoring the sword hanging at his side, contained not the faintest trace of knightly pride.

Eleanor had no idea what had been done to him. All she knew was that his dignity as a knight had been stolen from him. And to her, that was the most infuriating part about it all.

When the man got into range, she cut him down, then cast the blood off her blade with a flick of her wrist.

“Your Highness! Please remain behind me!”

“Very well,” Sonia responded.

The area behind Eleanor—where the princess was standing—was the platform where the royal thrones stood. From that elevated position, Sonia had a clear view of the mob of mindless knights as they approached, their naked bloodlust on full display.

A flood of negative emotions from those knights rushed through the princess’s slight frame. Eleanor was serving as a breakwater against the tide for the time being, but if she were to happen to fall, Sonia might end up swept

away by the massive surge of malice.

Yet though her life was in danger, Sonia showed no sign of faltering. She had committed herself thus far to maintaining her composure at absolutely all times. And in addition to that—she had no particular attachment to life in the first place, nor to the duty she was charged with.

If the Oracle of Light's life were to be extinguished, the sealed Demon King would be resurrected, and humanity would fall to ruin—but none of that mattered to Sonia. To her, humanity wasn't worth saving in the first place.

The royals and the nobles thought of nothing besides lining their own pockets, and the commoners were always shouting about their rights yet refused to even handle their own responsibilities.

Despite the fact that it was in humanity's best interests for everyone to band together, countries started wars with each other, and those at the top sacrificed countless numbers of people at the bottom for the sake of personal profit.

Though she had dedicated her very life to protecting humanity as the Oracle of Light, it seemed to mean nothing to anybody—people simply continued to hurt and kill each other as always.

Who am I doing this for, anyway? I have no desire to protect anyone. Humans are all selfish creatures of convenience; the Demon King may as well just resurrect and destroy them all.

The Oracle of Light is a sacrifice, Sonia thought to herself. An offering to keep the great beast known as the Demon King sealed inside the Orb of Light.

For these reasons, Sonia did not fear death. With no attachment to the world around her, she was prepared for death to take her at any moment. The people of her country saw this and lauded it as a great strength, but deep inside, she knew it was not a true strength in any sense of the word. She simply had nothing to lose, therefore she felt no fear.

That was why, even then, as the horde bore down on her in an attempt to take her life, fear should have been the furthest thing from her mind.

However—she was afraid. She hadn't stopped shaking the entire time.

She really, truly, didn't want to die.

As Sonia mused over why she would possibly harbor such a thought, the image of a lone guard flashed through her mind.

Sieg.

What a curious man he had been. Even in front of her, the Oracle of Light, he had maintained perfect composure—his body carried an immense power, as if supported by a rigid, unyielding inner strength.

“Why is it you are willing to risk your life for others, even though humanity is not worthy of protection?”

When she had asked that, he had responded:

“I just want to protect those who are important to me. That includes my fellow guard colleagues, my former party members, and the people of the city.

“There are people out there I dislike, and lots of things happening that are beyond the pale. Sometimes I even question whether humanity as a whole is worth protecting. In the end, though, I decided that I’m willing to protect humankind from the demons, if that’s what it takes to protect the people I care about.”

He fought to protect those important to him; humanity as a whole was just an afterthought. Having made such an assertion, Sieg was unlike anyone Sonia had ever met before. And he hadn't been all talk either—he had continuously put his life on the line to protect her. He'd even had the courage to face an entire horde of monsters all by himself.

His strength didn't come from a lack of value for his own life—it came from having something to protect.

If true strength really did exist, she had a feeling she had seen it within him.

“Agh!”

Eleanor was losing ground right before Sonia's eyes. No matter how many knights she cut down, they wouldn't stop coming, and she was being forced back.

“I will never allow you to reach the princess...!” the vice-commander

declared, putting her life on the line to protect Her Highness.

Suddenly, a lone crazed knight dove in for an attack from Eleanor's blind spot. She noticed him immediately, but she was already locked in combat with another and thus was unable to get into position to counter the new opponent.

If nothing is done, Eleanor will fall...!

As that thought came to mind, Sonia's body started moving of its own accord. She dashed forward and, taking aim at the knight who was attacking Eleanor, rammed her body into his stomach with all her might.

The frenzied knight let out a howl at the surprise attack, stumbling backward and losing his balance.

"Your Highness?! What are you doing—"

She had no idea why her body had moved. She had just wanted to protect Eleanor. The brave knight had been risking her life this whole time to protect Sonia, and she couldn't just sit back and watch as the woman faced certain death.

The crazed knight let out a vicious roar. A small girl with no battle experience ramming into him hadn't been enough to make him lose his will to fight; without a second thought, he hurled the princess violently aside.

Flung like a skipping stone, Sonia felt herself slammed hard against the floor. The impact struck her entire body, leaving her completely unable to rise.

I...can't move...!

A large group of knights began closing in on her.

"Princess!" Eleanor shouted, dashing forward to try and get her out of harm's way—but there were other knights standing in her path, blocking the way.

"No...! There's no time...!"

Still collapsed on her back, Sonia managed to raise her head. The red eyes of the knights were all glaring directly at her. In the face of such concentrated malice, her whole body stiffened as if she had been bound in place.

They were certainly going to kill her.

As she stared death in the face, memories of her conversation with Sieg at the Sacred Spring flashed before her eyes.

"There is one more thing I would like to ask you, Sieg."

"Whatever you like."

"Am I included among the people you wish to protect?"

"Of course you are."

He had answered her with no hesitation whatsoever.

That was why she had asked her next question without a second thought:

"If, perchance, the powers of the Oracle of Light were to disappear from me...would you still protect me with your life? Not the Oracle, not the princess...just me, Sonia, as a person?"

Why did I ask him such a thing? Thinking back upon it now, I feel my face burning red in embarrassment.

All the others around her had only seen Sonia as an Oracle of Light—one who would sacrifice herself to keep the Demon King sealed. And that might have been the reason she wanted at least one person in the world to value her not as an Oracle of Light, nor as a princess, but as Sonia, a human being.

Sieg had told her:

"I would absolutely protect you. With my life, if you so desired."

It was upon hearing those words that she had begun to fear death. After he had told her that, she had started to hold her life dear. At that moment, the entire world around her started bursting into color; she felt so euphoric that it almost seemed like she was the very center of the entire world. She was enveloped in warmth, as if a beam of light had been cast down from the heavens to illuminate her.

She hadn't realized it at the time, but the reason she had been so eager to appoint him as an Imperial Guard wasn't just because she had valued how capable he was.

She had wanted to be by his side.

The moment she realized this, Sonia slowly closed her eyes, as if to escape into her sweet memories. *If I am to die, let it be while remembering happy days gone by*, she thought.

However, the pain she was anticipating never came. Instead, she heard a scream—and it had not come from her own throat.

Then whose—?

As she opened her eyes with great trepidation, she saw a lone, large-framed man standing before her, his back to her. Taking up a defensive posture, he boldly stood in the path of the mob.

Roaring, the crazed knights swung their swords, but instead of piercing his flesh, the blades merely broke, unable to penetrate his sturdy frame. The broken metal bits clattered noisily to the ground.

“My apologies—I arrived a little late,” the tall man said, turning around slowly.

“Sieg...”

The man who was the object of Sonia’s obsession had arrived.

Chapter 27: Resolve

I managed to make it in time...!

With Sonia safely behind me, relief washed over me.

“You... How is it you have come here?” she asked in bewilderment. “You were imprisoned, were you not?”

“I was. However, Fam reached out to me and told me you were in danger.”

“And so you broke out of the prison? The one they say is an impenetrable fortress, which not a single person has ever escaped from before?”

“I promised you at the Sacred Spring that I’d protect you with my life. All I did was come back to make good on that promise.” Not only was Sonia crucial as the key to protecting the people most important to me, but she was *one* of those very people as well.

“Yes... So you did. That is the kind of person you are, after all.” Sonia let a slight smile escape her lips. “You have done a great service, Sieg.”

“Forgive my rudeness, Princess Sonia, but this isn’t over yet.” I had managed to make my way to her, but the city was still swarming with monsters, and the knights were still on their rampage for reasons unknown. We certainly weren’t in the clear yet.

“Eleanor, you did a great job protecting the princess for so long. If you hadn’t been here, humanity might’ve already been done for.”

“I merely performed my duty as vice-commander of the Knight Corps,” Eleanor said. “However, it pleases me to have you praise me so. Greatly, in fact. I should like it if you would pat my head later, in a thorough display of affection.”

“Glad to see you’re in good enough condition to crack jokes like that.”

“It was not a joke in the slightest.”

“We’ll back you up from here. Let’s take these guys down!”

"It was not a joke in the slightest..."

Pretending not to hear Eleanor, I stood in front of Sonia and confronted the mindless knights, with the other members of the Fifth Squadron lining up next to me.

Spinoza cracked her knuckles. "The knights've always acted like cocky bastards around us. Looks like a perfect opportunity to let off some steam by giving 'em a good poundin'!"

"N-No, you can't do that!" Seira sputtered. "No excessive violence; we've got to go easy on them! Let's try to hurt them as little as possible!"

"Sheesh... You really do overindulge yourself in fighting, don't you? Though I can't say I agree with Seira's overindulgence in compassion either..." Fam chastised.

I couldn't help but shake my head slightly and grin at my companions' exchange. Considering we were about to risk our lives in battle, they sure were a lively bunch.

Though, honestly, I found that liveliness rather endearing.

As the crazed knights dashed in toward Sonia, the four of us blocked their path and engaged them.

With a ferocious battle cry, Spinoza slammed her war hammer into the side of an attacker's head, sending him tumbling wildly across the floor.

"Bwa ha ha! No mercy! C'mon, who's next in line to get their brain rattled by this thing, huh?" She twirled her human-sized hammer around effortlessly, viciously flattening the knights one after the other, like some kind of mad devil.

"I'm so sorry, Knight Corps!" Seira wailed, cutting down any enemy who approached Princess Sonia with lightning speed; what her bikini armor lacked in defensive power, it handily made up for in agility.

Our opponents began setting their sights on Fam, who was loosing arrows at them from a distance. They started to move past Seira in an effort to take the archer down first; however, Fam suddenly dashed forward at lightning speed right into the midst of the knights, slipping behind them and slicing the backs of

their necks with a knife. Her attackers screamed and collapsed into heaps on the ground around her.

Fam snickered, sneering. “Silly knights. Did you think I could only fight at long distances? You’ve made a grave miscalculation—I happen to be pretty handy with a knife, as well.”

What a reliable group. The Fifth Squadron has the ability to defend themselves just fine; they don’t have to rely on me for protection. If they did, well, they probably wouldn’t have survived as guards for so long.

Before we had arrived, our side had been at an overwhelming disadvantage in the battle, but once the Fifth had joined the fray, the tide had turned in our favor in the blink of an eye. Once the last knight had fallen, there was nobody left standing in the royal chamber who bore us any hostility.

“Hah. No backbone on these guys, I swear,” Spinoza snorted. “Guess if they were weaklings to begin with, powerin’ up isn’t gonna suddenly make ’em put up a good fight, huh? Well, that’s what they get for slackin’ off so much.”

“I’m sure the knights didn’t expect to be lectured by *you* of all people about slacking off,” Fam murmured, rolling her eyes.

Suddenly, a muffled groan rang out, coming from somewhere among the fallen knights.

“Look, everyone! That man right there—he’s regained his senses!” Seira exclaimed, pointing over to one of the knights on the floor. Under heavy eyelids, his eyes showed that whatever had happened to him had been undone—the mysterious red color within them had disappeared.

I ran over to the knight. “Hey, are you all right? What happened here?” I asked. “Why did all of you start going wild like that?”

“I...don’t know. Before I knew what was going on, I had no control over myself. I suddenly wanted to kill Her Highness the Princess... Me, a knight...” the man sputtered in disgust with himself. “An utterly disgraceful act for our order.”

“Please try not to speak too much. It’ll aggravate your wounds,” Seira chided the man gently.

"So there was some knightly pride among your order after all..." Fam quipped. "And here I thought all you had room for was your own self-interest."

"Fret not—you and the knights no doubt had your sense of reason taken from you against your will. Not to mention, as you can plainly see, I yet live," Sonia proclaimed to the knight. "Waste not your time on regrets; instead, utilize it for the hereafter."

The princess's words seemed to halt the spiral of regret the man had fallen into. After I judged he was finally ready to listen again, I started asking questions: "Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

"Out of the ordinary...?"

"That's right. The symptoms you and your colleagues were exhibiting—we've actually seen them before. Not too long ago, there was an adventurer who started rampaging around town—and he was suffering from very similar symptoms." I recalled what we had been told at the time. "The doctor who examined him said he had ingested demon blood. Demon blood is a poison to humans, and it can cause them to lose control of themselves if they ingest it. I can't help but wonder if you and the knights might've ingested some as well... Can you recall anything along those lines?"

"Demon blood...? I can't imagine we could've..." the knight said, then suddenly backtracked. "No, wait... Perhaps when we...?" he went on, muttering to himself haltingly. "But...that *couldn't* be...!"

"Did something come to mind?"

"It must be my imagination...some kind of misunderstanding."

"We'll be the judge of that. Just let us know what happened."

"Spit it out, already!" Spinoza growled.

"Spinoza, don't grab an injured person by the collar!" Seira chastised.

After Spinoza finally let go of the man, he let out a few painful coughs, then hesitantly opened his tightly closed mouth once again.

"By rule, the Knight Corps are all supposed to assemble in the cafeteria and have our meals together after our scheduled training is over. This morning,

though, Commander Gregor ended our training early. Normally he has everything scheduled out exactly, down to the very minute; him leaving early that day was so strange to me that I decided to follow him.”

“Oh?”

“I saw him putting something into the drinks that were set at the tables in the cafeteria.”

“And you think that could’ve been the demon blood?”

It was certainly a possibility. The adventurer from earlier had supposedly drunk some wine that had been contaminated with demon blood too.

“I suspect that he’s telling the truth,” a voice piped up in corroboration; it was Eleanor’s.

“Speaking of which, you ended up unaffected, right, Eleanor?” I asked.

“Correct. I happen to be on a diet, so I neglected to eat lunch. That would explain why I am the only member of the Knight Corps who did not go mad.”

Sir Gregor spiked the knights’ drinks with demon blood. Which would mean...

“So he might’ve also been the one who let the monsters into the capital. The knights lost their minds at the exact same time as the attack—the timing’s just too good to be coincidental.”

“So you think Sir Gregor is the informant?” Seira asked.

“It’s possible. If he mixed in the demon blood, he would’ve needed connections with someone who could procure the stuff.”

“He hasn’t shown his ugly mug around ever since this whole mess started. That means he’s gotta be the traitor, right?” Spinoza spat. “Well, I sorta had a feelin’ it was him all along, y’know. He looked like an informant—kinda gave off that ‘Hey, look at me, I’m in bed with the demons!’ aura.”

At this smug outburst, Fam shrugged cynically. “You can say whatever you want now that the cat’s already out of the bag.”

“He might’ve also been the one who gave the demon blood to the adventurer. It could’ve been some kind of test run for the main event,” I

offered. Demon blood was quite rare; not just anybody could get their hands on it.

"In any case...we still need to figure out Sir Gregor's whereabouts. He hasn't been seen once since the uproar began," Fam reminded us.

Is he hiding somewhere, watching everything unfold from above...? Or...

As we were deliberating our next action, the door to the royal chamber opened, and I heard a familiar voice call out to me.

"Hey, there you are, Sieg! Been looking for you."

Bolton walked into the room, with Haruna and Irene in tow.

"Commander!" I greeted. "And hey, both of you are here as well—glad you're safe."

Haruna grinned. "Of course we are. Those monsters barely put up a fight."

"With us on the job, it was a total cinch," Irene affirmed.

"Seriously, though, Sieg, you are one tough bastard. These young ladies told me what happened—you actually broke out of that prison, huh?"

"I did, after hearing the capital was in danger."

"Hah. Well, I knew you weren't the type to just roll over and die, but I honestly didn't expect you to bust out of jail like that. What a badass." Commander Bolton let out a hearty laugh, giving me a friendly smack on the back.

"Anyway, Commander, what's the situation in the city?"

"Ah, yeah... The monsters that invaded the city have been pretty much taken care of now. From what I see here, it looks like you managed to make the knights chill out too, huh," Commander Bolton observed, before broaching another subject. "Actually, there's something I wanted to let everyone know."

"What's that?"

"It's about Sir Gregor. I think he's in league with the demons."

Apparently the commander had come to the same conclusion we had.

“Can you tell us what makes you think so?” I asked.

“I saw him leaving the capital with the Orb of Light.”

Everyone looked at each other in silence. We were at a loss for words.

“At first I thought he might’ve gotten it back from the thieves who had stolen it, but nope. He wasn’t coming back *to* the capital, he was leaving and heading somewhere else—completely ignoring the situation we were in.”

“Could he have been trying to take it away from the monsters that were invading?” Seira asked.

“That is utterly unthinkable,” Princess Sonia responded. “The Orb of Light was stolen by incapacitating the knights who were guarding it. If his intention was as you suggested, he would have merely had to inform them instead.”

Commander Bolton nodded in agreement. “And on top of that, some of my men tried to stop him—and he cut them right down. There’s zero doubt in my mind that he’s turned against humankind.”

I had some info of my own to share. “This man here gave us testimony that Sir Gregor mixed demon blood into the knights’ meals. It sounds like he’s behind their bout of madness too.”

“Well, sounds like case closed, then,” the commander sighed. “He had this whole thing set up from the start—framing Sieg, throwing him into prison for a crime he didn’t commit, then bringing the monsters into the capital.”

“But why would Sir Gregor do such a thing...?” Seira wondered.

“Who knows? All I know is he’s not on humanity’s side,” Commander Bolton replied. “He sent the capital into chaos, and tried to have the princess killed too.”

“Sonofabitch thinks he can screw around with us... We oughta wring his slimy neck.” Spinoza cracked her knuckles, her rage palpable.

“Commander Bolton. You stated that Sir Gregor left with the Orb of Light. Do you have any inkling of where he was headed?” Princess Sonia asked.

“I’m honestly not sure. All I know is he was headed northwest...”

“If that is the case, his destination is most likely the Lost Forest.”

“If the Orb of Light was spirited away, then the ultimate goal is certainly to resurrect the Demon King. With its dense miasma, the Lost Forest would be a suitable location to bring the Orb. They most likely plan to conceal it there and wait for the power of the seal to weaken.”

“Got it. Let’s head to the Lost Forest, then,” I declared, eliciting enthusiastic nods from my companions.

Seeing this, Commander Bolton grinned. “The one thing I bet they didn’t count on was Sieg breaking out of prison. If you had stayed locked up in there, the princess probably wouldn’t be alive right now. That gives us an opportunity we can take advantage of.”

He patted me on the shoulder with one of his large hands, then spoke again, as if passing his hopes and dreams on to me. “Listen, Sieg. I want you to beat the shit outta that guy for me. He’s been treating us guards like complete garbage for as long as I can remember, and it’s given me a hell of a lot of pent-up frustration.”

“All right,” I agreed with a nod. “It’s a plan.”

Chapter 28: The Lost Forest

We boarded a carriage and headed to the Lost Forest in pursuit of Sir Gregor. We, the Fifth Squadron, were the only ones on board.

Though the monsters that had invaded the capital had been exterminated and the raging knights subdued, there was no telling what other tricks the demons might have left up their sleeves, so Eleanor and Commander Bolton stayed behind to protect Princess Sonia.

I had offered to remain and guard the princess as well, since I had made a promise to do so, but she had calmly shaken her head and declined. *“There is no need to concern yourself with me,”* she had told me. *“You must focus solely on carrying out your mission.”*

My mission was to protect humanity from falling into the clutches of the demons. To do that, I needed to defeat Sir Gregor and take back the Orb of Light.

In accordance with Sonia’s orders, I set our carriage going. Seated in the driver’s area as I gripped the horses’ reins, I guided us in a northwesterly direction for a while, until we could eventually see a dense forested area in the distance.

So that’s the Lost Forest...

The Lost Forest had been designated as a dangerous area, and entry into it had been forbidden. One reason for that was because powerful monsters lived there, but there was something else about it that made things even more difficult for humans.

After we had pushed into the forest and been there a while, we all started to notice something.

“You know, I’m starting to not feel so great...” Seira murmured from her position in the cargo area. “My body sort of feels heavier now too...”

“Ugh. This feels even worse than a hangover,” Spinoza grumbled as well, her

face contorting in discomfort.

"It's because the miasma here is so thick... For demons, miasma acts as a kind of life energy, but for humans, it's more like a slow-acting poison," Fam explained. "The miasma here is the same as in the Valley of Resentment—perhaps even more powerful. If we stay too long, we'll be done in before we even have a chance to fight." Her face looked sickly pale as she whispered the words.

The most dangerous part of the Lost Forest wasn't the monsters; it was the miasma itself. When monsters were exposed to it, they exhibited increased power, but when humans set foot in it, their bodies showed negative effects instead. That was why humans never approached the place and why it was such a convenient base of operations for the demons.

"Um...what about you, Sieg?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, um, well, you don't really seem too affected by all this..." Seira trailed off.

"What if he's actually been a demon all along?" Spinoza joked.

"If you're asking whether this stuff is bothering me, well, it actually is. It's just still within my tolerance range, so far."

My companions seemed rather surprised at that response.

"You really are some kind of monster, aren't ya..." Spinoza muttered.

"Just, please, don't overexert yourself," Seira said. "You're the one who holds this team together. If something were to happen to you..."

"I know," I responded with a nod. "I don't intend on having us stay here very long. We'll get the Orb back as quickly as we can, then pull out right away."

To do that, though, we had to locate Gregor.

"Though, y'know, this forest is pretty damn huge, huh? And it kinda feels like we've been runnin' around in circles for a while too."

The Lost Forest occupied a vast expanse. The leaves of the giant trees that

towered all over obscured the light of the sun, making it so that even in the daytime, a night-like tranquility blanketed the area. A faint mist hung in the air, and no matter how far we progressed, the scenery never seemed to change; it felt like wandering around through a dream.

However, the forest was very real; if we didn't proceed with enough haste, the miasma would eat away at our bodies, potentially causing us to perish before doing any fighting at all.

"Oh—a fork in the road," Seira said, pointing. The path ahead split to the left and right.

I put my hand to my chin. "I wonder which way we should go..."

If I chose the wrong option, it would take us even longer to find Gregor, and the miasma would affect our bodies that much more. I couldn't afford to make a mistake.

Seeing my hesitation, Fam spoke up. "The path on the right is the way to go here..." she indicated.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Because of the smell."

"The smell?" Seira cocked her head to one side in puzzlement.

"I can faintly detect Sir Gregor's scent coming from that path. I'm pretty sure we'll find him down there."

"What is that, some kinda doggy trick?" Spinoza seemed both horrified and impressed at once. "You sure you're not pullin' our legs or something?"

"Believe me, or don't believe me...it's completely up to you. I only gave a suggestion—I'm not going to try to force the issue."

"What should we do, Sarge?" Seira asked, looking at me.

"Let's go with Fam's suggestion," I said. "We don't have any conclusive evidence either way, so we might as well try her idea."

I pulled on the horses' reins and took us down the path on the right.

After a while, we came to another fork in the road. Again, I went to Fam for

guidance, and again we followed the path she said she could detect Gregor's scent from. This repeated each time we encountered a split path.

I had no idea how long we had been there; running around through the dark forest enveloped in a thin layer of mist had thrown off my sense of time. It almost gave off the impression that time had stopped entirely where we were.

However, as monsters attacked us, and I started noticing my companions growing weaker from the effects of the miasma, I was painfully reminded that time was indeed passing.

We can't afford to stay in here much longer.

Just as I began to feel the anxiety, the path we were on, which had been a consistent width up until then, suddenly began to widen, and the area opened up before us.

Rising amid the dim light of the clearing was a building that had an unusual presence emanating from it. Candlesticks lined the path, spaced apart at perfect intervals. On an altar at the top of a set of stone steps rested a sphere, emitting a bright glow that effortlessly repelled the stagnant miasma that filled the space around it.

I knew right away that it had to be the stolen Orb of Light.

There were also some figures standing next to the Orb. As our carriage approached, I saw one of their faces twist into a grimace.

The familiar man began to grumble angrily. "What in blazes are you doing here..."

The man casting his resentful glare at me was none other than Sir Gregor.



Chapter 29: The Final Trump Card

“It’s been a while, Sir Gregor.”

“I thought I had you thrown into prison, Sieg... How did you get here?”

“I really owe you for that one, huh,” I declared, looking up at the altar. At the top were Gregor and another man wrapped in a black robe. The second man had the look of a sorcerer about him, his eyes glowed red, and a pair of sinister horns rose from the top of his head. He was overflowing with magical energy taken in from the forest’s miasma.

“So you were working with the demons after all,” I commented. “Putting up false charges against me...making the knights lose their minds by putting demon blood in their meals...letting monsters into the capital...those were all your doing, weren’t they?”

“And what if they were?”

“You may be an arrogant man, but I always thought you took pride in being a knight. I can’t believe you’d betray your country like this.”

“Are you trying to say I’m a disgrace as a knight?” Gregor let out a derisive snort. “I have no interest in good versus evil—‘good’ is merely a term used by those who are victorious as they write their histories. All I did was align myself with those who value me more highly.”

Saying those words without an ounce of remorse, the knight commander seemed devoid of any moral compass whatsoever; the only thing driving him was an insatiable lust for power.

“Should the Demon King be resurrected, I will be able to secure a rank far beyond commander of the Knight Corps. And if I must betray humanity to do so, then so be it.”

“I see. It seems you’re fully prepared to walk that path.”

“And what of you? What do you fools hope to accomplish in coming all the

way out to a place such as this? Perhaps you wish to take revenge for the poor princess who was slain by monsters...?" A smirk formed on Gregor's face. He apparently still thought the attack on the Royal Capital had succeeded—that with monsters swarming the city and the Knights rendered powerless to defend Princess Sonia, both she and the capital had been beyond saving.

"You seem to be confused about something," I told him. "Princess Sonia is quite alive—and there hasn't been a single death at the capital."

"What...?" That finally seemed to get a reaction out of Gregor. "Then what happened to the monsters I unleashed...?"

"We took care of every last one. That's why we're able to be here right now."

He fell silent at this; looking at us in our current state, he probably realized I was telling the truth. A look of dismay soon washed across his face.

"Sieg...you've gotten in my way at every turn. Had you not been here, my plans would've long since come to fruition." Though he spoke calmly, his tone was thick with indignation.

"Time for you to pack it up," Spinoza cut in. "It's over for you, buddy."

"Sir Gregor, if you've truly turned your weapons against the Royal Capital, then we have no choice but to turn ours against you," Seira declared, steeling herself and pulling her sword from its sheath.

"Hmph... You think you've already beaten me?" A fearless grin appeared on the knight commander's face. "It matters not whether the princess is alive. The Orb of Light is already ours—and when the holy energy she imbued it with eventually runs out, the Demon King will resurrect!"

"Do you think we'd actually allow that to happen?" I countered.

"Why would I need your permission? Soon, you'll all be nothing but rotting corpses!"

At this, the demon next to Gregor began firing magic projectiles in our direction. Several glowing bluish-white lights, packing high concentrations of energy, soared toward us, leaving comet-like trails.

Although the projectiles contained a lot of power, they weren't overly fast; I

sprang to the side and dodged one as it approached. When I did, though, it changed trajectory and followed. Unable to shake its pursuit, I tried to block it with my shield—but my body reacted on a delay, and the highly concentrated energy ball slammed directly into me. Grunting, I felt myself drop to a knee.

I heard my comrades shout out in pain as they were also struck; they hadn't been able to successfully evade the bullets either. It wasn't that the attacks were unavoidable—they just couldn't do so in their current state. The problem was clear to me: their bodies simply weren't doing what their minds were telling them to do.

"Have you forgotten, Sieg? You're in enemy territory right now. Having been amid such high concentrations of miasma for such a long time, you have no hopes of being able to move properly!" Looking down upon us, Gregor let out a thunderous laugh.

Just as he said, while the miasma was a source of energy for demons, it was a toxic substance to humans, so in reaching as far as we had into the forest, we had absorbed a substantial amount of the stuff; it felt as though a great weight was filling up our bodies.

"Now that you've been immobilized, I will take my time as I torture you to death. Shall I begin with your pesky little comrades...?"

At Gregor's signal, the demon released more magic projectiles from his palms; they were all directed at my companions rather than me.

"Sit back and relax in your front-row seat, Sieg—I hope you enjoy the show as I extinguish the lives of your precious companions one by one!" He erupted into howling laughter.

Then, just when the spheres of magic were about to shoot through my comrades, I stood up and dashed forward, thrusting myself into the line of fire—absorbing the full force of the energy bullets meant for them into my own body.

"Wha—?!" Seeing me move with nearly my usual agility, Sir Gregor, who hadn't been concerned in the least up till then, suddenly blanched. "Impossible! How can you still move...? Did the miasma not affect you?! That shouldn't be possible for humans...!"

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t insinuate that I’m some kind of demon,” I muttered, looking up at him as he stood on the altar. “You’re wrong if you think the miasma isn’t affecting me. It is—the effects are within my range of tolerance, that’s all.”

“Tolerance...? That’s absurd!” Gregor shouted. “It’s not possible for humans afflicted by miasma to move normally! You should be just as paralyzed as your companions are!”

That’s when I saw his eyes flicker red.

I had thought it was rather odd that, despite being in this miasma-filled place for an extended period just like us, he hadn’t seemed to bat an eyelash...

So he has actually turned into a demon...

“People can exhibit superhuman abilities when they’re protecting something important to them—but that’s something you wouldn’t understand, considering you’ve abandoned both your colleagues and your country.”

“*Ggh...!*” The very concept outside his realm of comprehension, Gregor became flustered.

“Out of hands to play already? Guess it’s my turn now, then.”

Gregor stayed silent, showing no reaction whatsoever to my declaration of war. I wasn’t sure if he felt the odds were against him or if he had given up entirely.

As I took a step toward him, Gregor let out a small sigh, then put a hand up to his mouth and started letting out a stifled snicker.

“You almost had me, Sieg. You really did. I never imagined you would be such a threat—you truly were a black swan to me.” He looked as if he was enjoying himself immensely; his previous consternation had vanished, and his calm countenance had returned.

“You sure seem calm.”

“Naturally. I still have a very special hand I’ve yet to play, after all.”

“Is that so?”

"Indeed. I'm pleased I kept it in reserve as the means for your demise," he responded.

As he stood there smirking at me, assured of his victory, I felt the sudden shock of something bumping into me from behind. After a brief moment, my back began burning with a piercing heat, and I realized I had been stabbed with something sharp—perhaps a knife.

The attack had come directly out of my blind spot. I hadn't felt any presence nearby—I had no way to react at all.

What just happened—?

As I fell to the ground, I mustered all of my strength to turn and look behind me. The sight that jumped into my field of vision at that moment made me doubt my own eyes—I felt as if I had to be under some sort of illusion spell.

Looking down on me with a cold gaze, a bloody knife in her hand, was someone I was sure had been struck by a magic attack and was lying flat on the ground just moments before.

It was the silver-haired girl—Fam.



Chapter 30: Betrayal

“Wh...What...?”

Time began to pass in slow motion. As my body pulled ever closer to the ground, I caught a glimpse of Fam staring down at me with sober eyes. In her hand she held a knife smeared with blood.

Fam was the one who just stabbed me.

By the time I came to that realization, I was already face down on the ground. I felt a burning heat spreading across my entire body, starting from the point on my back where I had been stabbed.

“Apparently even someone as sturdy as you will take damage if they’re struck in a vital spot with a knife that’s been strengthened by imbuing it with magic...” Fam mused.

“Fam?! What have you done...” Seira gasped.

“You betrayed us, didn’t you, you little runt?!” Spinoza yelled from where she lay on the ground.

Fam offered no response—all connections to the world around her had been severed, like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Don’t tell me you’re being controlled by them...?”

Hearing me say that, Sir Gregor let out a muffled laugh. I got the sense that he was mocking me for missing the mark. “Betrayed? Controlled? You humans always want to view the world in terms of your own convenience. You wish for certain things to be true and try to force those desires onto those around you. No, she has been on our side from the very beginning. *She* was the informant that was planted among you by the demons,” he revealed.

“You look as though you don’t believe me,” he went on. “Very well, allow me to elaborate a bit further. Why do you think your gauntlet was lying on the ground in the treasure vault, Sieg? Since you weren’t the one who stole the

Orb, who do you think brought it there?"

Putting it like that, even a child could figure it out. Fam had stolen the gauntlet from my room and left it in the vault. For someone who had easily managed to infiltrate an impenetrable prison, breaking into a heavily guarded treasure vault probably wouldn't have been that difficult either.

"We did not bend her to our will—she stabbed you in the back of her own volition."

If she had been under their control, she would've had no choice in the matter—but Gregor knew that telling us she had done it all of her own free will would land the biggest blow on our morale. He had to have been enjoying picking ruthlessly at our open wounds.

What a perverse bastard.

"Fam—is what he just said true?" I asked.

Everything that had been said so far had all just been Gregor's rantings or my conjecture. If Fam had gone on to say he was full of it, then that would've been that. I would've believed her—we all would have. However...

"Yeah...it's true."

Fam simply admitted it.

Seira and Spinoza were stunned into silence.

A close companion of ours has been a traitor. She's been in league with the enemy while they worked toward signing our death warrants.

That fact hit them like a ton of bricks, weighing down their souls.

While the others remained at a loss for words, I managed to find some of my own. "Why would you act in support of the demons?" I asked.

Since Fam had admitted to being the informant herself, there was little reason to doubt that particular fact. If she truly harbored ill will against humankind, then I would have to take her down—but I wanted to at least understand her motive, first.

Unfortunately, she did not grace my question with a response. Though to me,

it seemed less like a cold dismissal and more like she was hiding inside her shell, unwilling to expose herself.

The demon clad in black decided to speak up for her instead. “Why, it’s only natural for Fam to side with us demons.”

Immediately, Fam shot a warning glare at him. However, he ignored this and continued, “Gregor already told you she’s been on our side from the very beginning. The reason being...she is part human, part demon. A mixed-blood.”

I had heard that it was possible for a human and a demon to procreate, and that on very rare occasions, children had actually been born from their unions. However, something still didn’t quite sit right.

“I don’t see any features on her that you’d expect from that,” I said. The doctor at the Royal Capital had said those with mixed blood would have the characteristic red demon eyes, along with markings engraved somewhere on their bodies. Fam’s eyes, however, were not red, but a beautiful indigo color.

Following that train of thought, I said, “Does that mean she’s been masking her eye color, somehow?”

“How very perceptive of you. We couldn’t very well just plant someone with red eyes inside the Royal Capital now, could we?”

As the demon said this, Fam placed her fingers into her eyes, pinched the area around the corneas, and peeled off a thin membrane that had been covering them. Her new gaze flashed just as red as any demon’s.

“Ah...I see.”

A memory flashed through my mind then, one from back when we were headed to the Sacred Spring: when we were within the grounds of the area protected by a barrier that kept out demons, she had complained that she wasn’t feeling well. At the time, I had assumed she was just worn out from the constant battles in the harsh terrain, but thinking back on it, she could’ve been having some kind of adverse reaction due to her demon blood.

“I am the one who planted Fam into the Guard Corps as a spy. She had been planning to double-cross you from the very outset,” the demon explained.

“Even *you* had no way to react in time to your own comrade stabbing you in the back, did you, Sieg?” Gregor added, letting out a sinister snicker. “How does it feel to be betrayed by your very own? You must be in the throes of despair!” He sneered down at me. “Now, you can only watch helplessly from the afterlife as everything you so fervently desired to protect is torn completely asunder!”

There wasn’t the slightest hint of knightly pride left in him. He made no effort whatsoever to conceal his hideous laughter, which no longer even sounded human—he had already completely sold his soul over to the demons, it seemed.

“No—he’s not dead yet.”

This simple utterance from Fam quickly sobered the cocksure knight up from his laughing fit, and he eyed her in suspicion.

“What do you mean...?”

“I didn’t manage to finish him off.”

As soon as those words left her mouth, I planted my hands against the ground, pushed myself up to one knee, stood straight up, and began brushing the dirt off of my armor.

Seeing this, Gregor’s eyes went wide. “How can you stand up...?! You were stabbed through the heart!” He turned to Fam. “How dare you—have you betrayed us?! ”

“You sure are quick to doubt your allies, Sir Gregor. Maybe when you’re a traitor yourself, you automatically assume everyone else is the same?” I taunted. “I assure you, Fam didn’t betray you—she definitely stabbed me right in the back. The blade just didn’t quite pierce all the way to my heart.”

Indeed, that was why the wound hadn’t been fatal.

Fam herself had most likely been able to tell by feel that her blow hadn’t finished me off. As soon as her blade reached the point it did, she immediately leaped out of my range—because she knew if she had tried to push it in any deeper, she would’ve ended up taking a counterstrike from me. It was honestly an impressive display of quick and prudent thinking.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do after this is over, Fam. But first, we have a couple of spectators up on the altar who are in need of a serious beatdown."

With his final trump card having failed and under direct threat of aggression from me, Gregor finally seemed to sense that he was in danger.

The demon, however, was the first to take action. With slithering tongue movements, he quickly chanted a spell. Instantly, the earth cracked open, and thorny vines imbued with magic burst out vigorously. They immediately attached themselves to the prone Seira and Spinoza and wrapped around their bodies, squeezing tightly.

The two of them screamed in pain as the magic-infused vines tightened around them. The more they tried to pull themselves free, the deeper the thorns dug into their skin, making struggling a futile effort—their will to resist being consumed by countless tiny fangs.

"Hang on—I'll get you out of there!"

Just as I began to dash down to where the constricting vines were, a shadow stood in the way, blocking my path.

"You'll need to deal with me, first..."

Fam faced me, bringing her knife up into a battle stance. Her eyes, burning a brilliant red amid the mist, held clear hostility.

The demon, who had been controlling the vines from a distance, stared on in satisfaction, then addressed Fam in a hushed voice: "This time, finish the job. *Kill Sieg*. That is an order."

Chapter 31: Dialogue

A silver blade sliced through the faint mist that enveloped the forest. It was the tip of Fam's knife, plunging through the air like a living creature in an effort to pierce through my heart. It reminded me of a snake, twisting and wriggling as it tried to sink its fangs into me.

Damn—I can barely see her...

With the mist hampering my visibility and Fam clad entirely in black, I was having trouble keeping track of where exactly she was. She, on the other hand, moved with astonishing dexterity, targeting my vital points with extreme accuracy. I wondered if that meant the mist wasn't an issue for a demon's red eyes.

The cold glint of the knife's blade flashed, and it came whooshing at me in a crescent-shaped curve—but I dodged just barely out of its way. Without even waiting to see whether she missed or not, Fam bounded backward like a deflected ball, making sure to leave absolutely no opportunity for me to counterattack.

“I knew you were a superb archer, but your close combat skills are pretty amazing as well.”

“I may not look it, but I’m pretty handy at those types of things,” she responded, her expression not wavering in the slightest. “I’m impressed with you too, for being able to dodge my attacks despite the visibility. Can you see in the dark, maybe?”

“Nope. I can’t see your attacks at all, really. All I can do is sense them.” Rather than try to follow Fam’s movements, I was keeping my eyes open for fluctuations in the mist. The knife blade always came at me moving against the airflow—meaning that even if I wasn’t able to see the weapon itself, I could dodge the attack as long as I could see the movements of the mist.

“I should’ve expected as much from you,” Fam muttered. “I suppose there

isn't going to be any easy way to defeat you after all."

"If that's how you feel, why not throw your weapon down right now?"

"That isn't an option," she said, refusing my offer flatly. "More importantly...I'm wondering if you can afford to waste too much time chatting like this. Seira and Spinoza don't exactly have unlimited stamina, you know."

Even as we spoke, the two women in question had both been steadily accumulating damage from the thorny vines wrapped around them. It was best to assume they didn't have much time left.

However...if I wanted to help them, first I had to defeat Fam.

"Heh. And so the trusted comrades turn to each other's throats."

Sir Gregor and the demon had been observing us from a safe distance. If I slew the demon, Seira's and Spinoza's restraints would disappear—however, if I tried to make a move on him, he'd most likely kill the hostages first.

Suddenly, Fam was right in front of me. I had been so distracted with my thoughts that I hadn't noticed her petite form slip into range. Grunting, I pulled my shield up just in time to block her knife.

"What's wrong? You can't beat me if you're defending the entire time. At this rate, the other two squadron members will lose their lives—are you sure you want that?"

"Don't worry. I've already taken care of that."

That was when Fam started noticing something off. There were wounds on my body that hadn't been there before.

"You're bleeding...but I haven't landed any hits. Don't tell me you're taking the damage meant for those two?"

Once I had decided Seira and Spinoza probably wouldn't be able to hold out, I had activated a skill that allowed me to take on all damage being dealt to them. Even as I faced Fam, those wounds continued to accumulate.

"Oh, Sieg...the solution to this whole problem is so very simple. Just kill me and abandon Seira and Spinoza to their fates. Do that, and good Sir Gregor and company will no longer have any means of dealing with you. A man as strong as

you could fell them both without breaking a sweat. This isn't the time for you to be taking on extra damage from the others."

"That might be the case," I admitted. "Though are you sure you should be giving advice to the enemy?"

"It doesn't exactly take much thinking to come to that conclusion."

She's right.

"Don't worry about us, Sarge! Please, just focus on carrying out your mission! I don't want to weigh you down any further!"

"What she said! Just get up there and obliterate those scumbags for us!"

Both Seira and Spinoza shouted out to me in agreement—they wanted me to prioritize saving humanity over their own lives.

Their logic was sound. As a guard, that probably would've been the right choice.

However, it just wasn't possible for me to abandon my friends like that. Fam knew that about me, which was probably why she was trying so ruthlessly to force me into an option I'd likely never choose willingly.

"If you don't do something...you really will die, you know?"

"That's what your side wants, though, isn't it? That'd be the ideal outcome for you."

At my retort, Fam's face scrunched up in distress for just a split second—and that expression told me everything I needed to know about how she really felt.

"You know, Fam, I've been noticing something: it almost seems like you *want* me to kill you."

"What exactly do you think you've been noticing...? The reason I've been swinging my knife around this entire time is to try and kill *you*, you know."

"Sure, but even if those attacks had landed, they wouldn't have been enough to kill me. You of all people have been around me long enough to know that."

Fam offered no response.

"From the very start, a lot of the things you've been doing haven't made any

sense. If you had really wanted to kill me, you've had any number of opportunities in the past: when we were escorting Princess Sonia; during the ritual at the Sacred Spring; even when we were together in my bedroom. But you never made a move any of those times—you didn't go in for the kill." I looked her straight in the eyes. "Not to mention the most puzzling thing of all: the fact that you came to me in prison to tell me what was going on outside. If you hadn't done that, I'd probably still be locked up, the princess would most likely be dead, and surely the Royal Capital would've fallen. That choice of action didn't benefit the demons in any way whatsoever."

Sir Gregor had had me locked up in prison precisely because he perceived me as a threat. Yet the action Fam took was to urge me to escape—which went completely against what the demons were trying to accomplish. In fact, it could've even been considered an act of rebellion.

All of that led me to a single conclusion.

"Fam, you actually wanted to stop all this from happening, didn't you?"

Again, there was no immediate response. Though her expression remained unperturbed, I noticed her delicate body twitch briefly. Holding her knife in a battle stance, she spoke to me:

"May I ask you one question...?"

"Of course."

"Back when you were falsely accused of stealing the Orb of Light...I was going to let them know that you didn't do it, but you stopped me from saying anything, remember?"

"I do."

"I can't help but wonder...was that because if I had claimed you were innocent, it was possible they would've accused me as an accomplice and locked me up as well?"

"That's right." Since Fam was a part of my team, they probably wouldn't have given her testimony any credence. If she had tried to defend me without thinking it through, they could've found her guilty by association. That was why I had silenced her—by doing that, at least I had been able to keep her safe.

"I see...that's what I suspected," she murmured quietly. "That was the first time I had ever encountered a person who thought of someone besides themselves when their own life was in danger."

She had a tiny smile on her face—one laced with just a bit of exasperation.

"I've come into contact with a great number of people, and what I learned as a result was that you should never trust others. If you want to protect yourself, you need to cut all others out of your life without exception. Otherwise, they'll take your wishes and any words you happen to let slip and turn them all against you. You'll think they have your back, but instead they end up stabbing you in it without a second thought. I saw it happen so often it made me sick—yet I ended up doing the exact same things myself. Because if I didn't, I wouldn't have been able to survive."

The self-derisive smile she wore seemed to be something she was strangely accustomed to.

"When you're born to a human and a demon, the simple act of living life can be grueling. The humans call you a minion of the demons they fear so much, and the demons call you a flawed being, tainted with human blood. So you can't relax your guard around anyone. If you reveal your true nature to someone, you'll never know when they'll turn against you. Comrades serve as nothing but chains that bind you."

"So that demon up there isn't your comrade?" I asked.

Fam silently shook her head. "He doesn't consider me a comrade, and I don't consider him one either. I'm nothing more than a sacrificial pawn to him. When my parents were killed and I had nobody to turn to, he took me in and raised me as a spy to be sent out among the humans. That's my only relation with him. So as I said," she explained, "I have no comrades."

"Sure you do. We're right here in front of you."

"Unbelievable... You still insist on saying silly things like that." Fam was incredulous. "I framed you for a crime... I'm half demon and half human...and I'm even pointing a knife at you at this very moment. Yet you're still trying to reach out to me—you even call me your comrade. I honestly struggle to understand."

"It's because I don't believe that you're truly and honestly on the demons' side."

"The same goes for Seira and Spinoza too..." she went on. "Even though their own lives were in danger, they prioritized completing their mission over their own safety. To me, every last one of you defies explanation." A lonely, ephemeral smile appeared on her face. "In all honesty...I should've gone after you during the escort mission. But I couldn't do it, so I ended up having to drag you all the way out here."

"Don't you think maybe that was because you had ended up forming an emotional attachment to us? Maybe you even considered us comrades, even if just a little bit?"

"Maybe so...maybe so." She fell silent for a moment. "You know...after facing you like this, I've finally come to realize: I won't be able to kill any of you. I've had an emotional attachment to you for a long time already."

"Then come back to us, Fam. Let's take those bastards down."

She shook her head once again. "I'm sorry...but I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I have a blade embedded in my heart—a sharp one, made of magic. It was placed inside me by that demon over there." She pointed to her chest as she spoke. "If I were to turn against him, he would activate the blade—and it would instantly pierce through my heart, killing me," she explained, then offered me a brief, sad smile. "But even if that weren't the case, I couldn't go back to you."

"Why? If you feel guilty, you don't need to worry about it. Everyone makes mistakes—and yours can still be made up for."

"I'm scared... I've been betraying others for most of my life, after all. When I start thinking about when that betrayal is going to come back around to me, I get absolutely terrified," Fam said. "Instead of getting betrayed and falling into despair, I'd be happier just never trusting people to begin with. If I live my life with zero expectations from anyone, I'll never end up getting hurt."

Apparently that was her way of coping with the world she lived in. Having been constantly persecuted and betrayed by both humans and demons, she

had severed all connections with the world around her to protect her heart—that way, she wouldn't be left vulnerable.

"You know...in a way, this blade stuck in my heart gives me a certain peace of mind. As long as it's inside me, I know the one who put it there won't just toss me by the wayside."

"You're fooling yourself. That isn't trust, that's being used. Nothing good whatsoever will come out of a relationship like that," I stated plainly. "You need to stop running away from trusting others, Fam."

"But..."

"I already told you before that no matter what happened, I'd accept you with open arms."

"Words aren't exactly trustworthy things. People use them to lie all the time. I just can't stand the thought of being hurt anymore."

"In that case, let me prove it to you with my body, instead."

"Huh?"

I stared directly at Fam. "Your pain, your suffering, your sins, your scars, and your blade... I'll take on the burden of all of those with you. When you get hurt, I'll shoulder your pain myself."

"Even the blade stuck in my heart...?"

"Yes, that's right," I said with a nod. "I consider you my comrade, and I'll do anything to protect those close to me like that. I'll put my life on the line for you."

"If you do that...you'll definitely die."

"No, I won't," I assured her emphatically. "Trust me, Fam."

Fam's eyes went wide as I stood directly in front of her, my gaze unwavering. After a moment, she let out a soft chuckle. "Those eyes of yours are always so straightforward...they make me want to look away," she murmured softly in frustration. "But...that might be what makes me want to trust you too. I might be willing to let someone betray me, if that someone is you."

As she slowly raised her head, Fam's face looked pure and refreshed, as if an evil spirit had been cast out of her. Her red eyes held a warmth within them, unlike any other demon I had seen.

Eventually, she turned around and faced away from me, focusing her gaze on the demonic man standing above the altar.

"You think you can betray me? Don't tell me you've forgotten? There is a blade embedded in your heart that was conjured by *my* magic!"

"Then I'll just have to kill you before you set it off." She raised her knife and dashed toward him.

Because she had demon blood herself, the miasma was no issue for her, and she was upon the altar in an instant, flying up the stairs toward her target.

However, the demon was unfazed. After all, he held in his hand the ultimate trump card—one that guaranteed victory the moment he played it.

"Foolish woman... In the end, you're nothing more than a defective product born from a human and a demon. Unfortunately for you, your blade will never reach me."

Raising both hands, he activated the blade stuck in Fam's heart.

Thump.

The blade dug into her heart, halting all of her vital functions.

She let out a sudden pained gasp. Having been in mid-leap for her assault on the demon, her delicate body fell from the sky like a shot-down crow and began tumbling lifelessly down the steps to the altar.

Or so the demon envisioned. However, this reality he expected to occur never came to fruition.

Fam did not even slow down before landing in front of him. By the time he realized what was happening, he was already within lethal range of her.

"Wha—?!" His eyes went wide with shock.

In the next moment, the demon's head had been severed and was sent flying through the air. As it fell to the ground with a *thud*, its eyes stared up at Fam,

her knife in hand.

“H...ow...?”

His eyes were filled with incredulity—but before he could hope to understand what had happened, he was dead.

The moment he died, the vines that had been restraining Seira and Spinoza vanished. Perhaps thanks in part to me soaking up the damage they were taking, they both seemed to be fine.

“Impossible!” Gregor shouted. “How is she still alive?! That blade pierced her heart!”

Fam began a slow, purposeful walk toward him. Feeling pressured, he began to retreat but tripped over himself and fell onto his rear. At that moment, something inside him seemed to break; the flame of his fighting spirit had been extinguished.

I stood over the fallen Gregor, looking down at him. “I said I’d take on the burden of Fam’s pain, didn’t I? That demon’s blade of magic—I shifted the effect over to me instead.”

It was something I had been doing constantly since my days as a Crimson Fang: taking injuries inflicted on my comrades and making them my own.

“E-Even so, by all rights you should be dead! You’ve been stabbed through the heart, haven’t you?! Why do you still live and breathe as if nothing happened?!”

“This pain is nothing,” I said. “Not compared to what Fam has been through.”

Gregor sat in stunned silence, staring blankly, as if struck by a bolt from the blue.

Despite having said that, though, I actually had taken near-fatal damage—no matter how tough I might’ve been, my heart itself had taken the damage directly.

Either way, the situation had been completely turned around for us.

“Help! Somebody! Is anybody still there?!”

Still seated awkwardly on the ground after falling, Gregor called out around

him for assistance. His desperate shouts echoed desolately among the giant trees.

“Come on! I know there must be at least a monster or two out there still!” he yelled frantically in all directions, seeming to lose grip on his sanity.

Right as he was starting to go hoarse from all the screaming, something finally happened—he heard footsteps echoing from behind him.

“They’re finally here!” he squealed, a fire of hope lit anew in his eyes as he turned around. When he saw the figures standing there, though, his face contorted in dismay.

Seira let out a bold chuckle. “You called?”

Spinoza cracked her knuckles. “You really did a hell of a number on us, didn’t ya, ass-face? Well, I hope you’re ready for some payback—with serious interest!”

The only ones who had come running to Sir Gregor were his enemies. Not a single ally showed up to assist him.

“A-Anybody... Is there nobody out there at all...?”

Surrounded on all sides by the four members of the Fifth Squadron, Gregor, desperate for some way out of his situation, continued to mutter incoherently.

“Nobody’s there,” I interrupted. “You were the one who decided to cut off all ties with others. After all you’ve done, I think it’s expecting way too much for people to come running when you beg for help.”

Realizing that I had hit the nail on the head, Gregor’s eyes bulged in anger, and naked rage began to fill him. He sprang upward and put his hand on the sword at his waist.

“*Graaaaaah! Siiieeg!!!*”

Drawing his blade, he came slashing at me, face filled with rage.

He’s given in to desperation.

The most foolish mistake one can make in battle is to lose their cool. Their attacks become repetitive, which makes them that much easier to predict.

As Gregor brought his sword down, I parried it with my shield.

“Gah?!“

Knocking his weapon aside, I brought up my right fist and delivered a solid straight punch to the staggering man’s face. I felt his nose break against my knuckles with a *crunch*, then watched his body sail a good distance away as I followed the attack through.

Eyes rolling up into the back of his head, Gregor let out a graceless grunt and coughed up blood as he landed on his back, foaming at the mouth and losing consciousness.

“Looks like it’s over...” Fam said in a whisper.

“Yeah,” I responded solemnly.

“Why did you punch him instead of using your sword...?”

“Death was an escape privilege I couldn’t afford to give him. We need to lock him up and get as much information out of him as we can. Although,” I added, “I admit I still had a bone to pick with him after he stuck me with those false charges. I kind of wanted to make sure he gets to experience one of those special torture sessions I got too.”

“Wow, you’re more relentless than I realized, Sieg.”

“I am. That’s exactly why I refused to give up on you too. Even if you betray me, I’ll never abandon you.”

As I said that, blood began to spew out of my mouth.

“Sieg!”

“Sarge!”

Not good—I might’ve taken a little too much damage. My body isn’t doing what I tell it to.

“No, Sieg... You can’t die because of me. You just can’t,” Fam said.

I felt a warmth on my cheek.

As she looked down at me from above, Fam was crying—and her tears were landing on me.

Oh. I didn't know she had that expression in her repertoire.

If she was able to gaze at others with a tender look of concern like that, she'd get along fine with everyone from that point on. I tried to tell her as much, but no sound came out.

Chapter 32: Blissful Dreams

We apprehended Sir Gregor and returned to the Royal Capital.

I had sustained heavy injuries but had managed to survive. Normally, injuries like those should've taken months to fully heal, but the doctors were amazed to see that I was already in top shape within just a few days.

Once I had made a full recovery, Princess Sonia once again decided to bestow medals upon the members of the Fifth Squadron. The townspeople were on edge after the monsters had attacked, and she figured they needed something symbolic of reconstruction to help dispel that anxiety.

We never reported anything about Fam being an informant to the princess; we decided to keep that little fact a well-kept secret that only the members of the Fifth Squadron were privy to.

One night, after all that hectic business had been taken care of and things had finally calmed down, I heard a knock at my door as I was getting ready to go to bed.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me...”

“Oh, hi, Fam. Come on in.” I opened the door, and she was right there. “This sure is a rare treat, seeing you come into my room the normal way.” Normally she’d just sneak in at some point without me ever noticing.

“I figured I’d try the front door for a change.” She came up to me, then asked if it was all right to sit next to me; when I nodded, she gently sat down near me on the edge of my bed.

“So, um, I have something for you, today,” she said.

“And what’s that?”

“Here.” She brought out a pair of gauntlets.

“Gauntlets? They look brand-new—did you buy these?”

“Your old ones...I know they broke during that battle we went through, so I wanted you to have these. It’s also kind of an apology for everything I put you through.”

“There wasn’t any need for you to do that.”

“Maybe not for you...but I needed to do it. This is my way of taking responsibility,” she explained, then started to elaborate further. “That, and...”

“And?”

“One of your female comrades from a long time ago gifted you a pair of gauntlets, right? Well, I wanted to carry on that tradition and give you gauntlets as well—as your comrade,” she said. “Since you went out of your way to call me one.”

“I see...”

For Fam, this might be her maximum level of affection. That thought rather warmed my heart.

“I made sure to have your name carved into them.”

“Huh?”

“I used my knife—I wrote it out myself.”

I looked down at the gauntlets. There it was, carved in uppercase letters: *SIEG*.

“Now, if you ever lose them, people will know who they belong to, and they’ll find their way back to you.”

“You didn’t have to reproduce that quite so accurately...” I commented. I honestly hadn’t expected her to do the exact same thing Haruna had.

“Now, every time you fight, you’ll be wearing gauntlets that have my markings on them. Even if I’m not physically there, we’ll be together as one.”

“That’s a bit much,” I said. “But thank you. I’ll definitely use them.” My others had broken during the whole debacle with Sir Gregor, so it worked out perfectly.

Fam let out a sudden yawn.

“You seem tired.”

“It’s already nine o’clock.” That was the time she usually started to get sleepy.

“Can I sleep in your room...?”

“You’ve been doing that all along, haven’t you?”

“Yeah... I have, haven’t I?” She gave a relaxed smile, then, rather than crawling under the bed, flopped backward on top of the sheets.

“Not sleeping under the bed this time?”

“I thought I’d try to be a little more out in the open, for a change,” she explained. “Besides, if I stay in cramped spaces all the time, I’ll stop growing.”

A while back, Fam had told me that she had trouble sleeping in open spaces because she was afraid of enemies attacking—maybe something inside her had changed.

“Hey, Sieg...”

“Hm?”

“Thank you...for accepting me. For calling me your comrade. For sharing all of my burdens.”

“No problem,” I said. “Hope you get some good sleep.”

Fam nodded and closed her eyes in silence. Eventually I began to hear the faint sound of calm and even breathing.

I can’t imagine how relieved she must feel.

Because of her mixed human and demon blood, she had probably been living every day on edge, unable to trust anybody at all. Either someone was betraying her, or she was betraying them—her heart had no time to rest.

I would protect Fam at all costs—to make sure she could have blissful dreams from then on.

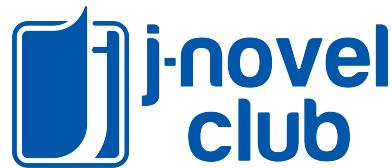
Wearing the gauntlets she had gifted to me, I started stroking her hair slowly and affectionately, watching on as she slept peacefully.











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No One Gets Past This Gatekeeper: The Unwanted Warrior Guards His New Post: Volume 2

by Kametsu Tomobashi

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