

3

Author: Leonard

Illustrator: Won

The Poison King:

Now that
I've Gained
Ultimate
Power,

the
Bewitching
Beauties in
My Harem
Can't Get
Enough
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“Mmmh...”

The little girl walked up to Caim and grabbed his right hand. Caim didn't understand what she was thinking as she looked him up with her vacant gaze.



Tea


A white tiger
beastfolk who has
served Caim since he
was a child.

Lenka

A swordswoman
with a peculiar fetish
working as Millicia's
guard.

Millicia

The first imperial
princess of the Garnet
Empire who devotes her
body and soul to Caim.



“Do you
also need a
shower?”

Sharon asked as she returned from
showering. Her curvy figure was clad
in a bathrobe that clung to her wet,
flushed skin, and she radiated the
sex appeal of a mature woman.

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue](#)
4. [Chapter 1: Ghost Village](#)
5. [Chapter 2: Beauty and Cocktails](#)
6. [Chapter 3: The Forest of the Lycaons](#)
7. [Chapter 4: The Lycaon King and the Wolf Girl](#)
8. [Chapter 5: The Imperial Capital](#)
9. [Chapter 6: The Conqueror Prince](#)
10. [Extra Story: Lenka Imprisoned](#)
11. [Extra Story: Sister Arnette's Adventure](#)
12. [Afterword](#)
13. [Bonus Short Stories](#)
14. [About J-Novel Club](#)
15. [Copyright](#)

Prologue

The following occurred late into the night, at an inn in a small town.

“Kinda late to be asking this, but what *can* you do, Millicia?” inquired a young man with purple hair and eyes illuminated by the orange light of a lamp. The man’s name was Caim—the son of the Master Pugilist and the central figure in a tragedy involving a certain poison curse. Caim was a child prodigy who had obtained overwhelming power by fusing with the Poison Queen and conquering her curse.

“Why the sudden question?” the pretty blonde girl next to him said, cocking her head. She was Millicia Garnet, the imperial princess of the most prominent nation on the continent—the Garnet Empire. She was Caim’s traveling companion, as well as his lover.

Caim and Millicia were currently both naked, having just finished the deed men and women engaged in, and were now enjoying a little pillow talk. As for their other companions—Tea and Lenka—they were both asleep in the same bed as Caim and Millicia, also naked.

“I was just wondering if you had a special skill or something. I mean, you haven’t really done anything on our journey so far, right?” Caim pointed out.

“Um...” Millicia groaned, pressing her hands to her chest. It seemed his words had hit a nerve. “T-True, I know that I am a burden... I am sorry for being so useless...”

“No, I’m not criticizing you...” Caim said, but it was a fact that she hadn’t been terribly useful in their journey so far. Caim had dealt with battles against monsters and bandits, and Tea and Lenka had handled all the camp preparations and meals. As a princess, it was natural that Millicia wouldn’t do these things, but that still did not change the fact that she hadn’t played an active role in anything so far.

“H-However, there *is* something I am good at! I may not be able to fight like

you, Caim, but I can use the Sacred Arts!”

“The Sacred Arts...” Caim repeated the unfamiliar words—and suddenly, information popped into his head.

The Sacred Arts were a special kind of magic used by trained priests and nuns that was rooted in their worship of God and the Holy Spirit. As they could use their faith to call upon power much stronger than they would be able to wield with their mana alone, the Sacred Arts were also called God’s miracle.

The Poison Queen’s knowledge just flowed into my brain, Caim thought. Fusing with the Queen hadn’t just given him the power to control all toxins—he had also inherited her knowledge.

“So that means you can use Healing Magic, create barriers, and purify things, right?” Caim said, confirming what he’d just learned out loud.

Millicia nodded. “Exactly—I am impressed that you know about that. When I was twelve, I was entrusted to the temple of the Holy Spirit Church in the imperial capital, where I was baptized and trained in the Sacred Arts, so I am adept at treating injuries and such.”

“Huh, good to know. But why haven’t you used those powers yet, then?”

“I have not had the opportunity. After all, nobody has gotten injured so far...” Millicia pouted slightly. “Even when we encounter strong monsters, you just eliminate them easily. Of course, I do not wish harm upon any of you, but... Well, I want to be useful...”

“My bad for not getting hurt, I guess. What can you do besides Healing Magic?”

“I can create barriers to stop monsters, but it requires a special instrument, so it cannot be used whenever I want. Lastly, I can purify ghosts and undead.”

“Don’t think we’ll need either of these,” Caim commented.

The chances of encountering undead during an ordinary journey were very low. They were monsters born from dead people who harbored grudges and had not been properly buried, so they mainly appeared in fallen castles and forts, or deep in dark caves where the light never reached.

“I learned how to cook at the temple, but I cannot compare with Tea, who is a maid. And besides, Lenka doesn’t let me do most chores... So, in the end, I am useless...” Millicia then began to weep.

Caim hadn’t intended to blame Millicia when he’d asked, so he hurriedly tried to comfort her. “Don’t say that! We’ll count on you when we’re injured, and maybe we’ll run into undead someday!”

“Uhh... I don’t really want any of you to get hurt, and a nun really shouldn’t be wishing for undead to appear...”

“Well...yeah...”

“I truly *am* useless... Please, console me, Caim!”

“Huh?!”

Millicia latched on to Caim and hugged him. Naturally, she was naked, and her soft breasts pressed against Caim’s torso, their shape changing as they were squeezed.

“Ah! Millicia is taking advantage of the situation to get the jump on us!” protested Tea, the beastfolk maid.

“Princess... This is not fair,” added Lenka, the red-haired knight.

Caim didn’t know when they had woken up, but the other two girls suddenly joined the conversation, still wrapped in bedsheets.

“Did we wake you up?” Caim asked.

“Grrraow... I just felt like Millicia was being sneaky.”

“What kind of senses do you have...?” Caim retorted.

“It seems the princess is in the mood, so how about another round?” Lenka uncovered her perky breasts, her eyes brimming with lust.

“Grrraow, Tea approves and wants to be first!”

“No! Caim must comfort my worthless self!” Millicia exclaimed.

“Now, now, do not fight. I suppose we should all compromise and have you spank me,” Lenka suggested.

“Shut up, you masochist!” Tea admonished her.

The three bewitching beauties noisily quarreled as they surrounded Caim.

“Come on... We *just* did it...” he sighed, realizing he wouldn’t be getting much sleep tonight either. Caim made up his mind to finish things quickly and began to caress the three girls in turn, producing moans each time.

And thus commenced a concert of three coquettish voices in the room bathed with orange light.

Chapter 1: Ghost Village

“Oh yeah, we did have that conversation,” Caim recalled.

“Yes. The time has finally come for my Sacred Arts to be useful,” Millicia said.

The village was entirely covered in mist, and the putrid stench of death and rot permeated the area. The inhabitants of this settlement had once lived peaceful lives, but it had now turned into a dead ruin that rejected life.

Caim, Millicia, Lenka, and Tea stood at its entrance, and for once Millicia was the one standing at the forefront. She was wielding a silver priest’s staff with multiple metal rings hanging at its end that rang each time she swung it.

The ghost village was located north of Jarro. Once, it had been home to fewer than a hundred people who had thrived thanks to their silk production, but now, it had been reduced to a den of the undead. Not a single villager had survived.

Sharon Ildana—the guildmaster of Jarro’s Adventurers’ Guild—had requested that Caim and the girls deal with the undead and investigate what had happened to the village.

At the time, they had been fleeing Millicia’s pursuers and had decided to make a detour using the northern route to go to the capital—but unfortunately for them, the road was blocked by a landslide, which brought their journey to a standstill. Instead of just doing nothing until the road was cleared off, though, they’d thought that becoming adventurers and earning money for their travel expenses would be more efficient. That was why they had accepted Sharon’s job.

“Ugh... It stinks. My poor nose...”

“Are you all right, Tea?”

Behind Caim and Millicia, Lenka tried to comfort Tea as she pinched her nose, agonizing over the smell.

“Stay in the carriage, Tea,” Caim said, pointing at the wagon they had used to travel. “You don’t have to force yourself to come with us.”

“B-But I’m your maid, Master Caim! I’d follow you anywhere, be it through fire or water— Bleeeeeergh!”

“Just go into the carriage! Or rather, head back to Jarro!” Caim ordered. In her current state, Tea wouldn’t just be useless—she’d actually be a hindrance. That made her loyalty more bothersome than anything. Caim would have preferred that she go back and recuperate rather than having her follow them and vomit all over the place, which would be too distracting.

“Ah, I have the perfect spell for this kind of situation. May the pure breath of the Holy Spirit purify us—Refresh!” Millicia brandished her priest’s staff and used one of her Sacred Arts. The next instant, a breeze carrying the scent of mint blew around them, clearing away the stench.

“It doesn’t stink anymore!” Tea exclaimed, back to normal now that the putrid smell of rot and death had disappeared.

“That is a spell usually used to blow away poison gasses and such,” Millicia explained. “I am glad it could be useful here.”

“Thank you, Millicia! I guess you’re not just some useless lady who just puts on airs while everyone else protects her!” Tea said.

“Is that what you thought of me? Not that I wasn’t aware of my uselessness, though...” Millicia’s shoulders slumped.

“Don’t worry—you’re not alone! There’s someone else who doesn’t do much even though fighting is her job!”

“Are you talking about me, Tea? Just so you know, I’m doing my best,” Lenka retorted sullenly.

As Caim listened to their conversation, he heard footsteps coming their way. “You’ll have to continue your discussion another time. Looks like our welcoming party has arrived.”

“Huh?” Millicia shifted her attention back to the village.

Several humanoid figures began to emerge from the mist. At first glance they

looked like normal villagers—people walking on two legs and holding farming tools like hoes and sickles—but the closer they got, the more evident it became that they were not normal at all. Their limbs were bent at unnatural angles, and some even had their necks twisted in the wrong direction. Their bodies were covered with injuries oozing dark-red blood, and maggots crawled over their rotten flesh.

“Zombies...” Millicia let out, her shoulders trembling.

“What a ghastly sight... I think I’m going to throw up again.” Tea put her hand over her mouth.

The rotten corpses were zombies, a kind of undead monster that often appeared alongside skeletons.

“Just looking at them gives me goose bumps. I wonder if my poison would even work on them,” Caim whispered, struggling not to vomit. Considering they were already dead, there was a high chance that toxins wouldn’t affect the zombies. Of course, Caim could always use acid and melt their bodies—but that would just turn the zombies into skeletons, which wouldn’t stop them from attacking. “And I don’t want to punch them either. I’m sure the stench would cling to my fists even if I wrapped them with condensed mana.”

“In that case, leave it to me!” Millicia pointed her priest’s staff toward the ghost village. “O great light that travels the stars... Strong, noble, white emperor of the heavens... May you encircle these lost lambs with your mighty hands—Holy Circlet!” Millicia finished her prayer, and a circle of light spread out with her at its center.



A zombie stepped inside the circle and immediately turned to dust, leaving only its clothes and the farming tool it had been holding. Lacking the intelligence to understand what was happening, the zombies continued to step into the circle and vanished one after another, until finally all thirty of them had disintegrated.

“Wow, that was impressive,” Caim let out with an admiring sigh. While he had known that Sacred Arts were effective against undead, he hadn’t thought the results would be instantaneous. “I’d never be able to do that. You did great!”

“I am honored by your praise,” Millicia thanked him, then drew a star in the air with her finger and mourned for the villagers who had suffered an untimely death. “May your lost souls find a peaceful rest.”

“Do you think the other villagers are inside?” Caim asked.

“Grrraow... It seems we have no other choice but to enter the town.” Tea strained her eyes, peering into the deserted village. She could see silhouettes moving around in the mist.

“Well, I can’t let Millicia do everything. Guess it’s my turn now,” Caim said. While Sacred Arts mostly relied on the user’s faith to invoke magic, they still required some mana, so Millicia would reach her limit eventually. Caim didn’t want to punch rotten corpses, but he could still use Kirin and defeat them with long-range attacks.

“I shall fight as well. I cannot let my princess shoulder the burden alone.”

“Grrraow... Then Tea will throw stones at them from afar. I don’t think my three-section staff would do much to them.”

“Well then, let’s go! Don’t stray too far from us, Millicia!”

“Yes!”

They all stayed close together to avoid getting lost in the mist as they stepped inside the village that had been transformed into a den of the undead. When zombies appeared, either Caim would shoot them with compressed mana, Lenka would cut them with her sword, or Millicia would purify them with her Sacred Arts. Thanks to her superior senses as a beastfolk, Tea quickly noticed

whenever a new enemy approached, which prevented surprise attacks, and she threw stones at them to support her companions.

Zombies weren't strong individually, but there were a multitude of them here. The thick mist shrouding the area only made things more difficult.

"What the hell is this mist anyway? It doesn't seem like a natural phenomenon," Caim complained.

"Controlling the weather is a very advanced feat of magic. Zombies cannot do that," Millicia answered with a troubled expression. "This is only a conjecture, but I think whoever caused the mist is likely also the one responsible for what happened to the village."

"So you think a mage did all this?"

"Necromancers are mages who can control corpses, but there is also the possibility that it is a lich."

Liches were a kind of undead monster that were only souls with no bodies. They were as intelligent as humans—sometimes more so—and could use magic, making them very troublesome. Though they were similar to ghosts in that they lacked a physical form, they were far more dangerous, being at least Marquis-class monsters. There was even at least one example of a lich amassing so much power and knowledge over the years that it had managed to reach Duke class.

"When I was at the temple, I read in their records that there was a Duke-class undead called an elder lich. It controlled thousands of minions and destroyed an entire city. So if there truly is a lich in this village, we must defeat it quickly," Millicia said.

For now, it was just this one village that had been transformed into a den of the undead, but if left alone, the effect would spread and cause immense damage. They had to take care of it as fast as possible.

"Master Caim! I sense something in that direction!" Tea pointed deeper into the village.

Within the mist, they could vaguely see a large form. From its shape, it did not appear to be a man-made object.

“Let’s go see what that is,” Caim said.

Caim and the girls then advanced deeper into the village until they arrived before a large tree. Its thick trunk was rooted firmly into the ground, and its leaf-covered branches stretched in all directions. The tree must have been at least three hundred years old, and judging by the altar at the base that still contained traces of past offerings, had likely been an object of worship for the villagers.

But that wasn’t what caught Caim’s attention—no, that was the robed figure sitting cross-legged as if meditating with their back against the large tree. Anyone who looked at them, though, would immediately know they weren’t human. The presence of death flowed out from the strange figure, and there was something extremely uncanny about them that made a chill run down Caim’s spine.

“Caim...” Millicia pulled at his sleeve.

“Stay close to me,” Caim told the girls as they all approached the large tree.

The robed creature noticed them and called out in a deep masculine voice. “You have finally arrived. You do not look like soldiers, so I suppose you must be adventurers, correct?”

“Who are you? You can speak, but you’re not human, are you?” Caim asked.

“The fact that you made it here means that you defeated my minions—but they were mere zombies, so I am not surprised.” The figure did not answer Caim’s question, instead continuing to talk as though reciting poetry. “Even death cannot make a useless person useful—only great effort can accomplish that feat. Truly, in this world nothing ever goes as one wishes. Whether alive or dead, my troubles never cease.”

“You’re quite chatty for an undead.”

“You thought only humans could speak? You are quite arrogant, young man.” The thing clad in a robe turned toward Caim, throwing him a cold stare from their dark, hollow eye sockets. “Hmm, your mana is intriguing. It exudes great power and a regal presence that no ordinary person could wield... It appears you *do* have the right to hold a conversation with me,” they said as they

removed their hood, revealing the pale, bluish face of a man. His skin was lifeless and drained of blood, but his facial features were sharp, making him quite the handsome man despite his lack of vitality.

“So you’re really a lich,” Caim said.

“How can you be so sure, young man?”

“You have no shadow. That’s because you don’t have a physical body, right?”

The man indeed did not have a shadow at his feet—or anywhere on him for that matter. That meant his body was spectral and had no physical form. Coupled with the fact that he could speak fluently, he could only have been a lich. Most people imagined liches as skeletons in robes, but they actually looked more like humans.

The lich didn’t seem to mind having his identity revealed, and his handsome face twisted into a smile. “I suppose you have found me out.”

“So, what’s your goal? Why did you attack this village and transform all of its inhabitants into zombies?”

“We have not even been introduced, and yet you keep asking questions. You are quite rude, young man.” The lich stood up and laid a hand on his chest. “I am Venharen, the king who once ruled over this land.”

“What? You were a king?”

“As for your other question, I need no justification for attacking this village. After all, a king holds the right to do anything he wants to his subjects. I am only toying with my property, which should not bother anyone.”

“So you attacked people without reason. In the end, you’re just a savage monster,” Lenka spit. “This land belongs to the great Garnet Empire. You, a mere undead, have no right to claim it!”

“Shut up, girl. I do not recall authorizing you to speak.” Venharen snapped his fingers and a great force struck Lenka, as though a boar had charged into her.

“Gah!” Lenka was sent flying away, rolling on the ground a few times.

“Lenka!” Millicia and Tea called out, rushing to her.

“You bastard!” Caim leaped at Venharen, throwing a kick reinforced by condensed mana at him, but he was blocked by an invisible wall. A dull thud rang out, as if Caim had kicked a hard rock.

“You certainly are fast and strong. Even though I am only a specter, your mana could actually harm me. I suppose you deserve some praise for that.”

“I don’t care. Just die already!”

“Summon Soul Knights.” Venharen swung his right arm as Caim tried to make a follow-up attack, and bluish-white flames appeared, gradually taking on humanoid forms. When their transformation finished, they had become knights wearing jet-black armor. Their faces were concealed by their helmets, but the pale flames could still be seen from the joints of their full plate armor, and their chilling presence was far removed from the living.

“Ooooooh!” the knights yelled in unison, their roars low as though they came from the bowels of the earth. There were five of them, each wielding a shield with either a sword or a spear.

“They are soul knights, Viscount-class undead monsters! Be careful, everyone!” Millicia shouted as the hostile undead knights approached.

“Got it!” Caim replied, throwing a punch at the nearest soul knight. His mana-clad fist struck the armor, knocking the creature back against the large tree. However, despite the strength of the blow, the knight quickly stood up and brandished its spear again. “They’re quite tough,” Caim remarked. “I guess that makes sense, since they’re undead.”

“Master Caim! Tea shall help you!”

“I will too. I won’t lose to mere undead!”

Tea took out her three-section staff as Lenka readied her sword, and they began to attack the nearby soul knights.

“Grrraw! They’re strong!”

“Tch... You’re nothing but a lowly undead!”

Tea swung her staff, but the soul knight defended with its shield. Lenka also seemed to be struggling, as she locked swords with her opponent.

Then one of the soul knights charged at Caim.

“If they’re Viscount class, that means they’re just one rank above orcs, but they feel stronger than that!” Caim said, kicking the incoming soul knight. Another thrust its spear at his face, but he dodged the strike, caught the spear, and used it to hurl the monster away.

Of the five soul knights, Caim fought three of them, while Tea and Lenka each opposed one of the remaining two—and although they were supposedly just Viscount-class monsters, Caim was sure they were stronger than that. At the very least, they were definitely stronger than the adventurers of the Black Lions.

“The lich is buffing them with magic! That must be why they are stronger than they should be!” Millicia shouted from the back, watching as her companions had a much harder time with their battle than usual. “I will purify them with my Sacred Arts, so please hold on until then!”

“Okay. You heard her—we must protect Millicia!” Caim said to the other girls as he shot a bolt of poison-infused mana at a soul knight’s head. The acid corroded the creature’s helmet, breaking it apart and revealing the skull underneath, but the poison didn’t affect the monster itself at all. It just kept attacking as if nothing had happened.

Caim covered his arm in compressed mana to block the incoming blow and clicked his tongue. “Poison is basically useless against them... Undead are a real pain!”

“Ooooh!”

“Shut up!” Caim smashed the knight’s skull. If it were a living being, that blow would have killed it. But even without its head, the soul knight stood up again and rejoined the battle. Losing their heads clearly wasn’t enough to defeat them. They were obviously a higher tier of undead than the zombie villagers.

Tea and Lenka continued to swing their weapons frantically, but no matter how much they attacked the knights, they would always get back up and return to the fight. Not even five minutes had passed before the two women started to grow exhausted, as they lacked Caim’s stamina.

“Are you all right?!” Tea called out to Lenka, who was panting heavily.

“Worry about yourself! Aren’t you having a hard time too?!”

“They’re both almost at their limits... Aren’t you ready yet, Millicia?!” Caim shouted as he parried the attacks from the three soul knights coming at him.

Behind Caim and the other two girls, Millicia whispered an incantation, tightly grasping her priest’s staff. Just as Caim was hoping she would finish quickly, convinced there were going to be casualties at this rate, she finally ended her chant.

“Sorry for the wait! I shall cast the spell now!” Millicia raised the tip of her staff overhead. The next instant, the mist in the surroundings cleared away, and they were bathed in the dazzling light of the sun. “Sacred Art—Sanctuary!”

White light spread out everywhere, forming a holy ground that purified the undead with far more power than the Sacred Art Millicia had used against the zombies. The soul knights were enveloped in the purifying light and began to disintegrate. Their jet-black armor fell off, the skeletons inside turning to dust, and just before they completely disappeared, they let out a dying scream—one of relief at finally being released.

“The purification...is over...” Millicia said, panting, her brow covered in sweat. “Holy ground is like a poisonous swamp to the undead. It should also have taken care of the lich...”

“Hmm, that really was quite the splendid spell.”

Millicia gasped, her eyes widening. She had been certain of their victory until she heard a man’s voice. When she turned toward the sound, she found the lich standing at the foot of the large tree as if nothing had happened. However, a closer look showed that the lich was covered with a faint purple membrane that had protected him from the purifying light.

“I did not think you were a high priestess, girl. Truly revolting,” Venharen said.

“How can you resist the purifying power of the holy ground?!” Millicia asked.

“The explanation is quite simple: When two opposite powers clash, they cancel each other out,” Venharen explained indifferently.

“That’s impossible... To think my Sacred Arts would fail...”

“I see—you’re using enough death to negate the purification. I guess liches aren’t called kings of the undead for nothing!” Contrary to Millicia, who was too shocked from seeing her best spell fail, Caim narrowed his eyes in understanding. The Sacred Arts’ power of light and the undead’s power of death were two polar opposites that countered each other, so by continuously releasing the power of death around himself, Venharen protected his body from being purified by the holy ground.

“Ugh... No way...”

“Princess?!” Lenka rushed to her master, who had fallen to one knee after having exhausted her mana, and supported her before she could collapse completely. At the same time, the light from the holy ground disappeared as it stopped receiving mana from its caster.

“Your priestess is now useless. With this, it should be clear who is victo—”

“No, it’s not!” Caim interrupted the lich with a punch to his torso. While it didn’t have a physical body, the lich was still blown back by the strike. “You said my mana would be able to harm you, right? Then I just need to punch you with my mana-clad fists until you die!”

“You little...!”

“It’s not as effective as the Sacred Arts, naturally, but at least you don’t have knights protecting you anymore!” Caim threw a rain of punches at Venharen while he was still lying on the ground. These blows would hurt him, since they were empowered by mana, so Venharen once again erected an invisible barrier to defend himself. But Caim didn’t give up—he intended to just hit the barrier until he broke through. So he punched and punched and punched again, until finally, after dozens of strikes, Caim smashed the invisible wall to pieces.

“Gah!” Venharen groaned as an onslaught of blows struck him, the impact so strong that cracks formed around him as the ground caved away. “Do not get carried away!”

“Huh?”

“Drain Touch!” Venharen grasped Caim’s shoulder, his hand clad in darkness,

and began to siphon Caim's life force. "Shrivel up and die, you pathetic human!"

"Hah!" Caim seized Venharen's arm, twisting it. Even though a lich's body was spectral, it seemed that it still adhered to human anatomy—Caim wrenched it so hard he managed to tear the arm out of its socket.

"Aaargh!"

"Toukishin Style—Ouryuu!" Caim immediately followed by putting his left hand on Venharen's abdomen and firing a shock of mana.

Ouryuu was a Basic Stance technique of the Toukishin Style that launched an explosive mana strike at point-blank distance. While its range was short, it was the Basic Stance's most destructive technique.

The mana exploded inside Venharen's spectral body, making him scream in agony. If he'd had a physical form, the shock would have destroyed his internal organs—instead, it completely tore Venharen's body apart, sending pieces flying off in all directions.

However, just when Caim thought he had killed the lich, the fragments of Venharen's body gathered together and his form was restored.

"Ugh... How could you...? How *dare* you do that to a great king like myself...?!"

Caim clicked his tongue. "You're still alive? Talk about tenacity." Saying the lich was still "alive" might not have been the best way to put it, but the point was that Venharen hadn't been defeated. Having no physical body, magic and strikes weren't fatal to the lich. Still, Caim thought that after all the mana-powered attacks he'd used, the lich should be destroyed already. "Are you really that attached to this world? You'd be better off just passing on already."

"I cannot allow the empire to persist after it destroyed my country. As their king, it is my duty to avenge the soldiers who died trying to defend our nation and the people who were mercilessly slaughtered!" At his words, a vast amount of mana, far more than he had used until now, gushed out of Venharen like an erupting volcano.

"You were holding back that much power?!" Caim cried.

“I wanted to preserve my strength for the moment when I struck at the heart of that hateful empire, but you are not an opponent I can hold back against! From now on, I shall use my full power to kill you and devour your soul!”

Caim kicked the ground, dashing like a bullet to close the distance and stop Venharen before he could do what he planned.

“You are far too slow!” Unfortunately, just before Caim could reach the lich, Venharen activated his magic. “May the realm of the dead manifest in this place—Death Pandemonium!”

The next instant, Caim felt so much death that it froze the core of his being. A black dome expanded with Venharen at its center, engulfing Caim. The heavy presence of death permeated the area beneath the dome, causing Caim to click his tongue.

“Damn, he got me... Am I inside his magic or something?” Caim observed his surroundings, but he could see only darkness. While he couldn’t see Venharen, he felt his presence everywhere around him. The sensation felt familiar... Yes, it was exactly the same as when he had faced the Poison Queen in that purple space. “Thankfully, it’s only me. The girls are fine.” His companions didn’t seem to be present—Caim had put some distance between them while fighting Venharen, so he was the only one who’d been captured by the lich’s spell.

A chuckle rang out. *“This time, it is clear who the true victor is.”*

“Huh?” Caim looked around. He’d heard Venharen’s voice, but he couldn’t pinpoint its origin. “Are we playing hide-and-seek now? You sound pretty confident, considering you were on the verge of death a few moments ago.”

“Of course I am confident. Right now you are like a meal served to me on a silver platter, after all. I can kill you whenever I want!” Venharen sneered, his voice filled with triumph. Even though he had been losing earlier, he was now certain of his victory.

“Seems you’re pretty certain your magic can beat me. Think you’ve won already?” Caim said as he continued to observe the black dome that imprisoned him, searching for the lich. The space was flooded with the powerful presence of death, and it felt like being inside a coffin.

It kinda resembles the holy ground Millicia created with her spell, but it's closer to the Poison Queen's world. That means this must be the lich's inner world.

"Well then, I have frightened you enough. Time to kill you!" Venharen laughed arrogantly. "This space is my very self. I can reap your soul whenever I wish."

"My soul, huh...?"

"Indeed! Within this zone of death, I can steal your soul in an instant and make it mine! You are no longer my enemy—you are my prey!"

Caim stayed silent for a moment. Venharen's words weren't an exaggeration or an empty threat—the presence of death Caim felt all around him indicated that the lich was telling the truth. "Just a warning, but you shouldn't try to take in my soul. It's too much for you," he said after a while.

"Are you trying to beg for your life? You, who struck me with such vigor earlier? How disgraceful!"

"No, what I'm trying to say is—"

"Well then, dinner is served. You were an interesting enough human, but it is all over now!" A giant mouth suddenly appeared from the darkness, its sharp fangs drawing near Caim to devour his body and soul. *"Bon appétit!"*

"Ugh..." Caim groaned as he was swallowed, unable to resist.

"Ha ha ha ha! What rich, savory flesh! This is my first time eating someone with such a delicious flavor!" The sound of chewing resonated around him, and Caim was in agony as his skin was torn, his flesh was sliced, and his bones were broken.

Finally, the lich's maw reached Caim's soul. Caim then felt unprecedented pain and discomfort as the fangs pierced his soul and sucked out the fundamental energy that was the source of his mana.

"What manner of soul is this?! The taste is so rich, yet also refreshing. Its exquisiteness permeates every fiber of my being! And the more I chew, the more flavor seeps out of it." Caim heard the vile praise as his consciousness began to dim. Venharen was speaking as though he was a gourmet who had tasted every

delicacy that existed, his voice full of glee. *“Splendid! What a wonderful soul! Even if I searched the whole wide world, never again would I find another like this one! Its taste and its aroma are just— Bleeergh?!”* In the middle of his compliment, the lich suddenly vomited. The black dome then popped like a balloon, and the area returned to its original state.

“Phew!” Caim exclaimed, released from the giant mouth. His body didn’t hurt, and despite having experienced being torn to pieces and devoured, he hadn’t suffered a single actual injury. Everything had been an illusion created by Venharen’s magic.

“Are you all right, Master Caim?!” Tea rushed to her master.

Caim stood up and moved his limbs, checking his body. *“I’m fine,”* Caim said, watching as Venharen threw up a little ways away. *“But he isn’t. Poor him.”*

Even though the lich didn’t have a physical body, he vomited up something similar to blood as his body convulsed in pain. *“What...is...your...soul?! Ugh... Is it poisoned or something...?”*

“Unfortunately for you, yeah, that’s exactly it.” Caim shrugged sympathetically. “I fused with the Poison Queen and received her power. My flesh, my blood, and even my soul are toxic. You tried to devour me, so now you’re facing the consequences.”

Earlier, Venharen had absorbed Caim’s life force with Drain Touch, but it had only been a drop in the bucket. Now he had gotten a direct taste of Caim’s poison-filled soul, and he was overwhelmed by the Queen’s full power.

“The Poison Queen, you say...? You mean that Demon Lord-class monster?!” the lich exclaimed in shock, his face warping in terror as he groveled on the ground. “Impossible... No mere human could absorb the power of a Demon Lord capable of destroying an entire nation on her own... Are you truly hum— Bleeergh!” Venharen once again vomited midsentence. He couldn’t even speak freely anymore.

“So while poison basically doesn’t work on an undead’s body, it does on their soul, huh?” Caim mused. He had never expected things to conclude like this. It had been an interesting battle, yet it ended with the lich destroying himself. “Talk about an unexpected ending... I’d rather have won another way, though.”

Venharen continued to throw up as his spectral body gradually turned purple. At this rate, even if Caim did nothing, his toxins would still kill the lich. Still, Caim approached him and said, “Well, um... Sorry, I guess.”

“Ugh...”

“Kinda weird to do this as an apology, but I’m gonna finish you off to end your suffering. Pass on for real this time, and stop haunting this world.”

Caim apologized for the unintentional conclusion and smashed Venharen’s head with a fist clad in condensed mana. The lich’s spectral body scattered and vanished, never to return.

“It’s finally over...” Millicia, who had been sitting on the ground due to mana exhaustion, said with a sigh as she stood up.

By eliminating the lich that had destroyed the village and turned its inhabitants into zombies, Caim and his companions completed their first job as adventurers.



Defeating Venharen caused the mist covering the village to disappear, proving it had indeed been the result of a spell, not a natural phenomenon. With the fog gone, Caim and his companions finally had a clear view of the village, but half-destroyed houses were the only thing in sight. There were no corpses left, as all the zombie villagers had been turned into dust when Millicia used her Sacred Arts to purify them.

With that, Caim and the girls had completed their job—and yet, they did not head back to Jarro immediately.

“Sorry, Caim, but I would like to hold a memorial for the villagers,” Millicia said. She was a priestess and could not remain unmoved by the miserable state of the village. “It might not do much, but I would like to at least perform a simple ceremony to put the villagers’ souls to rest. I do need to restore my mana before that, though, so it will take some time...”

“I don’t mind, but how long are we talking about?” Caim asked.

“Two to three hours, I think.”

“Guess I need to find something to kill time, then.”

Millicia went to rest inside a house that was still relatively intact, and Caim wandered around the deserted village. If it had been a normal settlement, he would have enjoyed touring it, but knowing that it had been filled with corpses only a short while ago put a damper on that feeling.

“Sir Caim!” Lenka called to Caim from the shadow of a building near the edge of the village.

“Huh?” Caim was puzzled but walked over to where Lenka was standing. “What’s up? Shouldn’t you be with Millicia?”

“Tea is taking care of her. Anyway, I have something important to talk about.”

“Something important?” Caim cocked his head. She’d gone out of her way not to have Millicia and Tea present, so what could it be?

“The truth is...I noticed something after looking around the village.”

“What, did you find where the lich came from?”

“No, something even more important.” Lenka’s face was *very* serious as she stared at Caim. “This is the perfect place for walkies!”

“...What?” Caim gaped. He knew what going *on* a walk meant, but walkies? “Explain.”

“What, you don’t know? Here.” Lenka took something out of her bag that made a clinking sound and showed it to Caim.

“Aren’t those...”

“A collar and a leash, yes.” In Lenka’s hands was a dog collar connected to a chain leash.

As Caim froze, too dumbfounded to react, Lenka eagerly put on the collar and made him hold the end of the chain. With that, the scene of a young man going on a walk with a beautiful woman collared like a dog was complete.

“This is perfect!” Lenka declared.

“No, it’s not!” What was *perfect*-ly clear, however, was that she had completely given up on her dignity as a woman.

“Calm down, Sir Caim. Look, the village is empty now, right?”

“So what?!”

“Then you can put me on a leash and go on a walk without anyone seeing us!” Lenka said brazenly. “I am a proud knight. I could not possibly do such a thing in front of other people. But look around us—the village is empty! That means we can do this without suffering the consequences!”

“What the hell?! How can you still consider yourself a proud knight, anyway?” True, knights served their masters like loyal dogs, but Lenka was obviously taking the “dog” part too far. “The villagers are gonna be crying in the afterlife...or, actually, maybe they’ll enjoy it?” The men would probably be pleased by the sight, at least. Still, that didn’t change the fact that this would be blasphemy toward the dead.

“A-Anyway, let’s go on walkies. You just need to pull on the leash as we walk together...”

“...Really? Nothing else?” Caim asked.

“I promise!”

Caim sighed, exasperated. If that was all, he could do it. It wasn’t as if anyone were watching, and it was still better than when she had asked him to tie her up. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.” He pulled on the leash.

“Woof!” Lenka barked cheerfully.

Caim held the leash connected to Lenka’s dog collar as they walked around the village. It was quite a bizarre scene, but no one was present to comment on it.

However, just when they finished their round of the village and Caim thought it was finally over, Lenka knitted her brows, dissatisfied. “This isn’t good enough. It’s just not as arousing as I was hoping.”

“You can’t be serious...”

“It will never be enough unless I truly become a dog... In that case!” As soon as she finished speaking, Lenka started removing her clothes.

“Why are you undressing?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Dogs don’t wear clothes!”

“What the hell?! Don’t snap at me like you’re the one making sense here!”

Without any hesitation, Lenka completely stripped down, baring her naked body to the world, then immediately fell back onto all fours “This time, it really *is* perfect!”

“No, it’s not. All you did was throw something very important to your humanity all the way down into the abyss...”

“You don’t need to hold back. Let’s continue our walk.”

“Maybe *you* should consider holding back. Like, really—restrain yourself,” Caim sighed.

Lenka was now on all fours, naked, wearing a collar connected to a chain leash held by Caim—exactly like a dog on a walk with her master. That fact greatly aroused her, making her skin flush and her breathing heavy. She shook her hips, encouraging Caim to quickly set off.



“Why did we come to this village again?” Caim asked himself.

Caim knew that once Lenka had her switch flipped, she wouldn't stop until she was satisfied. The same thing had happened back in the forest when she had demanded him to tie her up. In fact, he felt like she had only been more open about her fetishes since then. While Tea and Millicia were also quite aggressive in their approaches, Lenka was far more perverse than either of them.

“Woof, woof!” Lenka barked happily as Caim silently pulled at her leash, having given up on persuading her. They walked around the village, cheerful barks echoing through the settlement. Even though her bare legs scraped on the ground, Lenka didn't mind at all as she continued to bark merrily. “Woof, woof!”

Caim, on the other hand, was quiet.

“Woof, woof!”

Finally, Caim broke his silence. “Hey.”

“Woof!”

“Haven't you had enough already? You should be satisfied by now.”

Caim kept his mind empty all the while, but at this point they had finished another round of the village, so he hoped they could stop. Unfortunately, Lenka wasn't thinking the same thing, so she continued to act like a dog. Or rather, she went even further—she shook her rear in front of Caim, then turned her head his way and whined as she made eyes at him.

Caim immediately understood what she wanted. “That's not what you promised. Didn't you say we would just walk?”

She whined again.

“Don't whine, you nymphomaniac bitch knight!” Caim scolded Lenka, then spanked her.

“Awoof!” Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect, only serving to arouse Lenka even more. Her expression became enraptured, her tongue hanging out of her mouth as she panted.

“I came here to do a job as an adventurer, so how did it end up like this...?” Caim had admired adventurers since his childhood and had finally become the object of his longing—and yet, here he was, doing...*this*. “This is ruining the lingering rush from that fight, but I guess it’s too late to stop now...” As the saying went, if you’ve eaten poison, might as well lick the plate clean. Caim removed his pants and took Lenka from behind, turning her whines into moans.

Chapter 2: Beauty and Cocktails

In the carriage, on the way back from the village after Millicia's ceremony had concluded, Lenka hummed happily on the coachman's seat while Tea and Millicia pouted and half glared at Caim, who looked away awkwardly.

"It's unfair that you only did it with Lenka..."

"There truly is no helping either of you..."

Tea and Millicia sighed, but strangely, they didn't pry too much. Maybe they were feeling merciful, or perhaps they had reached an agreement as girls. Either way, they didn't blame Lenka for beating them to the punch and instead closed in on Caim.

"You'll have to make Tea your priority tonight, Master Caim!"

"No, I am the one who performed the best today, so I ought to be first!"

"Come on..." Caim winced at the girls' approach, massaging his brow. "How come you're so lively? We're returning from a destroyed village full of undead—can't you think of something else?"

"That's already in the past! We must face the future!" Tea declared.

"Exactly. We have properly mourned them, so now we must move on with our lives and think about what we will do now," Millicia added.

"And to you, that means thinking about our nightly activities...?" Caim didn't know if he should call them determined or just thirsty. Either way, their carriage reached Jarro during the conversation. "We've arrived. Let's get out of the wagon."

"We shall finish this discussion later, Master Caim."

"We won't let you get away, so prepare yourself."

Tea and Millicia both warned Caim as they exited the carriage with him.

"I'm tired. Let's report to the guild and go rest at the inn," Caim said.

They returned the cart they had rented and headed toward the Adventurers' Guild. When they entered the building, they found several adventurers drinking and talking noisily at their tables, just like the previous day. However, the instant the adventurers noticed Caim and the girls, they all turned to look at them.

"Hey, aren't they the guys from yesterday?"

"Yeah, they're the ones who beat the Black Lions!"

Apparently Caim and his companions had become quite famous, and they were now the center of attention.

"A skinny guy and three girls... Yeah, that's them. On top of that, those three are so gorgeous, they'd even give the capital's best prostitutes a run for their money!"

"Hey, don't say stuff like that. What if it offends them and they decide to kill you?"

"Did you know that the beastfolk woman completely destroyed the eyes of that degenerate monk from the Black Lions? He won't be able to see ever again!"

"The Black Lions were little shits, but their abilities were first-class. Those four defeated them without even getting hurt, so they're at least A-rank strength—maybe even stronger!"

The adventurers were all staring at Caim and the girls with awe and fright.

"Hmm... Doesn't feel half bad," Caim muttered. He wasn't an attention-seeker, but it did feel pretty good to have people praise and fear him—maybe because it was the complete opposite of all the insults he'd received as a cursed child back in his homeland.

"Ah, welcome!" The same receptionist as the previous day greeted them.

"We're here to report the completion of our job," Caim said.

"Understood. The guildmaster told me to bring you to her once you have returned. Please follow me."

Caim thought they would be guided toward the parlor again, but this time

they went right to the guildmaster's office.

"Guildmaster, I brought Mr. Caim and his companions," the receptionist announced after knocking at the door.

"You may enter," the voice inside replied.

When the door opened, the first thing that came into view was a pretty woman in her late twenties dressed in a suit, who stood up from her desk and came their way. Her name was Sharon Ildana. She had nice curves and silver-gray hair cascading down her back, and her well-proportioned facial features made her look both beautiful and intelligent.

"Please sit," Sharon said to them, then turned toward the receptionist. "Could you go fetch some tea?"

"Yes, please wait a moment." The receptionist then exited the room.

Caim and Millicia sat on the sofa as directed, while Tea and Lenka stood behind them.

"You're here to report the completion of the job, right?" Sharon asked. "I'm all ears, then."

"Yes. I shall explain." Millicia proceeded to recount what had happened in the village. She talked about the zombies and the one who had created them—a lich who had called himself Venharen and proclaimed he had once been that land's king, and how he planned to take revenge on the empire.

Sharon listened quietly, and by the end of the story she had cast her eyes down somberly. "I see... I think I know what this is about."

"Really?"

"Yes. That village—or rather, the entire area—was once part of a nation called the Totess Kingdom. It was conquered and annexed by the Garnet Empire more than a hundred years ago. If I remember correctly, Venharen was the name of their last king."

"I think I read about that in a history book..." Millicia pondered. "It was a nation that used necromancy and controlled undead, or something..."

"Exactly. Totess's king became an evil spirit that cursed the land after his

death, so the priests back then built a shrine and sealed him inside. Actually, I think the shrine was right next to that village...”

“So that means someone broke the seal,” Caim commented, sipping the black tea that the receptionist had served during Millicia’s explanation. “Still, I don’t see why anyone would free that lich. Is there any merit to doing that?”

Sharon became pensive, laying a hand on her chin. “Hmm... Perhaps it wasn’t intentional. Maybe the shrine simply deteriorated over the years or suffered some kind of accident. Either way, I plan to have it investigated, but...”

“But if it *was* intentional, that means it was an act of malice against the empire. Maybe even a crime committed against the imperial family,” Millicia finished Sharon’s sentence as both of their expressions darkened. If there was a mastermind behind this incident, the village hadn’t merely been destroyed by undead—this was part of something far more complex.

“Anyway, investigating it will be our job. For now, I suppose I should congratulate you on the completion of your first request.” Sharon laid four cards on the table. “Here are your guild cards. I made you all B-rank.”

“Wow!” Caim exclaimed as he took his. Each thin metal card had their name and the letter B engraved on it.

“Being B-rank allows you to enter most towns and checkpoints without having to pay a toll. It also proves that you are trustworthy, making it easier to gather intel,” Sharon explained.

“Thanks. Still, giving us that rank is pretty generous when we’ve only done one job,” Caim said.

“You defeated the Black Lions and that lich—you could already be A-rank. Unfortunately, I am only the guildmaster of this small branch, so I can’t give you a higher rank than B. But considering your skills, you should easily reach A-or even S-rank before long.”

“Should I really be receiving the same rank?” Millicia asked, lowering her eyebrows apologetically. She hadn’t fought against the Black Lions, and her Sacred Arts didn’t really count as combat abilities.

“You should. And you do need something to identify yourself, no?” Sharon

smiled. “I registered you as just Millicia. When you were born, Your Highness, many children were given your name, so it should not stand out too much.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Millicia, Tea, and Lenka took their cards. They also received a bag full of gold coins as their reward.

With that, their report was over, but there was still something they wanted to know. “Incidentally, is the road still blocked?” Millicia asked. They were only staying in Jarro because of the landslide and would depart for the capital as soon as it was cleared away.

“Unfortunately. It seems it will take a while.”

“I see...”

“The damage was more extensive than they realized. Technically, you could go straight to the capital through the forest, but it’s crawling with monsters, so that would be too dangerous.”

“I could deal with them,” Caim interjected.

“I know you are strong, Caim, but even you’d have a hard time. That forest is a mana zone, and supposedly there’s even a Duke-class monster living inside it. There are also walking trees roaming around, so without a guide it’s almost impossible to navigate the forest—or even get through it alive.”

Mana zones were areas where an immense amount of mana gushed out from ley lines underground. This caused plants and animals to mutate and transform into monsters even stronger than the ones found in normal forests. Walking trees were a perfect example: they were trees transformed by the mana zone so that they didn’t need to plant their roots in the soil, instead walking around and leading travelers astray.

“I think it’s more prudent to stay in Jarro until the road is cleared. That way, you’ll be able to hear the news I’ll get from the adventurers I sent to the capital,” Sharon continued.

“The road is blocked, no? Doesn’t that mean those adventurers can’t get back either?” Caim asked.

“Even if *they* can’t pass, *information* can. There are various ways,” Sharon answered vaguely. “Anyway, it shouldn’t take long—no more than three days, I think. So until then, I’d be happy if you just enjoyed your stay in this town. There are beauty salons and massage parlors for women, and you can also use the hot springs.”

“Ah, yeah, the hot springs...” Caim grimaced slightly. He didn’t really have great memories about them—mostly being scolded by the inn’s owner after he was assaulted by three ravenous beasts.

“I guess we don’t really have a choice...” Millicia cast her eyes down, concealing her impatience.

“Princess...” Lenka put a hand on her master’s shoulder with concern.

Millicia’s brothers—Arthur and Lance—were fighting over the emperor’s throne, and she wanted to stop them. For that, she needed to head to the imperial capital as soon as possible.

“Haste makes waste, Millicia. You shouldn’t be too hasty.”

“I know, Tea...but thank you,” Millicia expressed her gratitude to Tea for her comforting words, then she turned back toward Sharon. “Well then, please notify us when you learn something new, Guildmaster Ildana.”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Then we’re done here. See ya.” Caim and the girls exchanged goodbyes with Sharon before leaving the building. “Jeez... We can finally go back to the inn and rest now...”

“Let’s head to the open-air bath! Let’s *enjoy* it!” Tea suggested vigorously.

“We’re not going in together ever again,” Caim reminded them. Because their *activities* had dirtied the bath, they were warned that the next time it happened, they would be banned from the inn. “I’ll use the shared bath, so you can take the private one in our room.”

Tea, Millicia, and Lenka pouted, dissatisfied by Caim’s reply.



While they’d been forced to stay in Jarro, it wasn’t as though Caim and his

companions spent all their time at the inn. For example, today the girls had decided to go to the town's beauty salon to refresh themselves. The establishment, which offered mudpacks, massages, and other services for beautification, was right next to the hot springs, and the girls had gone there first thing in the morning.

Being the only man, Caim finally got to enjoy some alone time and spent it wandering around the town.

There's quite a lot of tourists, huh? Caim thought as he walked down the main street. He hadn't noticed until now, but there were many travelers coming to Jarro, and the main street was filled with stalls and stores aimed at tourists.

"Hey there! Want to try a hot spring egg?" someone called out.

"A what?" Caim looked at the street stall, puzzled.

The owner laughed heartily and presented Caim with a wooden plate with an egg on it. "Here, crack it and you'll see."

Caim did as instructed and cracked the egg on the edge of the plate. A soft egg yolk covered in half-liquid egg white spilled from it. "This isn't raw...is it?"

"It's an egg cooked in a hot spring. That gives it a creamy texture, unlike hard-boiled eggs. It's delicious, so try it," the owner said as he added a bright yellow oil to the top of the egg and gave Caim a spoon.

Caim gingerly scooped up some of the egg and put it into his mouth. The next instant, it melted on his tongue, the perfect blend of salty and greasy smoothly sliding down his throat.

"It's really good!"

"I know, right? Here, try a deep-fried egg too." The owner presented another plate. This egg seemed firmer than the one from the hot spring, closer in shape to a normal hard-boiled egg.

Caim put it in his mouth and chewed. The egg was crispy at first, but that was immediately followed by the creamy texture of the hot yolk spreading inside his mouth. It was similar to the hot spring egg he had just tasted, yet also distinct. Either way, he'd never eaten anything like them before.

“Seconds for both, please!”

“Here you go!” The stall owner gave Caim another helping of each egg. “They sell ale over there, so you should try them together. These eggs go well with alcohol.”

“Got it. Thanks.” Caim did just as the owner suggested and went to buy a drink at the other booth. He also purchased grilled chicken and fish skewers at other stalls, then found a vacant bench and sat down to enjoy the food and the ale.

Once he was done eating and drinking, Caim thought he could go for more, so he got up and went to buy another drink. As the Poison King, he was immune to toxins—including the negative effects of alcohol—so he could drink as much as he wanted and only experience the pleasant feeling of being slightly tipsy. Caim sat, drank his ale, got up, bought a new cup, sat, drank, bought another, and so on. He looked just like the kind of worthless man who spent his days drinking instead of working. Other tourists were also eating and drinking as they walked, but what Caim did was on a completely different scale.

I might be going a little overboard... Not that I care about how other people see me. It wasn’t as though he would stay in Jarro forever, so it didn’t matter what the inhabitants thought about him. At least, what he was doing was *far* better than the “walk” he had done with Lenka.

“My, is that you, Caim?” a voice called.

“Hm?” Caim turned toward it and found Sharon Ildana. Unlike the previous day, she wasn’t wearing a suit but a simple blouse with wide-leg pants. He supposed she was on her day off.

“I know I said I would be glad if you enjoyed your stay in town, but I didn’t expect you to enjoy yourself *that* much.” Sharon smiled wryly as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with one finger. She never dreamed that Caim would tour the stalls like he was now doing. “Where are the others?”

“They went to that beauty salon thing.”

“Ah, I see. Of course they would. Their mudpacks are great for the skin, so I highly recommend them. You should have gone along.”

“Meh, not interested.” He didn’t mind his lovers wanting to look beautiful, but personally, he didn’t want to have strangers massaging his body. He got enough of that with the girls touching him during their nightly activities.

“Is that so? Well then, how about going drinking with me? I’m alone myself, and I know a place that serves great cocktails,” Sharon suggested.

“Hmm... I guess it’d be a nice change.” Caim was starting to get tired of ale, so he wanted to drink something else. “Fine, I’ll come with you.”

“Well then, let’s go.”

Caim threw the skewers and cups he had used into a nearby garbage can, and just as he was preparing to follow Sharon, she naturally closed the distance between them and entwined her arm with his. Unlike Tea and the other girls—who clung firmly to his arm—the way Sharon did it felt natural.

She seems pretty used to being escorted by men... That’s a mature woman for you, Caim thought as her perfume tickled his nose and he felt her breasts pressing against his arm.

They both walked through the town until they entered a small bar in a back alley, and anyone watching would have wondered which one was escorting the other.

“It’s a small place, but it serves very tasty drinks. You might call it a hole-in-the-wall,” Sharon said.

“Well...I like the vibe,” Caim commented. It was a calm place, unlike the tumultuous bars on the main street.

“Welcome,” the elderly owner greeted them as he polished a glass. There were no other customers.

Caim and Sharon sat at the counter.

“Is there anything you want?” Sharon asked. “My treat.”

“Never tried anything classy like a cocktail, so I’m leaving the choice to you.”

“In that case, we will have your recommendation, barkeep.”

“Certainly.” He nodded and poured several liquids into a shaker. After shaking

it for a while, he filled two glasses with the contents, added an olive as a finishing touch, then served the drinks to Caim and Sharon. “Two martinis. Please enjoy.”

“The cocktails here are all amazing. Go ahead,” Sharon urged him.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Caim looked at his glass. The liquid in it was nearly transparent and a different color than ale. When he brought the drink to his mouth, the fresh scent of herbs tickled his nose. He hummed in approval before finally starting to drink. A sharp flavor pricked his tongue, and he was surprised by how strong the alcohol was. It also had a refreshing bitterness and a pleasant aftertaste that could become addictive. “This is my first time trying anything like this... It’s great.”

“I know, right? This cocktail is also one of my favorites.” Sharon lightly swirled her glass under her nose, enjoying the aroma, then brought it to her mouth. She gently sipped her cocktail, and when she was done, she casually wiped the lipstick mark she had left on the rim of the glass with her finger.

Caim watched Sharon silently. She was just drinking, and yet she made it look so elegant. Her every movement was refined, and she exuded the grace of a mature woman.

Millicia’s table manners also look nice, but it’s a different kind of elegance.

“As good as ever,” Sharon said with a contented sigh. “Want another drink?”

“Gladly.”

The barkeep made them new cocktails. Caim and Sharon drank them, then asked for another, and yet another after that. Caim was surprised by how much of a heavy drinker Sharon was—even though they were drinking strong alcohol, she was going at the same pace as Caim without difficulty.

“By the way, will you be leaving the town with *her*?” Sharon asked.

“You mean Millicia?”

“Yes.” There was another person listening, so she was avoiding calling Millicia “Her Highness.”

“That’s the plan. She hired me to be her guard after all.”

“I see... What a shame. And here I thought a promising adventurer had joined our guild.”

“Don’t you have the Black Lions or whatever the name was? They’re good, aren’t they?”

“They left, unfortunately.” Sharon shrugged as she swirled the olive inside her glass. “They moved to another town right after losing to you. They couldn’t bear the shame of being completely defeated by people who weren’t even adventurers.”

When Caim and the girls had entered the guild, all the adventurers inside had looked at them and whispered to one another. Caim and his companions had won against the Black Lions, so the murmurs had been of praise and awe—but for the losers, they must have been full of sneering and ridicule.

“The leader and the scout transferred to another town, and the last one had to retire because of his injury.”

“Sorry for all the trouble,” Caim apologized.

“I’m not blaming you. It’s their fault things ended up like this.” Sharon took the olive and tossed it into her mouth, slowly rolling it on her tongue before biting into the fruit with her back teeth. Then she discreetly spit the pit into her hand as she covered her mouth. “They caused many problems with women adventurers and clients, and I expected them to do something that can’t be undone someday. In a way, you could say that you saved us from future trouble. Still, it is true that we now have fewer capable hands.”

“And that’s why you invited me here.” Caim nodded in understanding. He had been wondering why she had suddenly suggested they get a drink together, and now he had the answer. “Sorry, but I don’t plan to stay here.”

“Because you are *her* lover?”

“...No comment.” Caim couldn’t readily reveal he had a love affair with the imperial princess.

Sharon chuckled and leaned on the counter, resting her chin on her hand. “Sorry, but it’s pretty obvious. It’s easy to tell how close a man and a woman are by looking at how they act together. And from what I observed, you are in a

physical relationship with your three companions.”

Caim didn't reply.

“For you to get your hands on such pretty girls... You are quite the man.”

“Do you want to invite me or drive me away? Pick one.”

“I'm just joking. This town has hot springs, and it's a great tourist spot, so I hope you'll at least come here to relax sometimes. If you took a few jobs while you were at it, all the better.”

“I'll think about it.” Caim *did* like the hot springs, so he wouldn't mind coming back. For now, the objective was to escort Millicia to the imperial capital, but he had nothing planned for what he would do after that.

Sharon sighed. “I think I'm a little drunk. Would you mind escorting me back home?”

“...No.” The truth was that he wanted to drink more, but he also couldn't let an inebriated woman return home alone. Her skin was flushed from the alcohol, which gave her a very sexy look. If any unsavory men saw her like that, they might drag her into a dark alley and assault her.

They paid the owner and left the bar, linking arms once again, and walked down the back alley toward the main street, when suddenly...

“Wait, you!” A hoarse voice rang out.

“Huh?” Caim and Sharon turned toward the voice and found several men surrounding one large man dressed like a monk.

“Bro, it's him. I'm certain!”

“Finally... We've finally found you!”

“And you are?” Caim asked, narrowing his eyes. The large man in monk attire had bandages around his eyes, and Caim felt like he had seen him somewhere.

“Is that you, Sheilow?” Sharon said, surprise in her voice.

“You know him?”

“Yes...and I think you know him too.”

“I do?”

“He’s the warrior monk of the Black Lions—one of the three who fought against you and your companions.”

“Ahh. Yeah, now that you mention it...” Caim recalled that the monk had fought against Tea and used a mace. Caim hadn’t ever learned his name, however, only calling him “Underling Two” in his head.

“You lost your sight during the match and retired from adventuring, so what are you doing here?” Sharon asked.

“That voice... Is that you, Guildmaster? Why are you with that man?” Sheilow inquired. It appeared he was truly blind.

“We shared a drink together. But that’s none of your business. Anyway, what brings you to me?”

“I’m not here for you, Guildmaster—but him!” Sheilow announced, pointing the mace he had been using as a cane toward Caim.

“Huh? Me?”

“Indeed. I want a duel to the death with you!” Sheilow declared.

Caim certainly hadn’t expected that. “Is this revenge for the other day? Tea was the one who blinded you, not me.”

Tea had torn Sheilow’s face with her nails, destroying his eyes, so if he wanted vengeance, she should be his target.

“As a proud believer of the Siegzelon faith, I revere strength! While I do force myself on women, never would I dispute the result of a fair duel!”

“So why are you here?”

“My faith teaches that strength is everything. Someone who cannot fight is worthless.” Sheilow slammed the head of his mace into the ground, causing the surface to crack and a cloud of dust to rise. “That beastfolk woman said that you were stronger than anyone else. I decided to trust her words and make you my ultimate goal as a warrior!”

“So in short, you’re looking for somewhere to die. What a bother,” Caim

sighed. Sheilow wanted to fall in battle against a strong warrior. Having lost his sight, his life was now worthless, so he'd decided to end it by challenging Caim—the man that Tea, who'd bested Sheilow, had called the strongest of all. "That's stupid. If you want to die, then do it yourself." Caim waved his right hand in annoyance. "I have no reason to help with your suicide. I was having a great night until you showed up, so get lost."

"You bastard! Do you have any idea how he feels—"

"Don't care. Shut up." Caim backhanded the man who had stepped close to him to complain, knocking him out.

"Oh... To think you could defeat one of my juniors in a single strike! Impressive," Sheilow commented.

"Thanks, I guess."

"Still, I have my pride as a warrior! I won't leave just because you tell me to!" Sheilow lifted his mace and pointed it at Sharon this time. "If you refuse our death match, I'll violate her!"

"What?"

"Not only her, but every woman who was with you too! I'll break their limbs, pin them down, and ravish them like vulgar pieces of meat as they scream and cry!"

Caim was impressed by how good Sheilow was at provocation. While Caim didn't think Sheilow would be able to act on his threat without his sight, it wasn't a matter of it being *possible*, but the very fact that he'd declared he would violate Caim's companions right to his face.

He may be on death's door, but I can't ignore what he said!

"Fine. If you're gonna go that far, then I guess I'll do as you wish and kill you." Caim unlocked Sharon's arm from his and asked her, "By the way, I won't be punished for this, right?"

"This is legitimate self-defense, and he just declared he would commit a grave crime, so it'll count as though you have killed a bandit," she answered. In a way, it was like eliminating a monster—there were no consequences for it.

“Good. Let’s go, then—I’m gonna kill you.”

“Much obliged.” Sheilow brandished his mace with both hands and had his underlings back away so that they would not be dragged into the fight.

“Caim...” Sharon called to him.

“Step back. It won’t take long.” Caim stepped away from Sharon and stood before Sheilow, just an inch out of the range of his mace. “I’m right in front of you, so come at me already. Or would you rather I come at you?”

“No... Here I go!” Sheilow steeled himself and swung his mace as he charged toward the sound of Caim’s voice. It was a suicidal attack from a man prepared to die, resulting in a blow that was sharp and heavy.

Unfortunately...his opponent was just on a whole other level.

Caim avoided the best attack of Sheilow’s life simply by lightly twisting his body sideways, letting the warrior monk pass by him.

“Too bad, degenerate monk. That was quite a good strike.”

“Gah!” A deep diagonal cut appeared on Sheilow’s torso and he collapsed, splattering a large amount of blood on the ground.

Caim had used Seiryuu, one of the Toukishin Style’s Basic Stance techniques, and had slashed at the monk with a blade made of condensed mana when he had passed.

“B-Bro...”

“May you rest in peace...”

Sheilow’s underlings wept as they stared at his corpse. He had been a lustful, degenerate monk who had acted like a scumbag, but apparently, some people would still cry for him.

“So...you wanna go at it too?” Caim asked them.

“No... We need to take his body away. We won’t fight you.” The underlings retrieved Sheilow’s corpse and started to leave. “Thank you for accomplishing his wish and helping him pass on. You gave him a warrior’s death,” the underling said, and they all retreated deeper into the back alley.

After encountering Sheilow, Caim once again linked arms with Sharon and was led to a certain establishment slightly away from the main street—a love hotel, a place where men and women stayed to do *this* and *that*.

“So...how did we end up like this?” Caim asked himself, a finger on his brow, trying to sort through his recent memories. Nothing special had happened—after the fight, Sharon had naturally taken his arm again, they’d walked for a bit, and then as if the building were pulling them in, they had entered the love hotel that just so happened to be on their way. All of this had resulted in him sitting on a bed in the dimly lit room he currently occupied. “I don’t remember either of us trying to seduce the other...”

“Relationships between men and women are basically decided by the mood and the impulse of the moment. It’s fairly common for things to end up this way,” Sharon said as she returned from showering. Her curvy figure was clad in a bathrobe that clung to her wet, flushed skin, and she radiated the sex appeal of a mature woman. “Do you also need a shower?”

“No...I’m fine. Let’s just get done with this already.” If Caim took too long, the girls waiting for him would be very displeased—though just “resting” with another woman should already be enough to leave him on the receiving end of their anger.

Sharon chuckled. “That’s not a very tactful thing to say. Worst pickup line I’ve ever heard.”

“Uh...” Caim blurted out as Sharon climbed onto his lap.

“This is my thanks for saving me earlier. Just enjoy yourself.” Sharon embraced Caim and pushed her soft lips against his, parting them and invading his mouth with her tongue. Using her arms, she locked his head in place to prevent him from fleeing and pressed her abundant assets against his chest. While Caim’s attention was occupied by the sensation of her breasts, she quickened the movement of her tongue, one-sidedly licking Caim’s.

Damn... She’s used to this! Sharon was completely different from the three women he was used to sleeping with—she lacked their awkwardness, and the technique she showed with her tongue only proved her experience. *Just how*

many men have had sex with her... Or rather, how many men has she had sex with?

“You shouldn’t be so surprised. Many adventurers are quite wild,” Sharon paused the kiss and whispered into Caim’s ear as if she had read his mind. “I try getting a little taste of all the promising young men—and some of the young women—in the guild. Giving adventurers a little motivation is part of the job too.” She blew a sweet breath into his ear, then resumed the kiss, her tongue moving even faster than before.

I see... True enough, she would be able to entice most adventurers with a technique like that, Caim thought, praising her skill. As their tongues intertwined, intense pleasure rushed to his brain. Even without touching them with his hands, Caim knew that Sharon’s breasts were taking on obscene shapes as they squeezed against his torso. How could she possibly bring so much pleasure just by kissing him and pressing her body against him? Of course a man would never disobey her once he got a taste of this. Sharon had likely captivated many adventurers and brought them under her control using this method.

She’s amazing. I’m really impressed. But as a man, I can’t just give in!

“Nnnh?!” Sharon’s eyes widened as Caim suddenly pushed her tongue aside to invade her mouth with his own.

I might lose when it comes to technique and experience, but I’m far above her when it comes to stamina and physical fitness!

Caim obeyed his lust and greedily devoured Sharon’s lips, using his tongue crudely like a beast. It was entirely different from the technique Sharon had shown earlier. There was no skill here—this was a rough kiss where he devoured her lips without reciprocation.

Don’t think I’m like other men—if I yielded to you and climaxed without doing anything myself, I’d never be able to face my lovers! Caim didn’t think that Tea, Millicia, and Lenka were inferior to Sharon. In fact, while they were not as skilled or experienced, he thought they were superior to Sharon as women. However, even though he knew it wasn’t logical, Caim felt if he lost to Sharon here, that would imply she was superior to his lovers. Therefore, he had to win.

“Y-You’re being very rough. You shouldn’t be so greedy,” Sharon chided him, drawing back from his kiss. “I’m thanking you for saving me, so you should just relax and let me do everything.”

“Sorry, but I prefer to devour rather than be devoured.” Caim grinned savagely. “From now on, I’ll be the one on the offensive. Let’s see who gives in first.”

“...Very well. Show me what you can do.”

Caim pushed Sharon down on the bed and stripped away her bathrobe. However, even in a position like this, Sharon still smiled bewitchingly. “You think a boy who isn’t even twenty yet can make me come? I hope you’re not a quick shot, at least.”

“Keep talking. You won’t be able to soon enough!” Caim mercilessly thrust his hips, stabbing his “sword,” now standing valiantly like a legendary weapon, into the cleft before him. Intense pleasure struck him like a bolt of lightning, and Caim’s vision went white.



“That was impressive. Let’s call it a draw,” Sharon said, breathing roughly after their fierce, two-hour-long battle. She and Caim were lying exhausted on the bed, their bodies dripping with sweat. “To be honest, I didn’t expect you to make me moan so much. Is that thanks to your youth?”

“You’re not *that* old,” Caim replied, his breath heavy from the intense struggle. He had more stamina, but the difference in experience had been too large to overcome, so he had only managed to barely keep up with her and their battle ended in a draw.

“You should feel proud of your sexual prowess. I suppose I should have expected no less from the man chosen by Her Highness Millicia. I wonder if she surrendered after you stabbed her with your ‘sword.’”

“Who knows.”

Sharon giggled happily, tickling Caim’s chest with her index finger. “You’ve also done it with the other two, no? As they say, great men truly are fond of sensual pleasures.”

“Well, sorry for being a womanizer, I guess.”

“I’m not blaming you. Besides, strong men are encouraged to have multiple wives in the empire.” The Garnet Empire was a meritocracy, so no one would complain if someone collected a harem as long as they had the ability. “It will be difficult to make people accept your relationship with Her Highness, though...”

“Yeah, I know... By the way, you don’t feel strange or anything, do you?” Caim asked.

“Hm? Why do you ask? I didn’t hurt my hips, if that’s the intent of your question.”

“I see...”

Sharon was the same as always. Caim’s bodily fluids contained his pheromones, which acted like an aphrodisiac to women who were compatible with him, so if they didn’t affect Sharon, that meant she was different from Millicia and the other girls.

Now that I think about it, doing it with her felt different than it does with the other three... Like, I dunno, something was missing... Sex with Sharon had been undoubtedly great, but it had felt lacking compared to his experiences with his lovers. They truly were special to Caim. *I guess it was worth sleeping with Sharon if I could figure that out... Man, I’m the worst.* Caim was exasperated with himself for only realizing how strongly he was attracted to his lovers after sleeping with another woman, and he realized he’d become a rather detestable man.

Chapter 3: The Forest of the Lycaons

Several days had passed since Caim and his companions had begun staying in Jarro—and yet, the road to the capital still hadn't been cleared off. During their time in Jarro, they had bought the necessary supplies for their journey, defeated monsters for the guild, enjoyed the hot springs, and many other things.

The girls discovered that Caim had slept with Sharon the instant he had returned to the inn. There was no way he could deceive Tea's nose, so he had revealed everything to them.

"Grrraow, I suppose there's nothing to be done about it. It *is* you, after all, Master Caim."

"Imperial women are broad-minded, so you do not need to fear our reaction that much."

"That doesn't mean you can just keep collecting women, though. I'm the only pet dog you need."

Unexpectedly, Tea, Millicia, and Lenka hadn't been angry about Caim's adventure with Sharon. Tea was a beastfolk, so she knew that strong males were always surrounded by many females. As for Millicia and Lenka, they were born in a nation where polygamy wasn't unusual, and both of their fathers had multiple wives. Therefore, the three of them hadn't minded Caim's love affair with another woman, but... Well, that night they squeezed him drier than usual.

Regardless, the four of them lived a rather decadent lifestyle for a while—until one day, a messenger from Sharon Ildana told them to come to the guild.

"So, about the situation in the capital... It seems a civil war is brewing," Sharon said with a sigh as she sat in front of Caim and the girls inside the guild's reception room.

"What?! Tell me what is happening!" Millicia exclaimed, placing her hands on the table between the sofas and leaning closer to Sharon.

“P-Please calm down, Your Highness!” Sharon held Millicia’s shoulders to stop her and began to explain. “As you already know, the first imperial prince and second imperial prince—Their Highnesses Arthur and Lance—are fighting over the throne. And with the emperor bedridden due to his illness, there is nobody to stop them.”

Everyone listened silently.

“Until now, everything has happened behind the scenes, but a few days ago, a trusted retainer of Prince Lance was assassinated. Because of that, Prince Lance decided to take all of his retainers and leave the capital. He is currently raising an army east of the city.”

“To think the situation would get so much worse...” Millicia paled as she sat back on the sofa.

“Princess...” Lenka, standing behind, put a hand on her master’s shoulder with concern.

“Prince Arthur is also preparing his own army to fight against Prince Lance. It is only a matter of time before they clash and a civil war occurs,” Sharon continued.

“So it is a race against time... We need to go to the capital right away!” Millicia declared.

“But the road is blocked. Should we go back the way we came and take a detour?” Caim suggested. If they couldn’t go to the capital using the road out of Jarro, then they could just head back south and take the eastern route.

“No, we would not make it in time... This might be a desperate measure, but I think we should try going through the forest!”

This idea had been brought up before, but because it was a mana zone where dangerous monsters lived, it had been rejected.

“I don’t mind, but are you sure about this?” Caim asked.

“Yes. I am sorry to place this burden upon you, but I need to go back to the capital as soon as possible and stop my brothers. Please!” Millicia bowed to her companions.

“Well, like I said, I don’t mind. Fighting is my thing, after all.”

“Tea is fine with it too. In fact, I’m eager to put my skills to use.”

“If you have resolved yourself, Princess, then so have I. I shall accompany you to the end.”

Caim, Tea, and Lenka nodded. They were all prepared to head through the dangerous forest to escort Millicia to the imperial capital as soon as possible.

“This is too reckless... Just being strong isn’t enough to let you traverse a mana zone,” Sharon chided them with an exasperated look. “No matter how powerful you are, it won’t help if you get lost in the forest and can’t get out. It’s too dangerous for just the four of you.”

“I know that, but it’s not like there’s another way,” Caim retorted.

“Actually...I did suspect it would come to this, so I prepared a guide.” Sharon smiled wryly and clapped her hands. Then, the door opened and a petite girl entered the room. “This is Lotus, a supporter working for Jarro’s guild. A job has kept her away for a while, and she just returned yesterday.”

“N-Nice to meet you! I look forward to working with— Ow!” The girl—Lotus—bit her tongue as she introduced herself and started to cry.

“Uh... This is our guide? Like, seriously?” Caim narrowed his eyes in doubt.

The person Sharon presented was a petite girl who barely reached Caim’s waist. She wore a sturdy-looking jacket and short pants, had short, black hair, and carried a large knapsack on her back. Droopy rabbit ears of the same color as her hair hung down from her head, clearly marking her as a beastfolk. Each time the girl moved, her floppy ears swayed with her.

“Oh, don’t underestimate her. She’s our guild’s best supporter. I can vouch for her skills,” Sharon assured them.

A supporter was someone who didn’t fight but, as their name indicated, supported other adventurers. They carried supplies, set up camps, prepared meals, and assisted their allies with items during battles.

“She’s been hunting and gathering herbs in the forest since her grandfather’s time, so she knows the forest really well. There is no better guide than her.”

“Ay’m Lotush. Nish to meetch you...” Lotus said, lisping after biting her tongue earlier. It was hard to believe the guildmaster herself would vouch for someone like *this*.



Caim looked at Lotus silently for a moment, then said, “Well, as long as she’s capable enough to do what we need her to do, I guess that’s fine. She could be a kid or an old man for all I care.”

“Thank you...and sorry for involving you in our problems...” Millicia apologized.

Lotus shook her head, her droopy ears doing the same. “N-No, it’s fine! I don’t mind!”

“Grrraow, she’s adorable. I want to pat her head,” Tea said, approaching her.

“Eek!” Lotus immediately fled with a shriek, hiding behind one of the two sofas in a flash.

“Wow, she’s fast,” Caim commented, impressed.

“She ran away from me! Why?!” Tea exclaimed.

“Sorry, she’s quite the coward, and because she’s a rabbitfolk, well...” Sharon trailed off, looking at Tea.

“Ah, yeah, Tea’s a tigerfolk—of course she would be scared,” Caim concluded. To rabbits, tigers were predators, so Lotus’s survival instincts must have made her flee the instant Tea, a white tiger, got close to her.

“Can a coward like her really guide us through the forest, considering how dangerous you said it was? I’m not sure bringing a little girl like her is a good idea...” Lenka inquired, looking at the rabbit girl hiding behind the sofa with exasperation. As a lofty knight, she was worried about taking a child to a dangerous place.

“Dear me, what a hopeless child.” The guildmaster gave a strained smile as she grabbed Lotus’s knapsack and dragged her out in front of Caim. “I know I’m repeating myself, but she truly is a capable supporter and knows the forest better than anyone. True, she’s a coward and quick to flee, but that also means she’s very good at sensing danger. And, don’t worry—she won’t escape on her own and leave her clients behind.”

“I hope so...” And with that, Caim received Lotus from Sharon. He was pretty uneasy about her, but considering her speed, she wouldn’t die easily, at least.

As long as she doesn't die because of us, it should be fine. Me aside, Millicia would feel bad if this girl died right before our eyes. “For now, I guess I'll let Tea take care of her.” Caim then passed Lotus off to his maid.

“Leave it to me!”

“Noooooooo!”

Tea rejoiced, and Lotus screamed.

“Well then, we're off to the capital. Thanks for the help,” Caim said to Sharon.

“You helped me too.” She smiled softly. “You're welcome to stop by again whenever you want.”

“You just want to push more work on me, don't you? I can see right through you.”

“But after that, I'll give you some *special* service, just like last time. Is that not good enough for you?”

Caim didn't reply and looked away.

“Master Caim...”

“Caim...”

Tea and Millicia shot him a subtle glare.

“Anyway, let's go!” Caim announced their departure, glossing over the matter.

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Their conversation over, Caim and the girls exited the building and left the city. They had not even spent a week in Jarro, but between the duels, the undead subjugation, and his adventure with the guildmaster, Caim felt like a lot had happened. And now, they were heading east of the city—toward the Forest of the Lycaons. If they crossed it, they would be able to reach the capital without using the road that was currently blocked by a landslide.

“W-Well then, let's enter the Forest of the Ly— Ow!” Their guide—the black rabbit beastfolk Lotus—bit her tongue, and her eyes filled with tears. She shrank back in fear, her body trembling; biting her tongue and lisping when she

talked had become a common occurrence.

Caim really wanted to throw out a retort about the guide being the most anxious person in the group, but held himself back.

“The reason the Foresht of the Lycaons ish called a mana zone is because it’sh filled with mana, and the monshters living here abshorb that rich energy,” Lotus explained.

“Which makes them stronger than the average monster, and that’s why this place is dangerous, right?” Caim asked.

“Yesh!” Lotus nodded repeatedly. “Not only are the monshters strong, but there are alsho walking trees, woozyshrooms, and many other troublesome plants that confushe your senshes and cause compasshes to malfunction. Anyone unprepared ish almosht assured to get lost and never eshcape the foresht again.”

Walking trees were, well, trees that walked, making it harder to get one’s bearings. As for the woozyshrooms, they released spores that made people dizzy and robbed them of their sense of orientation, causing them to wander through the forest until they collapsed from exhaustion and died—only for the spores to infest their corpses and grow more woozyshrooms on them. That’s why even if someone was strong enough to deal with the monsters, they could still die if they weren’t prepared for all of the different plants.

“The forest ish divided into three layersh. The outer layer ishn’t that dangerous and there are almosht no monshters there, sho people can gather herbs eashily. However, you can’t enter the middle or inner layersh without a guide—you’d be risking your life. So please shtay close to me sho you don’t get losht,” Lotus explained, turning her back to Caim and the girls to face the forest, her droopy rabbit ears tracing an arc as she did. “Well then, let’sh go. The outer layer is relatively shafe, but pleashe be careful.”

“Got it,” Caim replied.

Carrying her large knapsack, Lotus stepped on fallen leaves as she entered the forest. Caim followed her, then Millicia and Lenka, and finally Tea took the rear—the formation they had decided beforehand.

The inhabitants of nearby towns and villages feared the forest, but the outer layer was mostly normal. There were even small birds and animals wandering around, as well as edible herbs and mushrooms growing here and there.

“Oh... Not bad,” Caim muttered as he watched Lotus from behind. She made almost no sound as she walked—not from her footsteps, the rustling of her clothes, or the noise from the swaying of her large knapsack. She had also concealed her presence so much that if she were to stand behind someone, they wouldn’t notice her unless they were very perceptive.

She’s like an experienced ranger... There’s no way she could beat me in a fight, but if she seriously tried to hide, I’d have a hard time finding her. No wonder Sharon recommended her. Her skills are worth learning.

Caim attentively observed the movements of Lotus’s limbs, then started to imitate them, his body gradually beginning to move like hers. Her unwavering core and firm yet silent steps were similar to those of a seasoned martial artist. As a practitioner of the Toukishin Style, Caim understood she must have practiced hard to reach this level of proficiency.

And it’s not just her movements—it’s the way she breathes too. Even though Lotus was carrying something heavy, her breathing was steady and silent. There was no doubt that she was very skilled at what she did. *I’m pretty sure I can adapt her movements to my martial arts. It’s not like I’m aiming to become an assassin or anything, but it could be useful in the future.*

As Caim imitated her, Lotus suddenly turned back and looked at him curiously, glancing at his face for a few seconds before facing forward again. She must have sensed his presence becoming more subtle and turned to check if he was still behind her.

They continued to walk like that for two hours without interruption or conversation until Lotus abruptly stopped, looking tense. “Th-The middle layer ish jusht beyond here. It’s going to be very dangerous from now on, sho pleashe be careful.”

“Doesn’t look that different,” Lenka commented from the middle of the formation.

Millicia also looked around curiously. “Actually, I feel like the mana in our

surroundings is thicker and the air heavier. It is a bit similar to the village when it was full of undead.”

“Ah, now that you mention it...” Caim nodded. This area of the forest looked the same at first glance, but anyone with a keen sense for mana would notice the difference. The mana suddenly became so thick that it felt like there was an invisible wall at the limit between the outer and middle layers of the forest. “I guess we’re entering the mana zone for real now.”

Caim sharpened his senses and noticed that he no longer felt the presence of small animals in his surroundings, likely because they didn’t want to come near this place. That was no surprise—from here on, the mana zone called the Forest of the Lycaons truly began.

Just before making the first step into the middle layer, Lotus put down her large knapsack and took something out of it.

“We’ll use this from now on. Please grab it and don’t let go.”

“A rope?” Caim looked at the thick rope she presented to him. Wires must have been woven into it, because it was pretty heavy and seemed sturdy enough that common blades wouldn’t be able to cut through it.

“It’ll be our lifeline,” Lotus said. “We must not be separated, so never let it go.”

“Well, I don’t mind, but isn’t this a little much? We still have a clear field of view...”

“We’re entering the mana zone for real. It’ll *feel* like you’re walking straight, but you’ll actually be going in circles—or even though you’re looking at the person ahead of you, you’ll suddenly lose sight of them and find yourself alone. That’s how dangerous the place is,” Lotus explained.

“...You’re the guide. We’ll do as you say.” Caim could easily defeat Marquis-class monsters, but he was still a novice adventurer. If Lotus, a veteran guide, said something, he would listen. Caim looked back at his comrades, and everyone nodded as they grabbed the rope.

“Well then, let’s go. Walk slowly.” Lotus stepped forward, going so slowly

and cautiously that Caim couldn't help thinking she was still acting a bit cowardly. However, his opinion changed after a few minutes of walking.

Caim gasped in shock as his vision suddenly blurred. His sight grew hazy as if covered by a fog, and he had a hard time focusing on Lotus, who was walking right in front of him. Her figure wavered left and right, and the same went from the trees. It was as though the trees were walking...

"No, they *are* walking!" Caim exclaimed. It wasn't an illusion—the trees were moving, uprooting themselves as they walked one step at a time. "So that's what they look like, huh...?" He had read about these walking trees in books, so he was aware of them. Still, he couldn't help but be surprised by actually seeing trees walking on their own.

"That's a pretty impressive sight. Are they really plants?" Lenka asked, dumbfounded.

Lotus stopped in her tracks and turned toward her to explain. "Walking trees are both plants and monsters at the same time. By the way, this one in particular releases pollen that blurs your vision and makes you dizzy, so please be careful."

"Ah, so that's what's going on," Caim muttered, clicking his tongue and rubbing his eyes. As the Poison King, he was immune to toxins, but that didn't help against pollen that physically affected the eyes.

"Makes sense for a mana zone. If we did not have the rope, we might have already been separated from one another," Millicia said.

"Grrraow. If we do get separated, I don't think I'll be able to find everyone. The pollen is affecting my nose too," Tea added.

Caim looked back and noticed that because the walking trees had moved, the scenery was completely different, which made it impossible to know which path they had taken. "Say, Lotus... How are you keeping your bearings?"

"Ah, uh... Well...intuition."

"Seriously?!"

"Yesh! Please don't get mad!" Lotus pleaded, her droopy rabbit ears

twitching.

“I’m not angry, but can you really travel through the forest only using your intuition?”

“Yesh. My grandpa guided me around the forest many times, so I just know where to go...”

“So there’s no logic behind it, and it’s just pure experience. I can’t imitate that.”

It reminded Caim of fish—some would leave their river to enter the sea and travel around the world, and yet would still be able to find their way back to the river where they were born. They weren’t using signposts or compasses—they just *knew* the way instinctually.

I guess she’s the same way. Even though she’s not a monster, she’s a true resident of this mana zone.

“The pollen isn’t the only danger. There are monsters ahead. If I were alone, I could hide, but with everyone else along...”

“Don’t worry about that. Just leave the fighting to me,” Caim declared. As long as he didn’t get lost, he was confident he could deal with the monsters.

However, Lotus was unaware of Caim’s strength and looked at him with doubt in her eyes. “The guildmaster said that you were strong, but will we really be all right?”

“Everything will be fine. You just need to guide us, and I’ll take care of the monsters.”

“Grrraaaaaw!”

“Oh, here’s the perfect opportunity to show you,” Caim said, turning toward the monster that had just emerged from the trees.

“Eek!” Lotus shrieked and quickly hid behind Tea, in the back of the formation. Her speed truly was amazing.

Caim observed the monster that had just appeared. It was a big, black-furred gorilla around three meters tall, with two heads and four arms.

“That’sh a twin kong. It’s very shtrong, sho you shouldn’t fight it head-on!” Lotus warned him.

“Thanks for the info.” Caim waved his hand and stepped forward.

“Ah...” Lotus blurted, watching as he ignored her warning.

The massive gorilla glared at Caim with its two pairs of eyes and charged. Swirling its four thick arms like wheels, it swung them at Caim, roaring as it rained punch after punch down on him.

Lotus screamed and covered her eyes with her hands, so as to not see the tragic event that was about to unfold. Surely, if a giant gorilla hit someone, it would turn their body into a gory mess.

“Grrraow, it’s all right. You can watch,” Tea reassured her gently.

Lotus timidly moved her hands away from her face—and what she saw was Caim, standing calmly as the gorilla continued to punch him.

“I see. You’ve got quite a lot of power, and the fact that you have four arms makes your attacks harder to predict, which can be rather bothersome. All in all, I’d say you’re around Viscount-class level.” Caim calmly analyzed his opponent as he parried its blows, his arms clad in condensed mana.

That was Genbu, the technique of the Basic Stance of the Toukishin Style that specialized in defense, using Mana Compression to make his arms stronger than steel. Because the technique worked by focusing mana into a single point, he would be severely injured if he was struck anywhere else, but Caim would never make a mistake like that.

“Observe your opponent while defending against their attacks, and when you find an opening...” Caim calmly watched the monster, learning the rhythm and pattern of its attacks. Eventually, he found an opportunity for a counterattack. “...you strike! Hebi!”

Hebi was a counter technique typically paired with Genbu. The user would only defend at first, observing their opponent, before abandoning all defense to launch a counterstrike once they spotted an opening.

Caim extended his arm like a snake, using his hand like a sword to stab into

one of the twin kong's throats. The neck was a vital area for every living being, and the monster screamed as one of its own was pierced, spouting blood and dyeing the nearby leaves red as it staggered back. Still, the glint in its eyes didn't waver—its vitality was just as impressive as its size. It glared at Caim with intense hostility.

"You look ready to continue our fight and all, but we're done already," Caim muttered coldly. The next instant, the twin kong's large body staggered like a drunkard, and it fell to its knees with a groan. "Don't expect to live now that my mana is inside you. It's no different from being bitten by a venomous snake."

The monster suddenly began to vomit blood from its two mouths, and its four eyes became bloodshot before tears of blood started to flow from them. Then it collapsed on the ground and stopped moving.

"It was pretty strong, but I guess that's to be expected from a mana zone's monster," Caim commented.

"Amazing... He really won..." Lotus whispered, shocked. What she had just witnessed had been beyond her understanding. How could a human so easily block the giant gorilla's rain of punches, then go on to defeat it in a single blow?

"As you just saw, fighting won't be a problem. Focus on guiding us. After all, it doesn't matter how many monsters I kill if we end up lost anyway," Caim said.

"U-Undershtood," Lotus replied, still astonished—and lisping as always.

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After that, they were attacked again several times, but Caim didn't consider any of their foes to be very strong, so he would sometimes let Lenka or Tea deal with them. They suffered a few light wounds, but thankfully, Millicia was present to heal them with her Sacred Arts, and it never developed into serious injuries.

They proceeded deeper into the forest until the evening of their first day.

"So we're camping here tonight?" Caim asked.

"Y-Yesh. You musht not come out of the tent during the night," Lotus said, once they were finally inside their tent, which had enough space for all of them

to lie down. “This tent ish special and was given to me by my grandfather. It’s made from the skin of a monshter called a giant chameleon. As long as we don’t make any noishe, nothing will find ush. I alsho spread a strong monshter repellent around here. But”—Lotus’s droopy rabbit ears trembled—“we’re only shafe inside the tent. I can’t guarantee your shafety outside of it, so you musht not go out! If you need to do your business, pleashe use this pot!”

“Well...I guess we don’t really have a choice here. Are you okay with this too?” Caim asked the girls.

“Yes, of course. We won’t go out of our way to put ourselves in danger,” Millicia answered on behalf of the other two.

Caim and his companions weren’t foolish enough to do something they’d been specifically warned not to do.

“Anyway, shouldn’t we eat? I’m starving.”

“Same here. We walked a lot today.”

Tea and Lenka made their hunger known. Naturally, Caim, Millicia, and Lotus were just as hungry—they just didn’t show it.

“But if we can’t go outside the tent, then we can’t make a fire,” Caim said, realization hitting him.

“The fire could abshorb the thick ambient mana of the mana zone and provoke an exploshion, sho you shouldn’t make one during the day either,” Lotus explained. “Pleashe make do with presherved food.”

“An explosion? Seriously? Man, mana zones are really dangerous...” Caim sighed, his shoulders drooping.

Mana not only affected the flora and fauna but also natural elements like water and fire. It could fuel flames and increase their strength, leading to an explosion, so it wasn’t a good idea to light a fire in a place with abundant mana.

“Here is tonight’s dinner.” Lenka distributed everyone’s share of preserved food.

Caim shrugged as he received his insipid meal. *Quite the frugal dinner...though it’s still far better than the bread full of mold and rotten*

vegetables I used to get back in the village. “I guess crackers and jerky are fine once in a while.”

“Indeed. That’s what we ate while on expeditions when I was in the knight order, so I’m used to them,” Lenka agreed as she and Caim started to chew their rations. The others then followed suit.

Once done with their dinner, having nothing else to do, they all decided to turn in for the night. They lay down in the following order: Caim, Tea, Millicia, Lenka, Lotus. Even though they were a little nervous about sleeping in a mana zone, the exhaustion of the day caught up to them, and they quickly fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, as everyone’s peaceful breathing echoed inside the tent, moans rang out.

“Aaah... Mmmh... Master Caim...”

“...Huh?” Hearing his name roused Caim out of his slumber. His mind was still hazy from just having woken up, and his thoughts were muddled, but he could feel something soft in his hands. It was a very pleasant and satisfying sensation, like plucking ripe fruit. His fingers sank into the squishy, elastic, and slightly wet bulges as he groped them tirelessly.

“Master Caim... Please don’t be so rough...”

“Wait...” After toying with the mounds in his hands for a while, Caim was finally fully awake. His vision was filled with silver, and the smell of sweat coupled with the fresh scent of soap tickled his nose. “...Hair?” Caim realized. In front of him was silver hair, and he knew only one person with hair that color. “Is that you, Tea?”

“Yes, Master Cai— Aaah!” Tea’s reply turned into a moan when Caim reflexively put strength into his fingers and pinched the hard peaks of those soft hills.

Finally, Caim realized the situation. He was hugging Tea from behind, and the squishy objects he had been playing with were her breasts, which had been liberated from her maid uniform.

“What are you doing?!” Caim exclaimed, careful not to raise his voice too

much so as to not wake the others. He didn't understand what was happening—why was he rubbing his maid's breasts?

"What am *I* doing? *You* are the one who suddenly started groping my chest, Master Caim."

"R-Really?" Caim was doubtful at first, but then he recalled that ever since the girls had become his lovers, he'd spent every night—and sometimes the day as well—sleeping with them, to the point that groping a woman's body had become routine to him. Perhaps his body had automatically hugged Tea, and he'd toyed with her breasts in his sleep out of habit. "S-Sorry. Guess I must have been half asleep. Forgive me."

"I don't mind. Or more precisely, I want you to continue."

"Seriously? Have you forgotten where we are?" Caim chided her. They were in a mana zone, one of the most dangerous places in the world. Even if they were currently safe in the tent, it would be very imprudent of them to do that kind of thing in a situation like this.

"But after all you've done to me, my body is aching and I won't be able to sleep. That will affect my performance tomorrow..."

"That may be true, but..."

"Besides, it's your fault, Master Caim, so you should take responsibility for it," Tea said, grinding her round butt against Caim's crotch.

Caim groaned and tried to distance himself, but found that he couldn't. There was nowhere to flee in the confined tent, and his member gradually gained vigor.

"Everyone is fast asleep from exhaustion. They won't wake up even if I raise my voice a little." Just as Tea had said, Caim could hear the uniform breathing of Millicia, Lenka, and Lotus. They likely wouldn't wake up easily.

"Fine, but only a little." Caim relented and started moving his hands again, eliciting a moan from Tea. Now that he had made up his mind, he didn't hesitate. He vigorously moved all of his fingers like a virtuoso pianist, assaulting Tea's breasts to make her orgasm as fast as possible.

“Master Caim... If you’re so forceful, I won’t be able to keep my voice down...”

“You’re the one who asked for this, so deal with it. If someone wakes up, I’ll stop.”



Tea bit her finger to hold back her voice, but she couldn't suppress all of her moans as Caim continued to toy with her chest. He massaged her breasts—sometimes symmetrically, sometimes with different movements—pinching the tips and making her mounds take on all kinds of shapes. Her bust was the best toy ever, and he felt like he would never get tired of playing with it.

“Mmm... Grrraaooooow...” Eventually, Tea let out a stronger moan, though she still kept her voice down. Her half naked body spasmed a few times before going limp.

Having achieved his goal of making Tea climax, Caim finally released her breasts, feeling very accomplished. “You should be good now, so we can finally sleep.”

“Tea might be,” she said, panting from the afterglow of her orgasm. “But you aren't, Master Caim.” She grabbed Caim's “sword,” eliciting a groan. She lovingly caressed its length, which had reached its apex from playing with her chest, and sweetly murmured in Caim's ear, “You can use Tea however you want. Please satisfy yourself with my body, and don't hold back.”

Tea rolled up the skirt of her maid uniform and pulled down the red underwear covering her hips, then guided Caim's “sword” toward her warm spring.

At first, Caim resisted the urge welling up inside him—but in the end, he gave up and surrendered himself to the storm of lust, thrusting the tip of his “sword” deep inside her dripping wet spring.

Chapter 4: The Lycaon King and the Wolf Girl

The next day was exactly the same, and so was the one after that. Lotus walked in the front, guiding them through the forest, while Caim, Tea, and Lenka fought against any monsters that appeared.

“W-We’ll be entering the inner layer from here on, sho pleashe be careful!” Lotus announced nervously on their fourth morning inside the forest, lisping as usual.

It had taken them three days to pass through the middle layer, but finally, they were stepping into the heart of the forest. It was going to be even more dangerous, but they had to traverse it if they wanted to reach the capital.

The scenery in the heart of the forest was different from the middle layer. The trees were at least twice as tall, and their trunks and branches were golden with silver leaves. The mana was so rich here that it had completely transformed the vegetation.

“So we’ve finally reached the inner layer. Any advice, Lotus?” Caim asked.

“No, I have none,” she instantly replied.

Lenka was surprised by her answer. “What about the safety rope? Are there no more plants that confuse people?”

Lotus shook her head. “All of that shtops past the middle layer. The inner layer ish all about fighting shtrong monshters.” She proceeded to explain that the monsters from the middle layer were too weak to live in the inner layer, so walking trees and such didn’t inhabit it. “The mashters of the forest—the lycaons—live here. All the monshters in the inner layer are either really shtrong or very good at hiding.”

If Lotus were by herself, she would be able to hide from the eyes of the lycaons and other monsters, but she was guiding Caim and his companions right now, so that wasn’t an option. Their only choice was to face any foes head-on. Right now, Lotus really did look like a rabbit in front of a predator, her entire

body shaking from fear.

“I am sorry for forcing you to go through this,” Millicia apologized. “But we have to go to the capital no matter what.”

“We’ll protect you, so please continue guiding us along,” Lenka followed.

Lotus nodded, still trembling. Spending a few days together had helped increase her trust in the others, and while she was extremely frightened, she didn’t hesitate to keep moving forward.

“Don’t worry—I won’t let a single monster touch you. If one shows up—”

A giant worm burst out of the ground.

“—I’ll kill it.”

Caim used Seiryuu—the Basic Stance technique of the Toukishin Style that compressed mana into a blade—to instantly slice the monster into round pieces.

“He defeated a tyrant worm—an inner layer monster—like it was nothing...” Lotus commented, mouth agape.

“Oh, that was an inner layer monster? It was pretty strong, but if that’s how powerful they all are, they won’t be a problem,” Caim said—and he wasn’t even trying to brag. He just hadn’t found the creature to be a threat. The only thing it had going for it had been its size, after all.

“Its size is exactly why it’s a troublehome...” Lotus retorted, hearing Caim’s impression of the monster.

“That’s just how Master Caim is, so roll with it.”

“Indeed, typical Caim.”

“We would have a hard time against it—Sir Caim is just exceptional. I advise you to simply ignore it.”

Tea, Millicia, and Lenka all comforted the rabbit girl. They were used to Caim’s absurd strength, so they weren’t fazed by it anymore.

“As long as Caim is with us, we will be fine. So do not worry and leave it to him.”

“Undershtood.” Lotus stepped forward, encouraged by Millicia.

Caim and the girls followed after her, stepping inside the inner layer. Once they had crossed the forest, they would be drawing near the imperial capital, and their mission to escort Millicia there would be over.

However, Caim and his companions would soon realize that there was no way that their journey would end so smoothly. They had faced many difficulties until now, and this forest would be no different.

A few hours after entering the inner layer of the forest, one of the masters of the forest—a lycaon—finally appeared.

Caim gasped, a shiver running down his spine. He immediately realized what that shiver meant—he’d noticed the creature’s arrival even before Tea and Lotus, who were beastfolk with better senses. Maybe it was the sharp intuition of the strong, but whatever it was, it allowed Caim to react faster than anyone else.

“Get behind me!” he shouted, grabbing Lotus’s knapsack and forcefully tossing her back.

The rabbit girl yelped as Tea caught her. “Grrraow?! Master Caim?!”

“Stay back! Don’t come any closer!” Caim yelled, still facing forward. There was no way he would turn his back on such a powerful being.

An instant later, *it* finally appeared before them. It hadn’t made a single sound, nor had there been any scent to warn of its coming—it had just emerged suddenly from the trees, leisurely strolling about like a king. Its steps were light, not even breaking the twigs it stepped on or disturbing the leaves on the ground.

“A lycaon?! And it’s their leader!” Lotus screamed, flustered and still leaning on Tea.

This creature that had appeared before them was a four-meter-long wolf with white fur and red eyes, and its presence was overwhelming. Its limbs were thick as logs, giving it an imposing and terrifying appearance—and yet it also seemed divine. Each strand of its fur radiated an intense pressure, enveloping its body in

the aura of a vastly powerful being.

In this mana zone, where the flora and fauna struggled merely to exist, this creature stood at the apex of its ecosystem—it was a lycaon, one of the masters of the forest. Or perhaps, as it was their leader, it would be more appropriate to call it the Lycaon King.

“I thought lycaons were supposed to be Marquis-class monsters? It’s clearly not,” Caim muttered, his eyes focused on the giant wolf.

Marquis-class monsters were so strong that it took multiple adventuring parties working together to equal a single one. Caim, however, felt that the creature before him was far above that level—that even thousands of knights and soldiers wouldn’t be enough to defeat it.



Tea, Lenka, and Millicia just stood speechless, staring at the wolf. That wasn't because they were wise enough to not make a sound for fear of being targeted—they were just completely overwhelmed by its presence.

Still, one person—Lotus, who was used to the forest—finally managed to speak, her voice trembling. “Th-That lycaon ish the leader of the pack! It’sh far, *far* shtronger than all the othersh!”

“The leader, huh? No wonder I feel like this, then.” Caim nodded to himself.

Lycaons were wolflike monsters that lived in this mana zone. No one knew their actual numbers, but it was supposedly between fifty and a hundred—or so Lotus had told them. That might have seemed like a small number at first, considering the size of the forest, but given they were all Marquis-class monsters, it was actually a great many of them.

“I guess that puts it around Duke class in terms of power.” Cold sweat trickled down Caim’s back as he faced down the strongest enemy he had encountered so far.

Duke-class monsters were second only to Demon Lords and could only be defeated by an entire army’s worth of knights. Although Caim had inherited the power of the Poison Queen, his combat experience was still limited, and he couldn’t fully utilize her magic. In a way, that meant the giant wolf standing before Caim was currently much stronger than he was.

The Lycaon King let out a deep, low growl, and a voice suddenly resonated inside Caim’s head. “*If you wish to pass, then show me your might, strong one.*”

“No way. Did it just...?” Caim was dumbfounded. Had the wolf just *spoken* to him? Also, it clearly hadn’t used human words, and yet he had understood it perfectly well. How was that possible? “You must be pretty full of yourself, showing up suddenly like this and making demands. I haven’t even set foot on your turf yet.”

Lotus was a skilled guide, so of course she had been careful to avoid the lycaons’ territory. However, the giant wolf’s eyes showed no hunger, so it didn’t seem as though it had come to prey on them either.

“You’re not here because we’re in your territory, nor do you want to eat

us...so I suppose you must have come to fight. Just our luck, as usual.” Caim stepped forward. If the monster challenged him to a battle, then the only thing Caim could do was accept. He didn’t really *want* to fight, but if he didn’t, they couldn’t continue their journey. “Fine, let’s do it. Bring it on!”

Caim released an enormous amount of power from his body. Toxic mana gushed out like a volcanic eruption, causing the grass at his feet to wither and the soil to rot away.

The four girls squealed.

“W-We must flee!” Millicia yelled, and they all hurried to hide behind nearby trees.

The Poison King and the Lycaon King—these two abnormal monsters now faced each other.

Caim let out a battle cry as he mustered all the mana he had. During their travels, they had encountered a few strong individuals, but this was the first time Caim had ever had to truly go all out. He wouldn’t hold back this time—now, he would use his full power from the very beginning to face the formidable foe before him. “Purple Poison Magic—Nidhogg!” The colossal amount of mana Caim released took the shape of a dragon made from liquid poison, which then assaulted the Lycaon King. “Take that!”

The giant wolf leaped back and avoided the toxic dragon, which crashed into the ground instead, corroding the soil and leaving behind a crater.

“As if I would let you get away! Devour it!” Caim ordered the poison dragon, controlling it to pursue the Lycaon King. The acid dragon melted the trees as it chased after the giant wolf, who kept dodging it and zigzagging through the forest. But the Lycaon King didn’t *just* run—it counterattacked too, charging at Caim and attacking him with the massive, saber-like claws at the end of its tree trunk-sized legs.

Caim lowered his posture to dodge. If he had tried to block the strike with Mana Compression, he was almost certain it would have gone straight through and torn him to pieces. Caim immediately tried to follow up with an attack of his own, but was stopped by the Lycaon King’s howl.

“Grrrrrrraaaaaaaaaw!”

“Wha—?!” The roar transformed into a shock wave that blew Caim away, slamming him against a tree. “Ugh... So you can use ranged attacks too. Not bad!”

“Grrrrrrraaaaaaaaaw!”

“As if I’d fall for that twice!” Caim swiftly rolled to the side, then pointed his index finger at the wolf. “Poison Shot!”

The toxic projectile flew at the Lycaon King, who had paused after his howl, and struck its target. However, while smoke rose from its white fur and an acidic smell permeated the air, the attack didn’t actually seem to have had much of an effect. The giant wolf only glared at Caim.

“My poison can melt steel, but *that’s* all it does to you? What the hell is your fur made of?” Caim complained bitterly. Not only was the monster amazingly fast and powerful, but it possessed incredible defenses too. Did it have any weaknesses at all?

The Lycaon King charged at Caim once again, swiping with its claws—but this time, Caim didn’t dodge. Instead, he created a blade from condensed mana and met the strike with it.

“Toukishin Style Basic Stance—Seiryuu!”

The mana blade and the wolf’s claws collided, each trying to cut through the other, scattering sparks everywhere. However, the clash ultimately ended up in a draw. Both of them were blown back, rolling on the ground in opposite directions.

“Damn!” Caim cursed, a sharp pain running through his bleeding arm as he stood up, gritting his teeth. A quick look at his arm showed it had been gouged to the bone by the Lycaon King’s claws. If Caim had been an ordinary person, it would have been a fatal wound. “So that means we’re not equal in strength...” he grumbled, frustrated, as he glared at the giant wolf, who lay on the ground a little ways away.

At first glance, their clash seemed to be a draw, but when actually looking at the damage each of them had received, the difference became evident. While

Caim's arm was bleeding profusely from a deep wound, the wolf only had lost a single claw. It was barely injured.

The Lycaon King stood up effortlessly and growled, glaring back at Caim.

"This might be bad... It's actually *really* strong..." Caim grimaced, rubbing his arm as he poured mana into it, enhancing its healing. Improving recovery speed was a basic way to use mana, and the Toukishin Style augmented it even further. Unfortunately, it still wasn't enough to completely heal the injury.

I'm basically down to one arm now, while my foe is practically unscathed. Jeez... I didn't expect this thing to be so much stronger than my old man. Even Caim, who so far had overwhelmed all of his opponents, couldn't see himself winning against the powerful ruler of the lycaons. For the first time since he'd become the Poison King, he felt as though he was truly in danger. His back was drenched in cold sweat.

"The *current* me can't win. So...I just need to break my limits and reach a new level." The sensation of the grim reaper pushing its scythe against the back of his neck—the feeling of imminent death—sharpened Caim's mind, and he felt the flow of time slowing around him.

Caim was certain of one thing: If he defeated the enemy before him—if he overcame this impending death—he would become even stronger. And he was confident that he could do just that.

Caim exhaled, focusing his senses to their limits as he manipulated his mana. Unlike earlier, this time he didn't waste a single drop of mana. He compressed everything carefully, not allowing any to overflow.

"Grrrr..." the Lycaon King growled, observing Caim without attacking.

Caim didn't know if the monster was testing him or if it just underestimated him entirely—but either way, it benefited him. *Just keep thinking you're ahead. I'm gonna overtake you soon enough.*

When someone was about to die, it was said that the experience greatly stimulated their brain, and they could experience a dozen years of life in an instant. Caim, faced with imminent death, was going through something similar. As he condensed his mana, he envisioned his fight against the giant wolf in his

mind. He suffered hundreds of defeats—but every time, he closed the gap in strength between them a little more, one step at a time.

While Caim possessed incredible potential, he had limited experience against opponents stronger than him. In fact, besides the Lycaon King, the only one he could think of was his father—Kevin Halsberg. Except for him, Caim had only fought weaker foes, which hadn't taught him much. In order to grow, warriors needed to fight against more powerful opponents and risk their lives in battles to the death.

Caim had learned the Toukishin Style—the Eastern martial art rumored to be the strongest in the world—by observing his father and his twin sister practicing together. Caim's unbelievable talent was like an enormous diamond in the rough, and right now, the danger to his life was polishing that diamond with incredible speed.

"Okay. I'm done," Caim declared. In that condensed moment of time, among the countless battles against the Lycaon King he had imagined, Caim had found a way to defeat it. He clad his entire body with mana he had compressed to its limit. "Toukishin Style Secret Stance—Shiyuu!"

Caim used the technique his father had attempted to kill him with in their battle. Caim had only seen it once, but his prodigious talent allowed him to reproduce one of Toukishin Style's secret techniques.

The Lycaon King growled in surprise and leaped far away from Caim. It wasn't as though it had been attacked, nor that it had sensed the activation of the technique. No, it only had noticed that the presence Caim emanated had completely changed.

"That's a wild beast for you. Impressive instinct," Caim praised the wolf as he examined his body.

Caim was using Shiyuu, one of the eight secret techniques of the Toukishin Style. It was based around surpassing one's limits by completely opening all the chakras—the sources of mana in people's bodies—and producing a tremendous amount of mana. Ordinarily, most people could only open one chakra out of eight. Master warriors and mages could reach three or four. However, opening all eight of them at once wasn't just an amazing feat—it was suicidal. After all, it

would use up all of the mana inside one's body, leading to death. When Caim's father—Kevin—had activated Shiyuu, he hadn't used it for more than five minutes, as he would be drained of all of his mana if he went further than that.

"Considering my mana pool, I estimate I can keep this up for ten minutes. Man, this is quite a difficult technique," Caim complained, but with this, he had come even closer to the true essence of the Toukishin Style. "The Secret Stance has eight techniques, so I guess there's seven more to go."

Caim didn't know what the other techniques were, unfortunately. He kind of regretted not having squeezed the information out of his father before beating him.

"Anyway...I'll find a way to learn the other techniques someday. But first..."

"Grrr..."

"I need to defeat the foe before me! I hope you're ready." Caim lightly rolled his shoulders as he glared at the Lycaon King. His preparations were over. Now, all that was left was to settle the fight. "I'm glad we met. Thanks to you, I'm gonna become even stronger!" And with that, Caim kicked the ground and closed the distance between himself and the giant wolf.

Caim no longer needed to use any cheap tricks. He charged head-on at the Lycaon King and punched it in its maw, eliciting the first groan of pain from the monster. Then Caim immediately followed up by grabbing its fur and hurling it. It didn't matter that the giant wolf was several times larger and heavier than Caim—it flew without resistance.

But the master of the mana zone wasn't about to let itself be roughed up so easily. It turned itself around midair and roared, firing another shock wave.

"Haaaah!" Caim did the same and shouted, creating a similar shock wave that countered the wolf's. Naturally, Caim didn't have the ability to control sound—he just put a lot of strength into his belly and screamed with all he had, forcefully negating the monster's howl. "So that's Shiyuu... To think I could attack just by shouting!" Caim exclaimed, getting more and more excited at the power he was exhibiting as he chased after the Lycaon King.

The instant the giant wolf landed, it swung its paw at Caim, its claws sharp as

katanas. Caim easily shattered them with a backfist, then followed with a body blow to the now defenseless Lycaon King, causing it to roar in pain once again.

“And another!” Caim continued with a kick at full power.

The giant wolf flew through the air like a ball, bouncing on the ground a few times before slamming into a large tree.

Caim had only been throwing simple punches and kicks—and yet, just by using Shiyuu, which strengthened all of his physical abilities, each one was a deadly blow. However, in exchange, he couldn’t use any other techniques like Seiryuu or Kirin. Controlling the flow of mana from his opened chakras took all he had, so he didn’t have any leeway to do anything else.

I’m still very inexperienced, but for now, that’s plenty! Caim felt like he had just devoured a dragon, and his body was brimming with power. He poured the energy gushing out from him like scorching magma into his fists and struck at the Lycaon King again and again. *Stronger! Even stronger!* Caim screamed in his mind as he punched the giant wolf with his strengthened body. He needed to be stronger. Faster. He would strike and strike again—and surpass his limits!

Then, eventually, the Lycaon King collapsed, whining feebly as it stopped moving.

Caim understood that meant their fight had ended and lowered his fists. “It’s over...”

The battle was finished. Caim had won. The combat hadn’t even lasted long enough to use up all ten minutes of Shiyuu. It had been so easy that Caim felt the result was actually a bit anticlimactic. In fact, in his heart of hearts, he wanted to fight more.

Caim dispelled Shiyuu, and the almighty feeling that had permeated his entire body disappeared. Instead, exhaustion and a feeling of accomplishment overtook him. It was the same sensation as finishing a full marathon...or a round of intense sex.

“C-Caim?” Millicia called out.

“Is it over?” Tea asked.

The girls came back, seeing the fighting had stopped. Millicia and Lenka peered at the collapsed Lycaon King from behind a tree and sighed in relief as Tea stood behind them with Lotus in her arms.

“Are we safe now, Master Caim?”

“Yeah. It was a close match. One mistake and I would have died,” Caim replied. He’d ultimately won, but he very well could have died in this fight. In fact, he *had* died thousands of times in the simulations he had run in his mind.

“B-But why did it...?” Lotus started and Caim turned her way. “Why did the king of the lycaons attack? It usually doesn’t assault people... It’s very smart and doesn’t like to fight...” Her voice trembled, even though Tea was still hugging her. “It wasn’t trying to eat us or protect its territory, and it attacked us anyway... This shouldn’t have happened...”

“It shouldn’t have happened, huh? Yeah, I find that weird too.” Caim narrowed his eyes and looked at the Lycaon King lying on the ground. When it had appeared, it had told Caim to show his might. Also, during their battle, not once had it ever displayed any bloodlust toward him. Both of these things made Caim think that the Lycaon King hadn’t intended to kill him, but rather to test his strength. “I think it didn’t go all out. If it had, I wouldn’t have won so easily, even with Shiyuu.”

That was Caim’s honest opinion. The Lycaon King had been strong—very strong. If it had used its full power, Caim—no, even the Poison Queen, the source of his power, would have had a hard time winning against it.

“What’s your goal? Why did you attack us?” Caim questioned the wolf.

The Lycaon King slowly stood up with a small groan and looked at Caim. “*Thank you, strong one. I shall entrust her to you,*” a woman’s voice resounded in Caim’s head.

“What?”

“*I hope you will all live together. My dear child, people should live with other people.*”

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

The giant wolf didn't answer. Instead, it stabbed its chest with its unbroken claws, crying out in pain. Bright red blood spilled out, pooling on the ground and permeating the air with a choking smell.

"What the...?!"

"It killed itself?!"

Caim and the girls gasped in shock at what they had just witnessed. The Lycaon King paid them no mind, only digging deeper into its chest until it finally gouged a big, red orb out of it.

"It'sh its manacryshtal..." Lotus muttered. Indeed, what the giant wolf had taken out of its body was its own manacrysal—a monster's core, made of crystallized mana. Every monster had one, even if it was small and hard to find in a younger, weaker monster. But in the case of the Lycaon King—a strong and ancient creature—it was the size of a human head. The orb was a deep crimson color, and rich mana emanated from it.

"Take...it... This is...compensation..."

"Wait! Don't just keep rambling on until you die! Explain yourself!" Caim complained, but the giant wolf didn't answer. It was no longer breathing. Caim clicked his tongue, irritated. "So what the hell did it want in the end?"

"Caim..." Millicia looked at him sadly.

Caim didn't understand why, but he couldn't help feeling irritated. The great feeling of accomplishment from winning the unprecedented death match had completely vanished because of his foe's unexpected suicide.

Caim's companions were bewildered and didn't know what to say to him.

"W-Well, in any case, you won. We can't just stay here, so let's proceed forward," Lenka ultimately said, speaking for all of the girls.

Caim didn't reply.

"We should also take that manacrysal. It's from the master of a mana zone, it should earn us enough money to buy a castle."

Caim took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, you're right." He had been all worked up because the powerful enemy he'd struggled so much against had

just gone and killed itself—but now that he thought about it, why should he care? “Let’s go before other monsters come, attracted by the scent of blood.”

“Yes,” Millicia agreed. “And because the master of the mana zone was defeated, the ecosystem of the forest might fall apart.”

Lotus nodded repeatedly. “N-Now that the leader ish dead, the other lycaons are going to fight to shelect the next one. We need to eshcape quickly, or elshe... Huh?” She suddenly stopped midsentence and turned back.

Everyone else did the same, and they saw a silhouette leap out from a thicket.

“What?” Each of them let out a different kind of exclamation at the sight, and Caim raised an eyebrow in surprise.

What had emerged from the forest was a small, young girl.

“Ah...uh...” The little girl, whose long and unkempt hair was a deep green color, made unintelligible noises as she looked at Caim with her empty golden eyes.

“Is that...a young girl?”

“What is she doing here?”

Millicia and Lenka cocked their heads at the little girl’s sudden appearance. She didn’t seem to be older than ten. Her deep green hair was disheveled and so long it reached her ankles, and she was wearing a worn-out white dress with an animal pelt atop it. No matter how they looked at her, there was only one way to describe her: She was a feral child. Even Caim, who had once lived alone in a forest hut, had worn far better clothing.

“Mmmh...” the barefoot little girl tottered toward them and looked at the Lycaon King’s corpse. It was already dead, blood flowing out of its chest. The young girl’s golden eyes watched it sadly for a moment before she turned toward Caim. “Mmmh...” The little girl walked up to Caim and grabbed his right hand. Caim didn’t understand what she was thinking as she looked him up with her vacant gaze.

“...Hey.”

“Master Caim!” Tea shouted, and Caim sensed that something was coming.

The creaking of twigs being stepped on resonated as wolves the size of tigers emerged from between the large, luxuriant trees. They numbered more than ten, and while they were far smaller than the Lycaon King, there was no doubt that they were indeed lycaons.

“Must be a lycaon pack, but I don’t feel any hostility from them...” Caim said. The monsters continued to ignore him and his companions, instead heading toward the corpse of their leader. Then...they started devouring its flesh.

“That’s cannibalism...” Tea frowned.

“Why are they doing that...?” Millicia went pale at the ghastly scene.

Caim and Lenka were also shocked by the lycaons’ act. Only Lotus appeared to understand what was happening.

“They’re taking over the head of their pack. Now that it’s dead, they’re eating it to take in its strength,” she explained.

“What do you mean?”

“The flesh and blood of monsters in mana zones are also filled with power. So by eating it, the younger lycaons strengthen themselves and prevent other monsters from taking their leader’s power.”

“I see...”

By eating their king, the young lycaons inherited its strength and prevented the pack from growing too weak.

Once the lycaons finished devouring their king’s corpse—not even leaving a single bone—they turned toward Caim. He cocked his head in wonder before noticing that it wasn’t him their red eyes were looking at, but the young girl with green hair.

The lycaons barked, and the little girl did the same in return. They nodded, satisfied, then returned to the forest.

“Are they entrusting this child to us...?” Tea tilted her head to one side. “I’ve heard stories about highly intelligent beasts or monsters raising children. Maybe she was raised by the lycaons?”

“No way... How could monsters possibly raise a child?” Lenka said in disbelief.

“I also find it hard to believe, but there *are* legends that beastfolk are the result of beasts and humans reaching an understanding and having children together. Those are likely fake, though.”

Tea’s words seemed implausible, but they had no other explanation. In fact, Millicia seemed to be agreeing with the maid as she nodded, a complex expression on her face.

“Perhaps the leader of their pack gave us its manacrystral as compensation for taking care of this child? In exchange for giving us its precious manacrystral, it’s asking us to raise her from now on.”

“Yeah, it did say something like that,” Caim recalled the Lycaon King’s words. *“I hope you will all live together. My dear child, people should live with other people.”* Caim hadn’t been able to understand those words, but that was only natural, since they weren’t aimed at him. They had been aimed at the young girl.

In short, they had been asked to take a girl raised by wolves out of the forest and to let her live as a human being.

Caim looked at the young girl, who still grasped his hand tightly. She was obeying the Lycaon King—no, her mother’s instruction, and she refused to let go.

“I guess we can’t just leave her here...” Caim sighed. They couldn’t exactly let a young girl live in a mana zone full of dangerous monsters, even if they hadn’t received a manacrystral in compensation. Caim gave in and squeezed the little girl’s hand. “Fine, we’ll take you. Don’t know how long we’ll be able to take care of you, though,” he said, nonplussed.

“Indeed...” Millicia agreed with a troubled smile.



Though they had now fought the Lycaon King and added a mysterious girl to their group, that didn’t change the fact that Caim and his companions needed to keep moving forward. And so, they continued their walk through the inner layer of the Forest of the Lycaons.

“Toukishin Style—Kirin!”

A spiraling mana shock wave pierced through the skull of a three-meter-tall monster called a gigantopithecus. It collapsed on the ground, never to move again.

Caim had defeated the Lycaon King, but that didn't stop the other monsters of the inner layer from attacking them. Giant tigers, man-eating plants with dozens of tentacles, enormous worms sprouting from the ground, swarms of flies the size of human heads, massive two-headed venomous snakes, and more—countless monsters assaulted the group, but to Caim, who had managed to defeat the mana zone's master, they were no trouble.

In this way, Caim protected his companions, and they all proceeded deeper into the forest's depths.

"W-We're going sho fasht... We're already close to the border of the inner layer..." Lotus commented, her voice filled with awe as they rested after a battle.

As a guide, Lotus was used to traveling through the Forest of the Lycaons, but she'd always done it by hiding and taking big detours to avoid any danger. Thanks to Caim, though, they'd been able to head in a straight line without minding the monsters, which had cut the time needed for the journey by at least half.

"A-At thish pace, we should be able to exit the inner layer today... Then out of the foresht in a few daysh more," Lotus said with her usual lisping and stammering, holding the hand of the young girl entrusted to them by the lycaons.

"Mmmh..." the girl—Lykos—hummed. Perhaps it was because they were close in age, or maybe because they were both at home in the forest, but a kind of sympathy had developed between them, and the two girls had quickly become friendly.

Lykos was a temporary name Lotus had given the girl, as it was impractical not to have something to call her. Supposedly, it meant "wolf" in an ancient language.

"Glad we went through it safe and sound. Shouldn't take us long to reach the imperial capital after that."

“Yes. I should begin to steel myself for what is to come,” Millicia nodded at Caim’s words, her expression solemn. “Of my two brothers, I should try talking to Arthur first. He is the one I need to convince in order to end their strife. If I fail... In that case, I think we should support Lance.”

“Oh? Don’t wanna become the empress? I think you’d do well,” Caim said.

“Please, do not joke about this, Caim. A young, inexperienced girl like me is not fit to be a ruler,” Millicia answered with a bitter smile. Almost no one would want a woman of not even twenty at the head of their nation. Only those who wished to make her their puppet would rejoice.

“Well, I don’t know this Lance guy, but if that’s what you decided, then I won’t complain. I’ll help you, so just do whatever you want.”

“Yes, thank you very much.” Millicia beamed like a flower in full bloom, her beautiful blue eyes filled with trust and love for Caim.

As though drawn to her, Caim placed his hand on her cheek. Naturally, Millicia didn’t shy away—instead she leaned into his palm, her face relaxing into a comfortable expression.

“Mm-hmm!”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, someone intruded on the pleasant moment between Caim and Millicia. It was Lykos. She was pouting for some reason as she pinched Caim’s cheek, shooting him a small glare. Was she...jealous?

“Uh... What’s your problem?” Caim asked.

“She’s just being a girl. Women are women from the moment they are born,” Millicia explained.

“...I don’t get it. Jeez, what a demanding kid.”



Caim removed his hand from Millicia's cheek and lifted Lykos, putting her on his shoulders. Her expression did not change, but the way she waved her arms suggested that she was enjoying herself.

Two days later, they finally left the forest.

"All right, looks like we're out," Caim announced.

"Yes! It's so nice to get some fresh air!" Tea rejoiced.

In the end, they spent a whole week inside the Forest of the Lycaons. They managed to go through the mana zone without any serious problems, and they didn't lose anyone—in fact, they even gained a companion, which was certainly unusual.

"Th-There ish a village nearby. You can resht there and head toward the capital after that!" Lotus said.

"Got it. Thanks for guiding us. You want your reward directly from us, right?" Caim asked.

"Yesh," Lotus answered, and Caim handed her a bag full of gold coins.

"Whoa?! You're really giving me sho much?!"

The bag contained three times the amount they had agreed to pay her. That was a little excessive for a tip, but it wasn't as though Caim was short on money.

"Don't worry about it. We got all this from bandits anyway," Caim reassured her.

"Thank you... It'sh very helpful..." Lotus bowed her head repeatedly.

They had only traveled together for a week, but Caim felt a bit sad parting with her now. Naturally, the girls felt the same as they said their goodbyes.

"This is a shame, but this is where we part ways."

"Yes. Thank you for guiding us through the forest."

"You have our gratitude."

Millicia, Tea, and Lenka all thanked Lotus in turn.

Lotus was overcome with emotion and began to tear up. “I-I’ll miss you all... By the way, what about Lykos?” She eyed the young girl next to Caim.

Lykos had changed a great deal since they had met her. Her ankle-length deep green hair, once disheveled, had been tidied up. Her worn-out clothes had been replaced with one of Millicia’s frilly dresses, resized to fit, and her smooth and pale skin had been cleaned of any mud that had dirtied it. Now, she looked just like the daughter of an aristocratic family. In fact, considering the air of nobility she gave off with her deep green hair and golden eyes, maybe she actually *was* the illegitimate child of an aristocrat.

“Are you going to bring her to the capital with you? Isn’t that dangerous?” Lotus asked. She didn’t know why Caim and the girls wanted to go to the imperial capital, but given the tense atmosphere along the way, she had sensed that their reasons must be grim.

“True, we can’t really take her with us to the capital...” Caim nodded. The imperial capital was in the middle of a power struggle and on the brink of a civil war. It was far from a safe place to bring a young girl, and taking her there might endanger her.

“Indeed... We should find somewhere that will agree to take care of her before meeting my brother.” Millicia thought for a few moments before continuing. “We could leave her at an orphanage, but depending on the place, that might actually be worse for her. And considering she was raised by monsters and cannot even talk, not many people will accept her.”

The empire was a rich nation, but it lacked the infrastructure to provide adequate support for all orphans. Many orphanages were backed by the local lords and wealthy merchants, but those that weren’t could be fairly harsh places. In the worst cases, some orphanages would even abuse the children or sell them off as slaves. As a result, they couldn’t just leave Lykos to any random orphanage.

“But if we take her with us to the capital, I *do* know the head of a monastery that gives ample support to children regardless of background,” Millicia said.

“So in the end, our destination remains unchanged,” Caim concluded.

If they left Lykos to that monastery immediately after arriving at the imperial

capital, she shouldn't end up getting involved in their affairs. With no other choice, Caim decided to bring her with them to the capital.

"I-I'm reassured," Lotus said, relieved at how Lykos was being treated. "Well then, goodbye everyone."

"Hey, we're not at the village yet. Even if you plan to go back to Jarro, shouldn't you rest there for a night?" Caim asked.

"N-No, I'm used to sleeping outside. I actually find it more comfortable than the inn."

"Well, you do you, I guess. Thanks, and take care."

"Yesh. I hope everyone stays well too." Lotus said her farewell, lisping as usual, before returning to the Forest of the Lycaons.

"Lotus is a good girl," Millicia commented.

"Grrraow, she was adorable. I wish she could keep traveling with us," Tea added.

"And add another kid? What are we, a nursery?" Caim retorted, exasperated. "Anyway, let's head to the village and rest before going to the capital." He paused. "I guess our journey will be over soon."

The journey to the imperial capital that had started when he'd met Millicia was finally reaching its end. Caim had been hired as a bodyguard, and soon enough, his job would be finished.

Not that I can imagine a future without Millicia and Lenka anymore, though.

"It's been a while since we have slept under a roof."

"Indeed. I have been constantly on the alert, so I am rather exhausted."

"I'm eager to do some *hustling* tonight!"

Millicia, Lenka, and Tea cheered and Caim felt a chill run down his spine.

That night, as he had feared, Caim was assaulted by three ravenous beasts.

Incidentally, Caim shuddered far more at how suddenly the girls changed once Lykos was asleep than he had during his fight against the Lycaon King.

Chapter 5: The Imperial Capital

After spending a night in the village, Caim and his companions resumed their journey toward the capital. Their nightly activities had completely drained Caim of his energy, so the girls handled all the preparations—buying food, supplies, a horse, and a carriage. It was only a simple wagon without a canopy to protect it from the wind and rain, which wasn't really suitable for an imperial princess, but the small village did not have anything better than that.

"The capital isn't far from here, so this should be good enough. It should also help to throw people off our trail," Millicia said, sitting in the cart.

"Ah... It is truly heartbreaking that the princess must board such a shabby wagon..." Lenka wept, hanging her head in shame.

"Come on, it's kinda late for that, isn't it? We've walked along bad roads and slept outdoors a lot before this, and your princess proved that she's quite tough. This is nothing," Caim chided her. Millicia truly had grown during their journey, and that sheltered young lady was now only a distant memory. In fact, Millicia had even started helping out with camping, learning how to pitch a tent and start a fire.

"We should be able to fit into the cart if everyone squeezes themselves in, but who'll be driving?" Tea asked.

Lenka paused to sulk for a moment before lifting her head up. "I will. I'm the only one among us who knows how to handle a horse anyway," she answered. "But I'll need to rest on the way, so I'd like someone else to learn how to do it too."

"I don't mind learning. I want to give it a try."

"Tea too. A maid can't let her master be the only one working."

Caim and Tea both volunteered, raising their hands.

"Then..." Millicia started to raise hers too, but Lenka threw her an extremely sorrowful look, so she gave up halfway. Lenka didn't want her master to learn

how to drive a carriage.

“Only two people can fit into the coachman’s seat, so I’ll take turns teaching you and we’ll alternate who drives along the way,” Lenka said to Caim and Tea before turning toward Millicia. “As for you, Princess, please take care of Lykos.”

“Fine, I will do that,” Millicia replied, slightly sulky, as she hugged Lykos from behind inside the cart.

The young girl didn’t resist—her eyes were fixed on the horse, and she was drooling.

“Don’t even think about it,” Caim warned her. “We didn’t buy it to eat.”

The girl raised by wolves only saw the horse as a piece of meat, which made Caim wonder what her diet had been like in the forest. He decided he would keep an eye on her as he got into the coachman’s seat with Lenka.

After that, Lenka, Caim, and Tea took turns driving as they proceeded toward the imperial capital. On the way, a heavy rain began to fall, and they were forced to stop and hide under some trees, but finally, after two days, they reached their destination around noon.

“So this is the center of the Garnet Empire!” Caim exclaimed, gazing at the city ahead, surrounded by giant ramparts. It was far bigger than any town he had seen before—it was surrounded by tall ramparts, but some spires that rose even higher were visible over the walls.

“Mmmh!” Lykos climbed up Caim’s body as he stood up, her eyes going wide at the scene before her.

Both Caim and Lykos were amazed at the sight of the enormous buildings—something they would never have seen if they had continued living in their forests.

“Man, it’s so *huge*! Damn it, I wish we had the time to visit!” Caim complained.

They had come to the imperial capital to escort Millicia. The empire was currently in the middle of an intense struggle for the throne because the emperor was bedridden, so some people might target Millicia. As regrettable as

it was, they didn't have the leeway to sightsee.

"Once we have resolved everything, let's take the time to tour the city. I will guide you," Millicia said, gazing at the city's ramparts with a complex expression. She was feeling many emotions other than simple joy at returning home.

When he saw Millicia's face, Caim felt ashamed of his childish excitement. He cleared his throat and sat back in the cart. "So, what are we doing once we're inside? Heading straight to the castle?"

"Yes. That is where Arthur should be," Millicia replied.

Their intention was for Millicia to persuade the First Imperial Prince Arthur not to fight with her other brother, the Second Imperial Prince Lance.

Honestly, I feel bad for Millicia, but I don't think it'll go that smoothly, Caim thought. If words were enough, there would be no struggle over the throne in the first place. It was precisely because diplomacy was insufficient that her brothers were now trying to kill each other.

Family bonds aren't that strong, and blood isn't always thicker than water. After all, there are even fathers who try to kill their own sons. Caim recalled his own father—Kevin Halsberg. Kevin had mistreated his son for years, and when Caim became the Poison King, he attempted to kill him without hesitation. Thus, Caim didn't believe in familial love—he thought that such things easily crumbled like a sandcastle in the face of desire and profit.

Still, that doesn't mean Millicia is wrong. Just because the boy I once was, "Caim Halsberg," failed doesn't mean that she will too. And considering the fate of a nation is at stake, giving up isn't an option.

"Anyway, before we talk about that, we need to enter the capital. That means going through the city gate," Caim said, looking at the long queue full of travelers and peddlers in front of the entrance to the capital. Soldiers were inspecting every single person who wanted to enter. Caim and the girls needed to go through the gate somehow, or meeting Arthur would remain a distant dream. "Will they let us in because we have the princess with us or...will they stop us?"

It was currently unclear how wary Prince Arthur was of Millicia—and besides, they didn't even know who commanded the soldiers manning the gate. At worst, they might get arrested and imprisoned.

Lenka, sitting on the coachman's seat, crossed her arms with a pensive look. "Hmm... Soldiers in charge of the gate are generally either commoners or have a knight peerage, so there shouldn't be anyone insolent enough to arrest the princess, but..."

"Grrraow, we'll have to trust our luck and Millicia's popularity."

"D-Don't put it that way—it makes me lose confidence..." Millicia said with a troubled expression. "And please do not be angry with me if we are captured," she added with a tilt of her head.

Lenka drove the wagon toward the city gate. After they waited in line behind the merchants and travelers, it eventually was their turn to be inspected by the soldiers. If they were stopped here, they wouldn't be able to enter the capital.

However, things took an unexpected turn.

"Is that you, Lenka?!" a man's voice called as they approached the gate. The voice was coming from a young knight who seemed to be around twenty years old.

"You're...Kozy?" Lenka asked tentatively.

"Yes! I'm so glad you remembered my name!" he replied with a friendly smile.

"You know him?" Caim whispered to her.

"He's a junior knight I once trained. This really brings back memories," Lenka replied just as quietly.

Apparently, one of the soldiers in charge of inspecting people who wanted to enter the capital was an acquaintance of Lenka's.

"What is your business today? Were you outside for work?" Kozy inquired.

"Something like that. Anyway, I need to quickly return to the imperial palace, so if you could let us pass, it would help."

“Of course. By the way, who is that man next to you?” the young knight questioned. Was he suspicious of Caim?

Caim tried his best to stay calm and keep up a poker face.

“He’s a friend—or maybe colleague would be more accurate? Anyway, he’s been helping me with my mission outside,” Lenka replied.

“Hmm...” Kozy stared at Caim and only Caim. He didn’t even glance at Millicia—who was concealing her face with a hood and hiding herself in a corner of the wagon—or at Tea in her maid uniform, or at Lykos, the feral child.

From an objective point of view, they made for quite a suspicious group—and yet, the young knight didn’t even question them. “You can pass...” he said, despondent.

“Huh? Thanks.” Lenka cocked her head, not understanding why her junior was so dejected as she drove the cart forward.

“I didn’t expect you to be such a cruel woman, Lenka,” Tea commented.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s all right if you don’t get it. Ah, unrequited love has such a bitter taste,” Tea teased her, but that only confused Lenka even further. Unfortunately for the young knight, his feelings hadn’t reached Lenka.

Lenka hadn’t noticed herself, but the way she sat next to Caim showed that they were closer than mere colleagues. Also, her gaze was clearly filled with love and trust when she looked at him. Seeing that broke Kozy’s heart, but the object of his feelings was totally oblivious to all of it.

“With that, we’ve passed the first hurdle,” Caim said, looking around. “So this is the imperial capital, the greatest city in the empire—no, on the whole continent!” His face lit up with excitement.

As they passed through the gate, Caim’s vision was immediately overwhelmed by a sea of people. He had seen several towns during their journey, but this was the first time he’d ever seen a place so crowded. Tea was the same, her eyes wide open. As for the last member of their group who was visiting the imperial capital for the first time—Lykos, who had been raised by wolves—she blinked

repeatedly, bewildered by the number of people walking through the main street.

“There are so many humans and beastfolk, Master Caim... Even a race I’ve never seen before.”

“You’re right. They look like humans, but their hair and ears are different.”

Tea and Caim cocked their heads at the unfamiliar sight.

“They are elves. You know, the forest dwellers,” Millicia explained.

The three watched a couple shopping together. They had light-green hair and their facial features were so refined and beautiful that they looked like dolls. Their most distinguishing characteristic, though, was their sharply pointed ears.

“By elves, you mean like the ones in stories?” Caim’s eyes sparkled. Elves had often appeared in the picture books his mother had read to him when he was a child. Along with dwarves, they were the most well-known demi-humans, and this was his first time seeing one for real.

“Elves live in forests and generally don’t show themselves to humans,” Millicia continued. “However, young elves can be curious about the outside world, so they often leave their homes. Still, even in the empire, you usually only see them in the capital.”

“And yet they’re super famous. How come everyone knows about elves if they cloister themselves in their forest?” Caim asked.

“It’s because they are very powerful. Supposedly, a single elf warrior is equal in strength to an entire company. They also appear as mentors or companions in stories like *Record of Alhazard War* or *The Adventure of the Brave Hero Beakidd*.”

“Ah, I’ve read that book. It’s the heroic tale that made me want to become an adventurer.” Caim recalled the story he’d read when he was younger, remembering how he had wanted to become like the epic tale’s protagonist.

And now, I’m far from being the hero I admired... Rather than a hero, Caim was currently more like a Demon Lord. Someone who controlled poisons and used his power to sexually arouse beautiful women and have them serve him

couldn't be called a hero. *Heroes are people like that man... Kevin Halsberg. Someone who is righteous and battles evil...*

"...Whatever. It's ridiculous to think about." Caim shook his head.

Righteous heroes who mercilessly struck down evil were nice as story protagonists, but for someone labeled as evil, they were nothing more than a bother. To begin with, Caim had given up on his dream of becoming a hero like his father the instant he had transformed into the Poison King. The path Caim had decided to tread was neither noble nor righteous, but one where he would simply live a life that was true to himself.

"Anyway, where is that monastery your acquaintance runs, Millicia?" Caim asked.

"Hmm, that way." Millicia guided them.

Eventually, they reached an abbey with a serene atmosphere in a corner of the city. Children played with a ball in the spacious garden, and the place seemed very peaceful and pleasant.

"Oh, looks quite nice. All the children are smiling," Caim noted.

The fact that orphans were smiling like that proved how good this monastery was. There were plenty of children who had families who nevertheless did not smile. After all, children couldn't choose their parents.

"My mother founded this place. Even now that she is dead, friendly nobles and merchants continue to fund it, so it's financially stable, and the children here can receive a good education," Millicia explained.

"That's great. Now, let's hope they'll be willing to take in our wolf girl."

When they entered the premises from the front, an elderly woman dressed as a nun greeted them.

"You appear to be travelers. What business do you have with this monastery?" the gray-haired sister inquired in a gentle tone.

Millicia stepped forward and removed the hood concealing her face. "Long time no see, Mother Ariessa!"

"You are... Your Highness Millicia!" the woman—Mother Ariessa—raised her

voice in surprise, then quickly covered her mouth with her hand. She glanced around, making sure no one else had heard her, then sighed in relief. “I heard you were missing, so I am relieved to see you are safe.”

“Sorry for worrying you, Mother Ariessa. I am also glad to see that you are still in good health.”

The friendly atmosphere between the two made it clear that they shared a close relationship.

“And you seem fine as well, Lenka. I thank God for that.”

“Thank you for your concern. And for God’s guidance too.” Lenka bowed. She appeared to also know the elderly sister.

Ariessa then turned toward Caim and Tea, apparently wanting to say something, but in the end, she only smiled. “You must be Her Highness’s friends. Thank you for taking care of her.”

For her to act like this even though we look pretty suspicious—she must be quite principled.

“It’s nothing. I’m just doing my job as her guard,” Caim replied.

“There is much we have to talk about. Please, enter. I shall prepare some tea.” Ariessa guided them into a room deeper inside the monastery. “Do sit down. The tea will soon be ready.” And with that, she exited the room.

Caim and the girls did as Ariessa suggested and sat at the table. For some reason, though, Lykos sat on Caim’s lap.

Ariessa soon came back and placed cups filled with black tea in front of everyone, and a rich, fragrant aroma wafted from it. The tea didn’t appear to be made from high-quality leaves, which showed how good Ariessa’s brewing skills were. She must have been used to receiving guests.

“Well then, this place is soundproofed, so you do not need to worry about what you say. You came here for a reason, right?” Ariessa said, sitting opposite to Millicia.

“I would expect no less from you, Mother Ariessa. Do you perhaps know the current state of the imperial palace, then?” Millicia asked.

“I do, more or less. Some busybodies told me about it.” Ariessa’s expression darkened slightly. “You must already know this, but ever since the emperor became bedridden, the first and second princes, Their Highnesses Arthur and Lance, have been locked in a power struggle.”

Everyone listened silently as Ariessa continued.

“As their conflict intensified, His Highness Lance decided to leave the capital and go back to his domain, where he started to assemble an army. Before long, he is likely going to raise an uprising against His Highness Arthur to settle everything.”

Millicia gasped and went pale. She had *known* about all of this, but it had been unverified intelligence. Now, it was certain.

“His Highness Arthur already has branded His Highness Lance a rebel and is preparing a punitive force against him. They should depart in less than a month.”

“I will meet Arthur and persuade him to stop this conflict,” Millicia declared with a determined expression. Her eyes were filled with unwavering resolve.

My job to escort Millicia to the capital is done, but...

“Fine, I’ll help. We’re already in this together anyway,” Caim said with a shrug. He would feel bad about it if he backed out now. Since he’d come this far, he decided he would stick with Millicia until the end.

“Thank you, Caim!” Millicia beamed.

“Are you sure, Your Highness? I think it would be safer for you to hide yourself,” Ariessa suggested, looking at Millicia with worry in her eyes. “His Highness Arthur is not a bad person, but he can be very ruthless in pursuit of his ambitions. Just because you are a woman does not mean he will be lenient with you.”

“I am the first imperial princess of the Garnet Empire. I must accomplish the duties befitting my birth.” Millicia stood up and placed a hand on her chest, her expression like a warrior maiden heading to the battlefield. “True, I fled to another country, but I have returned, and I shall risk my life to save the empire,” she announced. “Thankfully, I have comrades to help me, so you do

not need to worry about me, Mother Ariessa.”

“If such is your will, then I have nothing more to say.” Ariessa also stood up and tightly grasped the rosary hanging from her neck. “May God’s blessing be with you, Your Highness Millicia.”

“Thank you.” Millicia bowed. “Incidentally, Mother Ariessa, we have a request...”

“Yes?”

“Could you take care of this girl for us?” Millicia gestured toward Lykos, who was sitting on Caim’s lap and slowly lapping at the tea with her tongue.

“I assume she has special circumstances?” Ariessa asked.

“Yes. It’s a long story...” Then Millicia proceeded to explain how Lykos ended up under their care.

Ariessa opened her eyes wide in surprise. “A girl raised by monsters... To think such a thing was possible...”

“We would be really grateful if you could take her in at your monastery...”

“Of course. God’s house is open to anyone. Even if she is an unfortunate child who was raised by monsters in a mana zone, we shall gladly welcome her.”

Ariessa approached Lykos and patted her head.

Lykos didn’t resist, but she stopped licking her tea and looked suspiciously at Ariessa.

“Everything will be fine. I will teach you a human’s common sense one step at a time. There is nothing that cannot be fixed in life,” Ariessa said gently.

“We are entrusting her to you, Mother Ariessa.” Millicia bowed.

“You’re probably going to need to buy things, so here is some money.” Caim placed a bag full of gold coins on the table. It was a lot of money, but he could get far more if he sold the Lycaon King’s manacrystal, so he didn’t mind giving up that much.

“Then I shall take this as a donation and use it to secure this girl’s future,” Ariessa said.

“Please do.” Caim then turned toward Lykos. “Well then, I guess it’s time to say goodbye. Stay well.” He patted her head.

“Uh...?” Lykos cocked her head, not understanding his words.

When Caim and the girls left the monastery, Lykos tried to follow them, but young nuns grabbed her arms and legs to stop her. Lykos frantically struggled to shake them off, but when one of the sisters gave her a cookie, she immediately calmed down and started to munch on it.

“What a calculating little girl... So cookies are more important than us, huh?” Caim said.

“Well, she is a child.” Millicia smiled faintly, then turned toward the imperial palace. “Now that that’s settled, let’s head to the castle.”

“We’re just marching straight into enemy territory?” Tea asked.

“Enemy territory, you say... It *is* my home, you know?” Millicia replied with a strained smile. “While Arthur holds the most power inside the castle, I am still a member of the imperial family. They shouldn’t suddenly point their swords at me.”

“In a way, it would make things easier if they did. Then I’d just need to kill Arthur, and that Lance guy could become the emperor,” Caim said.

“Again with your jokes... Our objective is to talk. Nothing more,” Millicia replied with a wry smile as the group headed toward the imperial palace.



At the center of the imperial capital stood a formidable castle surrounded by a deep moat and only accessible by bridges connected to its front and rear gates. Several soldiers were guarding the gates on the castle side of the bridges, and every single one of them seemed to be a well-trained elite.

I guess that’s what they call an impregnable fortress. Looks pretty hard to conquer, Caim mused as they walked toward the imperial palace’s front gates over the stone bridge connected to it.

Lenka was in the lead, followed by Millicia, Caim, then Tea in the rear. When they neared the entrance, the soldiers pointed their spears at them, clearly on

guard.

“Halt! Only authorized personnel may enter—” One of them started to speak only to be interrupted by Lenka.

“Who do you think you are pointing your spears at?! Stop this at once!” Lenka shouted at the soldiers. “Do you realize in whose presence you stand?! This is Her Highness Millicia Garnet, the first imperial princess and third in line for the throne!”

“What?!” The guards exclaimed, their eyes widening at what they just heard, and they pulled back their spears. Then they noticed Millicia, who was standing behind Lenka, and immediately fell to their knees.

“P-Please forgive us, Your Highness Millicia!”

“We might not have known, but we still beg your pardon!”

The soldiers went pale as they realized the gravity of what they had done. Pointing their spears at a member of the imperial family was an offense that could be punished with death—and not only their own but that of their families too—so it was only natural that they would be so frightened.

“You know, I didn’t think exerting authority would feel that good,” Caim commented with a wry smile from the back. Apparently, the satisfaction gained from using one’s lineage or status to make someone yield was different from the satisfaction of using force.

“I do not mind. Open the gates.” Millicia delivered her orders clearly, holding her head high with an air of dignity. She looked like a different person—like a true princess.

“At once, Your Highness!”

“Open the gates! Her Imperial Highness Princess Millicia is coming through!” the soldier shouted, and the massive metal doors on either side slowly started to open.

“Well then, I’m eager to see what awaits us inside.” Caim steeled himself as he stepped into the stronghold of the two brothers fighting over control of the empire—a den of monsters in human clothing.

The castle's entrance hall was adorned with red carpet. Vases and ornaments were lined up on the floor, and various paintings hung on the walls. Caim couldn't even begin to guess the value of everything, but he had no doubt that it was all very expensive.

And yet, he spotted something even more surprising.

"Whoa!" Caim exclaimed, his eyes fixed on the taxidermy monster standing in the center of the hall.

It cut a colossal figure, towering several meters over them, and it was covered in silver scales. The fangs that could be seen peeking out of its jaws looked like swords crafted by the finest blacksmiths, and its blazing crimson eyes gazed out over the entrance where Caim and his companions now stood. It was one of the strongest monsters in existence—a dragon.

"That's amazing... Was it made from a real one?" Caim asked.

"Yes. It is said the first emperor was the one who killed it," Millicia explained. "He was a master swordsman who united the neighboring countries through his martial prowess, and he left countless legends telling of how he drove monsters and foreign tribes away from this land. He is the reason the empire became a meritocracy that values strength."

"If he defeated a dragon, he must've been really powerful," Caim commented. He supposed that the first emperor hadn't done it alone, but it was still a feat impressive enough to make him worthy of being called a hero.

As Caim was admiring the dragon, an elderly butler hurried out from the corridor opposite to them. "Your Imperial Highness Millicia! Have you finally returned?!" he exclaimed, approaching Millicia as though gliding along the floor. The butler had silver-gray hair, a well-groomed beard, and a monocle over one eye.

"It has been a while, Grand Chamberlain Foshbell," Millicia greeted him.

"I have been awaiting your return, and I am truly relieved to see that you are in good health!" Foshbell knelt as he rejoiced over Millicia's safe return. His reverence didn't appear to be an act—he seemed to truly respect Millicia as his liege.

“I apologize for worrying you. My resolve wasn’t strong enough and I strayed as a result, but now I finally know what I must do,” she said, ashamed of herself.

Millicia had turned a blind eye to the dispute between her brothers and even accepted the help of the second-eldest brother to abscond to another country. She had done this to avoid becoming involved in the power struggle, but in a way, it was no different from abandoning her responsibilities as a member of the imperial family.

“I have returned, and from now on I shall perform my duty as an imperial princess,” Millicia declared firmly to Foshbell, who was still kneeling before her. “I wish to speak with Arthur. Can you arrange a meeting with my brother?”

Foshbell gasped, his monocle-clad eye widening. “Certainly. I shall inform His Highness Arthur of your demand immediately.” The elderly butler nodded fervently, then stood up and bowed. “It will take some time, so please wait in your bedroom.” Foshbell exchanged a glance with a young maid waiting nearby.

“This way, please.” The maid bowed and stepped into the hallway.

“Let’s go, everyone. She will guide us to my bedroom.”

“Ah, yeah.” Caim nodded, and they all followed the maid.

On the way, they passed by several knights and servants, who all looked surprised when they saw Millicia and immediately bowed to her. It was only now that Caim finally realized that Millicia truly was a princess.

After walking down the long corridor for over ten minutes, they finally arrived at a room deep inside the castle.

“We did not neglect your quarters during your absence, so it is as clean as you left it. I shall bring tea and sweets, so please wait a moment,” the maid said.

“Thank you. Bring enough for all of us,” Millicia ordered.

“Certainly.” The maid bowed deeply and exited the room.

For some reason, Tea kept watching her as she walked down the hallway.

“What’s wrong, Tea?” Caim inquired.

“She’s good.”

“What?”

“As you’d expect from an imperial maid, she’s *very* good.” Tea purred, her expression the definition of serious. “Her swift gait, her stable posture, the angle of her bow... She’s the perfect servant in every way. She’s truly an exemplary maid. I’m filled with awe.”

“I shouldn’t have asked...”

“Also, she might seem prim and proper, but I’m certain she does a very good job at night too. She has great childbearing hips.”

“I don’t care!” Where was Tea looking, anyway? Caim couldn’t help but be exasperated by his maid.

“Please enter, everyone.” Millicia beckoned them.

Caim, Tea, and Lenka did as they were asked and entered her bedroom. The interior was clean and tidy, and though Caim had expected a princess’s bedroom to be extravagant, it actually didn’t have that much furniture inside.

“This is pretty plain. I thought I would see dresses and jewels everywhere,” Caim commented.

“I mostly lived at Mother Ariessa’s monastery, and I don’t like a lot of clutter lying around, so I only kept what I needed here,” Millicia explained.

“Still, the sheets and curtains are very high quality. They’re so silky and feel nice to the touch,” Tea noted, her tail swaying under her skirt as she leaned over the bed and caressed the sheets.

Caim did the same. “Oh, you’re right. The bed is pretty big too. I’m sure four people can sleep on it.”

Millicia flushed. “T-To already be thinking about our nightly activities... You are being very indecent, Caim.”

“That wasn’t my intention at all,” Caim retorted.

“We’ve got to have a foursome here tonight. I’m sure having sex on such a springy bed feels amazing.”

“Don’t say that word here, Tea! Think about where we are!” Caim scolded

her.

“Indeed, Sir Caim is entirely right.” Lenka grimaced, shaking her head sadly. “We’re in the middle of the imperial palace. Security is tight. That’s why we should do it in the garden. The thrill would be incredible. I can’t help but be aroused at the idea of being *disciplined*, hidden behind a tree while the servants and soldiers are close at hand!”

“Not you too! Come on, do you girls only think about sex?!” Caim and his companions had come here to persuade Prince Arthur and avoid a civil war, so why were they talking about sex in the middle of what could be considered enemy territory?

As they were bickering, a knock came from the door, making Caim jump.

“I brought tea.” The voice belonged to the maid from earlier.

“You may enter,” Millicia said.

“Excuse me.” The maid came through the door with a tea cart and quickly started to prepare everything, pouring black tea into white porcelain cups adorned with beautiful flower patterns and placing them on the table with a plate of sweets.

“Well then, I shall leave now. If there is anything you need, please call for me.”

“Thank you,” Millicia replied, and the maid left the room after giving a respectful bow. However, they could still sense her presence just outside of the room, so she must have been waiting in front of the door.

“That was close. She almost heard us.”

“Give me a break. I don’t want to be arrested for something like giving an aphrodisiac to the imperial princess and then sleeping with her.”

Millicia and Caim both whispered, so as not to be heard outside of the room.

Tea pulled a chair for Caim. “Anyway, for now, let’s drink the tea. It seems to be made from high-quality leaves.”

“You’re right. I’m a little hungry too.” Caim sat and took one of the pastries. “What’s this? It’s kind of a weird shape. Why is there a hole in the middle?”

“That is a doughnut,” Millicia explained. “They are delicious. Please try one.”

“Let’s see...” Caim bit into the doughnut. “It’s really good!” he cried, as surprised as he had been when he first tasted chocolate. “It’s as sweet and rich as chocolate. The outside is crispy, but the inside is fluffy. I can feel the sweet taste of honey spreading through my mouth!”

“There are also chocolate doughnuts.” Millicia presented him with a dark brown doughnut.

“What?!” An intense shudder ran through Caim’s body. Doughnuts were already amazing by themselves. If chocolate was added to them, wouldn’t they become the greatest thing ever? Perhaps it would even be possible to conquer the world with them.

S-So this is the power of the Garnet Empire, the strongest nation on the continent! Just what kind of military might is needed to create something this good?! Caim thought, greatly shocked, as he ate one doughnut after another. Sometimes he stopped to drink some of the black tea, which had a delicious, mellow flavor. There was a small sugar pot on the table, but drinking the tea plain made the doughnuts taste even better.

“I think so every time, but you always make the food you eat look so delicious, Sir Caim.”

“It’s cute.”

Lenka and Millicia smiled as they watched Caim eat doughnuts. Tea did the same as she replenished his empty cup.

They all enjoyed the small tea party for a while until there was another knock at the door.

Millicia put down her cup. “Who is this?”

“Foshbell, Your Highness. Am I allowed to enter?”

“Yes.”

Foshbell had returned from seeking an audience with Arthur. Receiving the approval from his mistress, the elderly butler silently opened the door and stepped into the room. “I apologize for the wait.”

“I do not mind. More importantly, what was Arthur’s reply?”

“Well...” Foshbell’s expression darkened. “His Highness Arthur said that he could make some time tomorrow afternoon, so you should wait until then.”

“So he can’t even meet his little sister immediately?” Caim raised an eyebrow as he munched on a doughnut.

Foshbell threw a glance at him, then turned back toward Millicia. “His Highness Arthur is acting as the emperor’s proxy while he is bedridden and is busy with government affairs. He said that even if you are his little sister, he cannot put you before the nation.”

“I see...” Millicia cast her eyes down. Her brother’s reasoning wasn’t wrong, but it felt rather heartless. “Once Arthur decides something, he will not change his mind. Even if we try asking again, the answer will be the same.”

“I am sorry, Your Highness.”

“This isn’t your fault, Foshbell. Well then, I suppose we shall rest in the castle tonight.” She paused. “Incidentally, can I meet my father?”

“Once again, I am sorry, but nobody can meet the emperor without His Highness Arthur’s approval. He is the one in charge of defending the imperial palace, after all.”

“I...see...” Millicia said despondently.

Foshbell looked down slightly for a few moments, biting his lip, before raising his head again and asking in a businesslike manner, “Is everyone else also staying the night? Should I prepare guest rooms?”

“Yes, please. As usual, Lenka will use the room next to mine, so please prepare lodgings and dinner for Caim and Tea.”

“Certainly.” Foshbell turned toward them. “Are the two of you fine with separate rooms?”

“No, one room is fine,” Tea answered before Caim could. “I am Master Caim’s maid, so I shall stay with him.”

“Well then, I shall go make the necessary preparations.” The elderly butler bowed and exited the room.

“So...now we wait until tomorrow. Anyone else think this is a trap?” Caim asked as he inserted his finger into a doughnut’s hole and twirled it around. Perhaps Arthur wanted them to wait for a day so that he could attack them during the night.

Millicia shook her head, disagreeing with Caim. “No, I think Arthur truly *is* busy with government affairs. He isn’t planning anything.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Arthur doesn’t shy away from scheming on the battlefield, but he generally prefers direct confrontations. There is no way he would resort to an ambush when I do not even have soldiers at my disposal.”

“If you say so.” Caim nodded. If Millicia was so confident, then there likely wouldn’t be a surprise attack during the night. In that case, they should be able to rest and recover from their long journey. “So the decisive battle is tomorrow, huh...? Can’t wait for it.”

“I am not that eager... I just hope it won’t devolve into a fight...” Millicia clasped her hands in front of her chest and closed her eyes as if praying.



They were served quite an extravagant dinner. It was clear that the imperial palace chef had put all of his skills to use in making it. The food was brought directly to their room, so Caim and Tea ate together without Millicia and Lenka. It had been a while since just the two of them had shared a table together.

Afterward, all that was left was to rest and patiently wait for their meeting with Arthur the next day.

“If only it would go that smoothly...” Caim shrugged as he exited his guest room.

It was now well into the night, but unfortunately for Caim, he couldn’t sleep yet. Millicia had asked him to come to her room no matter what. Naturally, he could imagine the reason. He’d been called to her bedroom at night—there was only one thing it could be.

Still, we’re in the imperial palace. Doesn’t that make it even more immoral

than usual?

Right now, Caim was on his way to creep into a woman's bedroom during the night in order to make love to her. And not just any woman—the most important one in the nation. And in the imperial palace, no less. While he had slept with Millicia many times, the current location made the situation far more thrilling.

I wonder if I would receive the death penalty if I'm caught... Actually, they might just kill me on sight.

Millicia was pretty bold for inviting him to do this, but so was Caim for accepting the invitation. Caim himself knew he was doing something stupid, but he was afraid of what the girls would do if he refused. Because yes—Millicia wasn't the only one waiting in her room. Tea and Lenka were there too. For some reason, Caim had been asked to come an hour after his maid.

Caim sighed in resignation as he walked down the long corridor, concealing his presence. The lights were already out, but he had good night vision, so it wasn't a problem. Occasionally he would come across patrolling soldiers, but he hid himself carefully and slowly made his way to Millicia's bedroom.

I'm glad I learned to conceal my presence from Lotus. Thanks to the hiding skills he had acquired from observing the rabbit girl, Caim easily proceeded without being found. *If by some chance I were to run into Arthur now, it'd turn into quite the amusing situation... Not that it's gonna happen.*

The imperial palace was the size of a small town, and Arthur lived and worked in a different part of the castle than where Millicia's bedroom was. They were an hour's walk away from each other, so there was no way Caim would encounter him here by accident.

I'm almost there. Just need to keep going straight after that corner...

"I know you are here, Sir Caim," a voice called to him before he could reach Millicia's bedroom.

Still hidden, Caim gasped, and a chill ran down his spine. He had perfectly concealed his presence, so how had he been detected?

"No need to be surprised. I am a professional—no matter how good you are

at concealing your presence, you cannot hide your heartbeat or your scent.” Standing in the dark hallway was the elderly butler he had met that afternoon—Foshbell. He was standing like a guard in the middle of the corridor connected to Millicia’s bedroom.

“I’m impressed. How did you know I’d be coming?” Caim asked, stepping out of hiding and raising both of his hands in surrender.

“Her Highness Millicia was unusually excited after dinner, so I decided to stand guard here in case you decided to show up.”

“I see... Well, would you mind overlooking this if I go back to my room now? Don’t really want to be sent to the gallows for trying to creep into the imperial princess’s bedroom at night.”

“You misunderstand me. I am not here to arrest a scoundrel trying to assault Her Highness.”

Caim narrowed his eyes dubiously. There was no way that Foshbell didn’t understand the meaning behind a man visiting a woman’s bedroom at night.

“I am the emperor’s butler, and I have known Her Highness Millicia since she was a baby.”

Caim cocked his head at the sudden monologue.

“This is only my personal sentiment, but I do not wish for Her Highness’s hand in marriage to be used as a political tool. I wish for her to be able to marry the man she loves. Of course, that man needs to be strong enough to protect her.”

“Ah, I see... So you want to test my strength.” Caim finally understood what was happening.

Basically, it seemed as though the elderly butler wanted to duel him. It was like an indulgent father saying, “If you want to lay a hand on my daughter, then you need to get past me first!”

“That’s quite a muscle-brained outlook. Is that how it works in the empire?” Caim asked.

“As long as you are strong enough, almost everything is permitted in the empire. Therefore, if you want to marry the imperial princess, you need to

abide by this nation's system," Foshbell announced, taking a fighting stance with his hands raised. He lowered his posture, his right fist aimed at Caim, and his left held close to his chest.

One look was enough for Caim to understand that the elderly butler had mastered some form of martial art at a very high level.

"All right. Bring it on. You can have the first move," Caim declared.

"You seem quite sure of yourself. Well then, if you insist...!" Foshbell leaped at Caim, closing the distance in an instant, and swung his fist.

"Whoa!" Caim exclaimed as a sharp knife slipped out of the butler's sleeve, aimed right at his throat.

Their exchange only lasted a mere instant before they separated.

"Bravo!" Foshbell said, falling to his knees and clutching his abdomen.

"Phew, that was a surprise. You were totally trying to kill me," Caim commented. In an instant, he had broken Foshbell's knife in half and double-punched him in the stomach. "Are butlers doing assassinations nowadays? If I were anybody else, I'd be dead." Caim waved his hand and shrugged, exasperated, as he turned toward the elderly butler.

There had been killing intent behind Foshbell's attack. It hadn't been a simple test.

"I merely thought that if that were enough to kill you, then it was only natural that you die. After all, you *are* the man who stole Her Highness's chastity."

"And? Did I pass your test?"

"...Please take care of our princess." Foshbell bowed, his tone melancholic, then limped away in the darkness of the hallway.

Caim watched his back for a while, then turned around, heading toward Millicia's bedroom.

"Ah, there you are, Caim. What took you so long?" Millicia greeted him with a smile the instant he arrived. Tea and Lenka were behind her, all of them ready for what was to come.

“There was a little...incident. Anyway, what’s up with you three?” Caim asked, looking at them.

The girls were all wearing nightdresses with a particularly alluring design—in fact, they were more like lingerie than sleepwear. They were wearing what was called a baby doll, which was a kind of nightdress typically used by women, though theirs were made of fine lace and fabric so thin that Caim could see right through it. Moreover, the hems were extremely short, and they exposed almost everything they were supposed to cover. Millicia’s was red, Tea’s purple, and Lenka’s black—each color suited them and made them shine like jewels.

“We bought these back when the three of us shopped together. Unfortunately, we mainly slept outdoors, so we didn’t really have the opportunity to wear them until now. After all, it’s important to set the mood, don’t you think?” Millicia said.

“True, it goes really well with this room. I mean it.”

Strangely, sexy lingerie perfectly suited the bedroom of an imperial princess. Their appearance coupled with the dim light of the lamp and the scent of incense burning on the table stirred Caim’s lust and made him swallow reflexively.

Tea chuckled. “We’ve got such a wonderful bed. We should enjoy it.”

“And tomorrow is the meeting with His Highness Arthur, so it’s important to boost our spirits,” Lenka added as she and Tea took Caim’s hands and dragged him deeper into the room.

Then the three beauties lay on the large bed, lining up before him.

“I made sure that nobody will come near my bedroom, so you can do as you please with us.”

“We are nothing but females waiting for you to ravage us, Master Caim.”

“J-Just kill me...or not. I would love it if you teased me as usual, though.”

Gorgeous women on a luxuriant bed... Caim almost thought he was in heaven, to the point that he completely forgot his bout with Foshbell. He quickly removed his shirt, leaving him half naked, before leaping onto the bed.

Caim's first prey was Millicia, who was in the middle. He straddled her and grabbed her breasts over the baby doll, eliciting a sweet moan from her. He diligently groped them, ascertaining their softness; then his movements grew rougher as he did whatever he wanted with them, proving they were his.

"Mmmh... Aah... You're so rough...Caim..." Despite the way he was handling her, Millicia's voice was filled with happiness. Her blue eyes were glistening in pleasure as she lovingly caressed Caim's cheek with her hand.

"If you don't like it, I can always do the other two first," Caim teased her.

"Don't be so mean... I was saying that I wanted more..."

"Well then, all right. Here I come." Caim firmly grabbed Millicia's breasts and started rubbing them in circles, evoking another loud moan from the princess. Even through the lingerie, they were perky and springy. Strangely, though, Caim felt that her chest was softer than it had been the first time he'd touched it.

Wait...is her chest larger than it was during our first time? They had been doing it basically every day, so it was difficult to notice any gradual change, but he felt like her breasts had increased in size since their first time. But thinking about it, that only made sense. After all, Millicia was still in her teens, so she had room to grow.

"Aaah... It... Mmmh... Feels good..."

"Your chest is as sensitive as usual. Look, your tips are already completely hard," Caim said as he pinched her nipples through the baby doll.



Millicia moaned loudly, throwing her head back. Seeing her react like that made touching her all the more worthwhile.

Caim glided his hands toward the baby doll's shoulder straps and slid them down, exposing her chest. He felt like completely undressing her would be a waste of such a glamorous outfit, so he only removed the upper part.

Her soft mounds bounced when they were released. Despite their size, her breasts retained their roundness without sagging. The beautiful pink tips atop her pale skin were like flowers in full bloom upon the mountains. Caim moved his mouth close to one of them and bit into it, eliciting yet another loud moan from Millicia.

However, Caim didn't stop at biting. He also licked and sucked her nipple as he stroked her other breast with his hand. After a while, he switched his targets and sucked on the opposite nipple. Her soft flesh coupled with the seasoning of her sweat made for the perfect flavor. He could rub and suck them forever.

"Aaah... If you keep focusing on my breasts, you are going to pluck them off..." Millicia chided him, her voice feverish.

"Where *should* I touch, then? Here...?" Caim glided his left hand toward her lower abdomen. Then he spread her thighs that she was bashfully rubbing together, enjoying their feel in the process, and gently touched her crotch. He was far more delicate than when he had been roughly groping her breasts.

Millicia yelped at the sudden sensation. "Ah... Mmmh... It feels good..."

Caim gently caressed the wet place between her legs before pushing his finger into the slit, earning a loud, high-pitched moan from Millicia. Caim could feel her arousal intensifying, and from experience, he knew that it wouldn't be long before she came.

Tea giggled. "You're so adorable, Millicia."

"Princess... I shall help too," Lenka said.

The both of them, who were on Millicia's sides, started licking her neck and shoulders, aiding in Caim's assault.

"Aaah! L-Lenka?! And Tea?!"

“People are waiting for their turn, so you should come already. Tea’s next.”

“I cannot endure any longer, Princess. Please climax.”

“Mmmh! I-If you all lick me at once, I...!” Millicia pleaded as Tea and Lenka stroked and licked her body. She had been nearing her limit from Caim’s caresses, so it didn’t take long for the added pleasure to make her reach orgasm. “Aaaaaaaah!” Millicia cried, her back arching as she threw her head backward. She shuddered furiously, making the luxurious bed creak, but eventually, it was over and she sunk listlessly into the mattress.

The finger Caim had used to stimulate Millicia was slick with fluid, proving how much she had enjoyed it.

“We haven’t even gotten past the foreplay and she’s already fainted. Maybe we went too far?” Caim worried.

“If my princess cannot continue, then I suppose I have no other choice but to take her place while she rests.” Lenka suddenly embraced Caim from his right. She pushed her body, still covered in a black baby doll, against him, and her breasts—that were a size bigger than Millicia’s—changed shape as they were squeezed.

“Ah! That’s unfair, Lenka! It’s Tea’s turn next!”

“Hmph! First come, first served. And the castle is our territory anyway!”

“What does that have to do with anything?! Get away from Master Caim!” Tea protested, hugging Caim from his left. Her chest—covered in the purple baby doll and even larger than Lenka’s—pressed against his arm.

“Don’t fight. You’ll each have your turn.” Caim deftly groped their rears, wringing out moans from both of them. His fingers sank into their butts—which were as soft as their breasts—while he exchanged kisses with the both of them. “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna hold back tonight. I won’t stop even if you ask me to, so prepare yourselves!”

Caim had left his homeland, crossed the border to enter the empire, and now had reached the imperial palace. Apparently, reaching the end of this journey full of twists and turns had gotten him very worked up, and he wanted to take care of the blazing fire in his chest before meeting Arthur.

“Grrraaaaooooow!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Loud moans resonated inside Millicia’s bedroom. If Millicia hadn’t ordered people to not come near her chambers, surely a few knights and servants would have rushed in at some point.

After a while, Millicia woke up and rejoined the fray as Caim took turns embracing them, and the four of them enjoyed a sumptuous night in the imperial palace.

Chapter 6: The Conqueror Prince

Arthur Garnet. Twenty-seven years old.

He was the first imperial prince of the Garnet Empire, and he had been born on the battlefield.

Arthur’s mother was the emperor’s wife, and as such, she held the title of empress. One day, she was sent as her husband’s representative to a small nation to express their condolences following a particular event, but a civil war abruptly broke out. The empress was forced to stay in that country for the entire duration of the insurrection—which lasted more than a year.

And the child that was born during this war was Arthur.

Arthur was born on the battlefield, and it showed in his excellence as a soldier. He was a true genius, having shown a deep understanding of military science and governance since childhood. He was clearly more than suitable for becoming the next emperor.

And yet, Arthur never was appointed as crown prince. He was the child of the empress and the first imperial prince, as well as a very talented man—all of which should make him the perfect candidate for the throne, but he had two flaws: an intense desire for control and an extremely competitive spirit.

Arthur would have never been satisfied with just becoming the next emperor. No, what he wanted was to rule over the entire continent.

No one knew the reason for his ambition—if it was simply the warlike circumstances of his birth or if the blood of the first emperor, who had been a conqueror, ran stronger in his veins. But one thing was sure: Arthur Garnet loved conflict, and the instant he became emperor, he would immediately aim to conquer other nations.



The time for the siblings to meet had finally come.

With Millicia in the lead, the group walked down the corridors of the imperial palace, heading for a certain room deep inside the castle—the emperor’s office. As the room’s master was bedridden, Arthur, the first imperial prince, was the one currently working in it.

“We have been awaiting your arrival, Your Highness Millicia.” The knights standing guard in front of the office bowed respectfully. “His Highness Arthur is waiting inside. Please, enter.” Then they opened the door.

It seemed the knights had been told of their coming. Lenka aside, Millicia had thought that Caim and Tea would be barred from entering with her—and yet, they weren’t.

“Excuse me. This is Millicia,” she said at the doorstep.

“Ah, come in,” the man sitting in the back of the room curtly answered.

The group entered the office. There were several men inside—the one who had answered to Millicia sat at the desk in front of them, focused on a document, and civil officers were doing paperwork at desks on either side of him. Knights stood alongside the wall, staring intimidatingly at Caim and the girls.

The man at the desk in the center was young, in his late twenties. He had a large build with lean, well-defined muscles, giving the impression of a massive boulder, and seemed more suited to wielding a sword than doing desk work.

That man was none other than Arthur Garnet, Millicia’s eldest brother and the one closest to becoming the next emperor.

“You’re finally back,” he said, still looking at the document on his desk even though his little sister was now present. “The chamberlain was pretty worried. Seems like you went on a long journey.”

“Yes... I am sorry for the trouble I have caused,” Millicia replied with a tense expression. She had steeled herself before coming, but she was clearly feeling nervous, beads of sweat forming on her brow.

“I don’t mind. After all, it was Lance’s suggestion, no? I’m always troubled by his pranks.”

Millicia stayed silent.

“And I suppose our guests were troubled too. I apologize for the inconvenience. You shall be handsomely rewarded.”

“Hmph,” Caim snorted at Arthur’s “apology” which was more like a veiled order for them to forgive him.

I see... He’s powerful. It wasn’t about his actual physical strength, but more his presence. He exuded an aura of confidence that left no doubt that he felt he stood above everyone else. Giving commands was the norm to him, and he naturally looked down on everyone, even people he was meeting for the first time. He was, undoubtedly, a conqueror.

I’m sure a man like him would remorselessly invade other nations. In fact, he might be able to unify the entire continent. Even if that means creating mountains of bodies and rivers of blood, it wouldn’t pain his heart in the slightest.

Be they enemies or allies, Arthur wouldn’t hesitate to pile up as many corpses as he needed. It wasn’t as though he treated life lightly—only that he was resolved to be hated and resented by the entire world. Whether as a hero or a tyrant, the man before Caim would certainly leave his mark on history.

He’s well suited to ruling the empire, a nation of conquerors, but not someone you would want to be friends with.

“If you’re actually sorry, then why not look at us? It’s not as if your eyes are nailed to your desk, are they?” Caim said, mockingly.

“Caim!” Millicia raised her voice, flustered.

At that moment, bloodlust permeated the room. It didn’t come from Arthur, though, but from the knights standing guard in the office. Their hands were on the hilts of their swords, ready to correct the affront to their master.

“Stop,” Arthur ordered, finally lifting his head. The next instant, the hostility hanging in the air vanished. The knights flinched and let go of their swords.

“Oh... Impressive,” Caim said in admiration. The knights were elites, and yet Arthur had overpowered them with a single word and completely dispersed

their aggression. That wouldn't have been possible with mere willpower. Thanks to this, Caim now understood that Arthur was not only a great ruler but also a fairly skilled warrior.

"So are you. You didn't even break a sweat at *my* bloodlust." Arthur was impressed by Caim too—the coercive pressure he had unleashed on the knights had also been aimed at Caim and the girls. Millicia trembled, her face going pale; Lenka and Tea stiffened, their bodies tensing. Caim alone had shrugged it off. "Are you the master of a martial art? Considering you're not wearing a sword or any other weapon, I suppose you must be a hand-to-hand fighter?"

"Who knows? I don't recall us being on such friendly terms that I'd unconditionally explain things to you."

Caim and Arthur stared at each other silently for a moment, until eventually Arthur broke the silence with a snort. "I like you. Millicia's been employing you, but from now on you should serve me. I'll even give you a title. Let's see... How'd you like to become a marquis?"

"What?!" almost everyone in the room exclaimed, their faces filled with shock.

In the empire, duke was the highest rank aside from the emperor's children with a claim to the throne. However, as only members of the imperial family could receive that particular peerage, it could be said that marquis was effectively the next highest rank. Thus, everyone in the room thought it was lunacy that Arthur would propose giving that title to a man of unknown origin he had just met.

"If that's not enough for you, I don't mind making you a duke. That would go against the current laws, though... Ah, you can just marry Millicia. As her husband, you should be eligible for the title."

"Huh?!" Millicia cried, her face beet red. While she had always planned to marry Caim, she had never expected her own brother to suggest it.

"Become my sword and work for me," Arthur said to Caim, then turned toward Millicia. "As for you, support me as the next emperor, not Lance. You may not have much power, but the people like you. I shall use you well, so throw away the foolish plans you've been making."

“I—” Millicia began, but Arthur immediately interjected.

“The whole reason you came here was to persuade me to not go to war with Lance, no? That’s impossible. Our fight has already begun. It’s far too late for words. You should just side with the winner—that is to say, me—and marry that man there. If anyone objects, I’ll crush them, so just do what I say.”

“So you knew why I asked for this meeting...”

“Naturally. Considering the current situation, that was the only possible reason.” Arthur stared sharply at his little sister. “After he left the imperial palace, Lance traveled to the east and is currently raising an army. Of course, I plan to send a punitive force after him. It is already too late to prevent our conflict.”

“Then I will persuade Lance. Please, lay down your arms.”

“That’s impossible. Don’t thoughtlessly claim you’ll do the impossible.”

“How can you be so sure?!” Millicia retorted.

“Because it *is* impossible. Lance isn’t the kind of man to bare his fangs easily, but he isn’t so gutless that he’ll give up without a fight. In the first place, now that he is raising an army to rebel, he would be considered weak if he called it off and would lose his retainers’ support. Just like me, he has reached a point of no return.”

“But then...!” Millicia grimaced at her brother’s harsh statement. His words left no room for rebuttal and struck Millicia mercilessly. Arthur had anticipated the reason for Millicia’s visit and completely refuted her arguments.

“And don’t say that you’ll become Lance’s ally. No particular reason, but it’d be a hassle,” Arthur warned her.

Millicia stayed silent.

“If you throw away your life, it’ll also affect the lives of the people who follow you. Do not let your emotions decide the fate of your retainers. If you don’t want to fight Lance, then just hide somewhere until our battle is over. Don’t make me kill my own sister.”

“Arthur...” Millicia groaned weakly. She had come to persuade her brother,

and yet not only had her arguments been countered, but she was the one being convinced instead. It was a complete one-man show. Far from being a dispute between siblings, Arthur had controlled the entire conversation.

Millicia bit her lower lip, unable to object. It wasn't that she lacked resolve; she had realized that Arthur was already prepared to kill their brother and no words would stop him.

The discussion was over—or at least it would have been, if Millicia had been alone.

"Hey, don't leave me out of the conversation. That's annoying," Caim interjected, his voice filled with irritation.

"Oh?"

"Caim?"

Arthur and Millicia turned his way.

"I don't recall accepting your proposal to become your subordinate. You want to make me a duke and have me marry Millicia? I refuse," Caim declared. To begin with, he was already a king—the Poison King. He had no intention of letting anyone order him around and control his fate. "Millicia's already my woman, so you can't hand her to me like that. And if I wanted wealth or status, I could get them on my own. I don't need someone I just met to give them to me."

"So you're refusing my proposal? Do you know what that means?" Arthur asked. While the emperor was bedridden, Arthur was the most powerful man in the empire. Opposing him meant making enemies of every knight in the castle.

Caim understood that—and yet he gave Arthur the finger and declared, "My reply is simple: If you don't like it, then bring it on."



“Such insolence!”

“How dare you act like that toward His Highness Arthur!”

The knights standing guard snarled at Caim for insulting Arthur. They grasped the hilts of their swords and were about to draw them, but before they could, Caim unleashed a powerful bloodlust.

“Shut up. Small fry should stay out of my way.”

Caim’s intimidation froze the knights. They weren’t afraid—after all, they were ready to sacrifice themselves for the empire and Arthur. Even if they were facing someone they could never win against, they would still bravely fight... Or at least, they had *thought* they would. The reality was different. Just being glared at by Caim was enough to make their whole bodies tremble, unable to move. The pressure they felt from him was far greater than what they had felt from Arthur earlier.

“Oh? For you to freeze my guards so easily... You’re even more impressive than I thought,” Arthur said in admiration, stroking his chin.

The reason the knights were petrified was that they had been showered with pure, unadulterated bloodlust. No matter how courageous they were, they couldn’t fight their own instincts screaming that they were standing in the presence of a higher being. Just like a frog standing paralyzed in front of a snake, any creature would be rendered unable to move when faced with their natural enemy. Knowing that fighting or fleeing was useless anyway, they just lost their will to live.

“Could you stop? If you keep glaring at them like that, they’re going to die,” Arthur said.

“Hmph,” Caim snorted, dismissing his hostile aura.

The knights fell to their knees with labored breath. If the pressure had lasted longer, their bodies might have deluded themselves into thinking that they were dead and stopped their hearts.

“Are you okay with this, Millicia?” Caim asked.

“Huh?” she blurted, bewildered.

“You came here prepared, didn’t you? You had more than enough time to think about it. Or was your resolve so brittle as to be broken by his worthless arguments?”

Millicia gasped.

“Tell him what you think, and show him that I didn’t fall for a weak woman.”

“Yes... I will, Caim!” Millicia lifted her head, encouraged by Caim’s words. Unlike earlier, when she had been intimidated by her brother and couldn’t argue back, this time she stared straight at Arthur. “I have something to tell you.”

“...I’m listening.”

“You are not fit to be the next emperor! You wish for war and conquest, and will bring mayhem to the empire—and I cannot allow that!” Millicia asserted. In front of everyone, she declared that her brother, the first imperial prince, was not qualified for the throne. Even the second imperial prince, Lance, hadn’t been bold enough to pick a fight with Arthur face-to-face.

“You, a mere powerless princess, would say that to me?”

“I might be just a woman, but there are things I can do precisely because I am one.”

“And from your point of view, I am unfit to be emperor, huh? Interesting.” The next instant, just as Caim had done, Arthur released intense bloodlust. “So what are you planning to do, then?”

“I shall support Lance and make him the emperor. Starting now, we are enemies.”

“I see, I see... You really *are* getting carried away, aren’t you? Do you really think you’ll be able to leave this castle alive after making such a declaration?” Arthur slammed his fist on his desk.

A moment later, the door of the office opened and soldiers entered, surrounding Caim and the girls. Their movements had been swift and quiet. Caim immediately discerned that these knights were more skilled than the ones he had paralyzed with his bloodlust earlier.

“It’s fine to talk big, and I’m proud of your growth, Millicia. But do you have what it takes to back your words?” Arthur asked.

“I do not. But my future husband does.”

“Oh?” Arthur narrowed his eyes with great interest.

“Well, this has ended as I expected. I was certain the negotiations would fail.” Caim smiled wryly, clenching his fists and starting to manipulate his mana.

The instant Caim had laid eyes on Arthur, he had known things would end like this. Arthur wasn’t someone who could be stopped with words. It wasn’t a matter of being a good or a bad person—simply that Arthur had his convictions and ambitions, and the only way to make him listen was to use force.

“Your policy is that might makes right and the strong rule, right? Well, that’s easy to understand. I like to solve problems with force too,” Caim said.

“So you’re having your husband do what you can’t... That is indeed something only a woman can do, and I cannot imitate that,” Arthur admitted with a faint smile as he looked at Caim, who was releasing his mana and fighting spirit.

The amount of mana emanating from Caim’s body was more than ten times what the average mage possessed. And yet, even facing such overwhelming power, no traces of fear could be found in Arthur’s eyes. He hadn’t been affected by Caim’s aggressive aura either. The first imperial prince was more than his position—he had likely faced his share of bloodshed.

“Well then, let’s see the strength of the man you chose!” Arthur said.

“Oh, you will! Hope you enjoy it!” Caim replied.

The imperial soldiers closed the distance all at once. Caim covered his body in poisonous mana and snapped his leg around like a whip.

“Gah!” Several knights were sent flying by the attack. The robust men rolled on the floor and tried to stand up, but ultimately remained on the ground, unable to move. They weren’t dead—they’d only been paralyzed by the poison Caim had used on them.

“Quite the interesting technique,” Arthur remarked, narrowing his eyes as he looked at his fallen subordinates. “A martial art that uses condensed mana,

refines the body to the extreme, and requires no weapons—this must be the Toukishin Style, the renowned martial art from the East. And your mana... Is it a kind of curse? I've never seen anything like that before."

"You've got a keen insight," Caim admitted. "But aren't you taking this a bit lightly?" Analyzing the enemy without fleeing went past being brave—it was plain foolish.

For Caim, who wanted to stop the conflict between Arthur and Lance, the simplest solution would be to kill Arthur here and now.

Should I actually do it...? Caim thought for an instant, but he couldn't kill Millicia's brother right before her eyes. While she had resolved to fight against her brother for the good of her country, it didn't change the fact that she was a kindhearted person.

"I guess for now I'll just crush you until you're beyond recovery!" Caim kicked the ground, leaping at Arthur, intending to use a combination of punching and poison to defeat him. But just before his fist could reach the prince, it was stopped by a translucent barrier.

"You're quite hasty, young man. As if we would let you take our king so easily." A woman's voice reached Caim's ears. Then as though emerging from thin air, two figures appeared next to Arthur.

"General Gawain and Merlin the Great Sage! To think that Arthur's Twin Wings would appear together!" Millicia shouted, awestruck.

The two individuals who had suddenly teleported into the room were a large man wearing armor and a woman with a big pointy hat that screamed *I am a mage*. She was also dressed in a sensual dress that looked more like underwear than clothing.



The corners of the woman's lips raised as she looked at Caim with interest. "How amusing. It's been a while since something so unexpected has happened. Not only did Her Highness Millicia visit out of the blue, but she even brought a man who has the same mana as the Poison Queen. Just how much chaos has been building up for my Laplace's Prophecy to be this far off?"

"...And you are?" Caim asked.

"Merlin. I'm His Highness Arthur's left wing, acting as his close aide. People call me the Great Sage...or the Prophet," she answered. As Caim had presumed from her attire, she really was a mage. She must have been the one who had stopped his punch with a barrier. "As for him, he's Gawain, the right wing. He's the general who commands His Highness's soldiers."

The translucent barrier vanished, and the man in black armor stepped forward. The next instant, Caim felt a prickling pressure envelop his body.

He's strong...! Their eyes had only met for a moment, and yet Caim immediately understood that the man called Gawain was an exceptionally skilled warrior. That large, robust man had defeated countless enemies, stepped over the corpses of many of his comrades, and continued to walk forward no matter how injured he was. If he drew his sword, he would not sheathe it until he had cut down all the enemies before him. *While martial artists and swordsmen are different, there's no doubt he's a warrior equal to the Master Pugilist. I guess I'm at a disadvantage, since I'm fighting my enemies in their territory.*

"It's a shame, but we're gonna have to retreat," Caim said.

"You think I'll let you go after you have declared your intent to fight against His Highness Arthur?" Gawain spoke for the first time. His voice was low and deep, indicating he would never allow Caim and his companions to flee.

"Tea, you clear a path for our retreat. Lenka, you take care of Millicia. As for me, I'm in charge of the rear," Caim instructed.

"Yes."

"Understood."

“Ready... Go!” Caim shouted, and his companions took action.

Tea took the lead and exited the room, back the way they had come from. Thankfully, Caim had already defeated the knights, so as long as they could flee before any others arrived, they should be able to leave the imperial palace without being captured.

“Be careful, Caim!” Millicia cried frantically as she was grabbed by Lenka. Caim answered by waving his right hand without turning back, as his attention was fixed on Gawain.

And with that, I can use my full power without fear of hurting everyone. Caim didn’t have to hold back anymore and could now fight without restraint.

“Well then... Let’s fight.” Caim glared at the enemy before him with a belligerent grin that showed his teeth. A tremendous amount of mana gushed out of him, and he condensed it around his body. The mana pool he had inherited from the Poison Queen was so enormous that if he decided to, Caim could blow up the entire castle. And now, he used that mana to cover him like armor, making Caim look like a demonic god descending upon the human realm.

A normal person would have lost their will to fight just looking at Caim. And yet, Gawain didn’t seem affected at all. He didn’t tremble or anything like that—in fact, he was completely still as he pointed the black sword he had drawn at Caim. Just how much power did he have in his arm that he could accomplish such a feat?

He’s a really powerful warrior... It’s such a shame I can’t leisurely enjoy our fight. If possible, Caim would have liked to take his time and enjoy his battle with Gawain. Unfortunately, his companions were on the run, and he had to rejoin them.

“Purple Poison Magic—Nidhogg!” Caim imitated a snake’s jaws with his hands, gathering mana between them.

Sensing that a release of power similar to a volcanic eruption was about to occur, Gawain and Merlin immediately stood before their liege to protect him.

Caim unleashed the deadly poisonous mana gathering around his hands in the

form of a dragon. The creature was made of an acid so strong it could melt anything without leaving any bones.

“Highest Rank Protection Magic—Shield of Aegis!” Merlin shouted, holding her staff. A magic circle appeared in front of the three, protecting them.

The acid dragon clashed with the shining magic shield, and an unpleasant sound like metal scraping on metal rang out.

“Seriously?!” Caim grimaced. He hadn’t expected his strongest magic to be stopped. How could he have known that a mage capable of instantly creating such a powerful barrier existed?

“No way...” On the other hand, Merlin was grimacing too. She was creating a magic shield able to repel and reflect anything—and yet it was being overpowered by Caim’s attack, unable to return the blow.

The clash continued for a few seconds before the equilibrium broke, creating a strong shock wave. The dragon had exploded and transformed into a poisonous gas spreading around the room.

The next instant, Caim kicked powerfully against the floor, running with a low posture. Using the purple fog to hide himself, he closed in on Arthur and prepared to cut him with a blade made of condensed mana.

“Toukishin Style—Seiryuu!”

Arthur spotted Caim and prepared to defend himself, but he didn’t manage to make it in time. However, when the mana blade was on the verge of reaching his body...

“I won’t let you!” A black sword stopped Caim’s mana blade. The one who had blocked the surprise attack and protected his master was none other than the knight in jet-black armor—Gawain. “You’re fast, but you’re too straightforward. You have incredible talent, but lack experience. Did your master die early?”

“You somehow hit a sore spot, even though you don’t know a thing,” Caim said. Not only had Gawain stopped his attack, but that single exchange had been enough for him to pinpoint Caim’s weakness.

Caim had learned the Toukishin Style by himself through observing his father, and fusing with the Poison Queen had allowed the talent sleeping inside him to bloom. But because he had never been taught by a proper master, he dearly lacked combat experience against foes stronger than him.

This is no laughing matter. Not only am I fighting against someone stronger than me, but he's aided by a mage who's around the same level!

“Toukishin Style—Ouryuu!” Nothing ventured, nothing gained—Caim closed the distance between himself and Gawain to try to settle the fight in a single blow. His choice wasn't a bad one. It was even logical in some ways, considering that he was outnumbered and unarmed against an opponent whose sword gave him much greater reach.

However, Caim hadn't expected one thing: that Gawain was even stronger than he thought. The black knight didn't even try to dodge Caim's strike to his chest. Ouryuu was a palm strike that sent a shock wave directly into the target's body, so even the sturdiest armor wouldn't block it. And yet, Gawain just firmly planted his feet and absorbed the attack, redirecting its force toward the ground thanks to his impressive control over his center of gravity. The floor of the imperial palace cracked, but Gawain himself showed no signs of having been harmed.

Then the knight immediately followed with a downward swing of his black sword. Before he'd even seen it coming, Caim had already stepped back and retreated. And yet, even though he had dodged the slash, he'd somehow suffered a laceration running diagonally from his right shoulder to his lower left abdomen.

“I avoided it, so how...? Wait! He must've used his mana!” Caim realized.

Gawain had coated his black sword with thick mana, and his skill was almost as good as the Toukishin Style's Mana Compression. While Caim had dodged the physical blade, he hadn't avoided the mana. That's what had injured him.

“If I hadn't fought against the Lycaon King earlier, I'd have been cut in half...” Caim commented as he rubbed at his wound and wiped away the blood flowing from it. Thankfully, the cut was mostly through his clothes, catching on a little bit of his skin, so the damage wasn't as severe as the blood had made it appear.

If Caim hadn't fought against the Lycaon King—an opponent stronger than he was who had forced Caim to surpass himself—on his way to the capital, he would likely be dead, as he would've been unable to avoid the attack.

“Aren't you forgetting someone?”

Caim had somehow dodged Gawain's slash, but the black knight wasn't his only opponent. The robed witch—Merlin—activated a spell with a mischievous smile.

Ivy sprouted from the ground and coiled around Caim's legs, forcing him to his knees and restricting his movement. It wasn't that he had been negligent—he just hadn't had the leeway to dodge a spell just after avoiding Gawain's attack.

“Damn, I'm really in a bind now!” Caim exclaimed, trying to tear the ivy away.

“More like you're in checkmate,” Arthur announced detachedly. He drew the sword at his hip and thrust it toward Caim's neck. “Not bad. I suppose I should praise you for lasting so long against my Twin Wings. However, you made the wrong decision.”

“What? You want to say I shouldn't have sided with Millicia?”

“I'm not the type to comment about people's love lives. No, your wrong decision was taking the rear and letting your comrades escape first.” Arthur glanced toward the corridor outside the office. The hallway was still shrouded with poisonous gas and several knights were lying on the floor, but Millicia, Lenka, and Tea had already fled. “The only way Millicia could win against me is if you were on her side, so it was absurd to have you, her trump card, do something so dangerous. If you wanted to buy time to run, then you should have had Lenka or that beastfolk woman do it instead.”

Caim didn't reply.

“It seems your feelings toward those women clouded your judgment. A ruler must be rational. War is unforgiving, and you cannot win by listening to your emotions.”

“You talk big for someone who's being protected by his retainers.” Caim could follow the reasoning behind Arthur's words, but he couldn't accept the

conclusion. After all, one of Caim's objectives in life was to obtain a true family. As someone who had been abused by his father since he was a child and had a terrible relationship with his twin sister, this was his soul's greatest wish. To him, sacrificing his comrades—his lovers—to flee wasn't even a choice.

I wasn't swayed by my emotions. To me, those three are as vital as my heart. Abandoning them isn't even an option. But Caim didn't voice his thoughts, only staring at Arthur.

The imperial prince looked down at Caim for a few moments before he eventually sighed. "If that's your conviction, then do as you will. Thinking about it, if you *are* my little sister's husband, that would make you my brother-in-law. If you surrender here and stay obedient, I won't take your life. And as long as I have you, Millicia should return of her own volition."

"I have only one thing to say to that: If you're just gonna spout nonsense, consider shutting up instead."

"Quite a shame."

Caim tried to look for an opening, but the Twin Wings stood at Arthur's sides as he kept his sword pointed at Caim. Tearing off the ivy and counterattacking would at least take a second, and against a warrior and a mage of the highest level, that might as well be giving them an eternity to act.

I guess my only choice is to use that... Now nearer to death than he had been during his fight against the Lycaon King, Caim resolved himself to use his trump card: Shiyuu, a technique from the Secret Stance of the Toukishin Style. It had allowed him to defeat the Lycaon King, so it might be enough to get him out of this predicament.

Still, Gawain and Merlin are on the same level as the Lycaon King. Even Shiyuu might not be enough... But if he didn't use it, he would definitely die. If he was going to die anyway, he might as well risk his life using everything he had.

However, just before he could activate the technique, Caim gasped as something caught his eye. Since he was on his knees and looking up at Arthur, he happened to see *her* by chance.

When did she get here?! Caim exclaimed, internally. A petite figure was

clinging to the ceiling. *She* was like a shadow, dressed in black, concealing *her* presence from everyone in the room.

She noticed that Caim had seen *her*, and realizing there was no point in hiding anymore, *she* made her move.

“Your head is mine.” The woman kicked off the ceiling and charged at Arthur, her navy blue hair fluttering behind her.

She was Rozbeth the Headhuntress, a wanted criminal and assassin Caim and the girls had met on their way to the imperial capital.

“Huh?!” Arthur sensed the impending assault and blocked Rozbeth’s knife using the sword he had been pointing at Caim. It was truly impressive that he was able to defend against such a perfectly timed surprise attack.

However, Rozbeth didn’t stop there. She swung her second knife horizontally, and the sharp slash cut a red line across Arthur’s neck. An instant later, blood splattered onto the floor.



“Your Highness?!”

“Who is it?!”

Merlin and Gawain shouted, flustered by the assailant’s sudden appearance. The imperial prince, the one they should be protecting against everything, was now threatened by an assassin. They immediately acted to defend him.

“Greater Heal!” Merlin used a healing spell to treat Arthur’s injury. The cut had been deep, even reaching the carotid artery, and yet it was healed in an instant.

“Stay away from His Highness!” Gawain swung his black blade between the prince and Rozbeth, forcing the assassin to retreat.

Rozbeth leaped back and lowered her posture, placing both hands on the floor, and clicked her tongue. “I failed.”

“That was impressive, assassin,” Arthur praised her even though she had nearly killed him. “I didn’t sense your presence until right before you attacked me, so you must be very skilled. Are you also one of Millicia’s comrades?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m an assassin—I kill whomever I’m hired to.”

“Then who is your client? Lance? Someone from another country?”

“As if I would tell you. Still... I suppose I can reveal that Prince Lance is also among my targets.” Rozbeth twirled her knives and gave a belligerent grin. “In exchange for that information, you’ll have to pay with your life. Quite the bargain, don’t you think?”

“We won’t let you do that. Don’t you see us?” Gawain interjected, standing in front of Arthur to protect him. He glared at his liege’s enemy from the interior of his helmet and swung his black sword at Rozbeth.

“Kirin.”

But Caim stopped him. Caim had used the opening created by Rozbeth’s attack to tear off the vines binding him, then fired a mana shock wave at the side of Gawain’s sword, throwing off its aim and giving Rozbeth an opportunity to target a gap in his armor with her knife.

“I’ll take your arm.”

“Never!” Naturally, Merlin didn’t merely stand by and watch—she created a magic shield and protected Gawain.

“Hah!” Arthur, his injury completely healed, took advantage of Rozbeth’s knife being repelled by the barrier and swung his sword at her.

Rozbeth backflipped, dodging the slash, and made distance between her and her three opponents. Rozbeth pouted. “Drat, I really screwed up.”

If everything had gone as planned, she would have killed Arthur in her first attack from the ceiling. However, the prince had exceeded her expectations and reacted just in time, so her attempt on his life had ended in failure. And now, she was in a bad position. After all, Rozbeth wasn’t a knight, a warrior, or a martial artist—she was an assassin.

“If only I could pull back and have a redo... Any bright ideas?”

“Don’t suddenly act like we’re friends—though I guess you *did* help me,” Caim said, lightly rolling his shoulders as he stood beside Rozbeth.

Thanks to Rozbeth’s unexpected assault, Caim was able to extract himself from his predicament, but it didn’t change the fact that the odds were still against him. Rozbeth wasn’t his ally, so he couldn’t trust her, and he was against three people who would each be hard to handle by themselves. On top of that, if he wasted too much time here, then reinforcements of knights and soldiers would surely arrive before long.

“Millicia and the rest must have escaped by now, so I guess I should head out too. Next time we meet will be on the battlefield, so you better be prepared,” Caim announced.

“You think we will allow you to run away?” Gawain warned.

“I’m not running away. It’s a strategic withdrawal... Though I guess that’s the same thing.” Caim raised his right hand and held his fingers up.

Arthur frowned in confusion, but Merlin quickly understood what he was going to do, and her eyes widened in shock. “Get down! It’s going to explode!”

“Sorry, but it’s too late—I’ve already scattered my toxins everywhere. Poison

Flare.” Caim snapped his fingers with enough strength to create sparks.

The next instant, a burst of flame flooded the room and the imperial palace’s corridor.

“Archangel Sanctuary!” Merlin hurriedly created a dome barrier surrounding her, Arthur, and Gawain. It protected them from the blast, but when the fire died down, Caim and Rozbeth had already disappeared.

“I see... He used a combustible poison...” Arthur grumbled with a frown, standing amid the black smoke.

Caim had first sprayed a poisonous fog all around the room using his magic. Then, by snapping his fingers to produce sparks, he had ignited the combustible gas and created an explosion.

“I apologize for letting those scoundrels get away, Your Highness,” Gawain solemnly reported. The black knight gazed out the corridor’s window. It was broken and fragments of glass were scattered on the floor, so they must have fled through it.

“I don’t know who that woman was. How surprising that my Laplace failed to predict so many things in a row,” Merlin commented.

“Is it due to Millicia’s luck? Or that man’s power? Either way...it’s interesting.” Arthur’s face loosened into a delighted smile even though a new obstacle had appeared in his way. “I wonder if this is a trial on my path to the throne or a rite of passage the empire must endure to rule the continent.”

Either way, Arthur would proceed forward and face everything that stood in his way. After all, the empire was the greatest nation of all and deserved to dominate the continent, and Arthur Garnet ought to reign at the top of the world as its supreme ruler.

Extra Story: Lenka Imprisoned

A beautiful woman with red hair and a slim figure panted heavily inside a stone-walled jail cell, her hands bound by a chain hanging from the ceiling. She had several wounds all over her body, and the only clothing she wore was the old rag covering her bountiful chest.

“Just kill me...” she said, her voice shaking. Her name was Lenka, and she was a knight of the great Garnet Empire who served the imperial princess Millicia as a guard.

However, Lenka was currently imprisoned and in the middle of an interrogation.

“Just confess already. Where are your comrades?” the interrogator—a masked man with purple hair—asked, slapping a whip against his palm.

Lenka’s body trembled from the sound, but she lifted her head and glared bravely at the interrogator. “Give it up—I’ll never betray my comrades!”

“If you want to be whipped so badly, then so be it. Take this!”

“Aaah!” Lenka let out a high-pitched scream as the interrogator’s whip left a bright-red mark on her back.

The man chuckled evilly. “Still not willing to talk?”

“Uhh... Never...”

“Oh, really?” The interrogator swung his whip again, drawing another scream out of Lenka.

In the process, the rag that had somehow been covering her chest fell to the ground, exposing her voluptuous breasts to him.

“Oh, I see that our dear knight actually has quite the mature body. Did you use those tits to get your position?” the interrogator inquired with a malicious laugh.

“S-Stop! Don’t touch me!” Lenka shouted as the man’s hand drew closer.

“Ha ha! You say that, but look—your nipples are already rock-hard! You *want* me to touch you, no?”

“Ah...”

The man groped Lenka’s breasts as he tormented her with his words. She was so ashamed that tears started to form in the corners of her eyes. She had sworn never to cry, but her stout heart was slowly beginning to break.

“Are you crying?” the interrogator asked.

“I-I’m not...”

“Oh? You must be feeling good, then. Are you enjoying being tormented and whipped?”

Lenka opened her mouth to deny his words, but no sound came out. It would be easy to object and say that she wasn’t feeling anything, but deep in her heart, she knew he was right.

“Wait... Are you *actually* enjoying this?”

Lenka groaned.

“Ha ha! Look at you—you’re drenched! You must be a real slut! Is the empire employing prostitutes in its knight orders now?”

“S-Stop touching me...!” Lenka protested as the man groped her everywhere. He rubbed her chest, caressed her abdomen and thighs, stroked her butt, and even mercilessly dragged his fingers along her crotch. Every time he stimulated a sensitive part—or somewhere she was injured—a bolt of pleasure Lenka had never experienced before ran through her, eliciting loud moans.

“Ha ha ha ha! This is amazing. I can’t get enough!”

“No... Don’t touch me... Don’t strike me... Not there... Aaah!”

The man laughed madly as he struck at Lenka’s butt rhythmically like a drum, leaving red handprints on her pale skin until her entire rear was covered with them.

“Aaah... Please...stop...”

“Hmm, looks like you’ll give in soon. Are you finally ready to talk?” The

interrogator took Lenka's chin in his hand and forced her to look into his eyes. "Tell me where your comrades are. If you do, I'll stop."

"Uhh..."

"Give up. Then you won't have to suffer anymo—" Mustering her remaining strength, Lenka spit in the man's face, stopping him midsentence.

"I'll never betray my comrades... You're the one who should give up..."

"...I see." The interrogator's expression faded, and he struck the ground with his whip, cracking a part of the stone floor and scattering fragments. "Well, if that's the game you want to play, then I guess I have no choice but to violate you until you lose your mind!"

"Aaaaaaaaah!" Lenka's scream resonated throughout the jail.

Beastly moans echoed until morning as Lenka endured a hellish night of countless orgasms without rest.

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"What the hell is *this*...?" Caim said, bewildered, as he finished reading the notebook on the desk in their inn room.

At first he'd thought it might be a diary that Lenka had forgotten when she was tidying up, but it ended up being an erotic novel—or rather, the product of her depraved delusions.

"I saw her writing eagerly several times when we were camping, but to think it'd be something like *this*..."

Caim never expected Lenka to have a hobby like this. Of course, he knew of her perverted fetish, but he didn't think she would go so far as to write down her fantasies.

"Is there a problem, Sir Caim?" Lenka called out from behind.

"Whoa!" Caim hastily hid the notebook and turned toward her.

Lenka was standing at the bedroom's entrance. Her skin was flushed and she was drying her wet hair with a towel, so she must have just taken a bath.

"The bathroom is available. How about taking a shower, Sir Caim?"

“Ah, yeah... That’s what I’ll do.”

“If only the bathroom had been bigger, everyone could have gone in together. That’s why cheap inns are...” Lenka grumbled something as she left.

Caim sighed in relief and closed the notebook. “Let’s pretend I didn’t see anything.” He looked away from the writing that would someday become part of Lenka’s embarrassing past, then went to take a shower and wash away the filth—along with his memories.

Extra Story: Sister Arnette's Adventure

"Yah!"

The girl threw a sharp punch, and her fist struck a child-sized monster with green skin, blowing it up. The creature was called a goblin, and it was one of the weakest monsters in existence. As for this one, it was currently dead on the ground with a hole in its torso as though pierced by a thick stake.

"Yeah, I did it!" the girl exclaimed proudly, raising her fist overhead.

The name of the petite thirteen-year-old girl with a red ponytail was Arnette Halsberg. She was Caim's twin sister and the only child the Master Pugilist Kevin Halsberg had ever loved, making her the legitimate heir of the Halsberg county.

And right now, Arnette was surrounded by the bloody corpses of goblins.

"Look, I'm done. You can come out now."

"Y-Yes..." Pressed by Arnette, a boy nervously emerged from behind a tree. His name was Luzton, and he was two or three years older than Arnette. He worked as an apprentice butler for House Halsberg, though currently he was Arnette's traveling companion.

"With this, we're done with today's work. Cut off their ears, quickly," Arnette ordered.

"U-Understood... Ugh, this is so disgusting..." Luzton grimaced as he retrieved the ears that served as proof of the goblins' elimination.

Arnette and Luzton were traveling with one particular objective: avenging Arnette's father. That meant beating the one who had defeated Kevin—Caim Halsberg, Arnette's twin brother. Kevin wasn't actually dead, so "avenging" might not have been the best word to use, but he would never recover as a martial artist. Arnette could never forgive that, so she'd sworn to take revenge and left her home to pursue her brother.

As for Luzton, he held no such feelings toward Caim. He'd only happened to

spot Arnette as she was leaving and followed her.

“Seven... Eight... Nine...and ten. We should have enough to pay for lodging tonight,” Luzton sighed in relief after counting the goblin ears.

They had left the Halsberg residence on impulse and hadn’t brought any money for traveling expenses, so they’d both registered as adventurers in a town on the way. Adventurers could earn coins by defeating monsters and bandits, and as such, the two of them were currently hunting goblins in a nearby forest.

“It took me three minutes to take care of ten goblins, huh... I still have a long way to go.” Arnette pouted as she looked down at the monsters’ corpses. “I need to get even stronger before we reach the royal capital!”

“I think you are plenty strong already,” Luzton said.

“Of course I’m stronger than *you*! But compared to that man... Compared to Caim, who defeated Father, I’m still way too weak!” Arnette complained, kicking a nearby tree. It had a very thick trunk, and being kicked by a girl shouldn’t have even made it shake—and yet, it was uprooted and fell over with a dull thud.

Arnette had learned the Toukishin Style from her father and fought by covering her body with condensed mana. And now, a month after she’d left home, she had become even stronger. She had been raised carefully and spoiled by her father, but now that she was out in the wilderness and had only herself to rely upon, she’d gained combat experience and really grown as a fighter.

And yet, that man... Caim is still far stronger than me. His punch was so sharp and fast! She recalled the only time she’d seen him use Kirin. Even now, she could vividly remember—it was the pinnacle of martial arts, and she had made it her objective to attain it. *I’m definitely gonna catch up to him—and win!*

“Our battle will be at the royal capital. Just wait for me, Caim Halsberg!” Arnette shouted as Luzton watched her silently with a doubtful expression.

Arnette had steeled herself, determined to fight Caim, but she didn’t actually have any proof that Caim was heading toward the Jade Kingdom’s capital. She

was only assuming that her brother was waiting for her there—just a baseless hunch. But Luzton said nothing, since he hoped the two of them would never meet again.

“I don’t want to see siblings fight to the death...” he whispered.

“Did you say something, Luzton? Also, are you done retrieving those ears?”

“Ah, yes!”

“Then let’s head back to town. We need to exchange them for money and—” Arnette started to speak but was interrupted by a shrill cry. “Huh?”

The cry came from the hole left by the uprooted tree she had kicked earlier. A brown monster with countless tentacles burst out from it and began to assault her.

“Eeek! What the hell is that?!” Arnette screamed as the monster’s tentacles seized her.

“Th-This is a roper!” Luzton said the creature’s name from a little ways away.

The monster known as a roper was around the size of a boar. It was brown and had a cylindrical shape with countless flabby tentacles coming out of it, resembling a sea anemone.

“Wait! Wh-What are you doing?! Don’t go inside my clothes!” Arnette protested.

It was also known as a perverted monster. The roper was a cowardly creature and generally only preyed on insects and small animals. However, if it was attacked, then it defended itself by preventing its opponent from moving with its tentacles. They were dripping with viscous fluid, so the creature had developed a very bad reputation among female adventurers.

“D-Don’t worry, Lady Arnette. Ropers are harmless to people—they just coil their tentacles around your body, groping you to immobilize you.”

“Isn’t *that* a big problem?! What about my dignity?!” Arnette retorted as tentacles slipped inside her clothes and smeared her skin with thick liquid. “Hyah! Mmmh... You little... Seiryuu!” She tried to cut the tentacles with a mana blade, but failed. “Why?!”

Not only did Arnette lack experience, but she was also experiencing an unprecedented crisis for a young maiden, so she couldn't focus enough to compress her mana correctly.

"Noo! Stop! Do somethiiiiing!" Arnette ordered Luzton.

"But what could I...? Ah, I know!" Luzton drew the knife at his hip and carefully observed the roper. "There!" He stabbed the blade into the creature, which let out a high-pitched scream before dying.

"Wh-What did you do?"

"I hit its weak point. I read in a book that the red spot on a roper's body is right over their most vital organ," Luzton explained as he helped Arnette up. The boy had no combat experience, but he was very studious and read books on monsters in his spare time during their journey. "Knowledge is power. It's worth reading books if it allows us to survive."

"Th-Thanks," Arnette said, flushing. Killing monsters was her job, so this was the first time Luzton had ever saved her. She didn't know why, but for some reason, it really embarrassed her.

"Ah!" Arnette exclaimed.

However, it was only now that she felt true shame.

"Huh? What is this smell...?" Luzton detected a strange scent. It was stinky and kind of familiar...

"I-It must be the monster's fluids! I need to clean myself and change my clothes!"

"No, it's not from the roper. I think I recognize it..."

"Shut up! It's the monster, I tell you!" She jabbed his chin.

"Ow!" Luzton held where he was hit and cocked his head, wondering why he'd been punched.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. This is LeonarD, the eternal chuuni author.

We're already at the third volume. Time sure flies! The first volume's cover featured Tea, the second Millicia, and now it's finally time for the last of the three main heroines, our beloved she-dog—I mean, Lenka!

I owe all of this to you, dear readers—and for that, you have my deepest thanks.

Naturally, I'm also grateful to Won-sensei for his wonderful illustrations, as well as all the people involved in the publication of this book.

This is my fifth year since my debut as an author, and I kind of hope I can finally say that I've graduated from being a novice. My first work was released during the COVID-19 pandemic and sales weren't good, which made me cry a few times, but now even those times have become fond memories.

I have gotten used to writing, and the scope of my activities has expanded. I've been doing scripts for the manga version of my other series, and work on turning this one into a manga is also proceeding well.

I'm planning to continue doing my best as an author, so please treat me well!

Now, let's talk about this volume. This will contain spoilers, so read at your own risk.

The protagonist—Caim—and the heroines have finally arrived at the empire, and yet the path toward the imperial capital is still filled with hardship. First the village full of the undead, then the forest with the Lycaon King—and after an amazing battle, a young girl raised by wolves suddenly appears. Who would have expected to find a new comrade and heroine here?

After that, they finally reach the imperial capital and get to meet Millicia's brother—Arthur, the first imperial prince—but their encounter ends in a

confrontation. In a way, you could say this is the early appearance of the last boss.

Caim finds himself in a pinch, only to be saved by...Rozbeth the Headhuntress?! This time she helped because Caim was her enemy's enemy, but do not forget: Millicia is included among her targets.

Will Rozbeth become an adversary or a new ally? What kind of relationship will she have with Caim? Maybe—just maybe—she is going to be a new heroine? And then she will do *this* and *that* with Caim?

The answer will be in the fourth volume!

Speaking of, volume 4 is already set for release and the publishing process has begun. It shouldn't take long before you get your hands on it, so please look forward to it. I would be very glad if you continued to read the adventures of Caim and his sexily cute heroines.

Until then, I shall pray to all the gods, Buddhas, and devils for us to meet again.

LeonarD

Bonus Short Stories

Sweeter than Honey

The following occurred on the way to the imperial capital.

“I smell something sweet,” said the beastfolk maid—Tea—as she sniffed around.

“Really? I don’t smell anything...” Caim tried to sniff around too, but he couldn’t catch the scent.

“I’m certain. It’s coming from the woods over there.” She pointed at the forest next to the road. Being a white tiger beastfolk, Tea’s sense of smell was better than humans, so she could pick up on things Caim and the rest could not.

“Ah, now that you mention it, I think they produce honey in this area,” Lenka said. “There must be honeybee hives in these woods. I’m impressed you managed to notice them.”

“Don’t underestimate my nose. Noticing something like that is a piece of cake.”

“Honey, huh... Now I’m feeling nostalgic,” Caim muttered, a hand on his chin with a thoughtful look. When his mother was alive, she had often fed him honey because it was very nourishing. Honey toast had been one of Caim’s favorite foods, but he hadn’t been able to eat a single one since his mother died.

Millicia peered at Caim’s face. “How about we go retrieve some?” she suggested. “Honey is very nutritious and can even serve as emergency food. It also sells at a high price in towns too.”

“You’re right,” Caim nodded. “And I guess I do want to eat some. Well then, let’s go fetch some honey.”

The path was covered in leaf mold as they entered the woods.

“This way.” Tea guided them.

Before long, they reached their destination.

“...Whoa, it’s huge,” Caim commented. The hive was far bigger than any he had ever seen—at least the size of a two-story building with holes everywhere, and bees the size of dogs buzzed in and out of them.

“They’re giant bees, the producers of the empire’s honey,” Lenka explained, matter-of-factly.

As expected of the empire, even its honeybees were on a greater scale.

“Oh, seems like they noticed us,” Caim said. The bees buzzed around their hive, preparing to attack. But Caim acted before they could. “Toukishin Style Basic Stance—Seiryuu!”

Caim created a long blade made of condensed mana along his arm, then he swung it like a whip, cutting off the giant bees one after another. They resisted for a while, but they eventually understood they didn’t stand a chance. The bees removed their queen from the hive, then flew away.

“You did it, Master Caim.”

“And now we can get the honey,” he replied. Then they destroyed the giant hive together and tasted its honey. “Wow, it’s great!”

“...Indeed.”

“...Yes.”

Caim rejoiced, but the girls seemed strangely unsatisfied.

“What’s up? You don’t like it?” he asked.

“No... I do find it delicious, but...” Millicia started.

“Grrraaw... I prefer Master Caim’s ‘honey,’” Tea finished Millicia’s sentence with something outrageous.

“Bwuuh!” Caim spat out the honey in his mouth.

“Ah, you think so too, Tea?”

“There’s no doubt about it.”

The girls nodded at each other.

Caim wanted to point out that was impossible, but then realized that it was likely because his bodily fluids were like an aphrodisiac that greatly aroused them.

“I’m of the same opinion,” Lenka added. “Well then, let’s get a taste.”

“You don’t mind, right, Caim?”

The three bewitching women turned into ravenous beasts as they approached Caim.

“...Come on, give me a break.”

Unfortunately, nobody listened to Caim’s plea, and the three girls took turns squeezing out his nectar that was sweeter than honey.

The Sorrowful Ghost of the Haunted Mansion

This happened shortly after Caim and the girls registered as adventurers.

When they were staying in Jaro, they accepted a certain job.

“A haunted mansion, huh... I know we have time to kill, but that’s a pretty tedious request,” Caim commented.

The job was to exorcise the ghost haunting the villa of a deceased rich merchant. After his death, it was put up for sale, but because the previous owner had become a ghost and was now haunting the mansion, it was unsellable.

“Exorcizing the undead is my job as a priestess, so leave it to me!” Millicia declared, thumping her chest. While she was useless against normal monsters, Millicia’s Sacred Arts were perfect for dealing with ghosts. “Trust me—the instant we see the ghost, I will purify it!”

“We’re counting on you, then,” Caim replied.

“Millicia is unusually enthusiastic. I hope her efforts won’t amount to nothing,” Tea said in a teasing tone.

“Be careful and do not overexert, my lady,” Lenka added with a wry smile.

Caim and the girls arrived at the mansion. It was a large, two-storied residence, but the atmosphere around it was dark and oppressive.

“It smells moldy and the air is heavy...” Caim noted the instant they entered. Even without knowing it was haunted beforehand, they would have immediately noticed that something was off.

“There is miasma here, and I can feel the presence of the dead,” Millicia said, looking around the entrance hall.

However, while the atmosphere was clearly strange, there were still no signs of the ghost.

“Caim!”

“Seems like it’s finally showing up.”

A change quickly occurred. Suddenly, the furniture floated into the air and flew at Caim and the girls.

Caim clicked his tongue. “Talk about a warm welcome!” he complained, knocking off the flying objects. Thanks to Mana Compression, his fists were harder than steel, and he effortlessly smashed the various pieces of furniture.

“Aaaah!”

Next, Millicia, Tea, and Lenka were the ones who started to float, their bodies pulled toward the ceiling.

“Damn it!” Caim sharpened his senses with mana, trying to feel where the power originated from. “There!” When he discovered the source of the disturbance, he quickly used Kirin, striking it with a shock wave and releasing the girls from its influence.

“Aaaah!” The girls screamed as they fell and Caim hurriedly caught them.

“Th-Thank you, Caim.”

“It’s nothing. But could you get off me now?”

The three had fallen on top of Caim and were now clinging to him, pressing their soft breasts and rears on him.

“Women, women, women, women!” a voice suddenly screamed.

“Huh?”

“I hate popular guys! I’m jealous of men surrounded by women!” A translucent man appeared, shedding tears of blood. *“Why do you have three women when I can’t even get one! What’s so bad about me?! It’s my face, isn’t it?!”* he shouted.

“What the...” Caim muttered, staring at the ghost of the middle-aged man.

“Ah, they did say that the former owner of this mansion spent his entire life alone.”

“So he became a ghost because he regretted not being popular?”

Lenka and Tea spoke with exasperated expressions.

“I hate you! I hate you so much! I want a harem toooo!” the ghost shamelessly ranted.

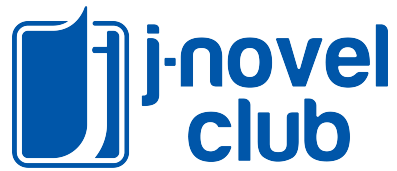
“...Millicia,” Caim said.

“Yes... Holy Circlet.”

“I just want to flirt with gi— Aaaaargggghhh!”

The light from Millicia’s Sacred Arts purified him, and thus the sorrowful ghost haunting this mansion finally passed on.

Though in an awkward mood, Caim and his companions returned to the Adventurers’ Guild to report the completion of their job.



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The Poison King: Now that I've Gained Ultimate Power, the Bewitching Beauties in My Harem Can't Get Enough of Me Volume 3

by LeonarD

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Illustrations by Won

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2024