



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

Short Story  
Collection

Author

**MOJIKAKIYA**

Illustrator

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**Volume 1**  
**Short Stories**





## When Dad Caught a Cold

His head was a haze, and he was sweating terribly despite all the chills he felt. Something was clogging the back of his nostrils, making it a bit harder to breathe.

His unfocused eyes fell upon Angeline. She was now ten years old and looked concerned. The moist hand towel on his forehead was faintly warm from his body heat. Angeline dunked it in water from the washbasin, wrung it out, and used it to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“Are you okay, dad...?”

“Yeah... Thank you, Ange... Is it already noon...? I need to cook...”

As he tried to get up, Angeline frantically pushed him back down.

“No, you need to sleep well.”

“Hmm...but...”

“It’s okay. You won’t get better if you don’t sleep...and the day’s almost over already.”

“It’s already that late...?”

With Angeline glaring at him, Belgrieve gave up and returned to lying supine in his bed. He had caught a cold—there was no doubt about that. *I haven’t caught one in ages.*

He felt pathetic and shut his eyes. Angeline stood and added wood to the fire. The fire snapped as it burned, but besides that, he could hear the sound of the pot opening and a wooden spoon stirring the mix.

It was the beginning of winter, and it grew colder by the day. The sky was covered by an ever-present veil of gray clouds, while the snowy days outnumbered the clear ones.

*I didn’t think I would fall into the river,* he lamented. He’d mistaken a bit of snow piled up over the frozen river for solid ground on his usual patrol. As it had been close to shore, it hadn’t been deep nor had he been at any risk of



drowning. However, he had toppled over, soaking his entire body in cold water that seeped into his clothes; the cold winds had made him even worse for wear. He had already been feeling chills as he'd rushed home, and even though he had taken medicine and eaten warm soup before he slept, he'd had a fever the next morning. Still, he had pushed himself to cook breakfast, and once he had something in his stomach and returned to bed, it was already evening.

He let out a deep breath, correcting the placement of the towel on his forehead. He hadn't the energy to offer a wry smile. He had been in the middle of spinning yarn and had barely made any progress sorting beans.

He knew there was no use in rushing, but when he was hazy with a fever, his mind would wander all sorts of places. He was beginning to worry if any of the vegetables stored in the yard had gone rotten.

Angeline retrieved the towel again and rinsed it out. She wiped his sweat and said, "Dad... I warmed up the soup..."

"Mmm..."

Belgrieve sluggishly lifted himself up. He held his spinning head with one hand.

"I'll have some...and...the medicine I decocted yesterday..."

"Got it... Stay where you are."

Angeline poured soup from the pot. As he watched her, Belgrieve felt both happy and pathetic for letting himself be nursed. He scratched his cheek, mulling over his conflicted emotions. A serving of the warm bean-and-dried-meat soup and the herbal concoction calmed him a bit, and soon he was sleeping peacefully once more.

Relieved, Angeline wiped his face again and added more wood to the fire. She had some soup herself, then stared long and hard at Belgrieve's sleeping face.

"Dad, how cute..."

*I guess everyone makes a childlike face when asleep,* she thought. On closer inspection, there was a faint mustache growing between his mouth and nose. While he maintained his beard, he usually shaved the mustache, but perhaps



his illness had prevented him today.

“What will happen if he grows it even more...?”

She grimaced as she imagined her father with a full mustache. She had pictured him looking like a completely different person. *This much is enough*, she thought, stroking his stubble. Belgrieve muttered something in his sleep, and she laughed.

It was always the other way. Angeline was always the first to fall asleep. Her father would also be the first to wake. *But today, I got up earlier than dad, and I stayed up because you never know what can happen.* She grinned from ear to ear.

“Don’t worry, dad... You have me with you...” she confidently proclaimed to her sleeping father, wringing out the warm hand towel again. She took one of her bedcovers—she usually slept under two layers—and draped it over Belgrieve.

And thus, once the night had passed and morning had come, Belgrieve awoke feeling completely refreshed. The haze in his head had cleared. His body was a little stiff, but that would resolve itself if he moved around a bit. One day of rest was enough.

He stretched, lifting himself to find Ange sprawled out beside him. She only had one blanket wrapped around herself, and her face was a bit red. He had a terrible feeling about this.

“Ange...?”

“Morning, dad...”

Her eyes were bleary, her voice a bit nasal. Belgrieve placed a hand on her head—it was hot.

He sighed. “You caught it... I’m sorry...”

“Urgh...”

Angeline wormed her hand out to grab his, putting it against her cheek and closing her eyes.

With a wry smile on his face, Belgrieve placed his own blanket over her,



wrung out a hand towel, and put it on her forehead.

“Thanks for yesterday... Now it’s dad’s turn.”

“Mmm.”

Despite her cold, Angeline seemed strangely delighted as she buried her face in the covers.

## **Sheep-Chasing Day**

A great many sheep had flocked to a corner of the plains where the southerly slope was positioned just right to receive the sun’s full warmth. The sheep meandered about and grazed upon the fresh grass there, all of them covered in fluff that was ready for shearing. They could practically be mistaken for small, white thickets, scattered as they were across the verdant prairie.

This land had likely been inhabited in the time before settlers came in from the empire, but those original inhabitants were long gone when the newcomers arrived, and their way of life was now a complete mystery. All that remained of them were the remnants of stone structures that had presumably been erected by human hands. These few stone walls dotting the plains, now overgrown with foliage, had probably been built by the ancients to keep their flocks from wandering off—so the village elders would say, at least. Regardless of their actual purpose, they broke up the smooth uniformity of the rolling grassy plains and could be seen from afar.

Angeline, ten years old, sat upon some of the bare stone rubble and gazed up at the sky. It was a clear summer day, and the morning sun shone brightly enough from the cloudless blue sky to snap anyone awake. There was scarcely any wind, though the occasional sporadic gust of wind ruffled her short black hair. In the distance, Belgrieve walked with the shepherds, chatting with them about something or other. Angeline’s perch upon the rubble gave her a high vantage from which to see all the sheep down the gently sloping hill as they wandered amid tall grass and low trees.

“Dad!” Angeline called out in a loud voice. Belgrieve turned to look at her, waving, and she waved back.



Angeline had come to help herd the sheep today. When the grass sprouted in the spring, the village sheep would be let loose to graze all day and night, fattening up after the lean winter. The combined flock was numerous, and once shearing time came around, they'd be corralled back to the village. The sheep naturally wanted to keep eating forever, and it wasn't so easy to call them back. Nevertheless, the shepherds managed to do it each and every year, either with the aid of sheepdogs or by their own strength. It was perhaps a sign of the village's growing prosperity that the number of sheep was increasing each year. They were gradually running short on hands, so Belgrieve had started to help out on a regular basis.

Angeline patted the head of a sheepdog that had come up next to her, its eyes closed in comfort, as the adults all moved hectically to herd the sheep. Belgrieve, for his part, had climbed up the hill to join Angeline.

"They're getting started, Ange. Make sure you keep a watchful eye."

"Okay." Angeline stood up from the rubble and closely observed the whole flock.

The adults—including Belgrieve—raised flags, apparently signaling to one another. The shepherd who seemed to be in charge lifted his flag high, then swung it down in a dramatic gesture. The other shepherds called out their orders, sending the sheepdogs racing all at once. The dog next to Angeline answered with a short, sharp bark before racing down the hill to join in.

The sheep were in disarray. They tried to scatter and run off in all different directions, but the dogs got in their way and corralled them to ensure they took flight as one. The shepherds moved behind them, occasionally chasing back the sheep that managed to weave their way through the dogs. Some of the sheep ran up the hills too. Unfortunately, this wasn't the right way to the village. Though the dogs blocked a majority of them, a few of them still slipped through.

"Dad! That way!"

"All right."

Belgrieve took off at a speed one wouldn't expect of a man with a peg leg, catching up to and turning one of the sheep in no time. Once he made sure he'd



done the job right, he circled around in front of a different sheep going in a different direction.

*I knew it—dad is amazing*, Angeline thought, watching him with pride. She looked around to see other children—shepherds in training—chasing after the sheep in a similar fashion. *Then I can do it too!*

“All right!” Angeline spotted another fleeing sheep and gave chase. Thanks to her daily training, she ran with resolute strides and caught up to the sheep quickly enough.

“Got you!” She leaped, wrapping her arms around its back. The sheep, startled, reared back on its hind legs and began to thrash about in an attempt to be free of Angeline. She kept a firm grip around its neck, but her arms couldn’t fully encircle the large sheep, and so she was shaken off and fell to the ground.

“Ange!” Belgrieve raced over to her, his face pale.

Angeline sat up, rubbing her head. The sheep ran back to the flock, and seeing that, she broke into a smile. “I did it, dad,” she said softly.

“Why did you jump on it? Good grief... Don’t do anything so risky.” Despite the wry smile on his face, Belgrieve let out a relieved sigh. He ruffled Angeline’s hair, a touch more gingerly than usual. “Well done, I guess. But it’s not over yet.”

“Hee hee... I know!” she said gleefully, before shooting up in a panic when, to her horror, she saw a fair few sheep racing past behind her father. “Dad! They’re loose! A whole bunch of them!”

It seemed that Belgrieve had left a gap in their encirclement when he ran over to Angeline, and the sheep had pushed through in full force. The shepherds now ran about in an uncoordinated panic.

“What are you doing, Bell?!”

“S-Sorry!”

Belgrieve frantically took off after the sheep. Angeline was hot on his heels, while the dogs circled around to get the drop on the runaways. The exasperated shepherds broke into hearty laughter even as the flock of sheep drifted and

morphed over the rolling hills like white clouds over green seas.

## Cider Making

“You don’t have to choose the best ones. Just pick every one you can,” Belgrieve instructed from below.

Eight-year-old Angeline swung freely around the tree. Be it green or misshapen, she plucked and tossed every single apple she came across into the basket below. Angeline was quite a bit better at tree climbing than Belgrieve.

She hummed as she plucked the apples by the stems, and once she had filled the basket, Belgrieve lifted and placed it onto the donkey-driven cart. He then replaced it with another one.

The village was dotted with apple trees, both young and old. The older ones were easily over a hundred years old, but still, every year, they were laden with so much fruit it was near impossible to pick it all. It would ultimately become a burden on the tree, so once the time came around, even the unripe apples were picked.

Apples in Turnera were small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand. The majority were red and ripe, giving off an enticing, sweet scent.

After she had picked the last one, Angeline looked at Belgrieve and called, “Any more?”

“No, you’re good. Come on down.”

Angeline smoothly made her way down, but once she reached Belgrieve’s height, she pounced on him.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as he caught her. He set her down on the wagon with the baskets, took up the donkey’s reins, and began walking.

It was customary to make cider whenever fall came around. This was a huge job that required everyone in the village to harvest the apples from trees all around Turnera and bring them to the village square to be pressed and poured into barrels. Cider was one of the few alcoholic beverages they could make in Turnera, and the villagers were eager to make enough to last the year. It would



be ready by the next year's spring festival, and much would be used up in the fall festival after that.

Belgrieve's cart entered the square, which was filled with the apples gathered from all over. The unripe, bug-eaten, or rotten ones were all picked out—these would go to the livestock.

Angeline jumped down from the wagon, spread her arms, and took in a huff of the stirring scent. "Hee hee! It smells nice..."

"It does. Now go wash your hands," Belgrieve urged her. She went and rinsed them off at the water hole with the other children. The water was colder in the fall, and it felt frigid when she stuck her hands into it.

Apple presses were brought out from every house to process the carefully selected apples. The adults spun the handles round and round while the children romped about and tossed in the apples, all while the crushed pulp oozed out of the bottom. It all went through a strainer, with the apple juice filtered out and the pulp remaining on top. The scent of apples grew even stronger.

The children would often steal tastes of the pulp, a good motivator for them to keep up their work. A few were scolded when they tried tossing in apples from far away, and each time laughter would abound.

When the barrels were full, the yeast was added, after which they were brought to the village's communal brewery. This was a sturdy building of stacked stone sealed with mud, made so the temperature inside hardly changed between summer and winter. There the barrels were to be stacked up and allowed a peaceful rest until their time came to shine; it would be a long time before anyone knew what each barrel of cider tasted like. The fall festival would soon be upon them, but the barrels they would crack open for it would be the previous year's vintage.

Once the square had been cleaned up, Belgrieve returned home with a heaping basket of apple pulp, while Angeline returned with a bottle of apple juice.

"We're not done just yet, Ange."

“Okay.”

Belgrieve sifted the fireplace for the charcoal buried in the ash, poured the pulp into a pot hanging above it, and kindled a fire. He added a bit of water, squeezed some lemon, and added sugar to the pulp. Sugar was valuable in these parts, but this was for the sake of preservation, and he was not sparing in the amount. It would be pointless if he cut the amount and it ended up rotting.

“Now stir well so it doesn’t burn.”

Angeline set up camp in front of the pot, a wooden spoon in one hand. At first, it only let off steam, but gradually, it began to bubble and fill the house with a sweet scent.

“Dad...it’s boiling.”

“Good, good.”

Belgrieve removed some wood to reduce the flame. The boil became gentler, and the apple mash that still retained some sense of cohesion dissolved into a watery mess. This was boiled down further, gradually removing the moisture.

Angeline quietly looked back. Belgrieve was wiping down an earthen pot—and once she knew he was distracted, she discreetly blew on the spoon and stuffed it in her mouth.

“Hawt...”

Sweet, sour, and hot—the apples were so delicious and syrupy she wanted to sneak another spoonful.

“Ange, it’s about time to store it.”

“Yesh!”

Angeline turned in a panic. Belgrieve looked at her curiously but quickly figured her out.

“You nipped some, didn’t you...?”

“Agh...”

Angeline turned away, her cheeks red. Belgrieve laughed and patted her on the head.



“How about we have dinner before we pack it up?”

“Yeah!”

There was no way she could turn down freshly baked bread with hot apple jam. Enraptured, Angeline came back for five more helpings, and each time, Belgrieve slathered on a thick jam layer with a wry smile.

“We won’t have anything to store at this rate.”

The closed windows rattled under the evening breeze.

## **Festive Fall**

After prayers had been offered to the Great Goddess above, next came the shrill chirrup of a tin whistle, then the bagpipes, bouzoukis, fiddles, and accordions—all of these instruments burst to life in unison. A lively clamor filled the town square, especially around the stone icon. There were cheers here and there, accompanied by the clacking of wooden tankards struck against one another that spilled copious cider on the hands holding them with each impact.

The sun was in the midst of its descent behind the mountain, and here and there, the glowing bonfires illuminated the faces of festival goers. The autumn festival usually would have started a bit sooner, but Helvetica’s chaos had delayed it—not that the villagers minded. They were delighted to have the young and beautiful Countess Bordeaux join in on their festivities.

Helvetica and Seren smiled as they were led around as guests of honor. While Helvetica came off as sociable and mild-mannered, the way she walked exuded nobility. The villagers observing from afar knew in their hearts that their lady was quite the individual.

There was one conspicuously larger flame amid the other bonfires, around which the village children and youth danced and skipped to tunes. Belgrieve watched over this scene, feeling tranquil. The sun was gradually setting, and the dancers looked like nothing more than silhouettes against the flames. This only made them seem even more lively.

*Angeline used to jump around with them,* Belgrieve reminisced. With his artificial leg, dancing was not his strong suit, but he remembered Angeline

dragging him along, and he recalled himself teetering around the ring.

“It’s been too long... Or has it?” he mumbled to himself.

It hadn’t been so long ago that the image of Angeline as a child had faded from his memory. However, it had already been five years since then. *How has she grown? If she had managed to return by now, then just maybe...* He shook his head.

“She’s doing her best at what she loves.”

*I can’t force her to come back just because I want to see her. That’s just me being selfish.* He gave a wry smile and took a sip of cider.

A large shadow loomed over him, and he turned to see Hoffman’s weary face.

“What are you doing all the way out here, Bell?”

“What? Something wrong, Chief?”

Hoffman scratched his head, a troubled look on his face. “I tried entertaining Lady Helvetica, but I’m not good enough! I feel bad for leaving everything to you, but could you handle this one?”

*What a chief we have.* Belgrieve chuckled and stood.

“I doubt I’ll do any better...but I *am* the one who asked her to stay.”

“Oh, thank Vienna! And sorry!”

When Hoffman brought Belgrieve over, Helvetica joyously rose from her VIP seat.

“Oh, Belgrieve, I was just wondering where you had gone! Come over, don’t be shy!”

“Sis.”

“I-It’s quite all right, Seren...” The countess shrank under her sister’s glare.

With a smile, Belgrieve lowered himself into the seat offered to him right beside the statue of the chief goddess, from which vantage he could overlook the whole square. It had grown rather dark by then, and the stars had begun to twinkle in the perfectly clear sky.



Belgrieve poured Helvetica a glass of cider, then said, “I know my invitation was quite spur-of-the-moment. Was there somewhere else you were supposed to be?”

“No, I’m very grateful. I’m the one who should be asking if I’m causing any trouble by being here.”

“You’ve caused a boatload of trouble, sis.”

“I-I know, Seren... Can’t we move on?”

“Ha ha! Give her a break already, Seren. I don’t really mind... Are the two of you acquainted with this sort of music?”

“Heh heh... Those nobles in the duke’s domain might not know it, but I’ve been surrounded by it since I was a child. I like it more than ballroom waltzes.”

“We’re often invited to village festivals in Bordeaux territory. They play these songs there, more often than not. The dancing might not be so elegant, but I like it as well,” Seren chimed in.

Belgrieve laughed and nodded. “Glad to hear I didn’t waste your time.”

Helvetica chuckled. “Heh heh... You’re surprisingly cynical, Belgrieve...”

Belgrieve shrugged. “What can I say? Some things you just stop caring about, once age catches up to you.”

They carried on with small talk as they sipped their cider and partook in the feast. Laughter broke out here and there, and gradually, the ring around the fire was growing larger and larger.

Helvetica watched, delighted, and let out a faint, longing sigh. “Such a lovely village. I wonder why I never came here before.”

“It’s an honor to hear that from you.” Belgrieve poured her another cup of cider.

Helvetica grinned at him. “I’m sure I would never have come here if it hadn’t been for you, Belgrieve. I am thankful for this bond you have forged for me.”

“I hardly did a thing. You should thank my daughter...thank Angeline.”

“Aha ha—that is true, in a sense. But this is undoubtedly your fault: I came

here to see you,” Helvetica laughed and prodded Belgrieve in the shoulder.

Seren expelled a fed up sigh. “There you go, blaming someone else for that bad habit of yours...”

“Oh, c’mon! At least let me have this much! Seren, you meanie!” Helvetica pouted with puffed-up cheeks.

The stars grew brighter and more numerous as the bonfires burned through the twilight.

## Winter Nights

A spell of good weather had continued for the past few days, yet today, the sky had been covered in gray clouds since the early morning, and snow poured down without end. The Orphen cityscape was dyed white, and the sweepers—who would usually be keeping the streets clean—were now tasked with shoveling snow. They wore thick coats, with caps pulled down far enough to hide their faces, and their breath came out white as they worked their shovels.

Angeline sat in her room on the bed, absentmindedly gazing out the window. She did not know how many days she had been stuck doing this. Her shoulder had healed, but it was apparently best if she didn’t move it so much. She had never received such a serious wound since becoming an adventurer, and she didn’t quite know how to recuperate. And so, she stayed still as told.

Fighting the demon had allowed her to experience many things. This included the boredom that came from having nothing to do. Her young body was simply brimming with energy, and it was quite a trial to hold it down and lie about idly. Perhaps that was even harsher than the pain.

Once afternoon came around, the sun began its descent—not that she could see it through the clouds, but she could make a good guess from the lighting.

“I’m bored...” Angeline flopped down on her back. Her eyes took in that same white ceiling she saw before bed every night. *If I’m going to be seeing it so often, I might as well paint a portrait of dad on it*, she thought. Not that she actually felt compelled to make that dream a reality.

Even when she didn’t do anything, she eventually grew hungry. Walking didn’t



bother her, so she would usually head to the same old tavern, but now that the snow was coming down, she couldn't be bothered to go out. The time passed in vain as she thought long and hard over how she would spend it.

It was strangely lonely to be on her own. She turned over a number of times in bed, buried her face in the pillow, and shut her eyes, distracting herself with the strange flickering sights beneath her eyelids. Though her stomach was empty, the fact she had done nothing made her less inclined to do anything about it.

It had grown terribly dim outside when there was a sudden knocking at the door. Angeline lifted her face.

"It's open..." she muttered.

The door swung open and Miriam popped her head in.

"Yoo-hoo, Ange. How are you feeling?"

"Hmm, not bad. But I'm bored."

After Miriam came Anessa. They both brushed off the snow they had collected while walking on the streets.

"Hey, Ange! Ahh, it sure is cold today."

"Both of you at once... Is something up?"

"Heh heh! I knew you would be bored, so I came to play," said Miriam.

"You haven't had dinner, right? I didn't think you'd go out in this snow." Anessa, ever the more prudent of the two, began setting ingredients down on the table.

"You got that right... You're my savior."

"I've been pretty bored these days too. The leftover Calamity-Class fiends have pretty much been all cleaned up."

While Angeline's party was taking it easy, the reinstated retirees were going all out, and by now they had exterminated a majority of the Calamity-Class fiends. Things were back to how they had been before, with the high-ranking fiends restricted to dungeons and far-off, uninhabited lands. Human

settlements were safe, at least to a degree. Angeline would probably have been bored even if she could move about.

She had wanted a vacation for so long, but that was because she wanted to return to Turnera. She had never wished to idle here in Orphen. However, the road to Turnera was sealed off by snow, and she would have to wait until spring.

Anessa mixed meat, vegetables, salt, and spices into a soup which, along with some soft bread from the bakery and small, salted fish from the grocer, became their dinner. The window glass fogged from the inside warmth.

Angeline ate the fish atop the bread and sipped the soup. Its sharp taste did wonders for warming her body.

“Delish!”

“Ah, the cold makes it even better than usual,” Miriam said, as she carefully blew on her bowl of soup.

Angeline grinned at her. “Too hot? Even your tongue is catlike...”

“Shut it!”

They argued a bit about pointless things and shared a bit of gossip around the table. Despite this and that, it was nice to have friends around. It staved off the loneliness and was fun in its own right.

The steam wafting off the soup writhed like a living being under the light of the lamp. It seemed the temperature outside was falling as the night drew on, and it gradually became a penetrating cold. The longer they were together, the better the warm soup tasted.

Suddenly realizing something, Miriam stood, strutted to the window, and rubbed the fogged glass to look outside.

“Oh,” she said and turned. “The snow stopped. The moon is out, and it’s beautiful!”

The three girls crammed into the narrow windowpane and gazed outside. The white-coated townscape sparkled under the silver moonlight.

Angeline recalled how she would walk along snowy paths with Belgrieve at

night. That silver world under the pale moon was breathtaking, as if it had come straight from a painting.

She hesitated for a moment. “Do you want to go out for a bit?” she asked.

“Sounds good.”

“Let’s go, let’s go!”

The girls hurriedly donned their coats and left. With the lamps snuffed out, the only light remaining was that of the pale moon streaming into the room.

## Parenting

Cooing sounds gave way to sudden violent and vigorous tapping on wood, and Belgrieve jolted awake.

“Shut up!” he shouted at the ceiling. He could hear something flapping away, chirping on the way out—a woodpecker, evidently.

*Good grief.* Belgrieve shook his head and lifted himself up. He equipped his peg leg, stood, and opened the window. It wasn’t yet daybreak; while it wasn’t far off from the time he usually got up, it simply did not sit right with him to be roused like this.

He thought to awaken Angeline as well, before the realization struck him.

“That’s right... She’s gone.”

It was the first spring since Angeline had left for Orphen. His daughter had set off in the fall, and he hadn’t received a single word from her, save for one brief letter saying she had arrived. Not that any letters could reach Turnera in the winter. Surely she was busy adjusting to her new working environment.

Every morning, he would unconsciously feel the urge to wake Angeline up, and each morning, he would be reminded she wasn’t there. Though he had sent her off as if it was nothing, that parental side of him couldn’t help but wonder what she was up to. It was almost as if he were the one feeling homesick.

He had, of course, been worried when his twelve-year-old daughter set off for the big city alone. However, in Turnera, the kids were already doing as much



work as the adults by the time they turned ten. Though still naive, these children worked their hardest to meet their parents' expectations.

While kids in the towns grew up in their schools, these farm children instead grew up with work as part of their everyday lives. In most cases, Turnera folk entered and left the world in Turnera—Belgrieve and Angeline being the rare exceptions. However, the village was gradually changing, as there were now more children learning swordsmanship and entering the mountains in admiration of these two anomalous figures.

In any case, the children who had once played around with Angeline had started to work without her. It was nearly inevitable that she had eventually thought to go out and make something of herself. Belgrieve did not want to get in her way, and he trusted her wholeheartedly.

Slipping on his clothes, Belgrieve took up his sword and went out; it was as good a time as any for his daily patrol. Before daybreak, the world was wrapped in lush shadows, and at first glance, it might have seemed like the village was still asleep. This was, however, a busy time of day on closer inspection. There was a thin veil of smoke from the chimneys as each house prepared breakfast, while the air was filled with the sounds of chickens, goats, and sheepdogs. A few farmers were already out in their fields.

Belgrieve watched his own frosty breath rise, then draped a muffler over his mouth and tensed his shaking shoulders. At the beginning of spring, it was still chilly before sunrise. The fact that the climate had more or less warmed up only made these minor chills all the more potent.

He only had a vague recollection of it, but he got the feeling Orphen was warmer than Turnera. It was farther south, so of course it was entirely possible that this was simply his gut telling him that, but he remembered feeling perfectly fine on the days when all the Orphen adventurers were complaining about the cold.

Was Angeline feeling the same right now? She would otherwise be out and about with a red nose and ruddy cheeks, running around in the Turnera snow. Surely she could endure Orphen's winters.

"How should I put it...?" Belgrieve said after a moment.

It seemed that no matter what he thought about, it would always come back to Angeline. Perhaps this was normal for a parent, but to him, it felt as if he just didn't know when to give up. In his worry, he considered sending out a mountain of letters. However, if he stirred up the girl's nostalgia, perhaps she would lose focus at a crucial moment. She could be injured or even killed—this was what Belgrieve told himself each time he found himself sitting by the fireplace with the urge to write.

After making his way around the village, he ventured beyond it. The sun was rising, and his surroundings were tinged with color. The morning dew twinkled in the early sunlight, dazzling his eyes. He slowly climbed the hills, and once he had made it to where he had a full view over the village, he watched the farmers moving about in their fields.

With a long, sharp glance, he made sure nothing suspicious was afoot.

There hadn't been any fiends for a long while, and no hibernating beasts had wandered into the village in a half-sleeping stupor. The days had passed in peace and tranquility, no different from the year before—no different but for the absence of Angeline.

*She used to love this place, didn't she?* Belgrieve's thoughts had turned to Angeline again, naturally. He smiled wryly and stroked his beard.

"Good grief... She's going to laugh at me for acting like this."

He stood up straight, the creaks and cracks in his back letting him hear his body loosening up. *Let's not be too morose. Today's a new day.*

Pushing his jostled scabbard back into place, Belgrieve began the slow climb back down. The village was fully awake now, and in the haze rising from the morning sun, the air resonated with work songs.

## The First Day

Countless people passed through the guild doors, their footsteps an uproarious din amid the ill-humored shouting of those who couldn't find a suitable request and the frustrated groans of those who had been rejected at the desk after bringing up a request far beyond their capabilities. The guild was

always lively in the mornings. Adventurers were desperate to get their hands on well-paying jobs, and they needed to get to them before anyone else. The requesting clients likewise wanted to get their jobs registered before the most reliable adventurers had already made other commitments. Numerous lines had formed before the counter as the men and women in charge of each station passed documents back and forth. They handled clients and adventurers in quick succession without ever letting their business smiles falter.

The adventurer's guild's main duty was to mediate work. They took on the various troubles of the townsfolk and distributed them to the adventurers. The jobs varied; although some required combat abilities, such as gathering materials in places that no normal humans dared tread or hunting down fiends that had appeared nearby, there were just as many requests for work like weeding, cleaning the roads, shopping, and finding lost items. The first group was seen as jobs for true adventurers and was preferred by those seeking wealth and fame. As one climbed their way through the adventurer ranks, the available jobs oftentimes came with ever-increasing danger. The other jobs, on the other hand, were taken by neophyte adventurers as young as ten years old seeking a daily wage. There was no age restriction for guild registration, though dangerous jobs were generally never given to children, who would never even need to use their weapons. They would usually come in early to take various odd jobs. Many children of poor households and street urchins from the slums depended on the earnings from such work to get by.

Once noon came around, the crowds would recede, and there would be far fewer clients and adventurers about. The ones who visited at this time of day were the higher-ranking adventurers who could still make a living while being choosy about their jobs, and clients who wanted to be certain their jobs were done right, even if it took more time. There were also adventurers returning from jobs that took several days to complete; those were comparatively scarce.

After the last adventurer had left with a request form in hand, the receptionist stretched out. "Ahh," she sighed. "Busy, as usual." Her work didn't end here; once she'd finished her shift at the desk, she'd have to get to work organizing documents or tidying up the disorderly lobby. Even so, she was thankful that she had a chance to catch her breath.

She was considering brewing some herbal tea when she caught a glimpse of black hair out of the corner of her eye. It was a young girl, just barely tall enough to peek her head over the counter. She must have been around eleven or twelve years old.

The girl put her hands on the counter and stood on her tiptoes as she stared up at the receptionist. “Um...”

“Yes, how can I help you?” The receptionist smiled. *What a cute kid*, she thought. *Has she come to put in a request for a lost item?*

But these expectations were quickly dashed. “I’m...here to become an adventurer!” the girl declared confidently.

“Huh? Oh, I see...” *The other form, then*, the receptionist mused. Child applicants were not a rare sight; perhaps she was an orphan, or from a destitute home, and she wanted to earn some regular income from odd jobs. And yet her clothes were neither dirty nor frayed, though they did have a rustic flair. Not a local vagrant then—it looked more like she had wandered in from the middle of nowhere. She had a sword strapped to her hip too. Whatever her actual skill with the blade might be, it was likely she had come from the countryside seeking her dreams.

In any case, it was guild policy to never turn anyone down, so the receptionist got to work without skipping a beat. While she was preparing the documents, a handful of fierce-looking men came up to the desk—a B-Rank party that had been on a roll lately.

The leader slapped his hand on the counter. “We finished up the job. Confirm it, would ya?”

“Splendid work. Um, could you tell me the request number and what it was about?” The receptionist turned to a shelf of documents, smiling. The black-haired girl was pushing herself up with her arms against the counter so she could intently watch the receptionist at work. The adventurers looked at her with cynical smiles.

“Hey now, little lady. This is no place for kids.”

“Oh, she’s got a sword. You a newbie?”



“Do you even know how to use it? How about I give you a lesson?” One of the men teasingly rapped on the girl’s sheathed sword.

The girl seized his hand, her lips pursed. “Have some manners. Aren’t you supposed to be older than me?”

“Huh?” the man snarled.

“Is it fun, bullying kids?”

The men glared at her sternly. One of them loomed over her imperiously. “You’re one cheeky brat. Hey, how about I teach *you* how manners work around here? We adventurers have a pecking order!”

Before the receptionist could stop him, the man lunged for the girl. But the girl grasped his wrist and gave it a tug. The adventurer reacted to the sudden counterattack by digging in his heels, but before he even knew what was happening, the girl gracefully swept his legs out from under him, twisting his arm as he fell. He screamed reflexively when his back slammed onto the floor.

“D-Damn brat!”

“You’ve messed with the wrong party!” The other men came at her, their faces burning with rage.

“Stop! Please, don’t!” the receptionist cried out, blanching at the tragedy that would surely unfold.

But when the dust settled, the last one standing was the black-haired girl. The men who had picked a fight with her lay grimacing on the ground around her.

The girl scoffed, then turned back to the stunned receptionist. She stood up on her tiptoes to look over the form on the counter before picking up a quill pen. “What parts do I have to fill out...?”

“Oh, um... Just the name.”

“Name... Angeline.” The girl’s face was utterly nonchalant as the pen glided over the paper.



## Night Lights

Though the cold was descending from on high, the forest gave off a peculiar warmth. At the beginning of spring, it was filled with a surprising plethora of colors. There were the bare branches that had yet to regrow their leaves, others that already had fresh buds, and others still that remained evergreen. There was also a distinct difference in the intensity of green depending on where the sun's light was abundant and where it was scarce. However, every inch was filled with the impression of new life, a distinct line drawn from the stillness of winter.

The ground was not a flat plain. There were bumps and drops here and there, around which water from the snowmelt would flow and puddle. There were also rocks of all sizes and withered trees covered in moss.

Belgrieve walked ahead, taking care not to miss a step, with Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam following him. Angeline was visibly elated, taking in the sights with a beaming smile and filling her lungs with the fresh air.

"Heh heh... I really do like it here."

"Hey, Ange, you have to watch your step."

"Okay!"

"Gah?!" Miriam raised a hysterical cry from behind as she stumbled, hastily holding on to her staff to keep her balance.

Anessa wearily helped her up. "What are you doing? Watch out!"

"Ugh, I just slipped. What am I supposed to do?" Miriam pouted with puffed-out cheeks, trudging onward in a huff. Anessa shook her head.

"This is practically our backyard, right, dad?"

"Yeah... Sounds about right."

Belgrieve had roamed these grounds for more than twenty years, and Angeline had followed along from infancy. When he walked, Belgrieve naturally picked out the places with the best footing and had made a habit of taking firm

steps. His peg leg made him even warier of his footing than the average mountaineer.

Anessa and Miriam had entered the woods a number of times for work, but that was not to say they were experienced enough to feel at home with poor footing. Still, as was to be expected of high-ranking adventurers, they planted their feet properly, albeit somewhat unsteadily. Miriam grew even more careful after she tripped.

Gradually, the sun set, and the meager rays that cleared the trees were disappearing beyond the western mountain. It felt as if the wind had suddenly grown colder, and Miriam shivered.

“Eep! That’s cold.”

“It’s evening... Hey, couldn’t we have headed out when it was brighter?” Anessa asked Angeline, who was ahead of her.

Angeline turned and chuckled. “It’s better when it’s dark... You’ll see why when we get there.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, I can’t wait...” Miriam snarked, before something ahead suddenly caught her gaze. “Huh?” This led the others to look as well. It was a lone bird on the ground, twisting and turning. “Is it injured, do you think?”

“It might be... Should I help it, dad?”

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes, looked around, then shook his head. “No, you can leave it alone.”

“Huh... Why?”

With a wry smile to Angeline’s sorrowful face, Belgrieve pointed in a different direction. There, in the thicket, he could see a sliver of white—an egg.

“That’s the parent. It’s trying to take our attention off of its eggs.”

“Ah, so that’s it...”

“So it’s because we’re here...?”

“Pretty much. Now let’s hurry.”



The sun quickly sank below the horizon, and Belgrieve lit his lantern. The path ahead gradually grew steeper, and as their gazes were drawn upward, they began to see the stars twinkling through the gaps in the trees. Those dazzling points grew much greater in number before their eyes.

“The night sky here is amazing...” Anessa let out a longing sigh. “You can’t see this in Orphen.”

“That so? Is it because there are no lights around?”

“Hee hee...the stars are nice, but just wait. You’ll see something even more surprising.”

“Oh, just tell us already.”

“Glowgrass, I’m guessing. I’ve heard it’s beautiful, but you don’t have to make such a big deal about it...”

There was a sudden gust of headwind. They were out in a clearing with nothing overhead to protect them from the wind blowing down the mountain, which rustled the grass and trees around them. Suddenly, Belgrieve snuffed out his light.

Anessa and Miriam stared wide-eyed. Countless stalks of glowgrass swayed, each exuding a pale, blue glow. Their soft glowing lights, extending no farther than a few inches, blended into one another to create a distinctive lake of light. The mountain towered beyond as a black silhouette, while a full, bespangled sky stretched out above them. It was as if the stars had been reflected onto the earth.

“How about now...?” Angeline said, turning to them triumphantly.

“Fine. You win.”

“Hey! Hey! Are we allowed to go in there?!”

Belgrieve nodded, and Miriam excitedly raced forth, parting the glowgrass seas. Angeline and Anessa were soon to follow, the pale, blue light illuminating the girls from below.

In the cold, early spring dusk, the wind swept over the glowgrass, forming waves and ripples that caused the shadows to flicker and sway.

## Ghost Stories

As the orphanage was joined with the church, it was situated close to the graveyard. The clergy had a duty of maintaining the graves and chanting daily prayers for the dead. Though it wasn't directly adjacent, it was well within walking distance.

The children who lived there were often dragged along by one of the nuns to clean the tombstones. They would sweep away fallen leaves, scrub away moss, and replace withered flowers for new ones. As a devout follower, the nun would make sure to be mindful and meticulous with her work, but the kids in their mischievous years would run off to play more often than not, provoking the nun's pious wrath.

"Enough already! The ghosts will come for naughty children like you!"

"Ghosts?"

"We're fine, Sister. Mighty Vienna protects all."

"Oh, but you see, the Great Goddess punishes bad little girls who don't listen. Now hurry up and rake those leaves."

And like that, they were cleaning the graves yet again. After evening prayers came dinnertime, then bed. There was a rule against staying up late, but it was never so easy for the children to fall asleep. They would gather in secret, whispering stories under their breath.

With her blanket pulled over her head, nine-year-old Miriam giggled.

"A ghost, they say!"

"An undead, right? The adventurers will deal with it."

If these children without relatives were not adopted, they would eventually have to pick up some trade to stand on their own. Most often, they would enter an apprenticeship with a craftsman or merchant, but becoming an adventurer was also quite enticing. After all, they were at that age where they longed for adventure. The nun would make a sour face whenever they brought it up.

In any case, the children recognized adventurers as the people who exterminated bad fiends. Surely they could protect small children from ghosts

as well.

One of the older girls cracked a mischievous face. “You really think so? Ghosts aren’t the same as undead, you know.”

“Huh? Really?”

Nine-year-old Anessa shifted under her blankets. “Yep, I’ve heard about it before,” she said. “You know Mr. Will’s house downtown? They heard footsteps in the dead of the night.”

The children pricked up their ears and swallowed their breath.

“At first, they thought it was a cat or something, but it sounded too big for that. Even half asleep, Mr. Will knew something had to be up.”

“And then? And then?” Miriam leaned in, exhilarated.

“The steps got closer and closer. They stopped right by his bedside, and he could hear breathing in his ear.”

“Th-That’s just a bandit!” a seven-year-old boy said, putting up a strong front.

“Shh,” the surrounding children chided, holding their index fingers to their lips.

Anessa chuckled. “It wasn’t a bandit. There was no one there when he looked up. He closed his eyes again, but he still heard it. ‘*Haaah...haaah...*’”

“Eep!”

“Finally, he leaped to his feet. He jumped up and screamed, ‘Who’s there?!’ and then, behind him...”

Anessa’s words were cut off as Miriam jumped in with a startling “Boo!” sending the rest of the children reeling back.

The kids who had yet to turn five had already been teary-eyed before the story reached the scary part, and that was the finishing blow. Their wails put the older kids in a panic.

“Hold on, wait, wait, you can’t cry!”

“The nun’s gonna come!”

“What are you doing, Merry?!”

But it was already too late. Frenzied footsteps traced the hall before the nun burst through the door in her pajamas. Looking at all the children nestled together, she scowled.

“Ah! It’s past your bedtime! What are you doing?!”

“Um, um, this isn’t what it...”

On top of the small kids who wouldn’t stop crying, the ones who knew they would be scolded had started sobbing as well, and the situation was getting out of hand. The nun was exhausted by the time everyone had finally calmed down, but she still had enough in her to become enraged once she heard what had happened.

“Anessa,” she sighed. “I thought you were a good girl.”

“Erk... I-I’m sorry. But Merry, she—”

“No! I did nothing wrong.”

“Quiet down. You all told stories when you’re supposed to be sleeping, so you’re all bad.”

The kids were astir.

“I-Is a ghost gonna come?”

“Will it go ‘boo’ at me from behind?”

“I’m scared...”

The nun panicked, seeing a few small ones about to cry again. “Calm down! Anessa’s story was completely made-up! Those kinds of ghosts don’t exist!”

“Huh? Then what kinds of ghosts are coming, Sister?”

“Um... Yes, well, you see...”

After much thought and some dithering, the nun told a heartwarming ghost story. This was far more enjoyable than prayers, lectures, and sermons, and the children’s eyes sparkled. This didn’t feel bad at all to the nun, and she began to grow quite invested in spinning her tales. By the time another nun’s curiosity prompted her to drop by, she had already begun telling a new one.



## Treading Wheat

The white-frosted stalks of wheat regained their verdant hues under the light of the sun. The ground was somewhat muddy after the snowmelt but not bad enough to hold up work.

Belgrieve walked down the path with five-year-old Angeline by his side. The skies had been clear since early morning, but that only made the weather feel even colder—there was nothing to insulate them from the heavy cold air from the atmosphere. The sun wasn't nearly strong enough to warm their bodies.

Angeline crouched down. Her cheeks were red.

"Are you all right, Ange?"

She thought for a moment. "I'm a little cold."

She restlessly gripped Belgrieve's hand.

Early spring work consisted of planting potatoes and treading wheat. There was still some time to go before the potatoes needed to be planted; treading the wheat was the first job of the year. The seeds suspended in the frost needed to be stomped to the ground, which would cause the stalks to branch off more and produce more kernels.

Turnera sowed wheat in both the fall and the spring, planting a different cultivar in each season. In terms of taste, fall wheat was preferred and thus harvested in greater abundance. The spring wheat was mainly grown as feed for livestock during the lean winter months. Though there wasn't a great difference in labor involved for either, it was only the fall wheat that would be trod in the cold.

They headed out to the misty field and saw several people already hard at work. Belgrieve noticed children among them. He made his way to the edge, planting his artificial leg on firm ground for balance—he could only tread wheat with his good leg.

Angeline stepped on the nearest bundle, her breath a misty white.

"You can put in more strength. But you can't grind your foot against it, or you'll tear the leaves."

“Okay.”

Angeline raised her leg and somewhat awkwardly moved it down the bristle of wheat. Belgrieve chuckled to himself as he got to work on the one next to it. The wind was gentle that day; sometimes, cold wind would buffet against their exposed faces, and when that happened, the simple job became incredibly taxing.

However, Belgrieve quite enjoyed treading the wheat. It was a job consisting of nothing more than walking carefully, but it was strangely relaxing. It put him in a frame of mind similar to meditation.

He lined up next to Angeline as she unsteadily made her way down the line and took her hand. She shifted her weight against him, and her steps became surer and more relaxed.

At times, she would stop to watch her breath waft away. The blue sky made the white puffs stand out all the more, and she could see the distinct shapes they formed.

“Dad, carry me...”

“Hmm? Hey now, we’ve only just begun.”

“It’s fine. Carry me...”

Belgrieve begrudgingly hoisted her up. She would plead for pampering at the strangest times. She was young, and sometimes she would grow tired of work halfway through. Belgrieve didn’t intend to force her to keep working, so he lifted her up as demanded.

Just like that, he walked a while with her in his arms, with some difficulty, before he had to put her down. “Daddy is having a hard time, Ange. Is a piggyback ride okay?”

“Yeah.”

He stooped down, and Angeline hopped onto his back. “You’ve gotten pretty heavy.”

Belgrieve softly chuckled and began walking again. His steps had grown heavier with Angeline’s additional weight. He could feel the wheat leaves being

crushed underfoot. Even squished to this degree, the wheat would come back healthier in the end. *How sturdy they are*, Belgrieve reflected with a degree of respect for the crop.

Angeline shifted and squirmed. “Does it hurt...?”

“Hmm?”

“The wheat. When we step on it.”

“Right... Maybe it hurts, but they grow up healthier because of it.”

“I don’t...like pain,” Angeline said, reaching her hands around his neck and hugging him tightly. Belgrieve chuckled, getting a better grip on her as she started sliding down.

“Yeah, daddy doesn’t want to see you in pain either, Ange.”

“But...do adventurers get hurt?”

“They do... Sometimes, it hurts.”

“Then I’ll put up with it,” she said, after a moment’s thought.

Angeline wriggled out from his arms and landed on the ground. She rushed to the next line over and began stomping on the wheat. By now, she already had a vague longing to be an adventurer. Belgrieve suspected the stories he told to put her to sleep had played a part. He was happy his daughter had set her sights on the same goal he had once pursued himself, but he worried about the danger that would come with it. He folded his arms contemplatively.

“What should I do...?” he wondered to himself.

However, the future was the sort of thing for which no amount of navel-gazing would ever be enough. He could only do what he could do in the present. Belgrieve began shuffling on again.

The sun was high, its rays shining down on the damp earth below.

## Pastries

The stately streets of Bordeaux were lined with low structures built out of sturdy stone. They carried the strong will of the old pioneers who had intended

to set up the city as their stronghold. Those pragmatic men and women had settled here, cut down the forests, and spread vast fields across the land.

That was in the past, though. Now, there were rows of gaudy, cheerful stalls, with adventurers and merchants energetically coming and going. Stationed at the center of an open plain with sprawling wheat fields surrounding it, Bordeaux was the greatest producer of grain in the north. This wheat, passed down and improved upon generation after generation, was known for its high quality. It traded not only in the northern regions but in Orphen and Estogal City as well.

Perhaps, then, it was natural that Bordeaux was also famous for its wheat-based cuisine. Their main alcoholic beverage was ale, while their bread took on various forms based on the wheat cultivars, grain types, dough shapes, and baking methods. Their baked pastries ranged from crunchy to soft and everything in between.

When lunch was over, Sasha led the party to a pastry shop. The smell tickled everyone's nostrils the moment they had set foot through the door, while the baskets of breads and sweets lining the walls were a sight for sore eyes. Belgrieve could feel saliva welling up despite having just eaten.

The girls' faces lit up, their eyes sparkling.

"Amazing..." said Angeline. "Just what I needed."

"What to do, what to do...? I would have skipped lunch if I had known we were coming here." Miriam stamped her foot in frustration.

A thin smile formed on Angeline's lips. "It's all right... You can do it, Merry."

"I see... You're right. I need to challenge my own limits! All right, this is nothing!"

"That's why you're gaining weight..." Anessa said, sighing.

However, Miriam was not the only one mesmerized by the sweets. Angeline and Anessa were also shifting their eyes frantically, picking out sweets from the various baskets. The format was the same as in Orphen, and they would have to place any items they wanted on wooden trays and take them to the counter. Belgrieve was not as predisposed to sweets as the girls, so he began to space

out and gazed distantly into the back of the store.

Soon, a new basket of freshly baked goods was carried in with a sweet yet astringent scent. The slightly thin bread had been shaped into cones, each piece oozing with what looked to be melted cheese. Belgrieve plucked one out, thinking it would be nice to have a freshly baked treat.

“Ooh,” Sasha cried. “What good eyes you have, Master! That’s the most popular item in the shop.”

“Oh really? That’s not why I picked it out.”

The girls, having overheard, each picked one out for themselves. Their trays were full, and Belgrieve worried if they would be able to eat everything.

“Will you all be fine with eating that much?”

“I have a second stomach for sweets.”

“That’s simply common sense for a lady, dad...”

“I see...I think?”

The girls gave one glance back at Belgrieve’s puzzled expression before going to pay at the register. The pâtisserie was connected to a café where they could bring their sweets to eat.

There, they ordered floral tea and began their onslaught on the pastries. There were hefty ones with chewy consistencies, thin ones as crisp as pie crust, and supersweet ones with dried fruits kneaded into the dough.

Belgrieve nibbled on the pastry he had picked out. It was freshly baked and gave off steam from where he bit into it. He thought he might have burned his mouth if he hadn’t taken in a great breath of air with it. It was filled with dried fruit and cheese. It seemed the dough had been stretched thin, then wrapped around its fillings. Sugar had then been sprinkled over its surface after it was baked. Belgrieve thought that the way the cheese melted was a big part of why it was so delicious, precisely because it was freshly baked.

“If they switched out the filling, it could be served as a meal...”

It seemed it would make a splendid dish if instead of dried fruits, it was stuffed with meat or fish—though that would be difficult to make without an



oven at home.

While Belgrieve was carefully appraising his lone purchase, the girls stuffed their satisfied-looking faces full with pastries. *Do all of them actually have another stomach?* Belgrieve wondered, amazed.

With a mouthful of tea, Angeline took a deep breath.

"It's delicious... And the dough is playing a big part. I can taste the wheat..."

"I'm glad you noticed! Heh heh... It's nice to hear that from you, Ange."

"The sweets from Orphen were nice, but the taste was all from the sugar and fruit. It might be the first time that the wheat's taste came through so clearly." Miriam happily munched down. Anessa seemed more restrained than the other two, but her hands were not stopping either. She seemed just as enthralled.

Seeing that Belgrieve had finished and was sipping on his tea, Angeline selected one of her pastries and offered it to him.

"Here, dad."

"Hmm? Oh, I'm good," he said, to which Angeline puffed up her cheeks.

"You're not. Say 'ahh.'"

"Yeah... Okay, fine."

He let her feed him the offered sweet. Angeline gave a satisfied nod, then without another word opened her mouth in return.

"Ah."

Belgrieve shook his head. *Good grief...* He picked a random sweet from her pile and placed it in her mouth. His daughter was on cloud nine. Thinking back on it, he would often feed her cowberries like that when she'd been a child, and he felt a sense of nostalgia.

Once the plates were empty, Angeline stood. He thought she was getting ready to leave, but instead, she took up her tray.

"Round two..."

"Here we go!"

“What?!” Belgrieve stared at the girls in complete disbelief. Just watching them seemed to give him heartburn.

## About Nicknames

“Can I leave it to you, Anessa?”

“Sure, I’m on it.”

Belgrieve handed Anessa a basket of seed potatoes, which she comfortably tucked under her arm before walking off. The snow had melted, exposing the black soil of the field. It was still damp enough that the soles of her shoes sunk and stuck with each step, but it was good enough for sowing. Anessa planted the potatoes in rows along the tilled dirt. For each potato, she scattered a handful of fertilizer mixed from manure, fallen leaves, and ash, and piled dirt over it. With one mound after the next, the field of Turnera’s second-most prevalent staple crop—after wheat—was born.

The sky was blue and perfectly clear, and while the wind caressing her face was still chilly, it was brimming with the essence of spring. She took a deep, refreshing breath, letting it permeate through her body. Had she felt that this labor was imposed on her, then perhaps the farmwork would have seemed more onerous, but she actually quite enjoyed it so long as she took some time to look around and take in the sights.

After every row, she stood up and stretched her back, taking the opportunity to watch the birds fly over the hills as she did so. She would never experience this sense of peace working as an adventurer. It went without saying that Angeline was fully at home doing this, but the same could now be said for Anessa and Miriam as well.

“I’ve finished up over here, Mr. Belgrieve.”

“Oh, thanks... Looks like we’ve got room for some more. Give me a sec.”

Belgrieve took the empty basket and left to replenish it. While Anessa waited there, empty-handed, Miriam came up to her with a puzzled look on her face. Anessa ignored her as long as she could, but it began grating on her, and she eventually turned with a frown.

“What?”

“You’re kinda still acting like strangers, you and Mr. Bell.”

Anessa blinked. “You think so?”

“I totally do. It’s been over a week, right? Why not just call him Mr. Bell like everyone else? Even if he’s still using our full names too.”

“What does it matter what we call each other?”

“That’s not—”

“Wah?!” Anessa cried out as Angeline suddenly appeared behind her.

“You’re putting up pointless barriers with your needless concerns.”

“I-I’m not really concerned...”

Miriam prodded her. “I got it: you’re embarrassed! Our little Anne’s all grown up.”

“What?! Wrong, fool! Don’t be crazy!”

“That’s right... You will never be my mother...”

“I’m saying you’re wrong!” Anessa yelled, her face a bright red.

Angeline and Miriam chuckled. That was when Belgrieve returned with the basket.

“You sound like you’re having fun.”

“Hey, Mr. Bell. Why do you talk to us like that?”

“Hm...? What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s like you don’t know us. Just call us by our nicknames. How am I supposed to relax with you calling me Miriam?”

Belgrieve placed the basket on the ground with an awkward smile. “You think so? I think you’ll get used to it pretty quickly.”

“That’s not true, dad...” Angeline hopped onto Belgrieve’s back, and he carefully shifted his weight to compensate. “I would feel distant if you called me Angeline...”

“No, you’re my daughter...”

“Yes, I am your daughter... Hee hee.”

Angeline gleefully buried her face in Belgrieve’s hair and took a whiff. With a resigned sigh, Belgrieve adjusted her position so she wouldn’t fall off.

“What are you girls trying to do? Good grief...”

“No fair, Ange!” Miriam stamped her foot and pouted with puffed-up cheeks. She quickly circled around Belgrieve and began tickling Angeline’s sides. The girl’s wriggling and thrashing only made her struggle to keep holding on to her father, which in turn made it more difficult for Belgrieve to keep his balance.

“Hey, come now, Miriam.”

“There you go again!”

“Got it, got it. Give me a break, Merry.”

Miriam let out a satisfied laugh, turning to Anessa with a grin.

“How about that, Anne?”

“What’s your problem? Quit bothering Mr. Belgrieve...”

“You mean Mr. Bell! Ah, you just don’t get it!”

Miriam’s cheeks were now fully inflated as she jumped at Anessa this time. She reached a hand for her side.

“Whoa, quit it! Gah!”

“It’s my time to shine,” said Angeline as she gallantly jumped down from Belgrieve’s back and sprung upon Anessa.

“There, how about that?”

“Had enough yet, Anne...?”

“S-Stop! Argh! Ah... Erk...”

The girls raised a ruckus as they tussled left and right. Belgrieve watched them anxiously, muttering to himself, “I just wanted to plant potatoes...”

## Play Fight, Play Right!

The children had gathered on the plains outside the village, restlessly chattering or pacing around. They ranged in age from about thirteen to barely five years old, and all of them were brimming with energy. Kerry's son, Barnes—the leader of the pack—turned the long stick he had propped against his shoulder.

"I told you I'm the hero!" he declared brashly, eliciting all sorts of complaints from the others.

"Oh, come on..."

"I wanna be the hero too."

"Me too!"

"Yeah!"

Each and every one of them clamored over who would do what, and the situation was beginning to boil over.

It had all started the day before. Turnera was hardly any traveler's final destination, but it wasn't so rare to see a peddler, minstrel, or troubadour simply passing through, and they usually gathered in droves during the autumn festival. Other than those months when the roads were sealed away in snow, the village usually had one visitor per month. The children always looked forward to the chance to look over the peddlers' goods they had never seen before with wide-eyed wonder or to listen to new songs and tales.

This time, Turnera had been graced by a number of peddlers and performers who had banded together into a rather large caravan. The peddlers opened their stalls in a corner of the village square and lined up their wares, while the minstrels stood to the side, strumming their instruments or reciting legends of the heroes of yore. A bit of a rarity among the performances was a traveling theater troupe on tour. With a black curtain as a backdrop, they would use stagehands dressed in black to move around props, changing scenes and producing special effects. In front of it all, a man in flashy makeup and gaudy armor brandished a sword.

"Lo and behold!" he sonorously proclaimed. "Thou art but a fearsome demon

spawn of Solomon. With the blessing of mine goddess, I vanquish thee!” He faced off against another man dressed in dark clothing from head to toe. The dark-clad villain raised his hands high and let out a bone-chilling groan, eliciting screams from the children who had been watching with bated breath.

The battle between the demons of Solomon who had once spread fear throughout the land and the hero blessed by the goddess Vienna was a popular topic for singers and storytellers. But it was usually confined merely to words and imagination. It was never like *this*—seeing it all play out in costumes and dramatic staging had the kids on the edge of their seats.

The play ended to unanimous acclaim, and every child in the village went to bed that night too excited to easily doze off. Thus, they got together the next day to recreate the story themselves, but no one wanted to play the part of the demon, someone who got beaten up.

Barnes swung his stick, incensed. “Take a good look at yourselves, all of you! We’re never going to start at this rate!”

“You’re the older one, Barnes. Give the young ones some time to shine!”

“That’s right! That’s right!”

“What are you on about, dummy? The strongest one’s got to be the hero!”

That was Angeline’s cue to stake her claim.

“That means *I’m* the hero,” the eight-year-old girl declared.

“Agh...” Barnes broke into a cold sweat. Though she was several years younger than him, Angeline was well-known as the strongest kid in the village. Her father, Belgrieve, had taught her how to use a sword, and there were (exaggerated) rumors that even the adults couldn’t beat her.

“N-Not you, Ange. You’re too strong!”

“You’re contradicting yourself now...” muttered Rita, the girl who was always clinging to Barnes.

Barnes pouted. “Can it!”

“Hmm... Then I’ll be the demon.”



“Oh, for real? All right, that settles it then.”

“Hey...” Rita said, speaking up again.

“What?”

“There are lots of demons, right?”

“Hmm... Yeah, now that you mention it.” There were seventy-two demons who served Solomon. The children vaguely remembered this from the tales. Feeling triumphant now that he had monopolized the hero role, Barnes grinned. “Yep. So there’s a lot more demon roles we need to fill.”

“Huh?”

“Tsk, no fair, Barnes.”

“Well, fine, then I’ll be a demon.”

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

“Same.”

The children took on the demon roles one after the next, standing beside Angeline as she faced off against Barnes. The boy’s smile gradually shrunk as he watched the enemy ranks swell. There were about twenty children, and except for Barnes, all of them had lined up on Angeline’s side, loudly clamoring and waving sticks. Barnes broke out into a cold sweat.

“Seventy-two?”

“We don’t have enough.”

“Well, we’ll have to make do.” Angeline brandished the wooden sword she always used in practice. “Let’s go.”

“Hold on, wait!”

Barnes the hero watched in horror as the small demons charged, bellowing out war cries.

## About the Red Ogre

Sasha Bordeaux's swordsmanship was renowned in the lands around Bordeaux. Her footwork carried her like a gale, and the sharpness of her bladework was already the stuff of legends. She was so skilled, in fact, that those who could block her second strike—let alone her first—were hailed as masters in their own right. Her fine looks, and the fact that she was one of the Bordeaux sisters—aristocrats renowned for their humility—earned her quite a bit of popularity.

In short, Sasha's position in the Bordeaux guild rivaled even the guild master's, but she didn't let it get to her head, and she never failed to train and spar each day in an attempt to reach even greater heights.

"Hrah!"

"Whoa!"

The sharp swing of her wooden sword knocked the wooden blade out of another adventurer's hand, before she thrust the tip at his neck. The adventurer raised his hands in submission, eliciting cheers from the peanut gallery.

"Amazing! That's Lady Sasha for you."

"Is it just me, or is her swordsmanship even fiercer than before?"

The crowd was universally impressed, and yet Sasha let out a disappointed sigh. "Not yet..."

"What's wrong, Lady Sasha?"

"I can't go on like this. At this rate, I'll never hold a candle to Master."

"Master... Wait, you're talking about that 'Red Ogre,' right?"

Sasha nodded. In her mind, Belgrieve still existed in a realm far above her. She had a serious and straightforward personality, and from the day she set out to be an adventurer, she had raced down that path with single-minded determination. She did more than just refine her own swordsmanship; she also researched all the empire's S-Rank adventurers past and present, committing all their names and monikers to memory. The tales and anecdotes of their feats were a great source of inspiration to her.

And yet, Belgrieve had been a completely unknown entity to her. She had already heard about Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie. Angeline was from her own generation and was one of the adventurers she greatly admired. But then there was Belgrieve, Angeline's father and instructor in blade arts. Sasha's wild imagination ran away with her, and thus Belgrieve, too, became an extraordinary individual in her mind. Sasha had yet to be proven wrong—they had fought two bouts, and she had lost to him both times. She was never one to toot her own horn, but in her heart, she was proud of her own prowess—so her defeat had come as quite a shock, only further fueling her admiration of Belgrieve.

However, such fanciful notions hadn't really spread among the other adventurers of Bordeaux. They didn't know how strong this Red Ogre was—they only knew that Sasha was the pinnacle of strength in their eyes, and they couldn't see any reason for her to be so despondent.

"Now, now, Sasha. You don't need to beat yourself up like that."

"That's right. You're already plenty strong."

Sasha silenced them with a resolute glare that made them flinch. "You little... Do you honestly see it like that? When the fiends have me against the wall, will I tell them 'I'm sure I trained enough'? What will such excuses accomplish?!" Sasha stamped her feet in frustration. "Now listen! Such conceit can be a fatal mistake! Just the other day in Turnera while I sparred with Master, I managed to knock the sword from his grasp."

"Huh? Then doesn't that mean you won...?"

"You fool! It was all part of the lesson! I grew conceited, convinced of my victory the moment I disarmed him. And to punish that moment of arrogance, Master swiftly grabbed my wrist and had me in a hold! I shudder to think of what would have happened had that been a real battle... If you let your guard down, sure of the kill, and the fiend musters its last bit of strength... Then what? Do you think saying 'I thought I was going to win' will save you?"

"Th-That's..."

"True, but..."

Sasha nodded, frowning sternly. “You understand now, don’t you? Master truly is a model adventurer. His eyes are constantly analyzing every situation as though it can turn into real combat. Presumably, he saw through the fact that I was focused on nothing but swordsmanship... I’m ashamed that I ever saw myself as first-rate!”

Sasha’s face turned red as she stamped at the ground. The adventurers exchanged glances. “Uh... I don’t know how to sugarcoat this, but, um... In other words, he led you around by the nose?”

“That’s right! I was dancing right in the palm of his hand...” For some reason, Sasha looked gleeful. “Despite having such skill, he hasn’t the slightest desire for renown and chooses to live in a remote village like Turnera. And yet he remains humble and warmhearted, unlike many other hermits. He’s sociable and kind, yet his eyes never fail to take in his surroundings. But that’s not all—not even close! One of his legs is a prosthetic, you know? Just how much training has he put in? Someone of my measly caliber can’t even imagine it... One might expect him to show it off if he was proud of all the effort he put in, but Master isn’t like that. The only way he has shown his abilities is by rearing his daughter, Angeline, into an S-Rank adventurer. His nonchalance, his modesty... It is said that the sharpness of a swordsman’s blade depends on the heart, and he is an exemplary model to follow. Even if he lies in an unreachable realm, I must set him as my goal. At the very least, I need to have him take me seriously in our next bout! Now who’s next?! Hurry and pick up your swords!”

Sasha bellowed as she took her stance. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and the adventurers raised their weapons, sounding off with their own battle cries.

At that exact moment, Belgrieve felt a terrible chill and let out a grand sneeze.

**Volume 3**  
**Short Stories**



## Ripples and Waves

Keep heading west from Orphen, and you would eventually run into a steep cliff by the sea, where massive waves crashed upon and ate away at the rock face. The sides of this cliff gently sloped down to softer beaches of rock and sand, where the white, glistening surf gently ebbed and flowed.

Atop the cliff was a conspicuously tall tower of stone—a lighthouse. Around the bay this tower overlooked was the coastal city of Elvgren. Several jetties fashioned from trees, buoys, and barrels protruded from the jutting stone wharf, where boats of all sizes were moored.

Elvgren flourished on its fishing industry; its marine products were shipped to every city in the north, where they would liven up any dinner table. Because of this, there were many merchants who passed through Elvgren, and thus it was always brimming with vivacity.

However, the city wasn't known only for its fish. There were several nearby dungeons of varying difficulty, and plenty of adventurers would come to explore them. Adventuring was a trade where the earnings were good, but death was a constant; thus, many businesses were set up to entertain these adventurers. For better or worse, they livened up the town and brought more people in.

As such, there were plenty of people coming and going when Angeline and her party members sat down at a roadside stall. The energy around them did not fall short of a typical day in Orphen.

The western sky was red, and though there was still light above, it was already dark down on the world below. The shops sandwiching the road had already lit the lanterns on their eaves. A fine-smelling smoke wafted from the stand, and a tipsy party of adventurers shambled down the road behind them.

Miriam's nose twitched. "Ahh, I'm hungry. What should we get?"

"We came all the way to Elvgren, so it's gotta be fish. What about you, Ange?"

"Doesn't matter... I just want wine. I'm thirsty..."



“Sounds good. Let’s get a nice cold one.”

They were thirsty and figured that every shop would have delicious food anyways, so that was what had brought them to this pop-up tavern.

“Wine and... What would go well with it?”

“Bring out the booze first! Then I can start thinking!”

They had just arrived that afternoon. After a night’s rest, they intended to dive deep into one of the nearby high-ranking dungeons. They usually worked around Orphen, so they needed a change of pace once in a while. Though the three of them were there for work, their minds seemed to be half on play instead.

They raised their glasses of chilled wine in a toast, then began to drink. The cool, potent potable poured down their parched throats.

When she honed her ears, Angeline felt she could hear the waves beyond the hustle and bustle. The ocean was near, and occasionally, a salty sea breeze would muss up her hair and make her skin feel sticky.

Angeline absentmindedly lifted her head and stared at one of the dangling lanterns. A fly was noisily buzzing in circles around it.

“Here’s your marinated anchovies and garlic-grilled mussels.”

Their food had arrived. On the first plate were small fish that had been sliced open and cured with citrus vinegar and salt before marinating in oil with thinly sliced onions and pickled green chili peppers. On the second plate, there were small shellfish that had been fried, shell and all, with minced garlic.

Taking some of each onto her own plate, Miriam giggled. “Anchovies... Mr. Bell’s face was amazing when he first tried them.”

“Right, I remember. He’s got a cute side to him, Mr. Bell.”

“Is dad doing all right?”

“What, you want to go home already?”

Angeline stuffed an anchovy into her mouth. “*Nom, nom...* It’s not like I want to go back. I just want to see dad.”

“Aren’t those the same thing?”

“Not exactly... I think.”

“Well, not like it matters to me, but you need to quit spacing out. We’re going dungeon diving tomorrow... Ah, hey, Merry! That’s mine!”

“Huh? Who gets to decide that?”

“You’ve already eaten three of them! That’s so unfair!”

“The early bird gets the worm.”

“Ah, you took another!”

“Merluza al pil-pil and rock oysters, coming up!”

Another dish came out while Anessa and Miriam were squabbling. Angeline grinned as she filled her glass. Dinner finished with a bit more bickering, and they left the shop in high spirits. A fuzzy moon now floated in the hazy sky; they could hear a small band playing on a street corner.

“What now? Want to go straight to the inn?”

“Let’s go to the sea...the sea,” Miriam said, now completely drunk.

Angeline nodded. “We should sober up a bit before we sleep...”

“Right... Ahh.” Anessa stretched. “Maybe we drank a bit much. It’s a working day tomorrow.”

They headed off for the harbor, the moonlight wavering over the gentle calm. While there was some wind, the waves were not high, and they could see islands across the open waters. The sea breeze was gentle once the sun had set.

The three girls silently stared at the moonlit sea. A mix of thin and thick clouds flowed across the sky, becoming a shadowy accent to the dim sky.

Angeline’s long black hair ran wild and was draped over her face. Listening to the waves crashing, big and small, she tied her hair back and took a deep breath. She drew in the salty smell of the sea until she began to feel an itch in her nose, causing her to let out a great sneeze.

Miriam burst out laughing. “Seriously, you picked that timing to sneeze?”

“What was I supposed to do about it...?”

“Right. Hee hee... That’s Ange for you.”

“What do you mean?”

Angeline puffed up her cheeks into a pout. The peaceful air pushed at her, and their laughter slipped through the space between the waves.

## Sheep-Shearing Day

*The summer clouds look like sheep fluff,* Angeline thought.

Once shearing season came around, the villagers would drop whatever else they were doing. This was a great undertaking that required all hands on deck. It came at the time of year when fluffy summer clouds lingered in the air and the sun shone down with blinding radiance—beneath which the sheep that had been chased in from the plains would pace about their pens. After eating their fill from the start of spring, the sheep would now be brimming with energy, and their coats had grown out nice and soft. It was hard to tell whether they were fat or just fluffy at a glance.

Belgrieve used a whetstone to sharpen the large shears he would be using. For the households that didn’t raise any sheep of their own, it was a tool that was only needed once a year. And so, he would need to sharpen it well before it saw its first use this year after so long. While he inspected the shears back to front, Angeline tugged on his sleeve.

“Is it sharp...?” the seven-year-old girl asked.

“Hm? Yeah, it should be sharp now.”

Belgrieve handed the shears over to Angeline. They were a bit too large for a child’s hands, and she had to spread her fingers wide just to grip them properly. One way or another, she managed to get them in her grasp and grinned back at him.

“I’m holding them...”

“Ha ha... You sure are. But you’ve still got some growing to do before you can use them properly.”

“Can’t I?” Angeline had hoped that this was the year she’d be able to shear the sheep, and now she timidly looked up at her father.

Belgrieve chuckled and patted her on the head. “I’m sure they’ve got some smaller ones at Kerry’s place. Let’s borrow them and give it a shot.”

“Really? Yay!”

Angeline swung her arms around in excitement. Just like that, the shears slipped out of her hand, grazing Belgrieve’s shoulder before smacking into the wall behind him.

“Ah...”

Seeing Belgrieve’s petrified expression, Angeline fidgeted and dithered before jumping into his chest in an attempt to make him forget it ever happened.

With the shears and a basket (among other tools), they headed over to Kerry’s house. A great crowd had already gathered in the front yard. The sheep would be led in from the pen out back several at a time and distributed among the shearers. Those who had mastered the craft could strip a sheep bare very quickly indeed, but the young hands still getting used to the work not only took longer but were also prone to nicking the sheep and causing them to kick and thrash. But this was all part of the learning process, and little by little, they grew accustomed to the job.

The harvested wool would be sorted based on how grimy it was, then washed and dried. For a while, Angeline helped out by carrying around the wool and soaking it in warm water. Such simpler jobs were often left to the small children.

Suddenly, Angeline heard her father call out to her. “Ange, come over here.”

Angeline turned. Belgrieve was on his knees by a lone sheep as she raced over to him.

“Can I shear him...? Is it okay?”

“Of course.”

Angeline stamped her feet joyfully.

Kerry chuckled at the sight. “All right, give it a shot. Here you go,” he said,

coming over to give her a small pair of shears.

They were small enough for even Angeline to handle properly. She opened and closed the blades experimentally with a sharp sound as she turned to face the sheep. It stood there silently, its long horizontal slit eyes barely registering her at all.

The sheep was made to lie on an old blanket, and Belgrieve held it down while Kerry stood to the side watching. Angeline had observed the process each and every year, so she thought she knew how to do it, but now that her time had come, she was at a loss for where to start and quickly found herself looking at Belgrieve.

Belgrieve smiled. “Now, where were we supposed to start, again?”

“Um, well... The belly?”

“That’s right. Part the hair from the hind leg joint to the foreleg joint...”

“And don’t rush, Ange. Nicking the skin is the worst thing you can do.”

“Hey now, Kerry—don’t scare her off before she’s even begun. Come on, Ange, give it a try.”

Angeline’s heart was pounding in her chest as she pressed the shears against the sheep. She looked at Belgrieve. “Here?”

“That’s right.”

She pursed her lips, mustering strength in her hand. As she tightened her grip on the shears, the finely honed blades sliced right through the wool—and the sheep remained docile.

Angeline’s face lit up. “I did it!”

Kerry burst into laughter. “Bwa ha ha! Don’t stop now! You’ve only just begun!”

Angeline pouted. “I know...” She worked the shears again, and with consistent clipping sounds, the fur gave way to reveal bare skin.

*What? It’s not hard at all*, she thought, moments before the tip of the shears nicked the animal’s skin. The sheep forcefully kicked with its hind legs, and in

her shock, Angeline leaped back with surprising deftness for a child. “Whew...”

Even as she stood there shuddering, the surrounding adults let out jolly laughs.

“You don’t have to be so scared.”

“Old Bell is holding it down tight. Calm down, it ain’t gonna hurt you.”

*That’s right, dad’s with me...* Angeline was suddenly filled with courage, and though it took time, she managed to finish the shearing without hurting the sheep any further. She had a proud look on her face as the adults praised her.

Eventually, the sun set, and the villagers went off, agreeing to see one another again the next day. Angeline grasped Belgrieve’s hand.

“You’re all sticky, dad.”

“So are you. We’re covered in lanolin.”

Angeline was glad that she’d gotten to do the same job as her father. But the shearing would continue. *Should I do it again tomorrow?* Angeline wondered as she gazed up at the night’s first star.

Unfortunately, the next day, her sheep ran away and caused a huge ruckus.

## Gleaning

The western mountains had become a dark form that loomed over all, their vastness swallowing up the lengthy shadows at their feet and casting a thin veil of darkness. However, the burning red of the setting sun still lingered behind it, painting the sky in dazzling hues.

Several villagers—mostly women and children—paced around the wheat fields that surrounded the village. Each of them was stooped beneath a basket or basin, with which they carried the ears of wheat they picked off of the ground. They were in the process of gleaning—when the grain that spilled out during the harvest was collected. No matter how carefully the harvest was conducted, some of the grain would inevitably fall to the wayside, amounting to a considerable quantity once collected. It was better to reclaim as much of it as possible rather than let the birds devour it.



Angeline—now nine years old—raised her hands high as she stretched out her body. The basket at her feet was about half full of grain. Off in the distance, she could see a large, Belgrieve-shaped silhouette moving in the dim twilight. She had come out to glean with her father, and set about collecting the fallen grain with single-minded focus, as though it were a treasure hunt. In that sense, Angeline found it to be fun and quite enjoyed herself. Competing with the other kids to see who could collect the most made it even more interesting, and in her enthusiasm, she ended up with a heaping pile in her basket.

This was a chore she had helped out with for as long as she could remember, and by now, she could handle herself without having to shadow her father. In fact, she wanted to work where he couldn't see her so she could surprise him with the extent of her harvest. With that in mind, she'd stooped down for a long while, combing the field some distance away from her father. Angeline glanced down at her basket again. She had gathered plenty enough, surely. She hoisted up her basket and tottered off, the mowed stalks crunching crisply with each step.

"Dad?" Angeline headed over to where she thought he had been, but Belgrieve was nowhere to be seen. She looked around, seeing scattered silhouettes of adults and children still moving about. *Are they going to keep gleaning for a while?* she wondered. Squinting, she picked out a larger form from the others and started off again.

"Dad..."

"Hm?" Hoffman, the village chief, turned around to see her. "Oh, if it ain't Ange. What's wrong?"

"Um, where's dad...?"

"Bell? Saw him over there a moment ago. You'd best get going; it'll be dark soon."

Angeline thanked him and headed off in the direction he'd pointed. The field was getting darker by the second in spite of the warm skies above, far beyond which a handful of stars had begun to twinkle. Now those who had been harvesting the grain had begun to go home, taking their lengthening shadows with them.

“Daaad...?” Angeline timidly called for Belgrieve, but there was no response. *Did he leave without me?* she wondered. All of a sudden, she felt like she was alone in the world. Her arms began to feel completely bereft of strength. These fields should have been familiar to her, but they looked utterly foreign to her once the anxiety washed over her. The gentle vale became a flat field of blackness that seemed to go on endlessly. She could hear the leaves rustling in the refreshing summer breeze, but it only caused Angeline to shudder. Right now it felt more like a piercing, high-pitched sound ringing in the depths of her ears.

Angeline turned towards the sound of somebody laughing in the distance. Before she knew it, she had wandered a long way off from the wheat fields, and the village lights faintly flickered far away. She hurried back towards the village—there was no way her father would come out here.

Angeline’s heart felt increasingly crestfallen, and the back of her eyes started to throb. She fought back against the tears threatening to spill over, a sure sign of the fair bit of growing up she had done since the time she’d gone to get glowgrass and lost her way. *I’m going to be an adventurer, so I can’t cry over something like this*, she told herself as she pursed her lips and hung her head. Even so, the overwhelming hopelessness was more than she could bear. “Daaaaad...” she whined miserably.

“Ange?”

Angeline’s face snapped up—and there was Belgrieve, walking towards her. It was hard to tell in the dark, but she could somewhat make out a relieved look on his face. Without a moment’s thought, Angeline threw her basket aside and threw herself into her father’s arms.

“Thank Vienna... You said you wanted to go off on your own...”

“I’m sorry...”

“But what are you doing all the way out here?”

“I don’t know... I thought you would be here...”

“I see... You must have been scared. Let’s be careful next time.”

Belgrieve picked up her basket and gathered the grain that had spilled out of

it. With Angeline on his back and the basket under one arm, he turned homeward.

“I did pretty well...on my own.”

“So you did. Good work. But you need to be aware of your surroundings.”

“Yeah, I’ll be careful...” Angeline buried her face in his back. It was warm and put her mind at ease. Even though she had done her best not to cry, her eyes were suddenly dampening. She nuzzled even harder to keep the feeling at bay.

An owl hooted from somewhere in the forest. The sun had well and truly set by now, with the only hint of sunlight a faint orange glow lining the peaks above. From there, the night sky turned purple, then indigo, and the stars made their appearances one after another.

## About Travel

The only thing keeping the road from Turnera to Rodina flat was the footsteps of the occasional traveler. In fact, the road was riddled with bumps and dips, and whenever a coach wheel trundled over one, it would jolt any riders a few inches out of their seats. These bumps tended to come in short, sporadic bursts, which made it difficult to sit at ease. It was understandable why Helvetica wanted to work on the roads.

It was difficult to maintain a healthy posture while aboard a rattling wagon. Belgrieve struggled to find a comfortable position to rest and found himself constantly shifting around. His body was already aching, and this restlessness certainly did not help. With every bump in the road, his peg leg clattered loudly against the floor of the carriage. On the other hand, Angeline and her friends seemed to handle the ride much better, merely shifting their weight every now and again. As working adventurers, they were often on the move, and since Angeline was terrible at horseback riding, wagons and carriages were their only option. The simple fact that they were all younger than Belgrieve was probably relevant as well.

Miriam pulled the brim of her hat down. “The first time we got a far-off request, we were about to rent some horses, but Ange started protesting,” she

recalled, chuckling.

“Are you sure about that? What request was it again?” Anessa asked her.

“If I remember correctly... No, it wasn’t a request. We were going to explore a dungeon. An AA-Rank one, yep,” Angeline said.

“Oh, in the southwest,” Anessa confirmed. “Yeah... Is your memory failing you, Merry?”

“I’m not wrong. The time when we were going to rent horses wasn’t for a dungeon, I’m sure of it.”

Belgrieve watched the girls argue over this triviality, chuckling softly. *Kids their age seem to be having fun no matter what they’re doing.* “I imagine you take wagons often when you head out on requests.”

Angeline nodded. “Yeah, though we’ll just walk if it’s close enough.”

Miriam giggled. “Ange can’t ride a horse, after all.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks poutingly. “Well, Merry’s not even athletic enough to climb onto a horse...”

“That’s fine for me! I’m a magician!”

“That’s not an excuse!” Anessa called back from the cabman’s perch.

Belgrieve laughed and stroked his beard.

When it came to something like an herb-gathering request, carrying weight wasn’t much of a factor, and an adventurer could get away with using a pack horse or his own strength to handle the goods. But when it came to ores, monster pelts, fangs, claws, scales, or other such things, they would tend to get heavy and unwieldy. Thus, when there was a job with a focus on gathering materials, a wagon became an absolute necessity. High-ranking adventurers often took on requests to subjugate gigantic fiends, and the materials that could be harvested from these fiends were correspondingly massive.

Belgrieve turned in his seat a little. “At the end of the day, I guess most of your requests take place close to Orphen.”

“Yeah,” Angeline said. “But we had to take a lot of long trips back when there

was that uproar caused by that demon...”

“We went to Benares in the east and Elvgren in the west,” grumbled Miriam. “I was worried they might send us all the way to the eastern checkpoint.”

“You were all working so hard. I was shocked when I heard about it.”

Angeline grinned and nestled up next to Belgrieve.

“Praise me more...”

“Huh...? Yeah, you did good.”

“Hee hee...”

“Mr. Bell, did you only work around Orphen when you were an active adventurer?” Anessa asked, glancing back from the cabman’s perch.

Belgrieve kneaded his beard. “I was only E-Rank... We generally visited the dungeons in the area.”

“Then were you riding wagons too, dad...?”

“That’s right, but we wouldn’t empty our wallets to rent one for ourselves. You know, back when you were just starting out, there were those public stagecoaches that went to the low-ranking dungeons?”

“Oh right, I remember those! That takes me back!” exclaimed Miriam.

“The guild runs them, right?” Anessa reminisced. “They still cost a bit of money, so we did our best to just walk early on.”

“Right. So did we. But once we saved up a bit, we took a stagecoach to a dungeon that was a little farther than usual. Is that still how it works?”

“Yeah... I see, so it hasn’t changed...” Angeline looked a little happy as she hugged Belgrieve’s arm.

Miriam chuckled. “It’s kind of interesting to think that Mr. Bell did the same thing.”

“Yeah, I can’t really picture it...”

“Ha ha... Well, everybody starts somewhere. But you all made it much further than I ever did.”

“That’s not true... I’m still no match for you, dad.”

“What do you mean? Good grief...”

Belgrieve smiled wryly, recalling his time as an active adventurer long ago. It had lasted only a little over a year, yet those memories were just as jam-packed as the twenty years in Turnera that followed. Even now, they were seared vividly into his mind. That was the first time he’d ever been really desperate to learn something. After returning to Turnera, his attention had turned to rehabilitation and training. Next, of course, he had immersed himself in caring for Angeline after she’d entered his life. Even so, the memories from his active adventuring days remained strong. Youth and dreams, hope, anxiety—it all melded together with a feverish, dazzling glimmer. Naturally, that was only in hindsight.

*Do these girls feel the same way about the days they’ve spent?* Belgrieve wondered. He laughed softly. *Though when it comes to rank, they’ve far surpassed me.*

The wagon suddenly jolted with a loud thunk, and Belgrieve found himself readjusting his posture yet again. *Rodina is still a long ways off...*

## Lizard Hunt

Angeline readied her wooden blade and swung at her father. Belgrieve blocked the strike with a slight shift in his stance. In the instant their blades locked, he yanked hers from her grip.

“Ah!” the young girl cried out.

“That happened because you weren’t gripping it firmly.”

“Urgh... One more time!”

Angeline raced to retrieve her wooden sword and assumed her stance again. Belgrieve smiled softly as he likewise prepared himself and parried the next strike that came at him.

Angeline intended to set off for the city of Orphen, though that was still a little ways off. Her skill with the blade far surpassed what one might expect of



an eleven-year-old, and it was said that she was Turnera's strongest—second only to Belgrieve, of course, though even he was fretfully counting the days until the inevitable moment when he faced defeat.

Angeline pursed her lips in frustration after another loss. She retrieved her wooden sword, cocking her head quizzically as she repeatedly tightened and loosened her hold of its hilt before a look of resignation settled on her face. "Dad... You're too strong."

Belgrieve patted her on the head. "Ha ha... I'm not going to lose to you just yet." He had his concerns about her childishness, but her dream of becoming an adventurer burned strong, and she had the skills to back it up. She also had a good head for battle, demonstrated in several fights with fiends. Putting aside the rose-tinted glasses he had for his daughter, she was undoubtedly overflowing with talent. At her current rate, Belgrieve was sure she could make it to B-Rank, and once she got enough experience, even A-Rank wouldn't be out of the question. In those days, he hadn't even imagined her reaching S-Rank.

Once their training concluded, they headed out to the square together. A merchant caravan had set up shop for several days now with all sorts of goods on display. To ensure the villagers didn't lose interest, the peddlers would introduce new wares little by little each day. For Turnera, where there was little entertainment, this was enough to entice everyone to the village square every day, and in this respect, Belgrieve and Angeline were no different.

However, when they arrived they found some of the farmers discussing something with troubled looks on their faces. It was strange to find them in the square at this hour, given that they were supposed to be following Kerry's plan to reclaim a certain plot of desolate land. Whatever they were talking about, it didn't seem promising. When they saw Belgrieve coming their way, the farmers grew excited.

Kerry emerged from the huddle. "Hey, Bell. I was just about to go fetch you. There's something I wanted to consult with you on."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

According to Kerry, the cultivation itself was proceeding smoothly, but when they were about half done, a number of giant lizards—larger than humans,

even—had appeared to impede their progress. These lizards had enormous, hard, green scales and red lines that started at the outer corners of their eyes and traced the lengths of their bodies. The farmers had scuttled away before they were attacked, but there was no way to make progress like this.

“Buglizards, huh... How many of them were there?”

“Fewer than ten—seven or eight, I’d say.”

Belgrieve stroked his chin. He turned to Angeline. “All right, Ange... It’s time for a practical lesson.”

“Yeah!” Angeline cheered, nodding enthusiastically. It seemed she had already been dead set on doing it before he had even suggested it.

They returned home briefly to make preparations before heading for the reclaimed land down a little glen with ample sunlight. Most of the wild foliage had already been cleared, and they had tilled some of the soil as well. That was where they found a number of the massive lizards lying still, seemingly warming their scales in the sun.

“Five, six...seven of them, dad.”

“Seven indeed...” Belgrieve took stock of their surroundings with narrowed eyes. Due to the lack of foliage, there didn’t seem to be any blind spots, so the number of foes they could see was most likely all of them. Belgrieve turned to Angeline. “Ange, be extra careful. It’ll be bad if they bite you even once.”

“Got it.” Angeline obediently nodded.

Belgrieve smiled, before furnishing a mixture of powdered oil and several poisonous herbs from the tool pouch on his hip. “The wind direction is... All right.” He set it alight and tossed it towards the lizards. With all the foreign substances mixed in, the powder didn’t burn as it otherwise would, instead spewing out a thick smoke which was carried by the wind and enveloped the lizards. The smoke of the poisonous herbs did a number on the beasts’ eyes and noses. The lizards went from languid to writhing in pain all of a sudden.

“Let’s go!” Belgrieve said—but before the words even left his mouth, Angeline was already a few steps ahead of him. She had seen the smoke as her opportunity. Belgrieve ran after her, surprised but impressed at his daughter’s

swift judgment.

With deftness befitting her tiny body, Angeline leaped forth, putting as much of her body's weight as possible behind the tip of her sword as she plunged it into the base of a lizard's skull, one of its vital points. The lizard thrashed for a moment before quickly falling still. For his part, Belgrieve raised his blade high and pulverized another lizard's head. The smoke had provided them effective cover to leverage the element of surprise, and the battle was settled before the lizards could even mount a counterattack.

Angeline grinned as she counted the number of cadavers. "I got three of them... Am I amazing?"

Belgrieve laughed, patting her head. "Yeah... You did well." She hadn't shown the least bit of fear towards the lizards, which were much larger than her, and her bladework had been graceful. The realization of his daughter's talent actually startled him—even now, she was more than good enough to be an adventurer. It was a happy realization, yet it left him feeling lonesome as well. "Now then... Let's go back. We need to report to Kerry and get these corpses taken care of."

"Yeah!"

The two of them held hands as they climbed back up the hill.

## **Sleight of Sister**

Helvetica Bordeaux's drive to recruit talent was famous in the surrounding lands. From the time of the late Count Bordeaux, she would use her keen eyes to scour the domain for promising talents during her patrols of the territory, and thanks to her generous terms (and perhaps a bit of strong-arming), she would bring them back with her. Ashcroft was a good example of this. As the fourth son of a destitute noble line, he had seemed destined to live a life of irrelevance, but thanks to Helvetica's keen eye for his managerial skills, he now served as the steward of House Bordeaux.

Apart from him, there was the erstwhile farmhand who now oversaw all the livestock in Rodina, and the retired adventurer who now managed operations in

the mining town of Erin. There were many others who had likewise been placed in such important positions despite their former lowly stations. All of them adored Helvetica and willingly lent their strength to the development of the county in earnest. Her manner of governance, which completely disregarded societal status, had earned her the antipathy of the nobles who had not a bit of talent to back up their conceit. Helvetica didn't lose any sleep over this—given her disposition, there were plenty of people eagerly hoping for their chance to sell their talents to her.

“P-Pardon me. I just remembered something important I must attend to,” a young, foppish man stammered as he ran out of the room.

Helvetica, seated at her office desk, heaved a sigh and propped up her head in her hands. “He’s out of the question.”

“Lady Helvetica, you needn’t waste your time on a man like that,” Ashcroft chided.

Helvetica stretched out. “I know that...” She had low hopes of finding anyone decent among the sorts who came to her out of the blue like this—not often, at least. A few years ago, the man who would go on to become a trusted advisor in Erin had happened to impress her with his profound intellect and eloquence during a chance meeting. Though her expectations were tempered, she *had* found the occasional diamond in the rough; that was why she was liberal in granting an audience to the occasional petitioner.

Ashcroft sighed as he placed a stack of documents on the desk. “I shall be on my way.” He was going to negotiate on her behalf with another noble residing in Bordeaux’s lands.

“Yes, please send my warmest regards.”

Ashcroft bowed and left the room.

Now alone, Helvetica let herself relax, stretching out over the desk and laying her cheek down against its surface. The well-polished wood felt cool to the touch. Her father, the former Count Bordeaux, had only just passed, but he had been sickly for a long time now and had given over the reins to Helvetica while he’d still had the chance. Though her father had still held the peerage then, Helvetica had been handling a significant amount of the work, so by the time he

passed away and she formally inherited the title of Countess Bordeaux, she had already had some experience with her aristocratic duties. Nevertheless, her father had been her heart's anchor, and it had been difficult to come to terms with his loss. Whenever she had mulled over a decision before, it had always been her father whom she had turned to first. But each time, the late Count Bordeaux would tell her to trust in her sisters or one of those talents she had recruited.

"We don't have enough people, father..."

Sure, there were plenty who could do the jobs given to them well enough—what she lacked was those who would confidently state their opinions, those whom she could debate with and sharpen her own thoughts in turn. And whenever she *did* find them, she would invariably put them in leadership roles in the towns, so in Bordeaux proper, she only really had Seren and Ashcroft—both of whom were always busy.

"Strong and reliable... Oh, if only Sir Belgrieve would come on board."

Helvetica sighed. She had only met him once before, in Turnera, but she was still fascinated by that middle-aged man with the prosthetic leg. His composure was befitting of his age, and he had the strength to easily fend off her guards. When they spoke during the fall festival, she could discern the depth of insight in his words. Having even one person like him by her side would be a huge load off of her mind.

As Helvetica lay there limply, Seren entered the room. She blinked, startled by the state of her sister. "You look tired, sis."

"Oh, Seren... Could you get me some tea?"

Seren popped her head out of the room and told one of the guards stationed beside the door to fetch a tea service.

"Are you pondering something difficult?" she asked when she returned.

"That's right... It's as I feared. Don't you think we're lacking in talent?"

"If this is about Belgrieve... I already told you to give up, didn't I?"

"I didn't say his name. Not once."

“But am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not...” Helvetica puffed out her cheeks, sulking. “I mean, if he came along, it would ease the workload on you and Ashe.”

“That is not the issue. Sir Belgrieve has his own concerns to attend to. And he clearly rejected you, did he not?”

“I mean, I did sort of strong-arm Karfey and Jolland into coming here... I suppose they’re not exactly enthusiastic about their work, though.”

“They’re both quite young. Even if they start working begrudgingly, it’s only natural they’ll start enjoying themselves once they see the fruits of their labors. By contrast, Belgrieve said he was in his forties—he can’t burn with the same ambition as the younger ones,” Seren explained, wagging one finger.

Helvetica giggled. “Oh, but a young lady like you can already understand how your *elders* think?”

Seren blushed. “Don’t tease me...”

“Hee hee... Sorry. But, Seren, don’t you think it would be wonderful if Sir Belgrieve were here? I’m sure he’d be open to consult with me on any matters, be they public or private. It would be a huge relief.”

“That’s...” Seren did mull it over a bit. Her lips curled into a little smile as her imagination raced, but she snapped back to reality soon enough. “No! It’s not happening!” she said, vehemently shaking her head.

“Really?”

“It’s. Not. Happening!” Seren pouted, her cheeks still red.

Helvetica laughed, amused. It seemed she still had one up on her younger sister. It wasn’t long before a maid entered with a tea tray.

## White Birch Cup

*Thunk, thunk...* The sound of metal on wood reverberated through the forest. Then, it was replaced by the creaking sound of a white birch tree falling, notched by diagonal axe blows. Just as planned, it fell neatly into a gap between

other trees, landing with a massive *thud* that shook the ground. Then, the forest was silent. The lumberjacks who had retreated a safe distance now crowded around the fallen tree. They patted themselves down, satisfied at a job well done.

“This is a good one. Perfect for making furniture.”

“All right, we’ll chop off the branches and... It’s a thick one; let’s split it in four.”

“Duncan, can you take care of the branches?”

“Right away. Leave it to me.”

With his powerful arms, Duncan lopped off the branches with his axe like it was nothing. Some of the larger branches were about as thick as the arm of an adult, and it felt to him like a bit of a waste just to discard them. “Hey, this one looks usable,” he said.

“Right. Let’s bring it back and see.”

Perhaps they could be used for some finer craftwork. Once the day’s work was over, the lumberjacks gathered the larger branches and hoisted them over their shoulders.

After the aberration of the forest had settled down, the lumberjacks resumed the work that had been put on hold during the crisis, and day after day, they diligently made up for lost time. They worked alongside Duncan, who had practically become one of them since coming to reside in Turnera. Strong of arm and candid of word, he proved himself a reliable ally whenever a fiend was encountered, and he had long since earned the trust of his fellow lumberjacks.

They returned to an outpost on the edge of the village, and while they were putting their tools away, they were greeted by Hannah’s arrival. She wore a handkerchief over her curly brown hair and an apron over her attire.

“Yes, yes, good work, everyone. I’ll get some tea going,” she offered.

“Ah, thanks.”

“How was work today?”

“We got a nice white birch down. If we’re careful with the milling, the lumber

will go for a fine price.”

“Hmm, that’s good to know... Oh? Duncan, what do you have there?”

Hannah eyed the branch from the white birch that Duncan had kept.

“Ha ha ha! It’s a branch from the white birch. If it’s this fat, I thought it could be used for something.”

“I suppose you’re right...” Hannah said. She picked up the branch and examined it front to back. “Yeah, it looks like I could make tableware or other small utensils.”

Duncan looked at her, a mite surprised. “Do you do that sort of work too, Hannah?”

“Huh? Yes, pretty much. My late husband enjoyed carpentry. I still have some of his tools lying around, and I dabble in woodworking to kill time. How about you, Duncan?”

“Well, my hands aren’t very dexterous, and I’ve never had a real knack for detailed work...”

“That’s such a waste. Right, I’ll teach you a thing or two. Let’s have you make something...a plate, or a cup, perhaps. I’m sure you’ll find some use in it.”

“Well, sure, but...”

“All right, that’s settled! Drop by my house sometime.”

“No, I...”

“Hee hee! Now this is getting interesting. Don’t dally; the tea will get cold.”

“Th-Thanks...”

Hannah began to hum a merry tune as she examined the other branches that had been salvaged. Duncan, taken aback, got some teasing smiles from the lumberjacks.

Later that night, he ate dinner at Belgrieve’s house.

“Oh? Then Hannah’s going to teach you some woodworking?” asked Belgrieve.



“Yes... I got roped into it before I realized it.”

“Hmm... You look like you’d be clumsy,” Marguerite chimed in.

Duncan smiled wryly. “Precisely so, Maggie. I don’t know if I’ve got what it takes...”

“Well, what’s the harm? Can’t hurt to learn a new skill.”

“Well... If you say so, Bell...” Duncan scratched his head, feeling a little embarrassed. Graham looked on with an amused smile as he played with Mit.

Some days later, Duncan bashfully paid a visit to Hannah’s house. He arrived to find the woman sharpening a chisel.

“Ah, glad you could make it, Duncan.”

“Pardon my intrusion.”

Her house was filled with tools of all sorts, both for felling trees and for finer detail work, and all of it was meticulously organized. It was like a workshop, with shelves filled with small wooden dolls or wooden tableware. Duncan was taking in all of the artisan products, amazed, when Hannah sidled up beside him.

“Those are the ones my husband made. Mine are over here.”

“Oh... Splendid handiwork.”

“Hee hee... Doesn’t it make you want to try some carving for yourself?”

“It does indeed. Do you think I’ll really be able to?”

“Relax, you’ll be perfectly fine—with proper instruction, that is. Let’s start with...”

Hannah pulled Duncan over to a workbench where the branch he had picked out had been cut down to a workable size. Using a chisel and wooden mallet, Duncan shaved down the edges. The well-honed tool shaved away at the white birch that still contained a bit of moisture, bit by bit.

“Right, just like that... Ah, you’re holding it up too high. You’ll poke yourself like that.”

“I... I see...”

Hannah reached around his shoulder and guided his hand with her own. “Like this,” she said as she adjusted the angle of the tool. Duncan’s nostrils were tickled by a peculiar, sweet scent—not perfume but a very familiar aroma, the scent of freshly hewn lumber. It seemed to permeate Hannah deeply.

Though his face flushed with embarrassment, Duncan’s heart danced as he watched the white birch wood slowly take shape. As he worked, he wondered just how delicious the ale he drank from this soon-to-be cup would taste.

## **Down by the River**

There was a river that flowed near Turnera—the very same river that would carry away the spring festival’s lanterns. During the seasonal ice melt, the water level would increase, but it was not a particularly large river to begin with. It flowed from the mountain and cut through the forest, but there was still a long way for it to go. When considering its entire length, Turnera was positioned upstream, where the currents were fast but the river itself wasn’t wide. The river’s water ran so cold that children who swam in it even at the height of summer would come out of the water with purple lips. Still, it was teeming with life, and those who fished the current rarely ever went home empty-handed. A basket trap would yield plentiful river crabs and eels.

Angeline—now eleven years old—was making her way towards the riverbank with a fishing rod in one hand, a wooden bait box in the other, and a woven fishing basket slung from her hip. She was going to play by the river today.

Summer had come, ushering in warm breezes and tall wheat stalks sprouting fresh grain. The villagers were in the process of planting the summer vegetable seedlings, and it wouldn’t be long until the potatoes became edible, though they would still be soft and young as yet. The village adults were busy from dawn to dusk, but this was a fun time of year for the children, for whom summer promised all sorts of new possibilities for amusement. The kinds of games they played along the river were of a practical nature, and because they often resulted in bringing home sides for dinner, their parents didn’t tend to be too displeased with their frivolity. Thus it became second nature for the children to head off to the river come summer.

“What will I fish up today...?” Angeline murmured, waving her fishing rod around. *I hope I can catch a large trout...* She would grill it just enough for the skin to turn crisp from its plentiful fat and season it with dried aromatics and salt. Most likely she could pair it with boiled potatoes, given the season.

Lost in daydreams of a delicious dinner, she arrived before she knew it. The early summer sun gleamed dazzlingly off the water’s surface. A few of the other kids were gathered at a bend in the river where the current wasn’t too strong, and seemed to be setting a basket trap.

Angeline set her rod, basket, and box by the riverside before approaching them. “Hey,” she called out.

The kids turned towards her.

“Oh, hi, Ange!”

“Come join us!”

Happy to oblige, Angeline doffed her boots and rolled up her pants before plunging her bare feet into the water, the biting cold immediately enveloping her toes and ankles. She took care to avoid splashing water—as much as that was possible, at least—as she trudged through the current. “Did you catch anything yet?”

“I just got a crab.”

“There’s an eel over here!”

Angeline peered into the baskets the boys pulled out of the water, and there was, indeed, a slippery black eel in one and a gray crab about the size of a child’s fist in the other.

“What about you, Ange? Are you going to fish?”

“Yeah...”

“Then that’s a good spot over there. I just saw a big one swim that way,” one of the boys said while pointing upstream.

“Oh, thanks.” Angeline climbed out of the water, gathered her things, and went off to where she’d been directed. The current was faster here than it was downstream, and the billowing surface almost seemed alive as it caught the

sunlight.

She fastened a bug she'd caught by the side of the field to her hook and cast her line with a loud whooshing sound. All that was left was to sit back and wait for the fish to bite. The water's current tugged at the line, but she knew when a fish took the bait it would feel distinctly different.

Angeline stared into the current for a time, her eyes blinking at the dazzling light reflected off the surface of the water. Suddenly, she felt the rod shake in her hands and yanked it upward immediately. A fish burst out of the water with a great splash, and she pulled it onto dry land where it flopped around helplessly.

"It's a trout..."

Angeline carefully removed the hook from its mouth, placed it into her fishing basket, and submerged the basket in the river. This was an auspicious start to her trip. Beaming, she baited the hook and cast her line again. A short while after the plop of the tackle hitting the water, she was startled to feel an abrupt tug on the line so strong that it caused her rod to bend down sharply, forcing her to dig her heels into the bank.

"What...? What is this?!"

Whatever it might have been, it was bigger than anything Angeline had ever hooked before. It seemed to be thrashing, as she'd feel the rod shaking in her hands now and then. Her own hands were trembling with exertion, and she feared she might be pulled in herself if she wasn't careful. Angeline faltered a bit, but once she realized that she had hooked a big one, any traces of fear were swept away by excitement. She planted her feet firmly, taking care to avoid snapping the rod while maintaining her grip on it, and faced the fish head-on.

"Grr..."

For a long while, she seemed to be locked in a stalemate with her catch, but she eventually felt the line slacken. Angeline saw her chance and gave one last pull with all her might—and suddenly, the weight was gone. The hook popped out of the water with its bait still firmly attached. Angeline stared at the tackle, utterly dumbfounded.

“Huh... Why?”

If it had been a fish on the line, it would have taken the bait, so she had absolutely no idea what had happened. It was like that entire tug-of-war had been a dream. That frustrating thought spurred her to stay and keep fishing until evening, but she couldn't shake the feeling of surreality even to the end.

When Angeline returned home and received her father's praise for the full basket of fish, she told him about the strange events that had happened to her earlier in the day.

Belgrieve laughed, folding his arms. “So they got you too, Ange? Daddy went through the same thing as a kid, you know.”

Angeline blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I'm sure it was a river spirit or something of the sort. They sometimes amuse themselves by teasing kids. I'm sure they're all getting together for a good laugh right around now.”

Angeline pouted. “Next time, I'll fish him up and take him home with me.”

“Ha ha! Good idea. Now it's time to prepare dinner—thanks to you, we're having a feast tonight,” Belgrieve said as he poured oil into a metal pan.

## **Star Calendar**

The caravan had arrived in Turnera, so Angeline headed to the town square with Belgrieve. This time there were six or seven nomadic folk traveling with ten or so peddlers, and about as many guards as caravanners. Cloth tarps were laid out over the ground before their canopied wagons, upon which various and sundry goods were on display. The peddlers touted their merchandise loudly, their voices mingling with the songs of the nomadic minstrels into a cheerful cacophony that filled the square.

While her father leisurely (but discerningly) inspected the various wares, the six-year-old girl toddled off to another stall on her own. Most of what was on display were everyday goods, but the village children flocked to the inventory of dolls and toys of wood and tin. Angeline was no exception, and she joined the other children before her attention was stolen by the large piece of paper

spread out over the back of the toy stand. The document, depicting a large circle with small figures, numbers, and letters tightly superscribed around it, was nearly as tall as she was.

The peddler, noticing Angeline's intense gaze, grinned. "Interested, are you?"

Angeline nodded.

The peddler laughed merrily and pointed at the illustration with a slender wooden stick. "This is a star calendar drawn by one of the imperial capital's greatest stargazers."

"A star calendar?"

"That's right. Everything within the circle is a star chart—a map of the night sky, essentially. The parts around it depict all the things that will happen in the sky over the next hundred or so years. Look here—this one shows the current year," he said, tapping the stick against the chart. There were dazzling figures, numbers, and letters, but Angeline couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"What does it say...?"

"Hmm... A meteor shower. It's when the billowing tails of stars trace through the darkness of the night all at once...when countless shooting stars fly by."

Shooting stars were not particularly rare; it was all but certain that you would see one or two if you gazed at the night sky long enough. Seeing many at once was a different story though. To see so many stars soundlessly tracing white lines through the night sky—an unending stream of them—would certainly be a beautiful sight to behold. The thought of such a spectacle so elated Angeline that she turned right around and raced off to find her father.

Belgrieve was stooped over to examine goods at another stall when Angeline leaped onto his back, forcing him to hastily correct his balance before he tumbled onto his face. "What the...? Ange, don't scare me like that."

"Shooting stars, dad! There's going to be a whole bunch of them!"

"Huh?" Belgrieve had no idea what Angeline was talking about, but he allowed her to pull him along to the stall with the toys anyways.

"Oh, are you her father, perhaps?" the peddler asked, looking amused.

“Yeah! Mister, let me see the chart, please!”

“Here you go—and take your time.” The peddler scooted his chair slightly to the side so Angeline and Belgrieve could easily get a closer look.

“I’m sorry for getting in the way of business,” Belgrieve said with a wry smile and apologetic bow of his head.

The peddler laughed. “I don’t mind at all. Though I’d appreciate it if you bought something...”

Belgrieve scratched his head. *Looks like I’ll have to get at least one item from him...* His musings were interrupted by Angeline tugging on his sleeve.

“Pick me up, dad!”

“Yeah, okay.”

Angeline, hoisted up by her father, was able to get a closer look at the star chart. Just looking at all the curious symbols was interesting, but she couldn’t tell which part pertained to shooting stars. That was something she had to know.

Belgrieve peered at the chart. “Hmm... I’ve never seen a star calendar before. If this is the unmoving star right here, then...”

“You can understand it, dad?”

“Hmm? Yeah, this is a map of the night sky. I’ve seen star charts before but never a whole calendar.”

The peddler looked a bit impressed. “You’re very knowledgeable, sir. Do you like looking at the stars?”

“Well, not necessarily. I use them to navigate when I’m out walking at night, so I’ve memorized at least a few of the important ones.”

“My dad’s amazing, right?” Angeline proudly puffed out her chest.

The peddler laughed. “Amazing indeed.”

Belgrieve chuckled self-consciously, then patted Angeline on the head. “So, why did you bring me here, Ange?”

“Um... Oh, this year, there’s going to be a lot of shooting stars, he says! Hey,

mister, you tell him!”

The peddler nodded and pointed at a part of the calendar.

“Yes, it certainly says that,” Belgrieve observed, nodding as well.

“That’s right. There’ll be a whole bunch, so I’m sure it’ll be beautiful.”

But Belgrieve simply scratched his cheek, feeling a bit awkward. “But, well... From what it says here, it’s already passed.”

“Huh...?” Angeline turned to the peddler.

The man smiled wryly and shrugged. “Did I forget to mention that?”

“You did...” Angeline’s shoulders drooped. She grabbed the hem of her father’s shirt for comfort.

Belgrieve smiled and patted her head. “There might not be too many shooting stars, but do you want to watch the sky together tonight?” He hoisted her up onto his shoulders.

“Really?” Instantly she became giddy again.

The peddler gamely turned aside and rummaged through his wares. He found what he was looking for and presented a cylindrical object. “If you’re going stargazing, then how does a telescope sound?”

“W-Well, that’s a bit out of my price range... How about this tin puzzle?”

Belgrieve haggled back and forth with the peddler while Angeline gazed up at skies that were still bright and blue. The clouds were thin and wispy, so she just knew the stars would shine beautifully that night.





**Volume 4**  
**Short Stories**

## Departure

The stunning colors of autumn had settled over Turnera. Blazing reds and invigorating yellows covered the mountain, with the evergreens in their midst providing a break for the eyes. But soon, around the time of the autumn festival, a cold wind would begin to blow from the north and scatter the leaves from their branches. These fallen leaves would cover the forest floor, and mushrooms would begin poking through the gaps.

The cowberries would be gone by then, eaten by birds, beasts, and whatever else craved them. Any red berries that remained would be trampled underfoot, their burst skins swarming with insects.

Belgrieve led Mit through the forest before the break of dawn, to the top of a high, scenic vista just outside of the village. As the morning sun began to shine over the village, they could see chimney smoke melting away into the crisp autumn sky. The festival had already come and gone, but some peddlers and performers weren't yet ready to leave, so the village square was like a subdued echo of the prior festive atmosphere.

Mit tugged at Belgrieve's cloak. "Dad...hold..."

"Oh, you're tired already?"

He lifted the boy into his arms. Mit squirmed until he had his arms firmly wrapped around Belgrieve's neck.

*I didn't think I'd ever go on an adventure again,* Belgrieve thought as he closed his eyes. But he knew it was time to make amends with his past. It was sudden, and he would be lying if he said he was entirely ready for it. The familiar scenery calmed his heart, but it was also tinged with the sadness of knowing he wouldn't see it again for a long while.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the brisk air that already carried a hint of winter.

"We should get going."

"Hmm."

He climbed down the hill with Mit in his arms, to find Marguerite sitting in the wagon, excitedly chatting with the blue-haired peddler. Graham stood to the side.

“Huh? You’ve never seen the salmon surging upstream? It’s amazing, I tell you. Come at the right time, and the entire river is filled with the things. You don’t even have to catch them; the unlucky ones get pushed up against the banks, and you can just reach out and grab them like this.” Marguerite mimed grabbing a fish.

The peddler giggled. “Fishing with your bare hands... Hee hee... How very wild. I always thought elves were a bit...well, ‘mystical’ is how I’d put it.”

“What’re you talking about? We all got to eat to live. Right, granduncle?”

“Indeed... We also build houses, forage for food, and make clothing. We aren’t very different from humans.”

Mit toddled over and jumped at Graham.

“Grampa...”

“Ah, Bell. Finally here.”

Marguerite jumped up expectantly. “What were you doing? We’re all ready to go.”

“Sorry. I was feeling a little homesick already.” Belgrieve scratched his head with a wry smile. He looked around. “Where’s Duncan?”

“You were taking so long he decided to go on a walk with Hannah.” Marguerite grinned, her arms folded behind her head.

With a troubled look, Belgrieve apologized once more, this time to the peddler. “I’m sorry for delaying your departure.”

“Don’t worry. I just need to reach Rodina today. We have plenty of time, don’t worry,” she said, waving her hand dismissively.

The weather had been fine from the early morning, and although the wind was cold, the skies were blue as far as the eye could see. The peddler shuddered at a particularly cold gust.

“It sure gets cold up here. Are you all right dressed like that, Marguerite?”

Apart from her fur cardigan, Marguerite was adorned in no more than a cloth wrapped around her chest and short pants, unsparingly exposing her fair elven skin. She certainly looked like she should be cold, but the girl simply cocked her head.

“Not really. It’s even colder where I come from.”

“Wow, that’s really something,” said the peddler, disbelief on her face as she rubbed her hands together for warmth.

The songs of the roaming folk were carried on the wind. The sun gradually ascended, though it wouldn’t reach the height it did in the summer months. Some time passed before Duncan returned with Hannah.

“Drat, I held you up...”

“No, it’s my fault for wandering off. Did you say your goodbyes?”

“Far from a goodbye.” Duncan’s bearded face blushed while Hannah giggled bashfully.

They had already loaded their luggage the day before so that they would be ready to depart as soon as everyone had gathered. Marguerite gleefully hopped aboard the carriage, and Duncan was soon to follow.

Belgrieve glanced around. His gaze crossed with Graham’s, who was holding Mit in his arms.

“Mit, you have to listen to what grandpa says, okay?”

“Yeah...”

“Take care, Bell. Look after Marguerite for me.”

“I will. And I’m counting on you to look after Turnera.”

He climbed aboard. The peddler took the reins and, urging the horse on, slowly began their journey. The villagers loitering around the square waved as they passed; Marguerite leaned out to wave at them in return.

The wind at their back carried on it the bleating of goats and the chirping of birds, the sounds of children playing, and the strumming of lutes.

## About Alcohol

*Clatter-clatter-clunk, clatter-clatter-clunk...* The wagon made a clattering din as it crossed the road before Angeline. The twelve-year-old girl waited for it to pass before cutting diagonally across the intersection.

The evening sky cast Orphen in increasingly darker shades of red. Angeline's shadow was long, and though the lanterns hanging from the eaves of the shops along the street let her see the silhouettes of passersby, she couldn't make out their faces. It was the season of snowmelt, and though the wind that brushed against her face had assumed a hint of spring's warmth, it was still cold out once the sun set. Having been raised in Turnera, Angeline was well used to the cold, but this didn't mean she was eager to be exposed to the piercing winds. She pulled her coat shut tightly and buried her face in her muffler.

"Hungry..." she murmured.

Angeline swiftly made her way down the street and pushed open the door to her customary pub. It had already been half a year since she left the nest to become an adventurer. Even since the day she registered with the guild and turned the tables on those adventurers who had picked a fight with her, she had continued to perform splendidly in her new role. Her achievements had already earned her C-Rank, and if the rumors were to be believed, she was a shoo-in for the higher ranks at this pace. Her young age and the speed at which she was earning promotions had brought her a great deal of attention.

Angeline herself was hardly concerned about such things, though. She diligently committed herself every day to slaying fiends, gathering materials, and exploring dungeons in silence, and when she would return home, she'd quietly eat dinner and go to bed thinking about her father, Belgrieve. She often cooked for herself, but occasionally, she would go out to the pub and enjoy the sautéed duck—one of little Angeline's modest indulgences in life.

She took a seat at the counter and placed an order with the taciturn barman. "I'll have sautéed duck and bread...and some herbal tea."

An older woman sitting next to her glanced her way. "Are you alone, little lady? It's dangerous for a girl like you to come to a place like this."

“I’m fine... I’m an adventurer,” said Angeline.

The woman seemed a little surprised at that answer. “Hmm... We’ve got quite a cute adventurer on our hands, then.” Evidently, she already had a drink or two in her; she talked Angeline’s ear off about this, that, and everything in between, cackling at her own words all the while. Angeline, who was never the most sociable girl, only offered a word in reply here and there, but the woman didn’t seem to mind the half-hearted acknowledgment as long as she could continue gabbing. Angeline’s attitude gradually softened, and she began to contribute a little more to the conversation. Eventually, Angeline learned that the woman was a wandering adventurer who had only just arrived in Orphen that morning.

“C-Rank?! That’s impressive at your age!”

“What about you, ma’am?”

“I’m B-Rank—just one step away from the big leagues, but it’s a big step, let me tell you,” she said, polishing off her ale with a wry smile and setting the empty tankard down with a loud *clunk*. “Hey, chief, could I get another?”

The barman wordlessly poured her another beer.

“*Nom, nom...*” Angeline stuffed some duck into her mouth. “Is it good?”

“Huh?”

“Alcohol.”

“Of course it is. It’s practically my reason for living.” The woman ended up chugging half the glass in one go.

Angeline swallowed the poultry and took a sip of tea before answering. “I...don’t think it’s good. It’s bitter and sour...and it makes my head hurt.”

“What? That’s no good... You can’t call yourself an adventurer like that. Hey, chief, can you whip up something for her that goes down nice and easy? It’s on me.” The woman produced a wallet from the folds of her coat, took out a coin, and placed it on the counter.

Angeline, alarmed at the woman’s words, nudged the coin back towards her with her fingertips. “I-I’m fine... I’d feel bad...”

“What are you talking about? You’ve got to at least be able to hold your drink, or you’ll never become a first-rate adventurer!”

“Huh... Really?” Angeline struggled to answer that. She had drunk a bit of cider at Turnera’s festivals over the years, and tried some wine in Orphen too, but she had never thought any of those drinks had tasted good. Nevertheless, it would be a huge problem if her inability to drink prevented her from becoming a better adventurer—she was determined to return to her dad only after becoming a first-rate adventurer, after all. Her mind was thoroughly set on that.

“Hm,” the barkeep quietly grunted, setting a glass down in front of Angeline filled with a steaming beverage. It appeared at first glance to be a black liquid, but on closer inspection, Angeline could discern a red shimmer around the rim. *Wine, then...*

Angeline was reluctant, but the woman who had treated her was watching her intently, so she finally resolved to take a timid sip. The spirits that rode the rising steam nearly sent her into a coughing fit, but when she tasted it, there was a sweetness in it that lingered on her tongue. Angeline was taken aback—she had anticipated it to have a mouth-puckering tartness. She took another sip. *Sweet...* Now she could pick out the scent of spices as well that made her body feel nice and warm. *Perhaps this actually is tasty...*

“How is it?” the woman asked, smiling.

“It’s sweet...and better than I thought.”

“Isn’t it? Good, good, very well done! You’re a real adventurer now!” The woman reached out and ruffled up Angeline’s hair, making her suddenly feel bashful. She flinched a bit but didn’t stop sipping her wine.

The woman laughed before throwing back the rest of her cup, then got up to leave. “Thanks for the meal! Perhaps we’ll meet again someday, but for now—fare thee well!”

Even after the woman had left, Angeline continued taking sparing sips of the sweet mulled wine. She started to get into quite a good mood and even ended up ordering seconds. When she left for home, she did so on feet that felt lighter than usual. *This might be nice after all*, she thought high-spiritedly as she dove into bed. *Once I’m back in Turnera, I’ll have a drink with dad.*

But then, the next day came.

“Urgh...”

A horrible sense of sluggishness and a slight headache left Angeline tossing and turning. The moment she’d learned to like drinking alcohol, she’d gotten ahead of herself and overdone it. All the good cheer from the night before had evaporated. *Like hell I’m ever drinking again*, Angeline swore to herself as she ground her forehead against her pillow.

## **That Elf Girl Who Left the Nest Is Still an E-Rank Adventurer**

In the forest where the trees had nearly finished turning and fallen leaves were piled high, Marguerite nimbly walked with a basket in hand. The elven maiden was dressed in a chest wrap, shorts, and a fur cardigan, and her slim rapier was slung from her waist.

“Um... What else was there?”

Marguerite checked the small note she had in her other hand before doing another inventory of all the herbs she had gathered. Now that she had registered as an E-Rank adventurer, she was visiting these woods to complete an herb-gathering request. Even at winter’s eve, there were useful plants that could be picked.

It was mainly flat open plains that stretched around Orphen, but there were the occasional hills and dells, some of which were wooded. Before ever entering a dungeon, most neophyte adventurers would get their start gathering herbs and hunting low-ranking fiends in places like these to gain funds and experience. This was how they picked up the basics of the trade. Discerning useful plants from similar-looking weeds across the vast plains was a good way to train attentiveness and observation, and navigating a forest was perfect training for dungeon exploration. New adventurers would gain experience and confidence in such places at little risk to themselves before gradually challenging increasingly more difficult jobs on the road to becoming first-rate.

Marguerite finally finished comparing the contents of her basket to the note and nodded in satisfaction. “Looking good. Man, this is way too easy.” She



stretched, yawned, and heaved a deep sigh.

To humans, the forest was almost a different world. Naturally it contained herbs, as well as lumber, firewood, game, and fruit, among other necessities for sustenance, but it was also a place riddled with danger. For any ordinary novice, even excessive vigilance might not be enough to ensure complete safety. But to the elves—who were occasionally called the people of the forest by other races—woodlands could never so much as cause them to stumble. As a matter of fact, Marguerite felt more comfortable here than when she was walking around the city of Orphen. Her heart was set at ease with every tree-scented breath she took.

Marguerite thought it would feel like a waste to return to Orphen already when the sun was still high and she had already finished what she had come to do, so she set her basket down and sat on a stump. She looked up through the forest canopy's leafless branches to see thin wispy clouds trailing across the sky. The wind was cold, but Marguerite hailed from much colder climes in elven lands; the weather here couldn't even make her shiver. She leaned back against a nearby tree's trunk and stretched out her legs. She could feel her blood gradually circulating to her feet, which had become a little wearied from walking without rest. Some kinds of fatigue were only felt once the labor was over.

Marguerite absentmindedly gazed up into the air as her mind wandered. Her life in Orphen had been fun so far. She had swiftly found close friends in Anessa and Miriam, and though she hadn't yet met Belgrieve's daughter, Angeline, the stories she had heard of her painted her as an interesting person, and she looked forward to finally meeting the girl. Then there was the culture and cuisine of the city and a sprawling cityscape she never could have imagined in elven territory. Every day felt like a festival to Marguerite.

Yet despite all the fun that Marguerite was having in her private life, her work was another matter. She had finally joined the ranks of the adventurers she had so greatly admired, but she had yet to do anything flashy herself. It had been far more thrilling back when she had been out on her own and slaying demons. With that said, she had been made all too aware of her limitations back in Turnera, so Marguerite mostly heeded what Belgrieve had told her. She was

confident she could hold her own even against an S-Rank adventurer in bladework, but that alone wasn't enough to call herself an adventurer. It was important to properly master the basics—a lesson imparted by both Belgrieve and her granduncle.

Nevertheless, Marguerite couldn't deny the mounting sense of frustration in her youthful heart. She yearned to dive into a difficult dungeon and contend with all she had against a powerful foe like a demon. These feelings perpetually blazed in her heart.

Eventually, Marguerite got up and brushed the withered leaves and dirt from her shorts and retrieved her basket. "All right, let's head back."

After lodging with Anessa and Miriam on her first day in Orphen, Marguerite had remained a freeloader in their home. She was always looking forward to hearing the tales of their feats each night. *What story will they tell today?* she wondered as she made her way out of the woods.

Her musings came to a halt when she came across something strange near the edge of the woods. It was a large quadruped covered in gray fur except for its long, slender tail. It was about as large as a cow but resembled nothing so much as an enormous rat. She could see the beast was gnawing on something right in the center of the path.

"The hell's that?"

Marguerite cocked her head quizzically as she approached it. The large rat took notice of her and turned her way. There was a frenzied look in its eyes, and its fangs were long and sharp like knives—likewise for the claws on its front legs. If Marguerite had known what a mutant variant was, she might have recognized it as such. The beast made a squeaking noise at her.

Marguerite blinked. "What's your deal?"

In the next instant, the rat's hind legs propelled it forward with great momentum. Its jaws opened wide, and its fangs and claws were poised to slash and tear her to pieces.

Marguerite casually and slickly avoided it, drawing her rapier and swinging it as the beast launched past. When it landed behind her, the rat's head fell to the

earth—there would be no second charge.

“What was that...?” Marguerite still looked befuddled as she sheathed her sword and briskly continued on her way. She wanted to get back soon and enjoy a drink.

The next day, when she went to the guild and sat in the lobby waiting for a request, she overheard some chatter from a nearby party.

“I heard they found a variant in the forest.”

“Yeah, only after someone killed it though. The guild appraiser had a look at it, and it turns out it was potentially a Calamity-Class fiend. Who do you think took care of it?”

*Calamity-Class, huh?* Marguerite mused, her hands folded behind her head. *What an ominous-sounding name—surely that would have been a formidable foe. Maybe I’ll have the chance to fight something like that if I climb up the ranks...* The thought filled her with renewed motivation.

## **Drinks Consumed, Conversations Bloomed**

Belgrieve, with Charlotte and Byaku in tow, was guided to a pub he had never been to before down a back alley. The small eatery was only marked by a barely visible signboard. Dortos and Cheborg were regulars here—the owner was apparently a former member of Cheborg’s party.

The man in question now slammed down his stein with gusto and laughed heartily. “That so? The Paladin’s just as sharp as ever, huh? His grandniece is even a demon slayer! That’s quite an accomplishment!”

“Lionel did tell me about the Paladin’s kin arriving... Hmm, I guess she couldn’t have turned out to be anything but an elite adventurer with that bloodline. Oh, the youth these days are a real handful,” Dortos grouched as he tipped back his glass.

At a glance, it looked to Belgrieve as though the two men complemented each other well, but there were still signs—albeit small ones—of how they had once competed with each other and, in competing, raised each other to new heights. That had been long ago—twenty years ago, when Belgrieve was an active

adventurer, they had already been S-Rank. They had remained in Orphen for a long time, both of them devoted to their crafts. That dedication was incredible to contemplate, and Belgrieve was simultaneously awestruck and dejected that he himself hadn't been able to do the same. In any case, the two men seemed to know Angeline well—it was more amazing to Belgrieve that these two living legends regarded his own daughter as their equal.

“How did you two meet Ange?”

“Hmm... I don't remember what started it.”

“That girl... She was rising through the ranks like crazy, so I took interest in her. ‘You're not half bad!’ I shouted at her, and she didn't even flinch. ‘It's the General!’ she shouted back! Gah ha ha ha! Hey, keep up! The drinks are lagging!” Cheborg called out loudly.

“Shut up!” came the shouted reply from the elderly barkeep. Belgrieve glanced over at the man, noting his broad forehead and sour expression. He was holding a bottle in one hand and a decanter in the other. “Quit hollering just because your hearing is leaving you, you dunderhead! I'm bringing it now, just wait!”

“Huh? What? Did you say something?” Cheborg asked, as loud as ever.

“I said to shut the hell up! If you're going senile, you can at least pipe down!”

Their thunderous exchange left Charlotte covering her ears, her eyes spinning.

Dortos let out a weary sigh. “Quit fighting among former party members, you fools.”

The barman, still evidently annoyed, set down a decanter filled to the brim with wine on the table. “It's always noisy as hell whenever Cheborg's involved. He's always been loud, but it's only gotten worse with his hearing on the decline.”

“Indeed, well, we're all aging here.”

“Allow me to pour for you, Dortos,” Belgrieve said.

“Much obliged.”

The owner watched Belgrieve pour with a bemused expression as he packed

his pipe with some kind of herb. “So you’re Ange’s old man, huh? I see... I fought alongside her when we were dealing with that demon. You’ve got quite a daughter, you do.”

*Is that so?* Belgrieve mused. He’d heard the man was a former member of Cheborg’s party, but he had never suspected he had fought alongside Angeline. Belgrieve appraised the man in a new light; he took notice of the man’s strong, toned arms under his rolled-up sleeves, and the glimpses of old scars. It surely took a lot to make it in an S-Rank party.

Cheborg enthusiastically set his cup back down. By now, the decanter was already nearly empty. “You got that right! I thought I’d be the one killing the demon, but she got ahead of me!”

“If I failed to do it myself, it would have been impossible for you!”

The owner puffed out a trail of smoke, chuckling. “If we were just ten years younger!”

“My thoughts exactly. My body simply isn’t as limber as it used to be...”

“What’s this? You’re all sounding pathetic! Ange’s gonna laugh at you if she hears you moping like that! Hey, bring out the hard liquor! I’m not feeling this at all! Stow the cheap stuff!”

“Cheap stuff is what you deserve!”

“Shut up, you old farts...” Byaku muttered.

The barman served up distilled spirits, and the mood soon took a turn. Dortos and Cheborg both showed vigor unimaginable from old men in their seventies—so much so that Belgrieve resembled an older man by comparison. Talk turned smoothly from what Graham was doing in Turnera to debating the fundamentals of training, and then on to Angeline in turn without pause. Belgrieve told them about his old comrades too, but when it came to the Exalted Blade Percival, the Aether Buster Kasim, and Satie the elf, the old soldiers had only vague recollections to share. They had hardly interacted with them, and they knew nothing of their present whereabouts. Belgrieve couldn’t blame them—it was a long time ago, after all. When he thought about it like that, the gulf of time between now and then felt practically abyssal to him.

Charlotte stirred beside him. “Dad, are you all right?”

“Hmm? Yeah...” Belgrieve smiled wryly as he rubbed his slightly ruddy cheeks. The mood was very merry, and even if the spirits were cut with water, their fumes were potent and aromatic. He seemed to be getting inebriated faster now.

When it was time to leave and they went outside, the cold wind felt very pleasant on his warm cheeks. He mused that he had somehow come back to the city he’d thought he would never return to, sharing drinks with legends he had admired long ago. It felt like a dream.

He lightly tapped his peg leg against the ground before slowly starting on his way. The main thoroughfare was as crowded as ever, and the sight of it brought his heart back to that time so long ago, though the rest of his body felt the intervening years. He took Charlotte by the hand and went on his way, but not before an enormous yawn escaped him. He rubbed drowsy tears from his eyes.

## **Beyond the Clouds**

After the shearing was done and the grime was washed out of the wool, it would be nice and fluffy. Then all that was left was to spin it into yarn—that would be a task that the villagers of Turnera would work on every night for the rest of the year. When they were stuck in their homes during the long winter, they would have extra time to sit before the fireplace spinning yarn.

But today wasn’t one of those cold winter days—it was summer, and the refreshing breeze blew through the open door and swirled around the house. Mit sat on the floor playing with the fluffy wool, seemingly fascinated with it. Despite the airiness of the fluff, each thread once separated was firm and taut, and slightly prickly when he squeezed it in his hand. This seemed to be endlessly interesting to Mit.

“Hey...” Marguerite called out from where she sat a short distance away.

Mit turned towards her with his wide, black eyes.

She patted her crossed-over thighs. “Y-You can sit here if you want.”

“No!” Mit turned the other way and continued touching the wool. Marguerite

pouted.

Belgrieve, Graham, and Duncan had all gone out earlier, variously to the fields, forest, and river to perform their respective jobs. Thus, Marguerite found herself in the uncommon position of minding the house and looking after Mit. *It's nice to take it easy now and then*, she had thought when she agreed to do it. But now she found herself at a loss, because Mit hadn't taken to her at all. "Hey, look. I know it's my fault, but..." she began, approaching the boy.

"No!" Mit summarily rejected her. He was never defiant whenever Belgrieve or Graham were around, but he was on his guard whenever he was alone with the elven maiden.

Marguerite sighed. *Come on. I know I tried to kill you before, but this is a bit much...* "What was I supposed to do in that situation? Honestly, Bell and my granduncle were the ones acting rash back then..." *You'd think he'd have gotten over it by now*, she thought as she glared at Mit resentfully.

Mit continued playing with the wool, but suddenly he turned, got up, and tottered over to the window.

Marguerite followed him, curious. "What's up?" she asked.

Mit was gazing outside. There were cumulonimbus clouds looming in the otherwise vivid blue sky, casting distinct shadows on the earth below. The gnarled and twisted clouds resembled gargantuan stone mountains.

Mit looked up at those clouds and then back at the wool. "Sheep...in the sky."

"Huh? Those ain't sheep. They're clouds."

Mit looked at Marguerite and blinked. "Clouds..."

"Yep, clouds. They float all around the sky, see. And you know, rain, snow, that sort of stuff, falls from those clouds," Marguerite explained, opening the window and admitting the gentle heat of the summery air into the room. Mit squinted, then picked up some of the wool and made his way for the door.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Walking..."

Marguerite pouted. "Don't go off on your own! Do you really dislike me that

much...?" she groaned as she chased after him.

The height of summer was near, and the sun beat down more harshly with every passing day. Mit's lustrous black hair glimmered in the sun as he ran, and Marguerite had to wipe the sweat from her brow as she followed.

He would stop now and then to gaze up at the clouds in the distance before taking off again.

"How far are you gonna go?" Marguerite wearily called out to him.

Mit stopped and turned to her. "Past there..." he said, pointing at the horizon.

"Past...the clouds?"

"Yeah... They're fluffy," Mit explained, squeezing the wool in his hand.

Marguerite quietly pondered that for a moment until suddenly dashing towards Mit. She grabbed him with both hands and lifted him up.

"No!" Mit cried out, squirming in her grasp.

"It'll take a lifetime with those tiny feet! Just leave it to me!" Marguerite said, smiling. She hoisted Mit up on her shoulder and began to race forth. Mit stared wide-eyed ahead, his arms and legs flapping around and his hair billowing in the wind.

"What do you think? Fast, right?" Marguerite boasted as she weaved her way through the trees and over rocks, pressing ever onward—or so it seemed. The ride ended as abruptly as it had begun when they came upon the river. Marguerite was forced to slow down to a halt, a troubled frown on her lips.

"Aw, darn... It's a dead end. Hmm, is there a good crossing...?"

As Marguerite considered their options, Mit hopped down and immediately raced along the riverbank. Marguerite turned to see Graham in that direction, dangling a fishing line into the water. Mit ran to him and clambered up his back.

Graham glanced over his shoulder, then turned to Marguerite for a moment before returning his attention to the water's surface.

"Hmph... So it's all about granduncle, huh?"

Marguerite frustratedly kicked a rock at her feet and turned to return home—



but then Mit ran back to her and tugged at her sleeve.

“Maggie...”

“Huh? Um...”

“Maggie too.”

“Oh... Right!”

Marguerite sheepishly took Mit’s hand and let the boy lead her back to see Graham.

## On the Road

The small, one-horse wagon rattled down the road, bound for Estogal. Gilmenja held the reins, while Angeline slouched against the railing behind her, staring at the distant scenery.

A leisurely ride from Orphen to Estogal City would take roughly half a month. Perhaps they would arrive sooner if they made haste, but they were headed there for the ball and nothing more. Arriving early would be pointless. Thus they chose to take their time.

Usually, a laid-back journey would be a bit more enjoyable, but now that her vacation had been ruined, Angeline was not in the best of moods. Gilmenja, who had taken on a supporting role for this journey, looked over her shoulder with her usual grin.

“Someone’s crabby. Empty stomach getting to you?”

“Not exactly...” Angeline said, sullenly resting her chin on the wagon’s edge. The wagon would jump every time it hit a stone, and the impact would ring from her jaw to the top of her head and make the scenery vibrate.

Gilmenja lightly tossed something over to Angeline, who caught it one-handed without looking. It was a baked sweet with dried fruits kneaded into the dough.

Scowling, Angeline nevertheless scarfed it down. She could feel the moisture draining from her mouth. “Do you have any water?”

“Nope.”

“Really...?”

“We’d be doomed if I didn’t.” Gilmenja tossed over a flask.

It had been about a week since they had left Orphen. It was supposed to grow warmer the farther south they headed, but this was mitigated by the encroaching winter. Some days, there would be snow and ice mixed in with the rain, and the winds would mercilessly stab against their skin.

After quenching her thirst, Angeline pulled up the blanket draped over her shoulders so that it covered her head. Just the day before, they had endured the sleet-filled rain, and everything in sight was damp and dreary.

“How long to Estogal, Gil?”

“We’re making good time. We should be there tomorrow.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Kidding. We’re around halfway there, tee hee.”

Angeline puffed her cheeks out and leaned against the railing again. Gilmenja’s antics were nothing new—she was always casually lying. Angeline gave up fretting over it and focused on the scenery.

She could see windmills in the distance, and beyond them, mountains adorned in the reds and yellows of their autumnal forests. Soon the leaves would start to fall. In Turnera, autumn would already be at its peak, and a carpet of leaves would have already spread over the forest floor.

Indeed, it would be time to prepare for the autumn festival. It was around this time of year that she would have searched the mountains for cowberries and akebia and rummaged through the fallen leaves for mushrooms. Though the skies would be dark and gray in winter, they would remain a piercing clear blue up until the autumn festival. The birds would yet be seen tracing circular paths above, and from across brooks, she would often see bears foraging in preparation for their hibernation.

Crawling towards the driver’s bench, Angeline took a seat and huddled into Gilmenja’s side.

For once, the ever-smug Gilmenja was mildly taken aback. “What?”

“It’s nothing,” said Angeline, though she nestled even closer. She was terribly lonely and felt compelled to stick close to someone. Though Gilmenja was bemused by the strange look on Angeline’s face, she sensed something was up with the girl. Regaining her composure, she prodded at Angeline’s shoulder.

“I could never replace your father, heh heh.”

“I know that. No one could replace him...”

“Hmm, well, seeing as you’re clinging to me like this, I must be standing in for someone. Now who could that be?”

“Don’t be mean.”

Gilmenja cackled.

A peddler’s wagon rolled on a little ahead of them. The two wagons were traveling at the same speed, so theirs was tracing the wheel ruts of the peddler’s vehicle. Farther ahead was a coach which seated many more passengers, and from it the faint tunes of troubadours rode the wind.

Many traveling performers and traders would already be in Turnera for the festival. As a child, Angeline had enjoyed their dramatic songs and performances. Her eyes would glimmer at the tales of S-Rank adventurers hunting down dragons and other high-ranking fiends. They were different from Belgrieve’s tales—those were more grounded in reality—but still, they stirred her heart.

Now they would be singing of her exploits. Her cheeks had flushed crimson when she had heard a minstrel singing a song of demon slaying in the last town they had stopped in. It was a little unsettling to hear the Black-Haired Valkyrie’s name invoked with such fanfare.

It was because of her renown that her trip home was suddenly canceled, and she had been summoned to the archduke’s stronghold instead. The powers she had gained out of her desire to be praised by Belgrieve had come back to bite her. Angeline pouted, leaning even more of her weight against Gilmenja.

“You’re heavy, Ange. Do you like me that much?”

“That’s not it...”

She didn’t quite understand it herself, but this was far more comfortable than hugging her own knees in a corner would have been.

Gilmenja grinned as she ruffled the girl’s hair. “Pull yourself together. We’ll reach the next town soon.”

“Urgh...”

Angeline sullenly looked down the road, taking in the sight of the other carriages and the grass waving by the roadside. The view was splendid, but she saw no signs of any village.

“What’s wrong? Heh heh.”

Gilmenja peered into her face, looking amused as ever.

*Another lie*, thought Angeline. But she knew she would be teased if she said anything about it.

## Feet on the Ground

The orphanage’s garden was quite vast in spite of being contained by the stone walls surrounding the church grounds, and its soil was quite fertile after long years of tending. Each season would turn out a fresh bounty of produce to furnish the orphanage’s dinner table, something that the sisters and the children would remember in their daily thanksgiving to Vienna for her blessings.

Angeline stood up from where she had been working between raised beds and wiped away sweat with the back of her hand. Her long hair had been securely tied up and covered with a kerchief, and she was dressed suitably for doing some gardening. She had come to help out at the orphanage earlier. Granted, she also wanted to visit Rosetta, who had been injured during the recent attack, but there was much work to be done for the church adjoining the orphanage, many everyday chores to be done aside from routine charity and worship. Just losing one worker in Rosetta left quite a gap to fill. Charlotte was also proactively helping out, evidently feeling some responsibility.

“Ah... The weeds are certainly doing well this year... Too well,” Angeline

muttered as she looked at all the wild grass she'd plucked from the beds. Whether it was Orphen or Turnera, agricultural work remained largely the same.

Charlotte, who had been pulling weeds nearby, turned to Angeline. She wore a straw hat, and her fair skin was smeared with dirt. "Wow, sis. You've already done that much?"

"Heh heh," Angeline chuckled. "Farming is in my blood. How about you, Bucky boy?"

Angeline looked around to find Byaku staring sullenly back at her. He seemed to have made just about as much headway as Angeline herself, but she frowned when she inspected his work. "Sloppy. This won't do. Take it from the top."

"I pulled them out, dammit."

"You didn't—you just tore off the tops. You need to pull them up from the roots."

"Same difference."

"It's completely different. The way you're going, they'll grow back in no time. Weeds are stronger than you think."

"You don't say." Though his words were begrudging, Byaku offered no further protest. He hunkered down again and reached for the grass stubs with his fingertips. The fact he'd ripped them so low to the ground only made them that much harder to uproot.

The sun was beaming down, but the winds gave them succor from its searing heat. When the church bells rang out, the children that had been hunkered down and working alongside Angeline and the others all took off clamoring in the same direction, chattering animatedly as they went.

Angeline dusted herself off and mopped up her sweat with her handkerchief, taking the chance to catch her breath. "Noon already..."

The sun was near its zenith, and her hunger was another sign that it was about lunchtime—or perhaps the thought of noon was what made her hungry in the first place.

After washing her hands at the well, Angeline entered the kitchen and found that the nuns were still in the middle of cooking. They were stirring a pot of stew and boiling chunks of wheat dough in a large pot. It looked like it would be a little longer.

Charlotte tugged at Angeline's sleeve. "Sis, can we go see Rosetta?"

"Yeah, sure..."

Angeline, Charlotte, and Byaku went to Rosetta's room, a space shared by four nuns. There were two bunk beds on opposite walls, and Rosetta was seated on one of these with a heavy tome on her lap. It seemed to be the scripture of the Church of Vienna. She muttered faintly under her breath, committing what she read to memory by recitation, but she turned to them with a smile as soon as she heard the door open.

"Sorry for all this. It's already noon, right? It must be hot out there."

"It's nothing... You look like you're holding up well, Ms. Rosetta."

"Hee hee... It's all thanks to you, Ange. And thanks for your hard work, Char. I'm sure the gardening was a lot of work."

"No, sis taught me everything, so I did all right. She's very good at it!"

"You came from a farming family, right, Ange?"

"That's right. Turnera is a very nice place. You should go there on vacation sometime, Rosetta."

"Ha ha... One of these days, but I can't really leave this place now. Just look at how busy it is when I'm not around to help."

Angeline pursed her lips, pouting.

Charlotte giggled at Angeline's reaction. "It's farther north, right? Then is it even colder than Orphen?"

"Hmm... I guess so. But the summers are refreshingly cool," Angeline said, reminiscing over her time in Turnera. She recalled how the winds would gently soothe her skin in spite of the blazing sun and how the tall grass of the plains would sway in tandem, each blade shimmering. From afar, it looked as though the light itself was flowing across the vast plain like waves.

Belgrieve was always tending to their crops at home, so the soil was nice and well-kept, and sometimes she would walk barefoot through the furrows. The soft, damp dirt sent a chilly frisson through the soles of her feet, which was quite pleasant in her recollection. In this soil, the summer crops would already be sagging with a bounty of vegetables, and in her memories (nostalgia tinted as they were), these always added vibrant colors to their summertime meals.

“Agh,” Angeline groaned.

“What’s wrong, sis?”

“Nothing... I’m just looking forward to going home, that’s all. I wonder how our crops are doing now...” Even now, she could practically feel the ticklish sensation of cool topsoil under her feet.

Rosetta giggled and closed the sacred tome. “You don’t really feel like an adventurer, Ange. You’re down-to-earth, and you don’t mind getting your hands dirty.”

“You think so? Well, I haven’t had the time for gardening since I came to Orphen... Maybe it’s a good thing I helped out here.”

Charlotte’s eyes were suddenly drawn to Angeline’s open palm. Wielding a sword for as long as she had had resulted first in blisters, then firm calluses, and the soil from the garden had worked its way into the crevices. There was still some grime in there, even though she had washed her hands. Charlotte looked at her own hands. “Will my hands ever become like yours?”

“Hee hee... Dad’s hands are even more amazing than mine.”

The light pouring through the window momentarily dimmed from a passing cloud. Byaku yawned. There was some kind of ruckus brewing in the dining room.

*Sounds like lunch*, Angeline thought as she rose and stretched out.

## Full Moon’s Lullaby

The stabbing pain in his right leg caused Belgrieve to jolt up out of his sleep. It was the first bout of phantom pain he’d experienced in quite a while. *The leg*

*isn't even there anymore, so why does it hurt so much?* It seemed such a senseless ache to Belgrieve. He gritted his teeth and tensed his knees as he endured the wave of agony.

After some time, the ache passed. While Belgrieve was focused on steadying his breath, he felt small arms cling to him.

“Dad...”

It was his four-year-old daughter, Angeline, nuzzling her face into his side.

“Sorry... Did I wake you?”

“Uh-huh...”

His sudden rising had apparently awakened Angeline, who had fallen asleep hugging him. His discomposed state seemed to frighten her, judging by the tears welling up in her bleary eyes.

The pale light of the moon shone down brightly through the window; it seemed to be only a little past midnight. Belgrieve continued to sit up for some time, caressing Angeline’s head. There wasn’t an iota of sleepiness left in his body. Angeline was still a little fretful, but his calming head pats eventually caused her expression to soften, and even as she lay there against him, her gaze became unfocused. Eventually, her breaths settled into a sleeper’s rhythm. He laid her down softly before trying to leave the bed to stretch his aching body a little, but before he could, Angeline sleepily grasped his shirt tightly.

“What to do...?” Belgrieve mulled it over for a bit. Ultimately, he still intended to go for a walk. Belgrieve reached for and somehow managed to attach his peg leg before wrapping the blanket around Angeline and lifting her into his arms. Angeline murmured unintelligibly in her sleep but showed no signs of awakening other than shifting her posture and burying her face in his chest.

When Belgrieve left the house, it was to see the moon’s glow pouring down upon the earth and causing every dewy blade of grass to sparkle in its light. Everything upon which the moonlight fell was brightly illumined, but anything that was hidden from it—every hollow and divot in the ground—was cast into impenetrable, pitch-black shadow. The result was a wondrous (albeit muted) scenery of starkly contrasted light and dark. Tonight was a full moon, as large as



though it were the night's sun, and likewise bright enough to occlude the stars. Each time the wind blew and shook the tree boughs, the sounds of rustling leaves would fill the air. Even though it had been so warm earlier, nights like this tended to be chilly. Angeline nestled even closer to him in his arms.

Belgrieve's walk took him all the way to the village square, but he was soon on the way back home again. Even that short jaunt had managed to put him in a different mood.

"Where...? Outside?" Angeline's eyes cracked open slightly, and she rubbed them with the back of her hand.

"Yeah, we're on a little walk."

"A walk...?" Angeline shivered, nuzzling against him.

Belgrieve held her close to him. "Are you cold?"

"No... Dad is warm," she said as she pressed her body against his warmth. Belgrieve smiled and patted her head.

Whenever Belgrieve was stricken with phantom pain, he would always think back to the past. It was the same agony from the moment he had lost his leg, exactly as it had felt back then, so whether he liked it or not, those old memories would suddenly stir unbidden from the depths of his memory. *It's been more than ten years*, he thought, sighing.

These episodes had become far less frequent ever since he'd found Angeline, but they still weren't all that rare even now. Whenever it happened, he wouldn't be able to sleep for the rest of the night—not so much because of the pain as because of the surge of old memories casting his heart into turmoil. That was what he believed, at least. It was because of those memories that he would be too troubled to lie down and close his eyes.

He sat in a chair at the end of the yard and gazed up at the moon. Angeline, seated on his lap and still wrapped in the blanket, relaxed against him.

"Big moon..."

"That's right. We have a full moon tonight."

"It's round...and bright..." Angeline squinted at its radiance, holding out her

palm towards it. “I got it!” she exclaimed, making a grabbing motion and pulling her hand back. She carefully opened it again and peered in. And then, disappointed, she pouted and looked at the sky. The moon was still where it had always been.

“It got away...”

“Ha ha! The moon’s a slippery devil.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks, bouncing up and down frustratedly on Belgrieve’s lap. “Dad, catch it!”

“Hmm? Sure, if that’s what you want. In that case...”

Belgrieve set Angeline aside, got up, and went back inside the house. When he returned to his seat, he was holding a cup of water.

Angeline stared at him curiously. “What?”

“Look, I already caught it,” Belgrieve said, showing Angeline the water in the cup. A small moon was floating, wavering atop the water.

“It’s true!”

Angeline excitedly held her face over the cup. And suddenly, the moon was gone.

Belgrieve chuckled. “Look, you scared it and it ran away.”

“Urgh. Where are you, moon?”

Angeline stuck her hands into the cup and stirred the water up with her fingers. It splashed out from the rim and wet the sides.

Belgrieve smiled and got up again. “Now let’s go back inside. If you sleep well like a good girl, I’ll teach you how to catch the moon tomorrow.”

“Really?” Angeline smiled joyously as she clung to her father.

The moon continued to shine high up in the sky.

**Volume 5**  
**Short Stories**



## Proper Present Protocol

After a boisterous family meeting, Maria left, then Byaku slipped out after her, looking strangely irritated, with Charlotte chasing after him. Kasim departed after both of them, unable to let them be, and that left Belgrieve alone to hold down the fort. He looked around the silent house and let out a deep breath.

“Oh... That’s right,” he recalled, and he took out the hair ornament he had purchased. It was a simple silver piece with a red gemstone.

Belgrieve folded his arms and pondered. *Now, how do I hand this over?*

Sure, he had bought it with the intention of giving it to Angeline, but now he grew strangely uneasy when it came to actually giving it to her. It seemed a bit cold to look her straight in the eye and just say, “Here,” but it didn’t seem like it would be any better to make a big deal out of it and raise her expectations either. He feared that would cause her to be disappointed with how meager of a present it actually was. Furthermore, Belgrieve didn’t know the first thing about wrapping gifts.

Had Angeline been the same young girl from Turnera, he could have handed it over without a care, but she had spent her impressionable years in Orphen, and in a sense, she knew the city better than he did. Nevertheless, he had already bought the present, and now Belgrieve was left to fret over whether she would be happy about it or not.

*She’s your daughter; what are you getting so feckless about?* he scolded himself, and wondered why his innate cowardice had to emerge here of all places.

“Good grief, I’m a hopeless father...” he grumbled and hung his head.

All of this agonizing came right after he had just found a tentative resolution to Byaku’s problem, and in that light, perhaps this seemed completely inconsequential. But it was a huge issue to Belgrieve, who still treasured his daughter over all else. Everyone wanted their gift to be appreciated—even more so if it was for someone precious.

Of course, Angeline would probably accept anything Belgrieve gave her with glee. Belgrieve himself would never disdain a gift from his daughter, but perhaps... Perhaps that was *precisely* why he agonized over whether this was really all right.

Suddenly, he found himself lost in reminiscing about when he taught Angeline how to use a blade. Then, he remembered the time when he thought she would be fine on her own and he had bought her first knife. She had jumped for joy, but she'd seemed happier just to be receiving a present from him rather than for the blade itself. After that, he had bought her a small adventuring pouch and a sword, among other things, and her delight each time she received one was such that it made him happy as well.

"But... Well, those were all *practical* items."

Belgrieve placed a hand on his brow and sighed. All else aside, she was still a girl, and yet he could not remember buying her pretty clothing, or even any accessories at all. It was dreadful in itself that this was the first time he would do so. With that in mind, he grew terrified of handing over this hair piece. *Is it really all right for her first accessory from me to be something so plain?*

Indeed, Angeline had been summoned to the archduke's estate, where she had been adorned in brilliant attire. Naturally, the hairpin Belgrieve had bought would not hold a candle to anything the archduke might have offered.

After his solitary ruminations, his navel-gazing took off on strange tangents. *What am I doing at my age?* he thought, holding his head. His spiraling was interrupted when the door suddenly swung open.

"I'm back!" Angeline's energetic voice heralded her own return.

Belgrieve perked up, his mouth opening and closing a few times before he mustered a response. "Welcome back, Ange. You're early."

"Yeah, it wasn't much of a job... Oh, right, about that! I got to take some of the dragon meat home with me. For dinner, how about we... Hmm?"

Angeline's eyes stopped on the hair piece on the table in front of Belgrieve.

"That's..."

“Oh, well, this is...”

“Where’d you get that? Did someone give it to you?”

“No... I bought it, thinking I would give it to you, but...”

“Me?” Angeline blankly stared between the hair piece and Belgrieve.

“Y-Yeah... Sorry, I’m not good with these sorts of things. If you don’t like it—”

Before Belgrieve could finish, Angeline pounced on him with the speed of a fleeing hare, her fiery eyes peering into Belgrieve’s face.

“You’re giving it to me?! A present?! Really?!”

“Uh... Yeah...” He picked it up, somewhat flustered, and handed it to her. After inspecting it front and back, she burst into a beaming smile.

“Hooray! Thanks, dad! I’m so happy! Hee hee... Tee hee hee!”

Then, she hugged Belgrieve and rubbed her head into his chest. Her reaction was no different from when she had received the knife and the adventuring tools.

*I’m an idiot.* Exhausted, Belgrieve gently patted Angeline’s head.

Suddenly, she lifted her face and held up the hair piece.

“Where should I wear it? The front or the back?”

“Given the shape...I’d say it probably goes up front.”

“Put it on for me!”

“No, I don’t really know about these things.”

*Is this good? How about this?* The parent and child debated the question until finally, it had ended up where it seemed best suited. As she looked into the mirror, Angeline’s face melted into a goofy smile, and she was quickly bouncing around the room. There was joy radiating from every pore on her body, and Belgrieve felt happy just looking at her.

Now that he was seeing her like this, he felt it suited her well and knew he was stupid for fretting over it at all.

“Hee hee... Does it look good on me?”

“Yes, very. Thank goodness...”

*I finally managed to give her a girlish present*, he thought, relieved. He was already considering giving her a pretty dress next. In that moment, he never could have imagined that he would soon be bursting into tears at the sight of her wearing a dress for the first time.

## Cock-A-Doodle-Doo

More often than not, Turnera’s early mornings would be graced by a rooster’s crowing. Whether it had been the kind of brisk summer night when the villagers could sleep at ease or a frosty winter’s eve when they would curl up under their sheets to stave off the dark’s biting chill, it was inevitable that the crowing of roosters would emerge from all around the village ere dawn, loud enough to rouse any light sleeper.

The house was pitch-black when Angeline (then eleven years old) opened her eyes. It wouldn’t have been unusual for it to take a moment for her eyes to adjust to the light of day, but there was nothing to see now—it was practically night still. She saw her father was still sound asleep next to her, so she curled up under the covers and tried to return to slumber—but she found herself strangely wide awake. It was the beginning of spring, and it wasn’t as fiercely cold as it had been a month before, but it was still frosty outside the covers. She didn’t feel like facing that, so she opted to toss and turn instead until her eyelids eventually began to droop again—only for another rooster’s call to rouse her once more. She wasn’t usually affected this much. *So why today?*

This time Belgrieve had also woken up, so she ended up going on a morning walk with him. When the two of them ventured outside, she saw it was still dark, though there was a faint light in the eastern sky. They ate breakfast after they returned, and she helped line the rack with the firewood Belgrieve had split. After that was Angeline’s free time, but ever since she had proclaimed her desire to become an adventurer, she had been training her skills with the sword more than ever before. Thus, her free time had essentially turned into training time, so she found herself once again facing off against her father with a wooden sword in the yard. Their weapons clashed a few times, but Angeline’s

movements were duller than usual. Belgrieve watched her, perplexed.

“Ange, are you tired? Maybe we should call it quits for today.”

“Um, w-well...” Angeline hemmed and hawed, fidgeting. *Why is the rooster’s crowing racing through my mind?*

Belgrieve kneaded his beard with a wry smile. “I’m not angry or anything. It’s important to rest now and then... Is there something on your mind?”

“U-Um, well, you see—” Angeline told him how the roosters had been on her mind since the early morning.

Belgrieve reacted with a bemused look and crossed arms. “I see. If it’s bothering you, why don’t you go to Kerry’s house and see? He has a large chicken coop over there.”

*That might do it...* Angeline put on an overcoat and hat before trudging her way through the still-thick layer of snow towards the center of the village. Kerry’s house had a sheep stable on the premises, and she could hear the bleating as she approached. Apart from the occasional stray cat who wandered through, Belgrieve kept no livestock, so all this vivacious clamoring was intriguingly different to Angeline. When she peered through the door, she saw Barnes forking hay into the pens from large mounds. She observed him at work, intrigued, until Barnes eventually took notice of her.

“Ange? What are you doing there?”

“Just watching... You have chickens, right?”

“We do. What of it?”

“Can I see them?”

Barnes gave her a funny look but took her to the chicken coop anyways, which radiated with the stench of chicken dung. The roosters glared at Angeline intimidatingly, so she glared right back at them.

“Satisfied?” Barnes asked, after she had looked around for a bit.

“Which one was crying this morning?”

“This morning? Well, only the roosters crow like that... We’re not the only



household who keeps poultry though.”

Observing the chickens walking around the coop, scratching and pecking at the ground, didn’t help to clear Angeline’s mind.

When Barnes saw that Angeline was lost in her thoughts, he clapped his hands loudly. “That’s right—come to think of it, we have chicks that were born not too long ago. Wanna see them?”

“Chicks?”

Angeline followed Barnes into the coop to an area that was sectioned off. It was lined with small boxes, and an old cloth was hung in front to keep the inside dark.

“Keep quiet, okay?”

Barnes carefully pushed the cloth aside and urged her to take a peek. Angeline looked just in time to see something small and fluffy make cheeping sounds as it fled to the back of the pen. She saw a very round hen nesting there with white-feathered chicks flocking around her, crawling under her wings, or hopping onto her back and making a huge ruckus. The hen gently spread her wings out to hide her chicks, but they had grown large by now, and there were a fair few of them to boot, so they were all sticking out and acting a little anxious.

“Cute...”

“Aren’t they? You can have a few if you want. Just ask my old man and he’ll give some to you.”

*Something this cute can come home with me?* Angeline’s heart wavered, but reason prevailed and she shook her head. “No... It’s all right. But thanks.”

With that, she left the coop—it wasn’t like she wanted to see the chicks that badly. Even so, she felt like her heart had settled down. On the way back, it was like the cheeping of the baby chickens still lingered in her ears. But it wouldn’t be long until she set off for the big city; keeping animals of any kind would only make it harder to go.

When she returned, Belgrieve looked up from his yarn spinning.

“Welcome back. How was it?”

“They were cute... Can we continue training, dad?”

“Sure, after I finish up with this.”

Off in the distance, a rooster sounded off once more.

## **Ladies’ Tea Party**

Yuri leaned against the table with her head propped up in her hand and heaved a deep sigh. “Time sure flies...” she mused.

“That came out of nowhere,” said Gilmenja, who was sitting across from her.

“I mean, it feels like only yesterday that Leo returned to Orphen.”

“Yeah, back then, I thought it was hilarious how that idiot could be a guild master.”

“He insisted it was a do-nothing post and that he would be set for life...”

“You should have just been honest with yourself and followed him back then. It’s your own fault for stubbornly staying at the imperial capital.”

“Oh, shut up,” she replied, as a waitress silently appeared to change out their teapot.

They were in a café in downtown Orphen. The snow had been falling down from the early morning yet again, but the sky was still its brightest around midday. This somewhat sluggish early afternoon light crept its way through the window, while a calm, quiet air settled around the sparse clientele. From time to time, they could hear the clattering of ceramics punctuating hushed conversations that were too quiet for them to eavesdrop on.

Placing her cup on the table, Gilmenja said, “You’ve started to look so old and stressed ever since you came here. It’s a waste of that cute face of yours, heh heh heh.”

“Give me a break... You’re lucky—you never seem to get older.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is so. At the least, you haven’t changed a bit in ten years. And here I am having to worry about my skin sagging.”

“Oh please, your sex appeal is going up. You’re just too tired to realize it.”

“Of course I’m tired...” Yuri’s shoulders sagged as she fiddled with the cup in her hands.

It was her day off. After leaving the desk to Edgar, she had headed out with her trusted friend Gilmenja for a cup of tea. Yuri’s job involved sitting down all day to manage adventurers and flip through paperwork, yet she was building up a completely different form of fatigue than when she worked up a sweat. It would be impossible to keep it up without some time to unwind. However, that did not seem to be the only source of Yuri’s stress.

Gilmenja giggled and used her fork to scoop up some of the cream that remained on the cake tray.

“If you plan on dawdling after coming all the way here, then what was the point of leaving your job?”

“You’ve got it all backward. I’m dawdling *because* I’ve come all the way here,” Yuri sulkily protested.

For once, Gilmenja let weariness show on her face. “You’re an idiot. You know that?”

“I’m very well aware...” Yuri sighed. “What to do...?”

“Act your age for once. I’m getting irritated just watching you.”

“Then what about you? How’s *your* love life treating you?”

“Do I look like I have one? Heh heh heh.”

“Hey, Gil... Have you ever thought of settling down somewhere?”

“I’m plenty settled already. I’m going home to my beloved darling every night.”

“You don’t have to put up a front with me.”

“Good grief, each and every one of you... Why did you all have to grow up to be so serious?” Gilmenja shrugged and poured a refill from the new teapot.

“You really need a change of pace. How about going along with Ange’s strategy for a bit? You might be able to nab that quiet guy while you’re at it.”

“Don’t be stupid. Leo doesn’t even compare to Mr. Bell. Leo would give up before it even became a match.”

“You know him too well.”

“And what about you? Mr. Bell’s kind and a hard worker. He’s prime real estate.”

“An interesting prospect, but the thought of having Ange call me ‘mom’ makes me sick.”

“Hmm, so you’re saying you’d go for it if Ange were out of the picture?” Yuri smugly suggested.

However, Gilmenja was not one to falter at this, and she calmly brought her cup to her mouth. “Then let me ask you the same question. Would you go along with Ange if Leo were out of the picture?”

“Hey, that’s not fair... Hmm, I probably wouldn’t, I don’t think. True, he’s a good guy, but...”

“If you understand that, then don’t ask.”

“Well, there’s no guarantee it’s the same for you. We all have our own tastes.”

“That really rings different, coming from the gal who fell for *Leo* of all people.”

“Are you looking to get hit?”

“Oh no, your fist would break me, my dear.”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you dancing around the subject. So in the end, how is it with you?”

“Same as you. It’s a real problem; say a prime real estate opportunity came with a nosy little sister living in the back hut. I wouldn’t be able to flirt in peace.”

“Heh heh... So it really would be possible without Ange, then.”

“Who knows?”

“Hey now, quit beating around the bush.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one who keeps beating around the bush. How about you be honest with Leo instead of me?”

“Th-That’s not what I... Ah, you’re as unpleasant as ever.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Gilmenja glanced at the veiled sun outside the window and stood.

“Leaving so soon?” Yuri asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Yeah, I have to see my darling beloved.”

“There you go again. *Sigh*... Anyways, thanks.”

“Do your best, heh heh heh.” Gilmenja put on her coat and made her dashing retreat.

Yuri stared out the window and sighed. The snow came down, sprinkling the cityscape in an alabaster sheen. It didn’t look like it would stop anytime soon.

## Dragon Liver Hot Pot

Lionel and Byaku had collapsed atop the table amid the various ingredients—liquor had made quick work of them. Hanging above the burner set into the center of the table was a pot with a partition down the middle containing bubbling red and white soups, respectively. Be it due to herb or spice, the peculiar smell wafting from the pot was unfamiliar to Belgrieve.

“Heh heh... Yes, please go right ahead, Mr. Belgrieve.” Gilmenja was beaming as she filled Belgrieve’s glass from a bottle of liquor.

Belgrieve laughed perplexedly. “Right, th-thanks... Are you sure you should be doing this, Ms. Gil? What about your job?”

“To be a server is a splendid, legitimate profession. Now, Mr. Kasim, a drink for you too.”

Kasim appeared to be not only unfazed but amused by Gilmenja. “Yeah, thanks. Heh heh... Nothing beats having my drinks poured for me by a beautiful lady. I feel a little bad for Yuri, though—with the rest of your party gathered

here, it's like she's the only one left out of the fun."

Edgar breathed out a weary, smoke-laden sigh. "We do go out drinking sometimes... Say, these guys are really down for the count, huh?" He prodded Lionel, who could only answer with a strange grunt. Byaku, for his part, lay almost perfectly still. If not for the telltale signs of his steady breathing, one might have been concerned that the boy had given up the ghost. With a resigned look at the two inebriates, Edgar reached out for the plate of ingredients to add to the pot, only to be stopped by Gilmenja. "What?"

"Did you think I came here to slack off from work? I said I was a server, didn't I?"

"So you're going to do that too?"

"I shall indeed. Now stand back, good sir, before you get in my way. Hee hee..."

Gilmenja picked up the plate of ingredients in one hand and a long pair of wooden sticks with the other, using them masterfully to add meat to the red soup and something pink and mushy to the white one.

Edgar noticed Belgrieve's face stiffen at the sight and laughed merrily. "No need to be scared, Mr. Bell. That's dragon liver."

Apparently the offal had been pressed through a sieve and made into a paste. Belgrieve had been thrown for a loop by the sight of the erstwhile mystery mush because he hadn't known that the dragon liver they had ordered would be prepared in two different ways—and indeed there was a portion of the offal that wasn't minced as well. He scratched his head, feeling a little relieved. "I guess new things make me anxious..."

"Yeah, I get it. I also found it off-putting at first. Hey, are you only putting it in the white one?"

"The red one already has some."

"Oh, I— No, wait, you're lying!"

"Yep, you caught me. Dragon liver has a pretty strong flavor—if I add it to both, you won't even be able to tell the difference between them anymore."

Have you really been eating hot pot for this long without figuring that out, Ed?”

“Did you really have to turn that around on me...? Well, whatever.” Edgar closed his eyes, resigned to taking that jab, and snuffed out his cigarette. Kasim watched him, grinning.

Gilmenja removed pieces of boiled, thinly sliced meat—mutton, perhaps—from the pot and placed them on a plate. Belgrieve didn’t know how to eat with the wooden sticks she used, so he instead used a fork. His first bite was accompanied by the surprising aroma of spices and the sensation of heat sweeping over his tongue, but the meat’s own flavor began to assert itself as he continued to chew it. Belgrieve nodded. *I see... This is pretty good.*

Kasim also seemed to be reveling in the flavor. “Ha! That’s something. It has a spicy kick to it—really warms you up.”

“Hee hee... I bet it does. You really have to cook the meat just so—I can easily see our young Ed overdoing it.”

“I mean... Fine, you got me. I hate to admit it, but you’re better at cooking it. Thanks. Happy now?”

For a moment, Gilmenja seemed taken aback, but she then began to sulk. “Don’t be so honest. It makes me feel like I’m the bad guy.”

“How many years have we known each other? I know how to handle you, if nothing else.”

“Oh my, I might have to throw in the towel then, hee hee!” Gilmenja shrugged slightly before turning her attention to extracting the fish and shellfish that had somehow found their way into the white soup. The seafood had turned a little brown—coated, perhaps, in the dissolved dragon liver.

Belgrieve salivated just from the delicious scent wafting from it. With his first bite of fish, the firm, fleshy white meat fell apart in his mouth. The richness of what he assumed to be dragon liver blended harmoniously with the flavor of fish, practically dancing on his taste buds. He tried a piece of solid dragon liver next. It was viscous and chewy, its sweet fattiness the dominant taste. He thought the flavor profile would pair well with alcohol. “It’s good.”

“Yeah,” Kasim agreed between sips of cloudy wine. “Not bad, Gil. Have you

ever been to the East?”

“Before I went to the capital, yes. I took a whole round trip, hee hee...”

“She’s lying,” Edgar interjected. “Never trust anything she says, Mr. Kasim.”

Gilmenja pouted again. “Don’t spoil my fun. That’s just unfair.”

“Oh, shut it. Hey, get those vegetables in there—that’s your job, remember?”

“Women don’t like impatient men,” Gilmenja groused, but she deftly stewed the vegetables anyway. They were fished out onto the serving plate soon enough—the leafy greens and soft vegetables requiring only a brief dip compared to the tubers and stalks. The vegetables now oozed with the refined flavor of the broth and were unquestionably delicious.

Just about when all the meat and vegetables had been eaten, Lionel suddenly shot up, his cheek ruddy where it had lain against the surface of the table until now. “That smells nice... Is that hot pot? Then I’ll have—”

“You’re too late, dummy. To think this was supposed to be *your* party...”

“I mean... Huh? There’s nothing left? And wait, what’s Gil doing here?”  
Lionel’s eyes, still lidded with sleepiness, anxiously roamed about the table. Byaku was still out cold, while Edgar’s forehead was planted wearily into his hand.

“Mr. Bell, Mr. Kasim—could you stick around a little longer?” Edgar asked.

“No complaints here,” Belgrieve answered.

“I’m good too,” Kasim agreed.

“Gil, ring up another order.”

“Good grief, my comrades just can’t keep it together. Hee hee...” Gilmenja dutifully got up, still giggling.

Edgar prodded at Lionel, who was still catching up to the situation.

Belgrieve smiled. *What a close party they are...*

## **An Elf Keeping House (Grandniece Arc)**



*It's practically become a habit to wake up before the sun rises,* Marguerite reflected. Back when she was in Turnera, she would keep Belgrieve company for his morning training until the habit became ingrained in her body. Even now, she would wake at the same time every morning.

With that said, the predawn hour was even darker in the early autumn than it had been during the summer. In Turnera, the horizon would just begin to be colored with the hues of impending sunrise, but early autumn mornings in Orphen were still pitch-black out. It was hard to imagine it was even the same time of day.

Marguerite hated meditation, but she did it anyway. When she finished, she casually practiced swinging her sword around as she waited for her tea to steep while wondering if everyone had reached Turnera yet.

"It's quiet..."

Anessa would usually wake up around this time, and then, a while later, Miriam would appear, teetering on her feet as she rubbed her sleepy eyes. They'd brew hot herbal tea and discuss the day's plans (among other things) while preparing breakfast. The three of them would take turns cooking breakfast and tried to follow a schedule, but as some adventurer requests could last several days, they often had to play it by ear. Miriam and Anessa boasted a higher adventurer rank than Marguerite, so their work did not overlap, but living with them afforded her the chance to hear all sorts of information from her seniors in the business: the latest dungeon activity, data on wanted fiends, where to look for in-demand resources, and what to be careful of. Marguerite would bid them to talk every day, and their knowledge steadily became her own.

These past few days, however, she had been left on her own. The piping hot tea felt colder when she sipped it alone, somehow. And because she was only making breakfast for herself, she hadn't felt like putting too much effort into it. Back when she lived in a palace as the princess of the Western Forest, Marguerite had felt a sense of isolation. There had been plenty of palace servants around her, and she had had her family by her side. Even so, she had been lonely—after all, there hadn't been a soul about who understood her longing for the outside world.

The only times Marguerite hadn't felt so alone were when she went to Graham's house to play. Her heart had danced whenever he told her tales of adventure or would instruct her in blade arts. Seeing the oddball elves who would come to visit the old master from time to time was a fringe benefit. Even so, Graham was hardly a social butterfly. Whenever she visited him, she generally hadn't found him entertaining other guests, and he had remained customarily placid and soft-spoken even in the face of her eager enthusiasm.

With all she had been through, Marguerite was, in a sense, accustomed to isolation. When she took flight from elven territory to roam the land and slay demons, she had been alone but not lonely. Her time in Turnera had greatly affected her, and ever since moving to Orphen, she had been sharing a home with girls her age. Every day was brightened by their presence and daily commiserating over work. Now, the isolation she felt after so long had become painful to her. Perhaps Anessa and Miriam's house was a little too big for someone to live alone.

*That's enough lollygagging*, Marguerite thought. After all, she was still a novice, never mind her actual skill level. If she slacked off just because there was no one around, then Graham—and Belgrieve—would certainly scold her. *Let's get breakfast started.*

Marguerite went to the kitchen to scrape together something simple, settling on reheating leftover grilled meat from the night before and making a sandwich with toasted bread and a bit of cheese. After heating up some soup she had prepared ahead to last her several days, she had a breakfast that had hardly required any work at all. She carried her meal to the living room table that was somehow too large for her liking now and silently started in on the sandwich. While she ate, her eyes wandered around the room. She felt alone at the table built for four.

Usually, Miriam and Anessa would tell her all sorts of things from across the table, while she'd offer stories from her elven homeland in turn. Then, Miriam would say something absurd, and Anessa would put in a weary retort. Occasionally, Angeline would be in the mix too. She didn't often eat at the house, but she would come around for a bit of tea.

The fact she couldn't throw down with Angeline anymore was such a

disappointment to Marguerite. She had made various discoveries through her work as a low-rank adventurer, but she was completely dissatisfied when it came to battle. The only time she could vent this frustration was in her “duels”—or rather, sparring matches—with Angeline.

“Man, she just had to leave with me on a losing streak...” Marguerite pouted, slouching in her chair. *She’s better than me with a sword, but that girl just falls apart as soon as her daddy’s around*, Marguerite mused. And yet, she liked her all the same. They were more than just good sparring buddies—she felt at ease when Angeline was around. The same could be said about Angeline’s father, Belgrieve, too. Despite being completely unrelated to Marguerite, he felt more “dad-like” than her actual father had. In the short time she had lived in Turnera, Belgrieve had earned her complete trust, and even in Orphen, she would feel relieved whenever she saw his face.

But now, there was no one—no Anessa or Miriam, no Angeline, no Belgrieve, or Kasim, or Byaku, or Charlotte... All of them had gone off to Turnera. She still had a few friends that she’d met through the girls, but it wasn’t like they were that close. There were few human adventurers at her lowly rank who could even rub elbows with an elf without getting all starry-eyed. Meanwhile, Lionel and the other skilled adventurers were usually busy with work—and even then, the way they spoke to her was a little different from how Angeline and her party did, a touch more reserved. The more she brooded over it, the more intense her loneliness seemed to grow. Marguerite stared blankly into the air for a while before finally snapping to and shaking her head.

“This ain’t like me.” She smacked her cheeks, immediately regretting the unexpectedly sharp pain. Nevertheless, she scarfed down what was left of the sandwich and chugged the rest of her tea before standing with gusto.

“It’s not like they abandoned me or anything,” she muttered.

She shook her head. *This really ain’t like me.*

“They’d laugh if they saw me like this. Stupid Marguerite, get a grip already.”

She pulled on her boots, retrieved her sword and her bags, and left the house. After the door clattered shut and the latch was turned, the house was enveloped in complete silence.

Another day had begun.

## **An Elf Keeping House (Granduncle Arc)**

Graham sat in front of the hearth, wordlessly sorting through beans and tossing the well-formed ones onto a plate. The kettle over the fire was quietly starting to whistle as steam escaped the spout.

Mit sat beside him, clanking two pieces of scrap wood together with a curious look on his face. He opened his mouth wide to take a chomp out of them, only for Graham to reach out and stop him. Expressionless as he customarily was, Mit's discontentment was palpable as he turned his back to Graham.

"Mit," Graham chided solemnly.

Mit froze and turned back to him. Graham looked at him sternly, then silently shook his head.

Mit stubbornly pouted for a moment before crawling into Graham's lap and settling there.

The firewood snapped, scattering sparks. Graham tossed Mit's wood scraps in to feed the blaze. Mit blinked in surprise as those pieces caught fire.

"They're burning..."

"They are."

"Is burning...fun?"

"I don't know if it is."

"Then is it boring?"

"It's not boring. It's warm, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Mit curled up, hugging his knees to his body. He brought both hands to his mouth and let out a long breath.

It was quiet, without so much as a peep coming from outside the house. But there was something in the air, something that gave the feeling that it was snowing; even through the closed window, the cold was creeping in.

“Mit...”

The boy looked over his shoulder, his black eyes capturing Graham. “Are you cold?”

“Yes, cold...” Graham repeated absentmindedly.

Mit stirred, then clambered up Graham’s shoulders and settled himself in a piggyback position, where he rested wordlessly to provide the elf with some warmth.

For a long while, neither said a thing. Finally, Graham broke the silence. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re cold, right?”

“I see... Thank you, but I’m fine.” Graham reached out and patted Mit on the head. Mit looked at him, perplexed, before returning to his lap. Graham, meanwhile, took up the task of examining the beans from front to back and sorting them once more. From the corner of his eyes, he could see the knitting needles and spindles in a corner of the room. He had learned some of the basics of working wool and yarn, but it was certainly not one of his strong suits.

“Must be getting sleepy...”

“You’re sleepy?”

“Not me. I was wondering if you were.”

“Sleepy...” Mit closed his eyes and rocked left and right. Before long, he slouched back against Graham as his breathing slowed to a steady, somnolent rhythm.

Graham gazed out the window into the snowy expanse, noting that it was still light out. It was the sort of weather that made him lose his sense of time. He continued to sort the beans for a while before he picked up Mit and put him to bed, draping a blanket over him.

But Mit had a firm hold on his arm and refused to let go. The boy stared at him through drowsy, half-lidded eyes. “Grampa...nap together...”

Graham looked a little conflicted, but his expression quickly softened. He got down on one knee beside Mit, then lay next to him. Mit closed his eyes,

relieved, and fell asleep once more.

There was nothing to do in Turnera during the winter. Even if there was, Graham was neither a member of the village, nor was he prone to bouts of restlessness. In recognition of the elf's self-composed character, Belgrieve had simply bidden him to do nothing more than patrol the village each morning—a task that didn't even qualify as real work for the legendary adventurer. He feared that he might do more harm than good if he attempted to manage any of the other routine chores of the house beyond picking over the beans.

In other words, he had nothing to do but entertain Mit. The child had been born of a demonic fragment, and in spite of his lack of expressiveness, he was naive and innocent. He had a bad habit of trying to bite anything that was within arm's reach, but he was doing it less than before, and lately, his enunciation had gotten a lot better. It felt like he was growing a little bit more every time he went to sleep. Even now, the mana swirling within the little boy's body was palpable.

"I hope that doesn't portend anything sinister..." Graham muttered.

The greatsword leaning against the wall quietly growled in reaction to Mit's emanating mana. Graham looked at the sword and held a finger up to his own mouth, shushing it. The sword's growling was quelled.

The elf was wide awake, but Mit was already in a deep sleep. The smoldering remains of the firewood were beginning to sputter smoke; he wanted to stoke the flames and add some more wood, but Mit was still coiled around his arm.

Out the window, all he could see was the frosty whiteness of midwinter. It would still be some time before Belgrieve returned.

Outside, the snow continued to fall. The kettle was softly whistling, and Mit was already in a deep sleep. Graham lay there silently.

## **Early Summer**

Eight-year-old Angeline held up her basket as she rushed back and forth through the thicket. Rummaging through the deep emerald foliage, she would pick out only the brightest, freshest sprouts to throw into her basket. The skies

were a piercing blue, bereft of any lingering hints of winter.

The lent plant was an evergreen bush that grew naturally around Turnera. It was sturdy and easy to graft and thus was transplanted all around town and grown as hedges as well. From late spring to early summer—around when the wheat stalks began to grow—the fresh sprouts would emerge, and gathering these sprouts to make tea was one of Turnera’s seasonal tasks.

Lent leaves were not the only ingredients that could be used for tea, but they were the easiest to harvest, and they had a neutral flavor that went down easily. Most houses would have their own special blend of herbs and flowers to spice up their lent tea.

Angeline’s harvesting began at sunrise, and by the time the last drop of morning dew had dried up, her basket was filled to the brim. She looked at it with a satisfied nod before running back to the house. The early summer breeze helped cool her from all the running around she had done.

When she returned home, she found Belgrieve in the yard, tending to a fire with a pot of water hanging over it. There were several drying mats around him, each spread with the lent leaves they had collected over the past few days.

“Hey, dad.”

“Oh, Ange. Welcome back.”

Belgrieve looked into the basket Angeline brought in and stroked his beard.

“You got quite a lot of them. Impressive.”

“I know, right... Hee hee... I’ll go wash them.”

She dashed to the side of the well, basket in hand. The freshly plucked leaves were liable to be covered in dirt and small bugs, so they had to be washed first. She placed the leaves into a small wooden bucket, which she filled with water, and began stirring it up until the grime floated to the surface. Then she held her harvest down and tipped the bucket so only the water washed away.

Taking a glance at her work, Belgrieve used his hands to mix up the leaves that were already drying. This would allow them to dry faster.

“Ange, where’s your knife?”

“I have it.”

“Good to know.”

Angeline placed the washed lent leaves back into her basket to finish drying. When they were ready, she stacked the leaves one by one until she had a neat, sizable stack, and chopped them all together. She did this several times until her basketful of leaves had become a spongy mountain of mince.

“You’ve gotten quite good at handling that,” Belgrieve said, sounding somewhat impressed. He was happy to know that she was taking over these jobs bit by bit.

Angeline stuck out her chest. “Am I a good girl...?”

“Yeah, you’re a good girl. But you’ve got to keep your wits about you.”

“Goooot it.”

Unlike other herbs used for teas, it was not enough just to chop and dry the lent. The minced leaves needed to first be very briefly blanched in boiling water. Standing with an empty drying mat, Belgrieve headed over to the bubbling pot, where Angeline held a sieve in one hand.

“Are you ready, dad?”

“Go ahead.”

With all her might, Angeline tossed a handful of leaves from her basket into the pot. In no time at all, these once-stiff leaves floated to the top, soft and supple.

“We’re good. Hurry, hurry.”

Angeline scooped them up with her sieve and dumped them onto Belgrieve’s drying mat. A column of steam rose, and it was an interesting sight to behold as the sopping wet surface of each green bit swiftly lost its moisture.

“Hey now, you have to keep at it.”

“Got it.”

Snapping back from being transfixed by the drying leaves, Angeline threw in the next handful. After letting them float for a few seconds, she scooped them



and dumped them onto the mat. Then, once the mat was full, Belgrieve brought out another one. These circular mats woven from vines were made by Belgrieve to pass the time in winter. Drying was a fundamental way to store food, and so there were plenty of drying mats stored in the shed.

When the mats were filled, the leaves were spread out as best they could to minimize overlap and placed where they would receive plenty of sunlight.

Angeline let out a sigh of relief, looking at the water that had turned brown.

“Is it over...?”

“Yeah, good work.”

Belgrieve smiled and patted Angeline on the head. Angeline let out a satisfied chortle, the sieve still in her hands as she stepped in place almost like she was dancing.

“Are we doing it again tomorrow?”

“The mats are all full... Let’s wait until our first batches have finished drying.”

“Okay!”

They needed to be left out until they were bone-dry, or they would grow mold. The early summer sun and breeze would produce enough dried tea to last the whole year.

Angeline mixed up the drying leaves as Belgrieve brewed a cup of tea. It was green with just a hint of brown, faintly tart, and mildly sweet—a familiar flavor with a refreshing aftertaste.

The thought that the leaves she had plucked would be served at every dinner table to come filled her with delight.

*Will I do the same job next year?* Angeline wondered, yet suddenly she found herself in the grasp of her growing yearning for adventure. At eight years old, it was her desire to be with her father that won out, and she shook her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...”

Angeline sipped at the tea to distract herself. A southerly wind was coming in,

conveying clouds like torn cotton on the breeze. It was a fine day for drying.

## Winter's Breath

Though the city of Orphen was seeing more snow with each passing day, the paved roads were kept clean by the street sweepers, among whom were low-ranking adventurers hired for the job through the guild. Despite their best efforts, the snow would still pile up the moment it was cleared away—an annoyance for some, but a pure-white blessing for those in need of their daily wages.

The main roads as well as the rooftops of the noblemen's houses were always kept clean as a whistle, but in other places, the residents would have to shovel it away themselves. The icicles that formed at the edges of triangular eaves would gradually grow larger and larger, sometimes becoming frosted by the snow that blew against them.

Belgrieve had gone to the church orphanage and shoveled the walkway from the door to the end of the yard. He'd only just shoveled it the day before, but the heavy snowfall from the night before meant it was now all the way up to his knees, making it hard to get anywhere. He thrust the rectangular shovel into the snow, lifted it up, and tossed it to the side. Because all of it had fallen the night before, it hadn't compacted and was easy to shovel—much easier than if it had the chance to melt and freeze back over. Thanks to a lifetime of winters in Turnera, this much shoveling was nothing to him.

Charlotte was working alongside him too, albeit with a notably smaller shovel. Her nose was reddened; hailing from the warmer climes of Lucrecia as she did, she was unaccustomed to the cold.

"Char, are you tired?" he asked.

"Well, maybe a little... No, I'm fine." Charlotte leaned against the shovel for a moment's rest before shaking her head and getting back to work.

"It's good to try your best, but you'll catch a cold if you push yourself too hard."

"I'm all right. This much is nothing. I mean, Byaku's doing his best too," she

said, sniffing. Byaku was on his own nearby, working without a fuss.

The orphanage's children had also sallied forth to shovel the road in front of the church. Though they attended to the chore at first, some act of mischief or another caused the first snowball to fly, and things only spiraled from there. Before long, all of them were cheerfully at play.

Charlotte dutifully continued shoveling, stealing an occasional glance at the children without joining them. It took her three shovelfuls for her to displace the same amount of snow Belgrieve could with one. Seeing this, Charlotte seemed inspired to redouble her efforts, but her bodily limitations couldn't be ignored for long, and she again found herself leaning on the shovel. Every heavy breath came out of her mouth as a cloud of white mist coiling around her face.

Belgrieve gently patted her head. "You're working too hard. You won't last long like that."

"I mean..."

"You don't need to try so hard to meet expectations. You can just go at your own pace."

"Hmm..." Charlotte fidgeted in place for a moment before stopping to rub her hands, which were apparently cold.

"Hey, break time, everyone," somebody called out from the church. The children cheered and ran in from the street to gather under the eaves, where the nuns poured piping hot tea for them.

Belgrieve sat in a chair and worked on straightening out the snowshoe fastened to the end of his peg leg. Rosetta brought him a cup of tea.

"Here you go, Mr. Belgrieve. You really are an expert at this."

"Ha ha... I do it every year, after all. This is easier than Turnera."

"That sounds rough... You've been a huge help. It's only us ladies here."

"I've got to tip my hat at how hardworking you all are. Thank you for the tea." Belgrieve took a sip. The brew was strong, and its warmth spread through his whole body.

Charlotte and Byaku blew on their cups, and snacked on cookies between sips

—sweets after a hard day’s work were all the more delicious. All the work they had done was enough to work up a sweat, so they only felt that much colder now that they had stopped.

The snow was still falling, and the areas that had been cleared earlier were already covered in a thin layer of frost. Once the refreshments were consumed, the children ran out into the yard to pack snowballs once more. Belgrieve, noticing Charlotte’s yearning, nodded to her. The girl only hesitated for a moment before she was off to join the others.

Rosetta watched her go, chuckling. “She’s a bundle of energy.”

“We’ve all been there.”

“I suppose so. I was in my share of snowball fights. I remember how the boys would really pack their snowballs tight to make them harder and more painful —*that* led to some real fights.”

“Ha ha ha! I imagine that happened a lot.”

“Ah, do you have some memories like that, Mr. Belgrieve?”

“Of course. We’d forget all about the cold and race around in the snow without coats.”

“Even in the cold, you’re bound to work up a sweat after all. And that just makes it colder.”

“Yeah. Ange would often find herself sneezing up a storm.”

Rosetta laughed. “Ha ha! That sounds like her.” She took a sip of her tea; her freckled cheeks had turned a little ruddy from the cold.

Belgrieve had learned that she had also been raised in this very orphanage. Now she protected and raised the orphans as one of the nuns. Even after suffering a wound that had left her on the precipice of death, she was still here, still had compassion for Charlotte, and still lived with her eyes ever on the future. *She’s impressive*, Belgrieve thought.

“Hmm? Is there something on my face?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Suddenly, a stray snowball collided with Rosetta, eliciting cheers from the children. Rosetta brushed the snow from her clothes and grinned. “Now you’ve done it! Who was it?” She ran out into the falling snow and made a snowball of her own. The children let out giddy shrieks and ran for cover.

Belgrieve considered picking up his shovel; but after reconsidering, he sat back down. Surely Vienna wouldn’t smite him for taking it easy until this great snow war reached its end.

Byaku’s deep yawn seemed to linger as a puff of frosty air for an eternity.



**Volume 6**  
**Short Stories**

## A Grave Visit

Turnera's cemetery lay on the north side of the village. It was an open and sunny place, and though it was quiet, it never felt gloomy. A small brook ran beside it, which joined the larger river a short distance away.

In Turnera, where the spirits of ancestors were held sacred, the graveyard was not a place for mourning. The sleeping dead were like dear neighbors and were so revered. And although there was no one officially designated to the role, someone or other would always keep the place clean and tidy.

It was a gentle day. A bit of time had passed since the forest's attack, and the fields and houses were mostly repaired. Relief supplies and construction workers had come in from Bordeaux, and they were steadily working towards returning to the norms of daily life.

From the distant mountain peaks, icy clouds blew through the air and slowly changed shape as they glistened in the blue sky. The sunlight fell warmly at the end of spring, and the winds were calm. It was the perfect weather for an afternoon nap.

For their part, Belgrieve and Angeline had come to the cemetery. They had been too busy in the village to visit for a long time now.

"What a nice day..." Angeline said. She stretched, groaning in satisfaction.

"A good day indeed."

Around the cemetery's entrance there grew tierra trees, casting pleasant shade onto the ground. Their green leaves, which had budded in early spring, now grew densely.

"It's been a while since we were alone together," Angeline observed as she held on to Belgrieve's arm.

"Ha ha ha... I guess you're right. We're here to visit family, after all."

There were new grave markers amid the old, but they could find the most ancient ones if they were to make their way to the back. These markers, which had once had square corners, had rounded out due to the wind and rain. They

were coated in a film of moss that grew wherever the shade was most persistent. The carved names on these stones had nearly been worn away, and one would need to look long and hard to make out their inscriptions.

“Grandpa, grandma, how have you been...?” Angeline crouched down and spoke to one grave. Naturally, there was no reply.

Belgrieve’s parents had died when he was still a child—his father when he was seven, and his mother when he was eleven. Angeline had never had the chance to meet them.

Belgrieve used the broom he’d brought along to swiftly clean the grave and the ones around it, his mind racing through memories of his parents. His father had been a man of few words but a hard worker, and he remembered his mother smiling a lot. Belgrieve’s red hair was inherited from her side of the family, though its tendency to curl had come from his father’s.

After he had buried his mother and returned home, the house had felt so terribly spacious. He could still clearly remember how he’d felt at the thought of spending his life there, alone. But his parents’ faces had gradually faded from his memory; he could not remember what his father’s face had looked like, and his mother’s had grown hazy lately as well. However, he still had a distinct memory of his mother’s burning-red hair and his father’s scruffy beard. Perhaps Belgrieve had subconsciously grown out his own beard as a sort of commemoration.

“Do you think grandpa had a yearning for adventure too?” Angeline asked as she set about scraping away the moss.

“I didn’t see it in him,” Belgrieve replied, shaking his head. “I don’t think he ever left Turnera.”

“Oh, I see... A trueborn son of Turnera, then,” Angeline concluded.

“That your grandpa was. But grandma didn’t grow up here. She was the daughter of a peddler, you see... When I was little, she would always tell me about all the places she’d seen before I went to bed.”

“Like the Haril checkpoint...?”

“Oh, I’m surprised you remembered.”



Some of the stories Belgrieve had told Angeline as a child had come from his mother. Most of her tales were simple ones. She'd spoken of her travels as a peddler, and that was enough to mystify a boy who had only ever known Turnera. There was something beyond the small world of the village, and someone so close to him had seen it. This had kindled Belgrieve's yearning for adventure—though perhaps his mother would have regretted that her stories had resulted in him actually striking out on his own.

*I might not have been the best son,* Belgrieve thought. His parents had both loved their peaceful life in Turnera, and he couldn't imagine that either of them would have wanted their son to become an adventurer. All the less so, given his adventure had ended in his being maimed.

Nevertheless, he did not regret his choice. It was human nature to wonder what could have been if only another path had been taken, but no other road would have led him to the present. Perhaps he hadn't chosen the best route, but he didn't believe he had made a mistake either.

Once he had finished sweeping, Belgrieve offered up the flowers he had plucked on their way to the cemetery.

"It's quite curious. My dad had a dad and a mom of his own... It should be obvious, but I can't imagine it at all," Angeline said, looking between the gravestone and Belgrieve. "Did grandpa look like you, dad?"

"I'm not so sure... It's been nearly forty years since he passed. To be honest with you, I've completely forgotten."

"Is it that easy to forget a face? Even when he's your dad...?" Angeline wondered, sounding a bit forlorn.

Belgrieve thoughtfully stroked his beard. "All sorts of things have happened since then. Ever since you came to me, Ange, I've been too busy to remember."

"I see..." Angeline took Belgrieve's hand and rubbed her cheek against it. "But no matter what happens after this...I'll never forget your face..."

"Yeah... That's good to know." Belgrieve smiled and gently patted her on the head. "All right, let's get going."

"Yeah."

The two turned back down the same path they had come from. The wind shook the leaves of the tierra trees, and the light that filtered through their leaves flickered and shifted upon the ground below.

## **The Smell of Cold Medicine**

The hissing of the steam escaping from the kettle's spout was audible over the loud crackling of the wood in the fireplace below it. The kettle began to whistle even louder when Belgrieve poured more water into it before simmering down to a duller rumbling from the bottom.

Angeline—who was then five years old—stirred restlessly in bed. Her face was flushed, and her head felt fuzzy. Even though her nose was running endlessly, her sinuses were also congested, forcing her to breathe through her mouth and consequently parching her. Her throat was a little sore too.

Belgrieve removed the damp towel from her forehead and wrung it out before replacing it with his large, rugged hand. When he did, Angeline closed her eyes with a look of relief. “Still not better. You need to stay in bed today.”

“Okay...” she murmured.

Belgrieve replaced the towel, and Angeline snuggled deeper under the covers pulled up to her face. She had caught a cold—when winter turned to spring and brought warmer weather with it, she had let down her guard. Angeline had begun to run about lightly dressed, working up a sweat without changing. She had already felt it coming down since the day before last, and yesterday the sickness had truly set in. Today was no better, but even though she loathed her body feeling so sluggish and her breaths being so labored, it meant her father would stay by her side like this. For that reason, Angeline didn't mind catching colds all that much.

Belgrieve rifled through the cupboard and pulled out various small vials and boxes. Angeline knew that all of the dried herbs, oils, and medicinal juice concentrates he had collected were stored in that cupboard. He would always use the ingredients from there to make salves and liquid medicines.

Belgrieve frowned. “We're out...” It seemed he was short on ingredients.

Belgrieve mulled it over for a moment before going over to Angeline's side and gently patting her head. "Ange, will you be okay on your own for a little bit?"

"No..." Angeline stuck her hands out from under the covers and grabbed Belgrieve's shirt.

He scratched his cheek awkwardly. "But I don't have the stuff I need to make medicine. I'm just going to Old Caiya's place."

"Stay..."

"Hmm..." Belgrieve considered his options before letting out a resigned sigh. "All right, then let's go together. Just hold on for a bit."

With that settled, Belgrieve wrapped her in the blanket and hoisted her into his arms. Angeline snuggled into his chest with a sense of reassurance—and like that, they left the house. The sun's warm light poured down upon them, but the wind was still chilly. Belgrieve walked briskly towards Caiya's house, taking great care to ensure the blanket didn't slip and expose Angeline to the wind's chill.

Caiya was the village's apothecary, and all who lived in Turnera had been under her care at least once. When he knocked at the door, she called out that it was unlocked. Belgrieve opened the door and was instantly met with a curious aroma of various herbal scents blended together.

"Old Caiya..."

"Oh, is that you, Bell?" The figure crouched by the fireplace looked up at him. Her weathered face and prominent aquiline nose conveyed her gentle demeanor.

"Ange has a fever. I wanted to make her some medicine, but I'm all out of milleme bark."

"Oh, is that so? Feel free to look for it," Caiya said, gesturing to a bed for Angeline to lie down in. Belgrieve thanked her and gently laid his daughter down before inspecting all the various bottles on the shelf. As the village apothecary, her inventory of herbs dwarfed Belgrieve's in variety and quantity.

Angeline was resting on her side, watching his back, when a bony hand

reached out to touch her forehead. The hand was coarse and made Angeline ticklish.

“Granny... That tickles.”

“You must’ve gone right wild, Ange. I didn’t think you were the type to catch a cold.”

“Ugh...” Angeline pulled the blanket over her mouth. She felt a bit restless under Old Caiya’s gray-eyed gaze. Though she reveled in it whenever Belgrieve would dote on her endlessly, she still felt rather shy under that certain penetrating scrutiny only old people could give.

Caiya’s fingers traced from Angeline’s forehead to her throat, then caressed her cheeks. She turned to Belgrieve.

“Bell, she’s almost better. The problem is mostly her nose and throat. Rather than milleme bark, you should steep niure grass with honey. You can brew it here.”

“Huh? I see... Okay, I trust your diagnosis.”

Belgrieve returned the bottle he had already found and took some dried herbs from another. He ended up picking out several other herbs and berries and heated them all to a gurgling simmer in a small pot of water. A pungent scent wafted from the pan.

“Drink slowly,” Caiya advised.

Angeline sat up and blew on the liquid in the wooden cup. Her first timid sip overwhelmed her with an unfamiliar aroma and bitterness, balanced out by sweet honey. The warm concoction seemed to soothe her inflamed throat. As she sipped the medicine, Angeline watched Belgrieve and Caiya talk about something or other until the cup was empty. The medicine’s warmth lingered in her throat and in the pit of her stomach, and gradually, her eyelids grew heavy. As they fell closed, she vividly felt the softness of the blanket and the smell of herbs. She knew she would be better when she woke up—there wasn’t a doubt in her mind.

## **Soft Winds and Straw Hats**

Straw was used as bedding and feed for sheep and goats, but it had other uses too. It might be used to thatch a roof or packed under bed dressing to serve as a mattress. Because the vast fields in and around the village produced plenty of wheat every year, there was never any shortage of straw. After the early summer wheat harvest, all the villagers would take home as much straw as they needed from the piles in the fields. Deference was given to the villagers who kept sheep due to the amount they would need. Once the animals' straw bedding was sullied, it would inevitably make its way back to the field, this time as fertilizer.

Belgrieve didn't keep sheep, so he only needed enough for his field and bed. He never took more than he needed—that would only invite mice to infest the pile—and simply stored it in his shed.

Aside from those customary uses of straw, one might also weave it into hats to protect against the summer sun. His nine-year-old daughter, Angeline, was using a wooden mallet to flatten the round, hollow stalks after they had soaked in water overnight. Dry straw was straight and brittle, unsuitable for weaving as it was—hence the necessity of this process to make it pliable.

Angeline stopped to catch her breath, laying down the mallet beside her and shaking out her hands, which were already feeling the strain of her labors. Several bundles of pounded straw lay beside her.

"Oh, you've already gotten that far?" Belgrieve said as he walked through the open door.

Angeline looked up and grinned. "Yeah. Did I do a good job?"

"You did. That should be enough." Belgrieve set down two half spheres of wood on the table, each about the size of a human head, though one was larger than the other. They were hat molds, used to shape hats as they were woven.

Angeline picked up several strands of straw, aligning them and spreading them out in a radial pattern overlapping at the center.

"Like this..."

"That's right. Now secure the center point so it doesn't come apart."

After firmly securing the strands, they began weaving, rounding it out

alongside the mold. Belgrieve was a deft hand at it, but Angeline was still a novice. She did her best to imitate her father's work with her small hands.

"Dad, I can't do this part..."

"You need to weave it tighter, or it'll come loose—oh, don't pull it that hard, or it'll come apart. Hold the edges firmly with your fingers."

She was passing horizontal strips through alternating vertical ones, but it was difficult to maintain a clean shape. Angeline's brow was furrowed as she focused intently on the half-finished hat. Even as the sun peaked and lunchtime came, she didn't want to get up from her work.

"Ange, it's lunchtime."

"Wait, just a little more..." she said, but she knew it would take longer to complete it.

Though Belgrieve was glad she was so serious about it, he didn't want her to push herself too hard.

"You don't need to rush. It's not going anywhere."

"I'm fine." Angeline shot him a sharp look before returning to the hat.

Belgrieve shrugged.

After several days of dedicated work, the hat that resulted turned out quite misshapen. The crown was shaped well enough, as it followed the hat mold, but the brim ended up wavy and uneven, and the edges weren't sufficiently bound, causing bits of loose straw to jut out. It turned out that the crown was just slightly too large as well, making it a bit loose on her head.

Still, Angeline wore it with pride. She'd made several straw hats before, but this was the first time she'd done it entirely on her own without her father's aid.

She looked rather pleased as she wore it on their evening rounds. She placed a hand on the brim as she looked at Belgrieve, who also wore a hat of his own making.

"We match... How does it look?"

“Wonderful. It’s incredible how you did that all by yourself.”

Belgrieve was very soft on his daughter, and it never even occurred to him to point out its flaws. He was genuinely impressed she had woven the hat all by herself and praised her, patting her on the head. This made Angeline even prouder of her work.

“But I’ll make it even prettier next time...”

“Ha ha... Do you want to become a hatter, then?”

Angeline pouted. “No, I’m going to be an adventurer!”

Belgrieve laughed. *There she goes again...* He knew she was inspired by his old stories, their daily patrols, and the sword training he had given her, but he hadn’t really begun to take her seriously.

Angeline dangled from his arm, frowning. “I will! I’ll train in swordsmanship even more!”

“I see, I see. Let’s both do our best.” Belgrieve smiled and swung her back and forth. Angeline kicked her legs in the air before landing back on the ground.

A sudden gust grabbed the oversized hat from her head, and it flew off. Angeline scrambled for it, but the hat slipped through her grasp and rose high into the sky, far beyond her reach.

Belgrieve chuckled, twisting his beard. “Oh, look at it go. You’ve got to chase it.”

“Yeah!” Angeline raced off, chasing the hat as it was tossed around by the wind. On the horizon far past the flying hat, the muted blue sky began to show the first purple and red hues of impending sunset, and distinctive dark shadows were soon to follow.

## **Seren in Turnera**

There didn’t seem to be much to the seemingly homogenous brown soil when looked down upon from above, but closer inspection would reveal a great many sprouts peeking out. The abundance of sunlight in spring awakened all the small seeds that had slumbered through the winter all at once.

Aside from pulling up weeds with their bare hands, the villagers also used sickles to shave away at the sprouts that had only just revealed themselves. The little greens were simply too small to extract by hand, but they couldn't be allowed to keep growing either. Doing so necessitated crouching down close to the dirt, and the farmers hadn't the time to stand up to take each step forward, so they would have to hold this posture for long periods of time. It was physically demanding, necessitating occasional breaks to work out the kinks.

Seren stood up amid the furrows with a hand on her side, bending her torso back and forth. She was still wearing her glasses, but she had forgone her usual high-class dress for the plain work clothes and apron of a village girl, and her hair was bundled up under a handkerchief. This was unbecoming of a noble lady, but she had grown accustomed to it.

"Seren!" Charlotte called out, waving her hand as she walked over with a water canteen. "Let's rest a little."

"Oh, thank you." Seren wiped the sweat from her brow as she left the field.

The weather was wonderful; the sky was a watery blue with thin wisps of clouds, and though the sun's heat was mild today, her labor had still caused her to work up a sweat.

Seren had come to Turnera with Sasha to discuss the ongoing roadwork. Whenever she wasn't having meetings with the surveyors, she would help out with the fields and make an effort to mingle with the villagers. She was better at such work than anyone would expect of a noble lass, to the surprise and delight of Turnera's villagers. Never mind the meetings and promises—it was things like this that made the villagers feel closer to House Bordeaux.

Seren accepted a cup of water from Charlotte and gulped it down. "Phew... That hits the spot."

"You're very good at farming," Charlotte said with admiration in her eyes.

Seren giggled. "You'll get used to it soon enough."

"D-Do you think so...? I never did any of this before I came to Turnera..."

The daughter of a Lucrecian cardinal would naturally have little to do with agriculture. And yet, such a girl had found herself in a remote village on the



northern borderlands, wearing a simple straw hat and getting her hands dirty.

Seren smiled and patted her on the head. “You’ll get the hang of it before you know it. But don’t overdo it.”

“I’ll trust you on that... But, Lady Seren, you don’t seem to mind working in the fields yourself...”

Seren’s eyes wandered through space as she thought. “Well... When I was a little girl, I’d think to myself, ‘Why must we do something like this?’” She squinted her eyes against a sudden breeze. “Perhaps it was because my father would always take me around with him. Oh, that father of mine... Even though he was the count, he would get down in the dirt with the farmers, laughing and bragging about the biggest potato he’d ever pulled up...”

*How could anyone lead well without knowing the ground they stood upon?* That was the political philosophy of her father, the late Count Bordeaux, and he had passed it on to his daughters. A noblewoman’s duties might otherwise entail adornment in luxurious, vibrant clothing and learning to navigate the dizzying world of high society—but the three Bordeaux sisters spent just as much time walking about the villages and towns of the county in the same practical attire as their subjects.

“Honestly, I couldn’t understand what father was thinking at the time. The other children my age from other noble houses would mock me relentlessly. But if he had never taught me so, I’m sure I would have become complacent and a terrible noble myself... It’s said that we rule over the peasants, but the truth is, we are being supported by them. That is what father would say, and now I know well that he was correct.”

Seren’s words were tinged with nostalgia. She took another sip of water before realizing Charlotte hadn’t said anything. When she turned to the girl, it was to see tears streaming down her face. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“*Hic...* I mean... I took your...dear father, and I...” Charlotte was helpless to staunch the flow of tears even as she desperately wiped them away with the back of her hand. The more Charlotte heard of Seren’s memories of her father, the more she was tormented with remorse for turning him into an undead abomination.

Seren hugged Charlotte and rubbed her back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you pain..."

"That's not it. I'm the one who..."

Seren chuckled and squeezed her tightly. "You're an earnest girl, Char. But it's okay. 'You mustn't concern yourself with what's done. Instead, use that time to work hard on what you have to do.' I'm sure that's what father would say."

Charlotte sniffled as she met Seren's gaze. Seren smiled and patted her shoulder.

"Now, break time's over. I'll teach you the trick to weeding. Let's make it to the end of this furrow, okay?"

Charlotte stood up, pulling the brim of her straw hat down over her eyes. "Yes... Let's do it!"

The wind seemed to be growing stronger, and every blade of grass rustled in the wake of the speedy gust.

## **Sasha Fights Another Day**

Sasha Bordeaux folded her arms and thought deeply. Before she returned to Bordeaux, she wanted the renowned Paladin to take her seriously enough to at least draw his sword. They had sparred several more times since their match on the first day, but not only had Graham never taken up a sword against her, he hadn't even used both hands. Her mobile combat style that made full use of her prided fleet-footedness seemed like mere child's play to the old elf. Sasha was proud when she'd risen to AAA-Rank, but the S-Ranks that gathered in these northern outskirts had easily shattered her flimsy pride.

"More diligence! Yep, that's what I need!" She nodded to herself a few times. She was never one to lose heart. When she witnessed a realm of strength beyond her own, she was the sort who grew inspired rather than discouraged. Unbeknownst to her, this attitude had quite a positive impact on the other adventurers of Bordeaux. In any case, moping wasn't getting her anywhere. Sasha sat down on the spot and took a deep breath in.

"What I'm lacking...is a level head! I can't imagine either Sir Graham or my

master, Belgrieve, letting their emotions affect their agility!” Sasha muttered, as though to convince herself. She seemed to have no qualms about putting both those names on the same pedestal.

For the time being, she decided to close her eyes and meditate. She had heard that Belgrieve had achieved results a cut above the rest through his meditation. However, her head was swirling with far more things than she had expected, and she simply couldn’t concentrate—and once she acknowledged that, her mind began to go off on even more tangents.

In spite of her irritation with her wandering thoughts, she simply put up with it and continued sitting still even when Angeline appeared.

She was lightly skipping by and swinging around a stick while humming a tune. The sight of Sasha brought her to a halt. “What are you doing?” Angeline asked.

“Oh, if it isn’t Ange,” Sasha said, opening her eyes. “I thought I’d try meditating... But it’s not working out as I’d hoped.”

“Hmm.” Angeline sat down beside her. The weather was fine today, resulting in a deep-blue sky with scattered clouds like firm clumps of cotton. The mountains bearing up the sky were also blue, and they caught the light in a way that made them near blinding to look at.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, Sasha sighed. “Did you ever do meditation training, Ange?”

“Nah. Not really... It’s not my strong suit.” Even if she didn’t straighten up and meditate, Angeline could grasp the flow of mana in her own body with minimal effort.

Sasha tightly clutched her knees and, with her chin resting atop them, frowned. “This must be a difference in talent... No, but...”

“There’s no need to force yourself to sit still... Graham said that moving around can also be a sort of meditation,” Angeline said, patting Sasha on the head.

Sasha blinked, feeling somewhat abashed. “Come to think of it... In your eyes, how strong is Sir Graham?”

“Too strong... I’ve met a few people whom I thought I might lose against. He’s the only one I *knew* for a fact I’d never beat.”

“I-I see... But you don’t lose to him when he’s bare-handed, right?”

“If I got serious, I’m confident I could get him to draw his sword... But that would only lower my chances even more.”

Sasha folded her arms. “If *you* are saying that...I have a long road ahead of me.”

“Want to spar?” Angeline offered, whipping her stick around.

Sasha immediately sprang to her feet, her eyes sparkling. “Can we really?!”

“’Tis my duty to save a girl from her worries... Besides, we all meditate in our own way,” Angeline proudly declared, puffing out her chest.

Sasha picked up her sheathed sword, glancing between her weapon and the stick in Angeline’s hand.

“Uh... Y-You’re not going to use your sword?”

“If you can’t beat me like this...then you’re a long way from facing off against Graham’s sword,” Angeline asserted, swishing the stick around. It was still furnished with fresh, green leaves.

Sasha shut her mouth and took up her stance, the tip of her sword angled slightly towards her foe. Perhaps because she was using a different weapon than usual, Angeline held the stick one-handed, with her other hand dangling loosely. She was watching Sasha with probing eyes but betrayed no openings of her own.

*I must have underestimated her when she said she would use the stick*, Sasha thought with uncharacteristic objectivity. Nevertheless, she was already licking her lips, knowing she would be facing a formidable foe.

*Calm down, calm down*, she told herself as she closely observed each move Angeline made. Then, Angeline suddenly announced, “If you’re not coming, I am,” and burst forward.

Angeline was already standing right before her. Startled as Sasha was, she blocked the supple stick with her sheath. From deep within her body, Sasha

could feel heat beginning to rise up as her mind became clear. *This* was what she loved, and she simply couldn't deny it. There were few opponents on par with her in Bordeaux; just how blessed was she to find so many higher-level partners willing to put up with her now?

*This is my meditation*, she thought gleefully. They exchanged several slashes until Sasha's blade swung through thin air as Angeline struck her with the stick from behind.

"Wah!"

"You're too excited. You can't meditate like that."

Sasha blushed.

## Chim Chim Cher-ee

Each home in Turnera contained a rather large fireplace. Aside from providing warmth, they provided cooking fires as well, so their flames were tended all throughout the year. Before sleep, the residents would bury the warm embers in ash, scoop out excess ash, and put away any fuel that hadn't been used. The next morning, the smothered embers would be revived in time to cook breakfast.

Even so, there were times when the fireplace would be completely devoid of flame—whenever it was time for the chimney to be swept, the flames were moved to an outdoor fire pit, and the ash and cooking implements would be removed from the fireplace. By that point, the inside of the chimney would be coated in built-up soot. At a certain point of congestion, this could prevent smoke from going up the chimney and could even be a fire hazard. Turnera's chimneys were made wider than most, but without regular maintenance, even something built to last would quickly go to waste.

Angeline stood before the empty fireplace, psyching herself up. The ten-year-old girl had a hand towel wrapped around her head and wore an apron, perfectly dressed for the role of a chimney sweep.

"Ange," Belgrieve called from outside the house. She turned around just in time to see her father enter with an old and tattered wool blanket.

Belgrieve chuckled at the sight of her. "Looks like someone's excited."

"Yeah!"

"Can you hold that side?"

The two of them spread the blanket and laid it down inside the fireplace. The soot scraped off the chimney's sides would fall onto it, and when the cleaning was done, it could all be easily removed, ensuring that the fireplace wouldn't end up covered in the filth from the chimney. This blanket had served this purpose many times before and was stained black.

Then two of them went outside. A long ladder had been leaned against the side of the house, next to which stood Kerry's son, Barnes. He carried a long rod furnished with a thorny brush at the tip in one hand and a much shorter brush in the other.

"Ange, are you sure you're going to do it?"

"I'll do it."

She precociously held her hands out to Barnes, who proceeded to hand her the short brush.

"What about that one?"

"You can have the long one once you're up there. How're you supposed to climb a ladder with it?"

Angeline nodded. *Makes sense.*

Angeline was going to do the chimney sweeping this time. It was a job that couldn't be done from inside the house because the soot would fall onto the sweep from above. She would climb onto the roof, stick in the brush from the top of the chimney, and scrape down the sides. Belgrieve had a peg leg and wasn't very good at climbing ladders. He would usually ask a lad from the village for help, but Angeline had insisted this time.

"Anyways, make sure you've got a firm footing. That's the important part," Barnes advised.

Angeline nodded.

“Take care not to fall, Ange. You can take all the time you want,” Belgrieve gently told her, but that only stoked her desire to prove herself. She nodded, but she was determined to do the job quickly and cleanly to impress him.

The ladder made a slight grating sound as she set her feet on it, but the weight of a child was hardly a burden. Angeline safely clambered up to the rooftop with little difficulty.

“Brush coming up!”

Angeline took hold of the long-handled brush that was passed up to her, but she staggered a little when she made to pull it up, causing the two men staring up at her to blanch. It was surprisingly heavy thanks to the brush being composed of iron bristles. What’s more, the length of the rod meant it would apply quite a bit of torque if it wasn’t held properly. Angeline quickly changed her grip to hold it around its center of mass and regained her balance. The two men below patted their chests, relieved.

Taking a look at the scenery from so high up, Angeline couldn’t help but let out a longing sigh. “Wow...” It was just a little different from the usual sights but was invigorating nonetheless.

“What are you lollygagging for? Get a move on!” Barnes heckled.

“I know,” Angeline answered, pouting, before turning to the chimney.

The roof was sharply slanted to ensure the snow would fall away naturally. It was difficult terrain, but Angeline was naturally nimble and saw little difficulty clambering up. She grabbed on to the rim of the chimney before catching her breath.

The chimney hole was large enough for Angeline herself to climb inside. She peered downward into the almost impenetrable darkness and spotted the barely lighter color of the wool blanket at the very bottom.

She adjusted her footing before timidly taking the small brush and sticking it into the chimney to begin scraping down the sides. The scratchy noises were pleasant to her ears, and she found the task more satisfying than she had expected whenever she felt lumps of soot scattering in bits and pieces.

When she could no longer reach the soot with the short brush, it was time for

the long brush to shine. Angeline took great care to keep her balance as she lowered it down, carefully adjusting her hold on it to apply force where needed to scrape away at the inside of the chimney.

Suddenly, she heard her father's voice from down the chimney. "You're doing good. Keep it up." Evidently, he could see the soot falling from within the house.

*How about that?* she thought proudly. She finished her cleaning and climbed back down.

Belgrieve patted her head. "You did very well. Thank you, Ange."

She'd had fun, but it had been quite tiring too. Angeline flashed a proud smile as she wiped sweat away with her hand.

"Oh!" Belgrieve exclaimed.

Barnes cackled. "You must've put your hands on the rim."

Angeline, alarmed, looked down at her palms to find that both were blackened with soot. Her forehead and cheeks now bore dark handprints where she had wiped away sweat.



**Volume 7**  
**Short Stories**



## Take the Elf!

The city of Orphen gleamed under the summer sun. It was the largest city in the empire's northern reaches, and it was as crowded and lively as ever.

*I've come here again...* Belgrieve felt a strange sensation come over him. However, he had to get used to it—after this, he was headed to somewhere even farther, beyond his wildest dreams. With this in mind, perhaps Orphen was actually the place to compose himself.

"I'm glad I got to see you again so soon," Lionel said with a smile, holding out a cup of tea.

After arriving in Orphen, Belgrieve's party had first stopped by the guild. They had only intended to exchange a few formalities, but they had been let into the back office and seated across from the guild master. And before that, they had received a warm welcome in Bordeaux.

*We're friends, so I don't really second-guess it, but from a normal person's perspective, we're really getting special treatment from lords and guild masters,* Belgrieve realized. He didn't know whether to feel happy or humbled about that.

"We found a lead faster than expected... Thank you. Aren't you busy, Mr. Leo?"

"I'm busy, for what it's worth—but it only makes sense for me to attend to our guild's precious guests. Or rather, please let me attend to you. Otherwise..."

"Dad, the guild master is looking for an excuse to rest."

"Ha ha! You saw right through me, Ms. Ange." Lionel scratched his head.

Kasim teased, "Working too hard will ruin you. Take a page out of my book and let loose a bit."

"Oh, I'd love to imitate you, but they get angry at me when I do," Lionel said, his shoulders dropping.

Anessa and Miriam giggled. Belgrieve found himself breaking into a smile as

he sipped his tea.

“Still, I feel a bit bad for borrowing so many of your capable adventurers...”

“Don’t be. I mean, there’s certainly nothing wrong with having Ms. Ange around, but we can handle our current workload... And if I’m being honest, it feels more like I was the one holding her down here.”

“That’s right, dad... It’s pathetic for an entire guild to be reliant on one party.”

“That stings...” Lionel recoiled a bit.

After scoffing at his antics, Angeline took a look around the office, which prompted Belgrieve to do the same. The documents looked more organized than the last time he had stopped by.

These musings were suddenly interrupted by the office door bursting open and someone racing in to swiftly pounce upon Angeline.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing, leaving me behind?!”

“Whoa there...” Angeline stood and caught the figure shooting towards her with a smile. “Maggie, have you been well?”

Marguerite smiled from ear to ear as she pinched Angeline’s round cheeks. “Good as can be! I’m already D-Rank! A little more to C! Ange, if you’re in Orphen, forget about old Lionel. Come see me first!”

“Hmmm... You’re right. Dad, we should have seen Maggie first.”

Lionel looked upon their reunion in misery. Without a hint of tact, Marguerite forcefully invited herself onto the sofa. Anessa cried out as she wiggled her way in.

“It’s already cramped. Don’t wedge yourself in!”

“Oh, shut it. Don’t make me feel left out. But what’s with you all suddenly showing up like this? You’ve even got Bell with you.”

“Yes, well, the thing is...”

They explained the purpose of their journey and their planned route. However, the more the story went on, the more Marguerite’s face seemed to light up, and Belgrieve had a terrible premonition. As expected, the moment

the story was over, she shot to her feet and declared, “I’m going too!”

*I knew it...* Belgrieve placed a hand on his brow.

Angeline laughed at her cockily. “You want to go? A mere D-Rank?”

“Ah, now you’ve said it! I’m gonna have to teach you a lesson!”

Seeing Marguerite’s temper boil over had Anessa and Miriam in a fit of giggling.

“But Maggie’s got the skill, despite her rank. Isn’t it fine, Mr. Bell?”

“That’s right. And it’ll liven up the trip.”

*This is bad*, Belgrieve thought, scratching his cheek. The girls were all for it, and Kasim was grinning—he knew he didn’t have much room to put his foot down. It wasn’t like he had any reason to refuse her request, but he felt like he’d be doing a disservice to Graham. The Earth Navel was a den of powerful fiends, and he thought it might be irresponsible to take her along. With that said, Marguerite was stronger than Belgrieve himself, so perhaps his worries were unfounded.

The more he silently ruminated, the more impatient Marguerite became. She jumped up again, pinning his arms from behind.

“That does it, Bell! I’m going even if you tell me not to! Prepare yourself!”

“Gah! H-Hey, Maggie, stop!”

Maggie was mercilessly squeezing his neck, and the two grappled until Angeline jumped onto her father with puffed-out cheeks.

“Not fair. Why only Maggie...?”

“Huh? Not fair? What was— H-Hey, stop! That hurts!”

Belgrieve was being squeezed hard from both front and back, and Kasim was cackling and clapping his hands together.

“Look at you, Mr. Popular!”

“Um... So I take it Ms. Maggie is going along? She’s low-ranking, so it shouldn’t require much paperwork, but there are still a few forms to fill...”

“Yeah, go right ahead. She’d come along even if we turned her down, that tomboy.”

“Oy, Kasim! Don’t just make that decision on your— Grah!”

He was locked in a terrible position and had no way to get out of it. He quite literally could not lift a finger against the two roughhousing women. Anessa and Miriam merely looked on in laughter. Lionel shrugged and got up to gather some papers from the shelf.

It went without saying that Marguerite tagged along.

## **A New Sword**

*Why do anvils look like they have cow horns growing out of them?* Angeline wondered. The smithy echoed with the sound of metal clanging against metal. In spite of the noontime hour and how sunny it was outside, the smithy was as dim as any cellar, illuminated only by the bright-red flame surging from the forge and by the sparks that would fly each time the heated metal was hammered. Craftsmen of all ages were coming and going through the darkened workshop.

“Over here.” A young craftsman beckoned to Angeline, rousing her from her distracted survey of the dark workshop. She quickly nodded and followed along.

Angeline had come to buy a new sword. The sixteen-year-old young woman had recently been promoted to S-Rank, and she had been sent off on an endless succession of hunting requests lately in response to the rising numbers of tough fiends that only high-ranking adventurers could slay. Now that she had a party and backline support for requests, she was less pressed than she had been while fighting on her own. Nevertheless, Angeline was still alone on the front line of battle, and after years of bladework, the sword she had used since she first started out was completely worn out.

Her father, Belgrieve, had told her to always carry a good weapon. The sword she had bought as a novice hadn’t been a bad one by any measure, but it was definitely made for the work of a low-ranking adventurer—not the rigors of battle faced by the highest S-Ranks. Frankly, it could be said that Angeline was

extraordinary for even reaching S-Rank with such a weapon.

This was what had brought her to a smithy on the outskirts of Orphen. Her new team was off participating in one of those hunting requests that constantly came into the guild. They had already worked together daily for a while now, but they could only converse when they found a spare moment, and until now, there hadn't been enough time for her to deepen their relationship. Angeline was still struggling with the sense of distance she felt with her first-ever party members.

The room in the back was another workshop, but instead of a flaming furnace, she heard the gravelly sound of a sword being sharpened on a water-lubricated whetstone, which glimmered with a captivating, mirrorlike sheen. Along the wall, Angeline could see a number of completed products. *So this is where the finishing touches are added...*

A middle-aged man—apparently the boss around here—sat at the back. The man was wiping down a honed sword with a cloth. As Angeline approached, he looked up from his work curiously. “Who is this?”

“She says she’s an S-Rank adventurer—you know, that Black-Haired Valkyrie,” said the young craftsman who had guided her.

The boss inspected Angeline more closely, a little surprised. “I had heard rumors, but she’s young... Still a child.”

“I came because I need a sword,” said Angeline.

The boss set aside the sword he had been working on. “I see. But why did you come to me directly? You should go to a weapon shop for that.”

“The guild told me to come here.”

Desiring to find herself a new sword, Angeline had naturally checked every weapon store she knew, but nothing in their inventories had felt right for her. After consulting with the guild on the matter, she had been told to go directly to the smiths.

The boss nodded and held out a hand to Angeline. “Let me see.”

“Okay...” Angeline unsheathed her sword and passed it over. The boss

carefully inspected the blade, then took it by the hilt and gave it a few swings.

“I made this sword,” he concluded.

“You did?”

“Yeah. It’s on the cheap side, but I’m sure he lived out his dreams, to have been used up to this extent. I’m surprised you managed to stand up to high-ranking fiends using this.”

“I’ve been resharpening it. But lately, I hardly put it through its paces before the edge is dulled.”

“I’ll bet. I never hold back when hammering out a blade; it’s the quality of the metal itself that keeps some of them cheap. This is one of the cheap ones.”

The boss stood. He took one of the swords leaned against the wall and handed it to Angeline.

“Try it.”

Angeline gripped the hilt, feeling it out before taking a test swing.

“It’s light...” she said, cocking her head.

“I see.” The boss gave her another sword. Just as before, Angeline gave it a swing, but something still felt off, and she returned it for another. This process went on for some time.

“This isn’t it.”

“You’re a tough customer, lady.” But the boss seemed to be enjoying himself. This time, before handing it over, he started to fish through his collection. “Not this one,” he murmured. “Nor that one either...” So it went, until finally he picked up one and proclaimed, “This will do. Give it a try.”

Angeline took it. She was pleasantly surprised when she held it by the hilt. It was smooth yet seemed to somehow cling to the contours of her hand. When she gave it a swing, it was neither too heavy nor too light. It was like she was slicing through the wind, and the springiness of the supple metal when she swung with the flat of the blade was truly splendid. “This is good.”

“I should imagine so. It was smelted with ore from the east, which is soft and

pliable. The hardness isn't ideal, but a springy blade might suit you better, the way you use it."

"I like it... Let me have it." The rarer ore it was made from meant it would cost a pretty penny, but that was within the price range of a high-ranking adventurer.

On the way back, Angeline placed a hand on the hilt of her new sword. *I'll be slaying fiends again tomorrow, but with this sword, I'll be safer than before when I fight.*

That comforting thought led to another; she began to imagine how she might deepen her bond with her party the next time they met. After all, if she could slay fiends faster, surely there would be more time to talk.

As she made her way home, her thoughts turned to what she could say to them next time they met.

## The People of the Plains

Though the plains looked like a long, flat stretch of land from afar, a closer look would reveal hillocks, gullies, and small rivers that flowed across its surface. Several muffin-shaped tents had been erected alongside one such brook.

"We'll let the sheep graze here for a while. But there are wolves in these parts, so we'll return them to the pen at night. That is a job for the younger ones," said an old man adorned with a robe of many-colored threads. He pointed towards the summer grass, which glistened in the light of the sun that was about to crest the towering mountain range to the west, then to the sheep, and finally, to the dogs and horse riders herding them.

*This kind of reminds me of home,* Belgrieve thought.

In the midst of their southward journey, Belgrieve's party had come across a small nomad encampment. It was something like a settlement, but it comprised only close relatives, an encampment of a single traveling family. It was less a town or village than it was one extended household.

Sunset was approaching, so Belgrieve's party had asked if they could borrow a



room for the night. The nomads seemed eager to mingle with travelers and offered them a warm welcome.

By the time the sheep were returned to their pen, the sun had hidden itself beyond the mountains, and the air was suddenly cold enough that they had to wear coats. Around an outdoor bonfire, they were offered roasted meat and alcohol made from fermented mare's milk. Belgrieve brought forth the sweets and preserved foods they had bought in Yobem and Mansa. Drinks were shared in bowls as they sat back and entertained one another with stories.

"We raise sheep in my homeland, but we've never used horses."

"Oh? Then what do you do?"

"We have dogs all the same, but our shepherds chase them on foot."

"And they catch up to the sheep like that?"

"They do. They know the ups and downs of the hills, so they just have to keep a good eye on the sheep."

"That's quite something. But can you chase them with that leg?"

"You'd be surprised. It just takes a little getting used to." Belgrieve chuckled as he slapped a hand against his peg leg.

Meanwhile, Kasim spoke with a few of the young men who seemed interested in magic, while the girls chatted with the other youths off on their own.

As was usually the case for Tyldes nomads, it seemed that all the boys who herded sheep on horseback could also handle a bow. They were now competing among themselves in target shooting. Angeline observed their contest while a young nomad girl played with her hair. The nomad women had a custom of weaving threads of all colors into their long hair. The patterns were meant to ward off evil and bring luck, though it was mostly a fashion statement for the younger girls. Such chances didn't come along often, so Angeline let them do her hair as well. Miriam and Marguerite looked on with amused looks on their faces.

"That's interesting stuff. And cute."

"Hey, not bad. How about you do me too?"

“Hee hee! Of course.” The nomad girl giggled. “I’ll do it for all of you once she’s done.” She was a young woman of about Angeline’s age with a dark tan and a very gentle look to her.

With a loud swishing noise, an arrow pierced a target leaning against a tree. A nomad boy puffed out his chest with pride. He looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old, right at the peak of his mischievous phase.

“How’s that? Smack-dab in the center.”

“Good going,” Anessa said, clapping her hands.

“Heh heh... Don’t you think? Even my older brothers don’t hit the center too often. You look like an archer, missy, but you can’t beat me.”

The boys on the sidelines were watching intently to see how things would pan out. After cackling, Anessa lifted her bow, took aim, and let loose. Her shot tore straight through the boy’s arrow, landing in exactly the same spot.

“What?!” The boy’s eyes widened while his brothers cheered Anessa on.

Anessa patted the boy on the shoulder, an impish smile on her face. “Your turn.”

“I... I’ll do it, just you watch!” The boy anxiously drew his bow, but he seemed to be taking an awfully long time to aim. It didn’t seem he would fire at all.

“You’re being childish, Anne,” Angeline chortled.

“Am I, now? But the kid’s got some growing to do. I think that’s just what he needs now... Hmm, that suits you pretty well. You’ve gotten a bit cuter.”

On top of the threads woven into her hair, Angeline had also donned the clothes the nomads wore. Grinning, she spun around to show off her new look.

Eventually, someone brought out an instrument, and a lively performance began. They used a different scale from the one used in the empire, but it was easy enough to dance to their plucky rhythm. Their inhibitions lowered by the milk-wine they had drunk, Angeline and the other girls, now in their own nomadic dresses, were soon twirling with the youths.

As Belgrieve and the adult nomads laughed at the spectacle, a muscular, dignified-looking man approached him—evidently their patriarch. “What lovely

girls you have. And good with the bow too... How about it? Would you let her marry my eldest? I'm sure they'll be a wonderful couple."

"I appreciate the offer, but that's something they'll have to decide for themselves."

"Hmm, I see. He's a hardworking boy..."

"I can tell just by looking at him. You have been blessed with a fine heir."

The man laughed merrily and held out a pot of the milk-wine. "You have a silver tongue indeed. Drink up; have your fill."

"If you insist."

The moon rose through the clear sky, and the night gradually drew on.

## **The Dancer and the Adventurer**

Angeline was off from work today, so she wandered the city streets of Orphen. The thirteen-year-old girl had found herself frequently exploring the nearby dungeons lately. By chance, she had coincidentally stumbled across and defeated a rare variant fiend, boosting her reputation at the guild. She was set to be promoted to B-Rank in the near future as a result.

Angeline was climbing the ranks at an incredible pace and had become something of a celebrity within Orphen's guild. There was a rumor going around that she wouldn't stop at B-Rank, that she would climb all the way to the top. Of course, Angeline just kept her head down and focused on doing her work, so she wasn't privy to any of this.

Today was her day off, in any case; she could have stayed in bed all day, but she wasn't tired, so she put on her casual clothes and decided to take a stroll. The fact she still had a sword at her hip—well, that was something of an occupational disease.

She bought some fruit from a stall, eating it along the way until she came across a crowd of people. Angeline indecisively approached the crowd, peering through the gaps to see what it was all about—a troupe of nomadic musicians, seemingly.

“Watch and be amazed. This dance hails from the lands to the distant south,” a swarthy man with a thick beard announced in a booming voice. Then came the flutes and the drums, and a slender dancer took the stage—a girl who looked to be no more than two or three years older than Angeline. Her bare, bronze skin moved and undulated in mesmerizing motions. The light cloth streamers attached to her garments billowed as though they were alive, occasionally caressing the faces of the spectators.

Each time the dancer took a nimble leap, cheers would erupt from the crowd. The dancer was flexible, able to bend her body to an alarming degree. The dance demonstrated her ability to raise her legs high enough to touch her knees to her head. Angeline’s head bobbed to the music as she watched. She’d seen countless street performers before, but this girl’s dancing strangely resonated with her heart, and their near ages made her feel a sense of familiarity with the performer.

Eventually, the music and the dancing reached its crescendo. As the dancer struck one final pose, the crowd was swept up in applause as they tossed a flurry of spare change into the basket placed before them. Orphen’s streets were always lively like this, filled with street performers showing off talents to earn some coin and peddlers who turned their wagons into impromptu stalls doing anything they could to draw customers.

It was in one such wagon that Angeline found herself, but not to shop. This was the wagon of the traveling troupe, piled high with props of their performance. Angeline approached the dancing girl who was toweling herself off in the shadows.

The girl turned to Angeline and smiled. “Hello.”

“Hello... I liked your dancing.”

“Did you now? Well, thank you.” The girl took Angeline’s hand, beaming.

“Your body’s flexible...”

“It sure is. Have a look.”

The dancer lifted her leg all the way up.

Angeline blinked in amazement. “Wow, that’s amazing... Hey, how do you get

a body like that?”

“Hmm, well, I just stretch it out every day. It takes time to get like this, though. You have to practice and keep at it.”

“I see... Yes, that sounds right.” Angeline nodded. It was the same with learning how to fight with a sword—it was a process of daily practice swings until it gradually became second nature to her.

Angeline tried lifting her own leg. She knew she was quite flexible, but certainly not as flexible as the dancer.

But the girl clapped at the display of athleticism. “Wow, very impressive! You’re already flexible enough.”

“Do you think so?”

“What do you do for a living? I suppose if you go around with that sword...”

“I’m an adventurer... I can move around and fight better if I’m flexible.”

“Hmm, I see! That’s amazing, at your age.”

The girl inspected Angeline closely, clearly impressed. Angeline had already become used to compliments from her colleagues, but this was something else; what’s more, it was coming from someone she herself recognized as incredible. Angeline felt rather bashful and found herself fidgeting under the attention.

“You’re...amazing too. Your dance was very impressive.”

“It’s part of the job!” The girl smiled bashfully and proudly puffed out her chest.

The drums and the flute had started up again, and the bearded man was reciting his patter once more. Outside, a new crowd was gathering. The girl draped a thin veil over her head.

“I have to get going!”

“Yeah...”

The dancer bounded forth like the wind to begin her routine once more. Her movements were supple and strong yet so light and graceful that it wasn’t hard to picture her flying through the air. Angeline’s cheeks flushed with excitement

as she watched the next performance and tossed a silver coin into the basket. When she returned home later, Angeline was still in a dreamy state of mind. The girl's dancing, the warm color of her skin, her garments—all of it evoked distant lands, far removed from where Angeline now dwelled. To see a girl her age working so hard excited her spirits too.

Angeline sat on her bed vacantly staring for some time, before the sudden remembrance of something that had passed between her and the dancer brought her to her feet. Though she had no intention of becoming a dancer, it would still be good to be as flexible as that girl in her practice of blade arts. Be it in dodging incoming attacks or maneuvering around the battlefield, she *needed* to train in those supple movements.

She tried raising her leg again, but she could hardly say she was anywhere close to the girl. Angeline pouted. With her next attempt, she tried giving her thigh a good tug. *Oh? That goes farther than I thought. Not bad...* But pleasant surprise suddenly gave way to spasming, throbbing pain.

“Agh!”

*I got ahead of myself...* Angeline collapsed limply back onto the bed, recalling her father's advice: *Take it little by little, one day at a time. Don't be impatient.*

“Dad would laugh at me for that...”

*Little by little, one day at a time... Someday, I'll be as limber as that dancer.* Angeline stared at the ceiling. Her hip joint was throbbing. *We'll have to continue this tomorrow,* she thought as her eyes drifted shut.

## **The Paladin and the Princess**

Elven territory, which spanned the continent's far northern expanse, was mostly covered in forests filled with towering trees, each of which was several hundred years old. Their boughs exuded an air of mystery, something vastly different from the forests that grew in human lands.

The tribe of the west was a large one, and it was no exaggeration to say that any elves that occasionally appeared at the empire's northern checkpoint all hailed from the same forest.

With the pitter-patter of her light feet, Marguerite raced out through the back of the palace. The sunlight poured through the gaps in the trees, creating pillars of light. The seven-year-old elven maiden took a deep breath before starting again. She fled the settlement into the forest that surrounded it. To the elves, the forest was their living space; they regarded it with veneration but didn't feel fear or wariness of it like humans did. Marguerite's steps were confident as she unerringly raced through the seemingly indistinguishable green environment until she finally spotted the small, unremarkable hermitage in the thicket. The house where her granduncle—the man she admired most—lived was fashioned to resemble the great trees that surrounded it. Its earthen walls were crowned with a roof of moss and thatch, out of which arose an earthen chimney that was trailing wisps of smoke. As an elf, Marguerite could find it effortlessly, but if not for the smoking chimney, a human would likely fail to spot it at a glance.

Marguerite raced up to the dwelling and pushed the door in without so much as knocking. "Granduncle! I came to play!"

Graham—who was seated in front of the fireplace in the back of the hut—turned his eyes to her with brow subtly furrowed. "Maggie... How many times must I tell you to knock?"

"Don't say the same things that father does!" Marguerite pouted as she ran up to Graham and hopped up into his lap, where she took a seat.

Graham sighed, then shut the book he was in the middle of reading and patted her head. Marguerite quite liked her granduncle's hard, calloused palms. It was like they had been carved with the proof of all the years he had spent wielding his sword. *If I swing a sword long enough to get a hand like that, will I be able to earn fame as an adventurer too?* she would always wonder whenever she was with him.

"You skipped out without permission again..."

"Well, father is always scolding me about something or other..." Marguerite groused sulkily. She wasn't very close to the man—he was strict with her and did not approve of her adoration of adventurers and the human world. But any fear of disappointing her father was driven far from mind whenever Marguerite heard Graham's tales of adventure, and the longing for the outside world

stirred in her heart. It was no surprise then that Marguerite would often sneak away from her parents to play with Graham.

“He will be angry again. Oberon scolds me too, you know.”

“It’s fine! You’re higher up than father, aren’t you?”

“That’s not true, Maggie. And your father speaks with your best interests in mind. He isn’t just trying to be mean.”

Marguerite pouted and turned to face the other way. For a while the two of them silently gazed into the flame of the fireplace, but eventually, Marguerite looked over her shoulder at Graham. “I want to hear what happens next.”

“Maggie... This is simply my story. I am seen as an oddity among the elves. I am not someone to be looked up to.”

Graham heaved a resigned sigh before slowly beginning to speak. His was a tale of adventure told with heavy and solemn words that spirited Marguerite away from the life she knew to a world completely foreign to her. In his words, she felt the heat of the dragon’s fiery breath and dizzy fear as he walked along sheer cliffs.

While she was entranced by tales of long ago, there was a knock at the door.

*Father is here?!* Marguerite froze up as she was immediately pulled out of her dreamland.

“Um, pardon me. I’m looking for the house of the Paladin, Graham. Am I in the right place?” The slightly airheaded voice from the door was that of a woman. Graham got up to answer the door and opened it to reveal a young, elven woman in the doorway.

“Can I help you?”

“I apologize for this sudden visit; my name is Maureen. I came from the Eastern Forest... I’m one of the oddballs, apparently. I long for the human world. So I thought I would hear a story or two before I go.”

“Hmm... Well, come in.”

“Thank you so much! Wait, whoa!” No sooner than she had set foot into the Paladin’s home, Marguerite charged up with a scowl on her face and started



smacking her; it didn't hurt, exactly, but it certainly got Maureen's attention.

Graham wearily scooped the girl up. "Marguerite, cease."

"But, granduncle..."

"Uh, who is the child...?"

"My grandniece...and the daughter of the king of the Western Forest."

"Huh? You mean she's a princess? Hey, quit it! Give me a break!"

Even in Graham's arms, Marguerite managed to launch a kick at Maureen. She was in a terrible mood; not only had she received a terrible scare when she thought her father had come, but the story had been interrupted. Graham took a step back with Marguerite tightly restrained.

"My apologies... Take a seat."

"Y-Yes, thanks..." Maureen fidgeted as she pulled out one of the chairs.

"So... What sort of story were you hoping to hear?"

"Oh, right. I was thinking of going to the human world. If you know anything about Keatai, I would love to hear it..."

"Keatai... Yes, that was a long time ago." Graham pensively told her what he knew, bringing up whatever details he happened to recall. It was different from the previous story but another tale of grand adventure nonetheless. Marguerite and Maureen were both immediately entranced as they were drawn into the world he described. Marguerite's irritation towards Maureen had completely vanished. In that moment, the two elves both shared in the same sights.

## **A Wagonload of Boredom**

The wagon rattled along the vast plains. The sun bore down relentlessly, but the wind was refreshing and cool. Angeline sat with her friends amid the cargo, her gaze distant, while Marguerite was nodding off as she leaned against a nearby cushion. Anessa was holding the reins, while Belgrieve inspected the edge of his knife. Kasim had tipped his hat down to cover his face and hadn't moved a muscle for some time.

They had just left Mansa and were now on the southbound leg of their journey. Some folks had tried to frighten them out of going, calling it a perilous adventure with no roads to follow, but they had yet to encounter any real difficulties. So much the better, as far as Belgrieve was concerned—but Angeline was starting to feel restless. She thought it would be wonderful if she could overcome some trial or other with her beloved father at her side, yet such an event simply refused to happen to her.

Angeline glanced to her side, where Miriam sat with her eyes closed and a comfortable expression on her face. She had removed her hat, so her cat ears were twitching as the breeze played over them. Angeline reached out and rubbed her finger at the base of one of those ears. The ear twitched, much to her amusement.

It wasn't long before Miriam opened her eyes. "What?"

"Don't worry about it..."

"How can I not? Seriously, just when I was comfortably asleep," Miriam grumbled, then draped herself over Angeline, embracing and nuzzling her drowsily. "Hmm... So smooth, Ange."

"Ugh..." Angeline struggled to extricate herself from Miriam's embrace and her mass of ticklish hair. In the course of her thrashing, her legs kicked against the wagon floor with a loud bump.

"Hey, you two—it's too dangerous for horseplay in here," Belgrieve chided.

"Okay..." Angeline managed to make herself comfortable and reclined against the wagon wall. She maneuvered Miriam into her lap and hugged her from behind.

Angeline loved daydreaming while holding Mit and Charlotte like this. With none of her siblings around, she made do with Miriam as a substitute. She patted her head with the same motions she would use to lull a child to sleep.

"Fluffy..."

"Urgh..." Miriam squirmed a little, but it didn't seem like she was actually inclined to escape, and in the end, she resigned herself to captivity.

“You look bored, the lot of you,” Marguerite observed. She had rolled over to see what the commotion had been.

“So do you...”

“That’s right. If we weren’t on a wagon, we could stretch our legs or throw down... It’s all this sitting down for so long that’s wearing me out.”

“Then why don’t you get down and run alongside the wagon?” Kasim teased. Everyone else had thought he was still asleep.

Marguerite puffed out her cheeks. “No way, not happening. I’d feel like an idiot if I was out there running on my own.”

Anessa looked back from the driver’s seat with a mischievous glint in her eye. “Then do you want to take over for the horse and pull the wagon?”

“Grr...” Marguerite threw her hands in the air. “Each and every one of you! What do you take me for, huh?!”

“Maggie, quiet down... You’ll wake Merry.”

“Ah, sorry...” Marguerite apologetically shut her mouth, only for Miriam to start thrashing.

“What am I, a baby?!”

“Settle down...”

“Nyah! Hey, bad touch!” Angeline’s hands had drifted down to her friend’s ticklish sides, making her thrash even harder.

“I told you to settle down... Maggie, help me.”

“Kay, on it.”

With more time than she knew what to do with, Marguerite would hop on any opportunity to move her body. She grabbed Miriam from the front, her expression mirthful.

The result was that Miriam ended up sandwiched between Marguerite and Angeline. Her cat ears perked up. “Have you no shame, bullying little ol’ me?” Merry cried.

“Nope.”

“Just because you’re a magician, that doesn’t mean you don’t have to work out. Build some muscle. There, there...”

“Nyoooo!”

The three of them continued mucking about. Kasim waved his hand in the air irritably. “Pipe down. Can’t a man have some peace?”

“But we’re bored!”

“Looks like you won’t be bored much longer...” Belgrieve murmured. He had kept his peace until then. He reached for the greatsword, which was now growling softly as he looked out to the horizon.

The party followed his gaze to see what looked like a black speck away down the plains, but it was steadily growing larger. It was a lizard-type fiend or perhaps even a subspecies of dragon.

Marguerite jumped to her feet with glee. “Just what I needed, a chance to go wild! I can take it on, right? Right?” Without waiting for an answer, Marguerite leaped from the running wagon. Miriam, liberated at last, frantically tried to tame her mussed up hair with her hands.

Anessa frowned. “C’mon now...”

“You show ’em, Maggie!” Angeline called out with a smile.

Marguerite’s charge faltered, traces of doubt crossing her face once she got a closer look at the fiend. She could just begin to make out another ten of them swarming behind it, all of them headed her way. “Agh... Fine, let’s do this thing!” she yelled, drawing her rapier.

It seemed she couldn’t bring herself to turn tail after making a show of running off on her own. The rest of the party laughed even as they gathered their respective weapons. Anessa brought the wagon to a halt, and they all disembarked, ready for battle.

When the slight crisis was averted, the journey went on.

## Rain Shelter

It happened all too suddenly—the sky became covered in clouds the color of lead, and with flashes of lightning, a torrent of large raindrops fell. The adventurers, who had been out collecting herbs and caught unawares, dashed off and took refuge under a large tree nearby.

The flaxen-haired boy wrung out his sodden cape with a frown. “Dammit, what’s with this rain? It came straight out of nowhere.”

“Ick, I’m soaked...” the elven maiden groused, her brow furrowed as she held up the hem of her shirt. Her wet clothes clung to her body, accentuating her figure in a strangely sensual way.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it. It’s just nature,” said the red-haired boy. He fished through his bags, handing out a towel to each member. The brown-haired boy was leaning against the tree trunk, watching the raindrops as they fell, so the red-haired boy draped a towel over his head.

“Here—dry yourself off, or you’ll catch a cold.”

“Thanks. Man, it just had to start when we were out gathering herbs...” The brown-haired boy grabbed the towel and coarsely rubbed it all around his head. Meanwhile, the blond boy had finished squeezing the water out of his cape, so he doffed his coat without hesitation and began wringing it out too.

“We’re lucky it’s the warm season. We would’ve been in real danger if it was winter,” the red-haired boy observed.

“Point taken.” The sandy-blond boy laughed and snapped his towel before looking over at the elf girl. “You dry off too, or you’ll get sick.”

“Thanks, *dad*, but I didn’t need the reminder.” The elven lass stuck her tongue out at him.

The blond boy pouted. “As bratty as ever, I see.”

“It’s your fault for treating me like a child. Now turn that way, I’m going to change clothes. No peeking.”

“Who would wanna look at you?!”

“Liar. I can see that look in your eye, perv.”

“Uh, maybe you should go to the other side of the tree...?” the red-haired boy

timidly suggested.

The elf girl scoffed. “I know that. I’m taking my bag!”

With that, she grabbed her bag and trudged to the other side of the tree. The red-haired boy breathed a sigh, while the other boys grinned at him.

“Closet perv?”

“Yup, closet perv.”

“Hey!” *There they go again*, he thought indignantly. The chuckleheads were doubled over, hardly paying him any mind now. He had just felt a little awkward, that’s all—but they would tease and poke at him over even that. Unfortunately, he knew it was futile to defend himself to them by now.

“Now, now, don’t get all sulky on us.”

“Yeah, you can’t help it if you’re a guy.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not like that... Well, whatever.” The red-haired boy gave up and reached for the basket of herbs, which were also quite sodden. It wouldn’t impact the quality, but leaving them wet for too long would make it easier for the leaves to be bruised. He gently bundled up the herbs in his hands, taking care not to damage them, and shook the water off.

The brown-haired boy seemed a bit impressed. “It’s that attention to detail that our leader is lacking...”

“Like you’re one to talk,” the blond-haired boy retorted mirthfully.

The rain had eased up a little, but the tree’s boughs were sodden enough that it was starting to drip down on them even under the canopy.

“Wow!” the elven maiden exclaimed. She had since finished changing and rejoined her friends. “I thought it was just a passing shower, but it’s coming down hard.”

“Yeah, but it’ll stop soon. We only have a little more gathering to do, so we’ll be back by the end of the day,” said the red-haired boy. He draped a cloth over the basket and sat down next to it.

The others either sat down as well or leaned against the trunk, arms crossed.

The sound of raindrops pattering against the leaves and ground echoed all around them, merging into a steady, indistinct roar.

“What should we do when we get back? Are we just going our separate ways?” the elf girl murmured. She had sat down, hugging her knees.

“Yeah, what to do...? Hey, we’ve got some money saved up, right? It’s been a while, so how about a drink?” the flaxen-haired boy replied.

“Hmm? Do we? We never have any savings to begin with because we drink them away...” the red-haired boy reasoned.

“Well, what’s the harm? We have everything we need for now. After we get through this, a good breather’s in order, don’t you think?” the blond boy argued.

“Right, right. I’m on board,” said the brown-haired boy.

“Me too...if it’s okay with you,” the elf girl said, turning doe eyes on the red-haired boy.

*So it’s three on one, huh,* the red-haired boy thought with a wry smile. It wasn’t like they were in dire need of money. They’d been working hard these past few days, and a little celebrating couldn’t hurt. *What’s the use in being an adventurer if all we do is grit our teeth and slave away?*

“Okay, let’s do it. But don’t drink too much.”

“I know, I know.”

“Hooray! Hee hee... I can’t wait!”

“Oh, looks like it’s clearing up. One more push, and we’ll have a good drink tonight.”

The heavy clouds had drifted away, revealing a thin patch of blue sky above. The red-haired boy got up and stretched. *The basket is almost full; only another hour or so to go.*

## A Tale of Monikers

Monikers were the kind of thing that naturally came about from one’s fighting

style or characteristic appearance. It was not completely unheard of for someone to think up their own nickname and for it to stick, but in most cases, it would simply start from nowhere in particular before the wandering minstrels would pick up on it, and thence the name would be immortalized.

Though he had reunited with Percival, Belgrieve remained at the Earth Navel. He had managed to obtain the material Graham had requested, but there was still the matter of what Istafar's guild master, Oliver, had asked for in exchange for borrowing the crystal. And so, another day was spent battling fiends from the abyss. After collecting some materials, he sat in front of the fire to rest his body.

"Where did your moniker come from, mister?" Lucille asked.

Percival furrowed his brow. "I have no idea. They just started calling me that."

"Heh heh heh... That's just how it works," Kasim said with a laugh before taking a swig of ale.

It suddenly occurred to Belgrieve that he was hanging out with several adventurers with monikers. Percival had one, as did Kasim and Angeline.

"Exalted Blade... It's probably because you were really strong, right?" Angeline reasoned, carving up a chunk of roasted meat. "I mean, cyclopes, true ancestors—you've beaten up loads of things, huh?"

"Dragons and demons too. I fought an archdevil once, but...I can hardly remember it."

"My word... You truly are incredible, Sir Percival," Duncan remarked. He had an ambivalent look on his face that was some combination of fatigue and astonishment.

Marguerite drank down her ale before casually offering her opinion. "Also coulda been because they were terrified of him. First time I saw you, I thought you were a fiend in human form."

"Now look here." Percival frowned.

"As the people of the past said, 'Don't judge a book by its cover—with some exceptions.'"



“Hey...”

“He really was just as scary as he looked...” Angeline chimed in with a nod.

Scowling, Percival yelled “Hey!” once more, yet he couldn’t work out anything else to say in his defense—he was too painfully aware of his reputation to deny it. Kasim was doubled over in laughter at the sight.

“What about your moniker, Mr. Kasim?” Miriam asked, chewing on a piece of roasted meat. “Where did it come from?”

“Oh, Aether Buster? Mine’s easy. I fought this fiend called the Hollow Lord, and I got it after I won.”

“What sort of fiend was it?” asked Anessa.

Kasim stroked his beard as he reminisced. “Its name came from how it suddenly appeared from nothing, just like that—out in the open sky. The top half of its body was floating upside down right above the capital. The thing had twelve long arms and seven heads, each of which could chant magic independently. It made a mess of the capital’s adventurers, even their S-Ranks. The way its menacing visage loomed over the city was like it had become the sky itself, and I smashed straight through it with Hart Langer’s Spear.”

“Oh, so *that’s* why you’re the Aether Buster.”

“Yep. Simple, right? That was also when I became S-Rank.” Kasim chuckled, pulling at his beard.

Ishmael nodded. “That was a famous battle. The enemy was far beyond reach and had formidable magic resistance. Most thought that would be the day the capital fell.”

Belgrieve found himself astounded by the grand adventures his old comrades had gone on. These were tales of a world he couldn’t even fathom. It went without saying, but Percival and Kasim had both walked their own paths in life over the course of years; undoubtedly, they had plenty of stories to tell.

“Ange’s moniker is simple too. Just look at her,” Marguerite said as she refilled her cup. “She’s a black-haired woman warrior: the Black-Haired Valkyrie, plain and simple.”

“That’s a moniker you’ll only find in the west,” Yakumo chimed in, exhaling a stream of smoke before continuing. “Everyone has black hair where I come from.”

Sure enough, the people of the East usually had black hair. It was uncommon enough in the Rhodesian Empire, though, that the black hair was a noteworthy characteristic.

“I see...” Anessa mused. “Then, on the contrary, there could be a Blonde-Haired Valkyrie in the east.”

“Yes, I could see it happening. It’s all about what leaves an impression.”

“Mr. Bell’s moniker also has to do with his hair.”

Anessa’s words caused Belgrieve to accidentally inhale a bit of his ale. “*Cough, hack! Hack-hack!* Anne! That’s—”

“Huh? What?” Anessa seemed genuinely confused.

Puffing out her chest with pride, Angeline explained, “Blazing red hair and the strength of an ogre... This is Red Ogre Belgrieve.”

“Ha ha!” Percival looked at Belgrieve with a grin.

After smacking his chest and steadying himself, Belgrieve took a deep breath. “You have it all wrong. Ange’s just saying things.”

“It’s already famous though,” added Marguerite. “Everyone in Orphen and Bordeaux knows it.”

Kasim gave a jolly laugh. “That’s right, and you’re pretty strong too. Hard to imagine you’ve been a farmer in Turnera all this time.”

“I see,” said Percival. “You even bear the sword of the Paladin. All this, without even an adventuring license. The Exalted Blade has nothing on you.”

“Give me a break already...”

Belgrieve held his heated face in his hands. It felt as though his cheeks had grown just as red as his hair.

**Volume 8**  
**Short Stories**



## Thus Spake Dad

With dinner out of the way, and after exhausting all conversational topics over drinks, everybody returned to their room with the sense that the day was at its end. But it wasn't as though they would immediately fall asleep as soon as they hit the sack. The girls merrily chatted late into the night, while the old men sat a while, drinking a few more cups of liquor.

"We're just following the highway, so it ain't a hard journey. But it sure is a boring one," Percival said, pouring some distilled spirits from the bottle.

"What, are you thirsting for blood already? Should we take a job hunting in a town along the way? Heh heh heh..."

"Don't treat me like I'm a fiend or something."

As Percival poked at him, Kasim chuckled and sipped from his glass. "You too, Bell. Drink some more."

"Nah, I'm fine. I can't keep up with you two," Bell answered, hurriedly cupping a hand over the lip of his own glass as the bottle was brought towards it.

"Live a little. How are we supposed to sleep before this bottle is empty?"

"He's right. It'll take far too long for the two of us."

"What are you talking about? Look how much you've had already..."

The liquid sloshing around inside it was more than halfway depleted. *Even after they drank so much at dinner...* Belgrieve mused with a plastered-on smile. It was an amount that would have certainly brought him down with a hangover the next day had he tried to imitate them. The fact these two could come out perfectly fine spoke to how well they held their drink. *I can't beat them here either...* His thoughts took a strange turn.

Percival munched on a potato he'd bought from the pub. "You were never much of a drinker. But you sure you haven't gotten any better at holding your liquor over the years?"

“We didn’t have any strong spirits in Turnera. Cider was the strongest stuff we had.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, the cider was pretty good,” Kasim said, pouring himself another cup. “You weren’t buying it from somewhere, right? You made it yourself?”

“Yeah, the entire village gets together to make it every fall. It should be around that time now... You drank it at the spring festival, right? That one was barreled the previous fall. We make plenty of it, and the brew rests all winter to drink in the spring. Then, when the fall festival comes around, we polish off whatever’s left from that batch.”

“Hmm, I see. I do remember seeing apple trees here and there. Makes sense.”

“Yeah. When Ange was still around, I’d have her climb up the trees every year to pick the fruit. She’s nimble and a really good climber, you know. It was never my strong suit, so she was a huge help.”

“She’s pretty light on her feet, yeah. Well, I guess that’s how it is with kids.”

“When the season comes around, you start plucking them from the ones that show a bit of red. You get ’em all by the end of it, but it’s a really busy time by then. From sunrise to sunset, there are loads of things you have to do to prepare for winter.”

“You really are a farmer. You’ve come a long way from home,” Percival said with a laugh.

*Well, he’s not wrong*, Belgrieve silently conceded. From time to time, he would wonder if all of this was a dream he was having from his bed in Turnera. But he knew this was undoubtedly his reality, and that delighted him to no end.

“It’s all thanks to Ange. She’s the one who pulled me back into the outside world.”

“Right. I don’t know what would have become of me if I’d never met Ange in Estogal City.”

“And I never woulda met you two again if that never happened. You never know where life’s gonna bring you.”

For all the cumulative years these three men had lived, the mood became rather solemn when these topics came around. The conversation took a brief pause as each sipped and mulled over their own thoughts.

Strangely enough, the serious air caused Belgrieve to remember something funny. He snorted, and Percival and Kasim looked at him curiously.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... I was just thinking about Ange, you know. She was always demanding to be pampered; she was such a crybaby when she was younger... And now, she’s an S-Rank adventurer of all things. She’s really grown up.”

“As far as I can tell, she’s still demanding your pampering, but... Well, I guess that’s how it looks from her father’s perspective.”

“Well, she’s my cute, precious daughter whom I value more than anything, but she was a real handful, if you can believe it... It was when she was two, I think. She learned to walk on her own two legs, and the moment I took my eyes off of her, she was trying to pick up my sword. I was so surprised I scolded her a bit louder than I should have, and she started bawling her eyes out... I had to stop working to hold her.”

“So she was already showing talent back then? That does sound like her.” Percival laughed and downed his glass.

Kasim grabbed the bottle to give Percival a refill. “Heh heh heh... So the two of you have come to where you are today through a lot of trouble. Must be hard, being a parent.”

“Well, in my case, Ange came to me before I was prepared for it. Normally, I think you would gradually develop a fatherly awareness as your wife’s belly grows, but... Yeah, it was a mess. She’d cry at night, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her once she learned to walk, and I never even imagined I’d need so many diapers. I was washing them every day. My friends in the neighborhood with kids were lifesavers... It was around the time she was three, I believe. She wanted to sleep in the same bed as me, but then, she wet it when she had a nightmare. You remember how the bed at my place is a sheet over straw, right? Well, the sheet was soaked, and it’d seeped into the straw too. I had to change all of it out, and I was going back and forth from the shed in the middle of the

night.”

Perhaps the alcohol in his system was bolstering his enthusiasm, but Belgrieve was being strangely talkative, and Percival and Kasim were soon laughing along with his stories.

“Heh heh heh! What a merry family you have...”

“Heh heh heh... You must have other stories, right? No need to hide it. Go on.”

“Hmm, well...”

There was no end to his memories. There were plenty of things he remembered even if Angeline had forgotten. His glass was refilled yet again. It seemed that none of them would be going to sleep just yet.

## **Fishing Rod**

From among the shrubs, they selected the branches that grew straight and supple without any offshoots. It was crucial to ensure a certain thickness lest it break, so it was important to bend it slightly to make sure. Dead branches wouldn't do, but a well-dried branch would be sturdier than a green one. So much for the rods—next was attaching the line of twisted flax and wool. Once the hook was fastened to the end, the fishing rod was complete.

“Heh, this one's pretty supple. It should be able to land a big one,” Kasim mused, gently bending the rod back and forth.

Graham nodded. “We can't keep borrowing Bell's rods forever...”

It was still early enough in the year that it would get cold after sunset, so the fireplace was warmly ablaze. The turmoil in the forest had recently been settled, and though there were still repairs and cleaning up to be done on damaged houses and fields, the quotidian affairs of daily life had mostly resumed. The aforementioned repairs were done in the daytime, leaving off routine housework until after sunset.

Graham had been focused on making a fishing rod lately. He was often entrusted with looking after the children, and he frequently took them to the

river. Aside from splashing around in the current, the children would also fish or look for crabs under the river rocks. This was as much about recreation as it was about procuring food for the children, so Graham set about his task with some seriousness, lest he be the one to spoil their fun.

He lacquered the rod, making sure it would curve without breaking when a fish was on the line. He wrapped a cloth around the handle with the same thread of wool and flax as the line to bind it in place, then polished the hook until it gleamed like a well-honed blade. Graham had always wanted to make his own rod, and finally, he had crafted something he was satisfied with.

The older kids also had their own handmade rods. Not all of them were into fishing, but of those who were, some of them could pull in fish that put even an adult angler's catches to shame. As someone who looked after those kids, Graham felt he couldn't afford to be outdone.

"Nice," Kasim murmured after testing the tensile strength of the corded thread. "Maybe I should make one too."

"Go ahead. You have all the materials you need," said Belgrieve.

"Yeah, I guess so. Not like I'm doing anything else."

"What happened to my rod?" Angeline asked. Back when she was a child, before she had left for Orphen, she had made a fishing rod of her own.

Belgrieve scratched his head awkwardly. "I gave it to Emmet since he wanted one... I figured it was better than letting it gather dust in the shed."

"I see... Then I'll make a new one too."

"Then maybe I should as well..." Charlotte said, eyeing the newly fashioned rod.

Kasim chuckled. "All of us together, then. That'll be more fun."

"Me too—I want to fish," Mit chimed in enthusiastically.

With that decided, everyone—aside from Belgrieve, who had some work to do—set out the next day to find shrubs with branches suitable for rods. Byaku was brought along as free labor, and Graham ended up in something of a guardian role. He was taking over childcare from the parents who were too



busy repairing their fields, so the children too small to help out with that endeavor had tagged along too.

Kasim laughed. "What a rambunctious group we've got here!" His hat had been filched by one of the little kids.

"Sorry, I couldn't leave them behind."

"Don't worry about it. Now, everyone, gather round. You have to do what your big sis says," Angeline announced, putting on her elder-sister act.

"No!" the mischievous children said in reply, laughing at her and then scattering to run around. They were at the age where they were determined to do exactly the opposite of whatever any adult told them.

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. "Hey! Anyone who doesn't listen gets a spanking!"

"Oh, let them have their fun. It's fine as long as we can see them," Anessa said.

"She's right. Ange just doesn't have enough presence to command them," Miriam teased.

With even her friends laying into her, Angeline became even sulkier than before. "Come here, you little..." She began chasing after the children, who now ran from her gleefully.

Kasim wearily scratched his head. "Don't overdo it..."

"It's hard to tell what we even came for," Charlotte said with a soft laugh.

Nevertheless, they eventually found themselves near the forest's edge where various shrubs grew. They kept a sharp eye on the children to make sure they didn't go wandering off into the woodland on their own as each of them began searching for branches with potential.

"Instead of a bendy one, how about a nice sturdy one that just doesn't break?"

"If that's what you want, Kasim... But those ones tend to be heavy."

"Oh really? Then I guess a light one it is."

“Exactly—hey!” Angeline quickly dodged to one side. The children were trying to poke her with long branches. “You won’t reach me with such shoddy swordsmanship...” she snorted.

“Swordsmanship?” Anessa asked.

“But fine. Come at me. I’ll show you just how amazing your big sis really is.” Angeline snapped off a good-sized branch for herself and turned to face her foes with a grin. The children rushed her in a mad and joyful frenzy, but she was an S-Rank adventurer—even when her footwork was far from serious, she effortlessly fended them off. Once Mit joined in, the situation was completely out of control.

“Hey, what happened to the fishing rods?” Kasim wearily muttered.

## **The Hot Springs (Men’s Bath)**

“Where did you folks come from?” asked an elderly man who seemed to be a local.

“From the north,” Belgrieve answered.

Dense white steam rose from the open-air bath, swirling and fading into the starry sky. There was a chill to the air that made the steam feel that much heavier, such that one could scarcely see anything in the bath.

“There’s a small village to the north of the Dukedom of Estogal. That’s where we came from.”

“Oh? That’s quite the distance. You made it here on one leg?”

“Ha ha... It’s all about getting used to it. It’s been like this for close to thirty years now.”

“I see. But it’s never too late for an old wound to start acting up again. This bath is worth the journey, I guarantee it.”

Apparently, the local hot spring was renowned for its healing properties, and it drew quite a few visitors from afar. When the old man noticed Belgrieve’s prosthetic leg, he had assumed he must have traveled here for that very reason. Belgrieve simply smiled and nodded, seeing no need to correct the man.

It was quite a comfortable bath, if he was being honest. The temperature was a little high, but it wasn't long before he was accustomed to it and he could feel it warming him to his core while the sweat beaded on his forehead. He was looking forward to the pleasant feeling of the cool air against his warm skin once he got out.

In Turnera, there were limited opportunities to bathe or shower. Being able to soak in hot water like this was an uncommon and valuable experience for Belgrieve. Of course, nearly everything had been a new experience from the moment he set out on his journey. He had thought he'd never leave Turnera again, but here he was, soaking in a hot tub on his southward journey to the capital. Life was full of surprises.

The old man left before him, but even with one patron gone, the bath was still full of other bathers standing or sitting around in the water. Nearby, Percival closed his eyes as he submerged himself. His body—toned from years of fighting rather than dedicated training—was riddled with scars of all sizes, some old and others quite recent. Until their reunion, he had lived like a spirit of war, throwing himself into battle day after day. It was only natural for him to end up like this, and perhaps the spring's healing properties would do his wounds some good.

"Do you remember...that time we went to the hot spring near Mt. Garuda?" Percival said, breaking the silence suddenly.

"Yeah... I remember that."

After forming their party of four, they'd taken a job that had brought them to the town of Garuda. There, they had heard of a hot spring within walking distance and decided to pay a visit. The memory had become quite faint over the years, but Belgrieve could just recall something of it now that Percival had brought it up.

"Kasim hated baths, even back then."

"Yeah, he did. And still does."

Kasim had not joined them in the bath. He insisted that he didn't need it because his magic kept him clean. His dislike of bathing was no secret, and it wasn't something they could resolve at this point. Touya had been dragged

somewhere by Maureen, undoubtedly in search of something to eat. Ishmael had wandered off to check out an enchanted-tool shop that had caught his interest. All of them planned to meet at the inn later.

Belgrieve wiped the sweat from his brow and took a deep breath. “The hot spring back then...wasn’t as well-kept as this, I don’t think.”

“It was a rather slapdash operation, yeah. Granted, it *was* pretty cheap. Not much they could do about that...”

As their conversation went on, the memories came back to Belgrieve in vivid detail. The hot spring in Garuda had been an open-air bath much like this one. Their rough sword calluses had turned white as they soaked. He could also recall the image of Satie after her bath, when her fair skin had become faintly flushed. They hadn’t often had a chance to bathe, and she had...*probably* had a very happy look on her face. Belgrieve was doing his best to remember.

On the other side of the stone wall, he could hear voices from the women’s bath. Belgrieve smiled when he thought he recognized the boisterous, youthful voices that belonged to Angeline and the girls. *They’re always so lively no matter where we go...*

After soaking a little while longer, he got out of the bath, and his body retained the water’s heat for a while after that. As he dressed, he felt almost steamy inside his clothes, and a thin sheen of sweat lingered on his forehead.

The bathhouse’s changing room and waiting area were part of a large, stone building. Its white-plastered walls, lanterns, and counter made it feel somewhat like the lobby of an adventurer’s guild, but it was distinguished by the much more carefree and peaceful mood. There were tables and chairs scattered around where customers from all walks of life would emerge from the baths to drink and while away the time with conversation. The baths had been enveloped in darkness, but though the village was a little off the beaten path, the hot springs drew many visitors, and the pubs and inns amid private homes were still quite spirited even at this time of night.

Percival had come out a little before Belgrieve and was now seated across from Kasim in the lounge playing a chess-like game that used small colored stones. Kasim turned his gaze to Belgrieve as he approached the duo.

“Oh, there you are. The girls aren’t out yet.”

“I could still hear them messing around when I got out.” Belgrieve took a seat and looked around the room.

“Our lodgings had a ground-floor pub,” said Kasim. “I guess we’ll eat dinner there.”

“I don’t see why not. It was a pretty nice pub for such a rural place. They even had a magic cooler for the drinks,” Belgrieve recalled.

“They must get a lot of customers then. It’s nice to have a cold drink after a hot bath,” Percival said as he moved a stone.

Kasim immediately moved another one, deftly claiming Percival’s piece. He folded his hands behind his head, a cocky grin on his face. “All right, I win. Want to try again?”

“Tsk... I’m tagging you in, Bell.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Belgrieve shrugged.

Kasim reset the board, and they were soon taking turns moving stones and taking pieces from each other. Eventually, they heard some familiar voices—it seemed the girls had finally finished their bath.

Kasim looked up. “They’re here. Should we go get dinner, then?”

“Yeah, why not. Got you.”

“Whoops, that does it...” Kasim raised his hands in defeat. Belgrieve chuckled and got up from the now-finished game. The clamor from the streets filtered in on the night breeze as they made for the door.

## **The Hot Springs (Women’s Bath)**

The road to the capital wasn’t entirely smooth; while the highways were well maintained and easy for wagons to travel, there were still mountain passes that climbed and dipped, and other points along the route where they had to take large detours to avoid the more treacherous crags.

Near one such mountainous area, they came across a strange village

wreathed in steam. The village was built on the mountain slopes, and its streets were lined with stone houses. It wasn't directly along the highway, but it was near enough to their route to make a slight detour for proper lodgings for the night.

Generally, the gutters along the sides of roads usually served as irrigation channels, but these ones flowed with hot water. The bottom of the ditch appeared to have a peculiar glossy sheen, while the rugged, uneven stone sides took on peculiar shapes, almost resembling blooming flowers and moss. The village was dotted with numerous bathhouses, fed by a natural spring in the ground that flowed freely into the large baths, be they indoors or out.

"Whoa!" Marguerite exclaimed, staring in wide-eyed, entranced wonder at the sight of the large baths before her. Her soft, fair elf skin was unsparingly exposed to the outside air. "It's huge! You sure this is a bath and not a pond?"

"Haven't you been to the bathhouses in Orphen, Maggie?" Angeline asked her.

"Sure, but that was indoors—this is *outside*! I haven't been naked outside since I swam in the river in Turnera!"

Angeline nodded. "I guess so..." She turned once more to the sight of the vast, rippling hot spring before them. The bath was surrounded by rocks and obscured by steam, making it impossible to see to the other side. A stone wall surrounded the bathing area, but there was no roof above them, providing a clear view of the sky. The water was milky white and smelled somewhat of rotten eggs in a manner that didn't offend the senses somehow.

Miriam took a cautious sniff. "That's sulfur we're smelling."

"Sulfur?"

"That's right. It's a type of mineral. We sometimes use it in experiments," she explained, drawing on her knowledge and experience of such things as a magician.

The water was already filled with many bathers of all ages, most of whom had their hair bundled up to keep it out of the water. Many were chatting with friends or relaxing around the edges of the pool with their eyes closed, while

others were bending and stretching in the water. Although the sight of an elf like Marguerite initially caused a stir, the circumstances of shared nudity seemed to put everyone at ease, and their party was left to their own devices.

The sky above was beginning to darken. A smattering of stars twinkled against the deep-purple heavens visible beyond the steam. It made for a rather majestic scene. The night's chill was already in the air, so without further ado, they tested the water with their hands and found it to be hotter than the bathhouse in Orphen. Perhaps it only seemed hotter because their bodies were so chilled from the elements, but it was indubitably sultry in any case—not so much that it made sense to continue exposing their naked bodies to the biting wind though. Angeline gathered her resolve and walked into the water, the tips of her toes leading the way for the rest of her.

“Ugh... Ooh... Phew.” Angeline let out a strange sequence of noises as she curled up under the water's surface, holding her knees to her chest. She could already feel her skin tingling. The water felt slightly viscous and seemed to cling to her skin, seeping into her pores. It had been a while since she had last soaked in a bath. It felt like all the dust she'd accumulated in arid Istafar was being washed away—a very refreshing feeling indeed. Her friends had all gone through the same process and sat still beside her in the water, letting the sensations wash over them.

Anessa ran a hand across her face, brushing her bangs to one side. “It's hotter than expected... But it feels good.”

“I'm starting to get used to it...” Miriam leaned back against the rocky edge of the bath, her face flushed. She scooped up some water in her cupped hands and splashed her face. Her ruddy cheeks were practically glowing, the viscous bathwater running off her youthful skin and leaving a sheen like precious white jade. Angeline, enamored of the sight, reached out and pinched her cheek.

Miriam squirmed. “Ow...”

“It kinda feels...super sleek...”

“Because of the water? I think I saw something written about that on our way in, come to think of it.”

The bathhouse in Orphen used well water heated with flamestones, but this

hot-spring water bubbled up naturally from the earth. That supposedly entailed various benefits, all of which had been touted in detail on a sign at the entrance.

“I think it said something about making skin smooth, moist, and beautiful...”

“Your skin’s always been beautiful, Maggie. I’m envious.” Miriam nestled up close to Marguerite to rub her shoulder and upper arm.

Marguerite flinched. “Quit it. You’ve got pretty skin too. It looks even more supple and tasty than usual.”

“Urgh, even Maggie’s saying that now?” Miriam cried indignantly.

“It’s a universal truth—Merry looks tasty to everyone...” said Angeline, who circled behind Miriam as the girl tried to scuttle away, embracing her from behind. Miriam writhed, meowing in protest, but nothing could disturb Angeline’s solace in the softness of Miriam’s smooth skin.

“Smooth and squishy...”

“Don’t cling to me! It’s already hot enough!”

“Quit splashing around; you’re bothering the other guests,” Anessa chided.

“That’s right, pipe down,” Marguerite added, joining in and hugging Miriam from the other side. The three girls reduced the volume of their squabbling to a reasonable level, taking care not to splash water as they playfully wrestled.

The sun had finally set, and the white steam trailed off and faded away into the darkening sky.

## **Welcoming Winter**

The fall festival had already run its course, and the peddlers and minstrels had left for southern climes. Skies that had been clear until then gradually clouded over, and the winds were growing colder by the day. The snow wasn’t far behind, and soon it would begin to fall and accumulate until the end of winter. The villagers were hard at work each day, finishing up whatever small tasks remained before winter struck. The sheep and goats that had been left to graze in the fields during summer were now back in their pens, bleating loudly day



and night.

Graham, with rolled-up sleeves, gamely washed root vegetables that had just been pulled from the field without flinching, despite the biting cold of the water. The elf was accustomed to harsher winters after many years in northern elven lands, where the season was even harsher than it was in Turnera, and where the snow piled up even higher. He knew how to use fuel efficiently and how to keep embers burning; he had shoveled plenty of snow in his time and was quite experienced with foraging for food amid the undifferentiated white of rimy sylvan landscapes.

Nevertheless, among all the skills he possessed, agriculture and housekeeping were not his forte. The elven kingdom was mostly covered by thick woodlands that were ill-suited for farming—not that it was an altogether alien concept to elfkind, but most of their race were content to live off of the blessings of the forest’s natural bounty. They were unaccustomed to tilling soil or planting seeds, and they only seldom kept livestock.

In that respect, life in Turnera was fresh and new to Graham. It differed from both his life in elven lands and his time as an itinerant adventurer. Even tasks that wouldn’t have seemed too difficult from an outsider’s perspective turned out to be surprisingly challenging. He struggled to straighten out the furrows in the fields, and strewing wheat seeds evenly required a knack he didn’t have. Even children like Charlotte and Byaku were better than him at such tasks.

Farming was the village’s lifeline, so Graham took a step back from such work, thinking that his clumsy attempts to help were only proving a hindrance. Whenever Belgrieve wasn’t around, he focused on patrolling the village, foraging in the woods, and looking after the children, all of which the villagers appreciated. Graham was about to face his second winter in Turnera, and in hindsight, it was a little strange that Belgrieve had been absent for both of them. Last winter, he had lived quietly with Mit; the villagers had checked in on them frequently to make sure they were holding up all right, so he had never felt too lonely.

“It feels strange to hold a fall festival without him,” Kerry had said in the midst of their celebrations. Belgrieve wasn’t the sort to stand out, but his absence was felt keenly.

Since the last visit of Countess Helvetica of Bordeaux, the number of outsiders attending the festival had greatly increased. The festivities themselves were thus much livelier, but despite the growing hustle and bustle, the villagers felt like something was missing. Belgrieve's presence had become a significant part of Turnera.

Graham tucked the rinsed vegetables away into a basket and got up. When he entered the house, he found Byaku folding the laundry. At this time of year, drying clothes outside was no longer an option, so the clothes were hung near the fireplace. Winter laundry always carried a stronger aroma of smoke.

As Graham approached with the basket, Byaku looked up at him. "You got the vegetables?"

"Yes. If you please..." Graham said. Byaku took the proffered basket and stood up, gesturing his chin towards the half-folded laundry as if to tell the elf to handle the rest.

By the time Graham had finished folding the laundry and Byaku was stewing the vegetables, Charlotte and Mit had returned, still excited from helping with the village's sheep.

"It's started falling! The first snow!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"So fluffy," Mit added.

"I see. It's already started..." Graham had expected it, given the clouds, but it seemed winter had truly arrived. Graham carefully stacked the folded laundry and grabbed his trusty sword from where it was leaning against the wall. "I'll do a patrol before it gets too heavy... Do you want to come?" he asked.

"Yeah!"

"I wanna go!"

The kids both responded eagerly.

Leaving Byaku to tend the house, the three of them stepped outside. A dark, pearl-gray sky softly scattered snowflakes from on high—tentatively at first, but it was sure to pick up soon. Graham greeted some of their neighbors as they hurried through the village and headed out into the plains, where he slowed his

pace. Charlotte and Mit followed him closely, holding hands. Puffs of frosty vapor accompanied every exhalation, and their cheeks and noses were reddened. As they conducted their circuit around the village, the snow started to come down more heavily, gradually turning the distant horizon into a blur. The ash-colored plains became slowly carpeted in the frosty precipitation. Graham smiled; he always enjoyed seeing the stark passing of one season into the next.

Work on the roads had begun, and the path from the village through the nearby pass had been mostly cleaned up. But work was paused for the winter, so the piles of stones gathered for the construction were already hidden under the flurry. Charlotte and Mit gazed in awe at the downpour across the uninterrupted expanse of the landscape before them. Charlotte hailed from the warmer climes of Lucrecia, so perhaps this experience was especially enthralling to her.

It soon grew dark out, and Graham lit his lantern. Suddenly, he noticed some figures beyond the frosty veil. He made out two horses; the lead horse bore one rider, and the back horse carried two. Graham, arms crossed, squinted as he tried to make out the identities of the approaching figures. When the lead rider waved at him, his eyes widened in recognition.

“Sir Graham!”

“Duncan,” Graham answered, a hint of warmth in his voice at the reunion with his good friend. The other two riders were unfamiliar to him but were presumably acquaintances of Duncan.

It seemed this year’s winter would be a little warmer than the last.

## **Those Two, Back Then**

She ran, her long, chestnut hair billowing behind her.

“Adventurers are all about stamina.” Ever since her seniors in the business had told her that, thirteen-year-old Anessa would race around the streets of Orphen whenever she had the time. She would purposely choose the roads that were hardest to traverse, training herself to clear them without ever dropping

her pace.

After experiencing a life-and-death situation in the dungeon, she had devoted herself to her training all the more. She'd transitioned from a pure focus on the bow to learning how to handle a dagger as well. The fact she had been helpless against the mutated variant she'd encountered in close quarters left a strong impression on her.

When Anessa decided to live as an adventurer, she'd chosen the bow as her weapon. The reason was simple—the party had already had two swordsmen. She didn't have any particular interest in marksmanship, but such was life. But Anessa was diligent by nature, and perhaps she had some talent as well. She improved a good deal faster than the average adventurer. Perhaps this was to be expected in hindsight, as she would one day serve as the rear guard of the Black-Haired Valkyrie, but that was a long way down the line. She was still at a point where she couldn't even fathom growing overly proud of her skills.

Her first party had been composed of others from the same orphanage. They'd gotten used to the work and taken on a dungeon to advance to the next level, only to have the misfortune of running into a mutated variant of a fiend far beyond the dungeon's rank. This was enough for most of them to give up on adventuring entirely.

So now, Anessa worked even harder than before. There were only two people in the party now, but they were doing small jobs to make ends meet and building up experience by occasionally joining other parties on missions.

Miriam—the girl she got along best with—had become an apprentice of the Archmage Maria the Ashen. At first, Miriam had been unable to bear the harsh training, but she gradually grew accustomed to it. Her voice across the dinner table had regained some cheer and she was making visible progress in her magic. This was enough to spur on Anessa's own efforts.

They were convinced they had no other path in life. When their childhood friends had given up, they'd powered through on pure stubbornness... And just like that, two years had gone by.

After running through the city, Anessa came to a stop in front of a small store. She climbed the stairway outside it and entered the room on the second floor.

Inside, Miriam was holding an intense staring contest with a hefty grimoire.

“Home.”

“Ah, welcome back, Anne.”

The two of them were roommates. There weren't many landlords willing to rent a place to two young girls—one twelve, the other thirteen—but they had managed to snag the shop's second floor, somehow.

Of course, they'd had to leave the orphanage, even if it had taken so much trouble to do so. The nuns there had insistently told them, “Give up on being adventurers.” Though they knew the words came from a place of concern, it certainly didn't feel good to hear that day in and day out.

Anessa wiped away her sweat and reached out to grab a cup of juice that had been left on the table.

“Hey, that's miiine...”

“What's it matter? We've got plenty left, don't we?”

After she had polished off the juice, Anessa tied back her chestnut hair and sat across from Miriam.

Miriam's ears swayed in discontentment. She took the empty cup back, then thrust it at Anessa again.

“Refill!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Anessa had already grown accustomed to this exchange.

They maintained their silence for a while. Miriam continued staring at the grimoire, while Anessa spread her daggers and arrowheads across the table and began to hone them on a whetstone.

These two were no longer novices, though they weren't yet at the intermediate level. There was much to learn with each passing day. Now and then, they'd hear tales of adventurers—ones they'd known long enough to call their peers—losing their lives on what had seemed like minor requests. Anessa never failed to maintain her equipment and whenever she had money to spare, she would spend it upgrading or paying a fee to the guild for training. Miriam would practice magic whenever she had free time.

After she finished sharpening her third dagger, Anessa ruffled up her hair in irritation. “Maybe I should cut it...”

“Huh? Your hair?”

“Yeah. It’s gotten annoying lately.”

“It’d be a waste after you’ve grown it that long.”

“Well, I wasn’t trying to grow it out. I just didn’t have the time to cut it.”

Miriam looked up at her and shut the book. “We have been pretty busy.”

“Right. But we can’t grow complacent yet.” After tucking away the sharpened daggers, Anessa tightly fastened the arrowheads to the shafts. She pulled out her bow and plucked at it with her fingertips, producing a melodious twang.

“It’s about time we joined a proper party.”

“Hmm, one with a good vanguard, hopefully...” Miriam was hiding the fact she was a beast-man and wasn’t too enthusiastic about joining a party. Adventuring was a tough trade, and the fact they were two young girls was already enough for others to be dismissive of them. It was entirely conceivable that they’d be scouted by somebody with ill intent. Anessa understood this too, but there was a limit to what an archer and magician could do alone.

Miriam slumped down, resting her chin on the table. “Ahh, if only there were a strong and interesting swordsman our age. A girl too.”

“There’s no way we’ll find someone that conveniently.” Anessa smirked as she placed the bow aside and got up to brew some tea.

At that exact moment, in the northern village of Turnera, a black-haired girl sneezed.

## **Descending the Mountain**

The wagon traveled down an animal trail that could barely accommodate it, loaded to the brim with various goods from the Earth Navel. It was a struggle to move it even for the four burly men who were pulling it along. They were part of a large caravan, and all around them were others with heavy bags on their backs and fully laden horses. Everybody was weighed down with materials

harvested from fiends, except for the handful of adventurers stationed around the group for their protection.

They were on their way back from the Earth Navel after the big wave had subsided, which had been the source of the abundance of materials. With that out of the way, many adventurers and merchants were already making the trek down the mountain. But for all the people who were leaving, more still viewed the wave's end as their opportunity to enter the market; if anything, the number of people at the Earth Navel had increased.

With the mana crystal of the á bao a qu in hand, and having gathered all the materials requested by Oliver in Istafar, Belgrieve's group had had no reason to stay any longer. Conveniently, this departing caravan had been leaving at exactly the time they had wanted to head out, so they had tagged along for the ride.

Towards the back of the caravan, a man in his mid-thirties held out a crystal spike, frowning in thought. "We're making good progress. I'd like to see the plains by the end of the day..."

"We should make it at this pace," said Percival, walking beside him.

The man tucked away the crystal into the folds of his jacket and grinned. "Still, I never expected you to be the Exalted Blade. I knew you were strong, but not *that* strong."

Percival took out his sachet and inhaled through it with one eye closed. "I'm nothing special. All the high-ranking adventurers gather there. Aren't you the same, Great Eagle Wesley?"

Wesley scratched his head, a troubled smile on his face. "Give me a break. We may both be S-Rank, but my feats are nothing compared to yours."

The caravan was organized by a wealthy merchant from Khalifa, a major city in Tyldes. It included three parties led by S-Rank adventurers and several other high-ranking parties. Each group had obtained expensive materials and artifacts from the Earth Navel and agreed to join forces to ensure the safety of their haul on the way back. Their combined strength was already formidable without accounting for the ad hoc addition of three more S-Rank adventurers in Percival, Kasim, and Angeline. It was practically overkill at this point—not that

the merchants cared, though. Their chief concern was just transporting their goods safely.

The caravan's escort was led by Wesley, an adventurer known as the Great Eagle. He was an S-Rank adventurer active in Tyldes who had originally come to the Earth Navel as the guard of the very same merchant at the heart of the caravan. The other members of his six-person party were scouting for any enemies around the trail. The caravan proceeded down the mountain's slope, but that didn't mean they could rush. Steep cliffs and fiend attacks could spell disaster if they let haste overcome caution.

Wesley and Percival were serving as the rear guard—the most dangerous position, as assailants from behind would have the high ground. It was a difficult role, hence why it required two S-Rank adventurers.

Percival yawned. “No fiends would dare attack us with this group...”

Wesley chuckled. “Especially not with your intimidating presence.”

Percival grinned. “That's my role. You and my teammate can work out the finer details.”

“You mean the Aether Buster?”

“Not him. I'm talking about the man with the false leg and the greatsword. Ange's... I mean, the Black-Haired Valkyrie's father.”

“That's right. Belgrieve, the Red Ogre—he's strong and reliable.”

“Whoa!”

Angeline had appeared out of nowhere, her steps so quiet even these two hadn't noticed. Percival looked at her curiously.

“Hey, Ange. Where'd you come from?”

“I sensed someone talking about dad...”

Percival sighed at this mysterious ability Angeline had suddenly manifested, while Wesley was just bewildered.

“Oh, is Red Ogre his moniker?”

“It is. He's very strong. Stronger than me. And he always keeps a level head...”



“That’s...impressive. Is it true?” Wesley turned to Percival, half in doubt of her claims.

Percival thought for a moment before nodding with a mischievous smile. “Yeah. I owe my life to him. He’s reliable—no doubt about that.”

“Wow...”

It was at that moment that Kasim shambled over. “Hey, Commander. The boss says he wants to take a break soon.”

“Sure. Got it.”

“Mr. Kasim, my dad’s amazing, isn’t he?”

“Huh?” Kasim was momentarily taken aback, but all it took was a glance at the smirk on Percival’s face to know what the game was. He smiled and nodded without missing another beat. “Sure is. Bell’s quite the man. If we can trust him to watch our backs, you know he’s the real deal.”

Wesley’s smile grew stiff at the testimony of three S-Rank adventurers. “I see... The Red Ogre, huh? He must be S-Rank.”

“Well... No. He probably doesn’t have a license. He’s not even an adventurer.”

“Huh? Then, what... Is he a mercenary or something?”

“Not a mercenary either.”

“Huh? Then what does he do?”

“He’s a farmer from Turnera,” Angeline declared, her chest puffed out proudly.

Wesley held his head. Percival and Kasim glanced at each other with amusement in their eyes, stifling their laughter.

**Volume 9**  
**Short Stories**



## Elf Talk

“I’m also from an Eastern settlement, for what it’s worth, but I’ve never met Maureen before,” Satie mused.

“That’s right,” Maureen concurred. “I never thought a senior from the same region as me was living this close by. It’s shocking, really.”

“If it’s a different settlement, you’re not going to meet, right? It’s not like I know everyone in the West either,” Marguerite reasoned.

Satie, Maureen, and Marguerite were currently having a conversation. *For some reason, there’s a real stately mood whenever you have three elves together*, thought Angeline. She found herself entranced.

It was rare to see such a sight in the human lands. All three of them had shockingly attractive features, like their silver hair and fair skin. Angeline’s eyes were so focused on them, for a moment she had to wonder if she had somehow ended up in elven territory.

But this was a room at an inn. Belgrieve and the other older men had left and taken Touya with them, and so the girls had gotten together. The table was spread with tea and light snacks, while the twins played with wooden toys. It was kind of fun to pack everyone into such a tight space.

“It’s a vast place, elven territory. But, Maureen, you’ve met Graham before, haven’t you?” Miriam asked.

Maureen nodded. “Right, right. I think I’ve said it before, but I’ve actually met Lady Marguerite before too.”

“Hey, Satie, did you never consider going to meet Mr. Graham too?” Anessa asked.

“Ugh,” Satie groaned before putting a finger to her cheek. “Well, of course, I really looked up to him... But more than anything, I wanted to see new places. If I went to see Graham, well, I’d still just be in elven territory.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“But it’s just... You know... There were loads of folks who came to see my granduncle because they looked up to him, but I haven’t spotted any of them actually working as adventurers out here,” said Marguerite.

*That’s true, come to think of it...* Angeline folded her arms. “You’re right... I get the feeling there should be a few more adventuring elves out here.”

“Oh, there’s a surprising number of us. It’s just, an adventurer’s lifestyle runs counter to elf common sense. Once they get sick and tired of reality, they ultimately return home. That’s what happens to most of them. I’d say ninety percent realize it’s impossible for them just by mingling with humans on the border,” Maureen explained. She went on to describe how the two groups lived and thought about the world in completely different ways. Then there was the matter of some discrimination against elves to dissuade the would-be adventurers. She laughed, then proceeded to stuff her face with sweets.

*Are we really that different?* Angeline wondered. At least from what she had gleaned by sitting down and talking with them, Satie, Maureen, and (especially) Marguerite were hardly any different from humans. Sure, Graham had a somewhat mystical air to him, but it wasn’t difficult to get along with him. *If I ever met an elf apart from them, would I be able to talk to that one properly?* Angeline tried to imagine it, but she couldn’t even begin to fathom what elves talked about among themselves.

*But I’m sure dad could manage just fine,* Angeline concluded. She just knew he would be polite, listen well, and thoughtfully weigh his answers in turn. Surely his demeanor would be appreciated in elven territory too.

In that case, perhaps they’d have to go to elven territory together sometime. Those forests she’d heard of, the groves of trees dressed all in silver—perhaps they were even more incredible than the forest back in Turnera. If she could walk through them hand in hand with Belgrieve and Satie, it would surely be a lovely time indeed. Angeline giggled at that image in her mind.

“What are you laughing at?” Marguerite asked before taking a bite from a sweet pastry.

“Hmm... I was just thinking I wanted to visit elven territory one of these days.”

As soon as Angeline said that, all three of the elves’ expressions shifted.

Marguerite looked quite unpleasant and Satie stared back blankly while Maureen laughed.

“I don’t wanna go home.”

“It’s not a very interesting place, Ange. I mean, the scenery might be pretty, but...”

“But it might be fun to see how Angeline interacts with the elves back home. I can imagine their conversations not meshing in the slightest.”

Apparently, it wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows. In any case, all three of them considered elven territory boring. They’d found it so dreary that they’d all run off to become adventurers, so perhaps this response was only natural.

“But I want to see it once in my life. There are loads of ohma trees growing there, right?” Miriam asked.

“I get the feeling there’ll be other rare wildlife too,” Anessa went on, “though I imagine it’s real cold since it’s even farther north than Turnera.”

Angeline nodded. “It’s a land of mystery to us... And it’s exciting to head into the unknown.”

“Heh heh,” Satie chuckled. “I remember Bell saying something like that before—that it was a faraway place to him, so he wanted to visit it. But to us, the human world is far more appealing.”

“Do you still think so, even now?” Angeline asked her.

Satie thought for a moment, her eyes wandering. “Well... I’ve seen loads of terrible things, admittedly. Even so, I like it here. There’s Bell, and Percy, and Kasim—and I have my daughter too, heh heh...” Satie prodded at Angeline’s cheek.

“Hee hee...” Angeline bashfully scratched her head. There was no way she wouldn’t be overjoyed after hearing that.

Suddenly, the hallway was filled with the sound of several footsteps, and there was a knocking at the door. As it swung open, Belgrieve poked his head in.

“Sorry we’re so late. Have you eaten breakfast yet?”

“No, not yet. How about you guys?”

“No, we just finished our shopping and returned. I thought it would be good to eat something with everyone... What were you talking about?”

“Heh heh... I’ll tell you all about it later. Right, Ange?”

“That’s right, mom. Heh heh heh...”

Seeing the two of them smiling ear to ear, Belgrieve cocked his head curiously.

## **The Bottom of the Night**

By the time Yakumo, Lucille, and Duncan reached Rodina, there were already foreboding hoary patches along the road. The tracks of several carriages had been carved into the ground at the village’s entrance, beside which trailed the foot-and hoofprints of pedestrian and mounted traffic, creating a marbled pattern of white frost and black dirt.

Yakumo shuddered—there was a chill in the air. She pulled down the thick muffler covering her face to take a sip of steaming-hot wine. “Good grief... Just as cold as I imagined it would be.”

Duncan laughed. “It does seem like we’ll get to Turnera before the snow makes the roads impassable, at least.”

After Belgrieve had entrusted them with the á bao a qu’s mana crystal, the party of three had made their way north at an astonishing pace—reaching Turnera once the roads were snowed over would have been a grueling task. They had pushed their horses, changing them out for well-rested ones once they became exhausted, and they’d had the fortune of reaching Rodina without seeing heavy snow. Turnera was just around the corner, but the day was already spent, so they would venture out the following morning instead. In the meantime, they gathered at the pub to warm themselves after the bracing headwind they had endured.

Yakumo rubbed her somewhat reddened nose with her fingertip. “I’m still surprised to find myself headed for Turnera. No sane person would venture to the northernmost reaches of the duchy at this time of year.”

“Ha ha ha—no doubt about that! The thought of it would never even cross my mind if not for what I already know of Turnera. I never would have known the village even existed but for the rumors I’d heard of Bell.”

“You are native to these parts, aren’t you, Duncan? You are better suited for the winter than I am.”

“I was born nearer to the capital city of Rhodesia. I had never experienced winters as harsh as Turnera’s.”

The duchy spanned a vast swath of land from north to south. The whole territory would be considered northern lands from the perspective of anywhere else on the continent, but Estogal City was far enough to the south that winters in those parts were of a distinctly different character.

Yakumo packed her pipe with tobacco and put the stem between her lips. “The pork is good here, as I recall. We ought to stock up on it if we wish to make our winter a pleasant one.”

“You’re not very accustomed to the cold, I take it?”

“I’m from a fishing village, you see. We would have some flurries in the winter, but I’ve never been somewhere so cold that it could be sealed away by snowfall,” Yakumo explained, blowing out a column of smoke.

It was then that Lucille returned from wherever she had wandered off, bearing a rather large paper bag. Her fur hat and drooping dog ears were coated in a thin layer of snow—it seemed to be coming down heavily outside now. Lucille shook her head like a wet dog to slough off the snow before tottering over to join them in an empty seat.

“What, did you buy something?”

“They looked tasty.” The bag was full of sausages, bacon, dried meats, and more.

“That was quick,” said Yakumo.

“I mean, we’re leaving tomorrow morning... I needed to do it while I could.”

“Point taken... I shall buy some spirits myself.”

“Maybe I should find something to buy too.”

Yakumo and Duncan got up to leave.

The night turned to morning, and the sky was shrouded by pearly gray clouds. Yakumo shivered as the cold breeze caressed the back of her neck. She'd thought she had wrapped her muffler tightly enough the first time, but it would loosen over time and admit the chill through the gaps. She irritably rewrapped the scarf.

Lucille sang as she meandered around in the snow. "*Sha la la, sha la la, Snow White...* My fingers are too numb to play the guitar..."

Duncan, wearing a cap that covered his ears, loaded supplies into his horse's saddlebags, his head wreathed in his own frosty breath all the while. "I hear Lucille is from the south, but she seems fine in the cold," he said.

"It's because she's a dog. A little chill is just what she likes."

The horses they had found up in Yobem were stalwart beasts reminiscent of the ones in Tyldes, and had borne them on sturdy legs from the moment they had crossed into Estogal. From here onward, the snow would be heavier and it would be impossible to race through it, but the horses would still bear them reliably.

Once everything was loaded, they departed from Rodina. Duncan rode alone on his horse, while Yakumo rode with Lucille sitting behind her. Both horses were laden with bags dangling from their flanks.

Even with her arms wrapped around Yakumo, Lucille was shivering. "It's so cold, Yakky."

"Hmm... So even you start to suffer the frost if you're not moving around—Gah! Hey, don't grab my sides!"

It would take about a day to reach Turnera from Rodina, but the cold would slow their progress, so perhaps even that wouldn't be enough. That was why they'd left in the early morning. The farther north they went, the heavier were the clouds overhead, and the more bitterly the chill was felt. The snow was falling heavily by the time they reached the mountain pass, and the three travelers had to pull up the hoods of their coats to ward off the cold. Luckily, guideposts were lining the way to help with the roadwork, so there was no risk



of getting lost—but they wanted to avoid having to camp for the night at all costs. Even as they picked up the pace, the sun began to dip, and the world began to darken. What had been a flurry was now a blizzard, and soon after, a whiteout.

“This is bad. Should we prepare to camp?” Yakumo asked.

“No, we’ve made it to the plains,” said Duncan. “We should be there soon.”

It was just as he said. The mountain trail had ended, giving way to open plains and rolling hills.

The snow haze made it hard to see far, but Lucille’s nose perked up. “That’s the smell of smoke, baby.”

The sun had set by the time they saw the lights of the village, and the snow had piled deep enough to bury the horses’ hooves. Beyond the snow, they could faintly see the columns of smoke that rose from each house, trailing off into the dusky twilight.

“Sir Graham!” Duncan called out with a joyful wave of his hand. He had spotted a lone figure holding a lantern.

*Looks like we don’t have to camp out, to say the least,* thought Yakumo. She turned to look back down the paths they had traveled. Though the clouds above were thick, the moon was bright enough for its light to pierce the darkness. The fields of pure-white snow looked as though they were floating at the bottom of a deep, black sea.

“I can’t wait to sit in front of a warm fireplace...”

“Achoo!” Lucille sneezed and sniffled.

## **Cat Ears and Ash**

The name of Maria the Ashen was renowned not only in Orphen but all across the empire. After all, her fame wasn’t just from being an S-Rank Adventurer; as an archmage, she had developed a plethora of useful spell sequences known and used by most magicians of the modern era. Her achievements had won her the admiration of practitioners of the mystical arts everywhere.

Though Maria had set up a small hermitage in a nearby village, she still maintained a residence in Orphen. That was where she kept most of her tools and grimoires, and so that was where she would conduct all her research.

“Master, where do these ones go?” Miriam asked, holding up several stacked beakers.

Maria faced the table and kept her back to the ten-year old girl without saying a word.

“Master? Can you hear me, Master?”

Then, there was a popping sound. Something exploded in front of Maria in a burst of blinding white light.

“Eek! M-Master...? Are you okay?”

“Argh! Pipe down, would you? Just shove it on some random shelf! *Cough, hack!*” Maria frustratedly bellowed at her.

Miriam flinched and gave several apologetic bows. After her coughing bout passed, Maria clicked her tongue and covered her mouth with her thick scarf. “Dammit, failed again... Hey, fetch me some tea.”

Seeing her master in such a foul mood, the small beast girl pouted. *You don’t need to take it out on me*, she thought with a frown.

Miriam was a fledgling adventurer. She had formed a party with the friends she’d grown up with in the orphanage, taking on small jobs with them while she practiced magic. But she was in a hurry—without parents, she needed to pick up the skills to support herself as quickly as possible. Being an adventurer was a quick way to make money, but the income of a rookie adventurer was barely enough to get by. Furthermore, they needed better equipment and tools if they wanted to take better jobs, and that required money. If they continued doing nothing but small jobs day after day, the situation would only grow worse.

As a member of the beast-man race, Miriam was particularly sensitive to the curious glances of others. If she ever wanted to stand up with pride in the face of the world, she would need to become independent enough to brush off whatever comments or looks were sent her way. That was her dream. However, the grimoires required to learn magic were yet another expense she could not

afford. For a party of penniless orphans, it was impossible to move forward without a little risk.

One day, they had resolved to tackle a dungeon that—while difficult—was just within their reach as E-Rank adventurers, but the venture had been a resounding failure. Having cut their teeth on hunting and gathering work outside the dungeon, they had expected it to be smooth sailing, and it had been—that is, until they had run into a variant fiend. As E-Rank fledglings, they had been no match for it and had been very nearly annihilated. As luck would have it, they'd been saved by Maria, who had happened to be conducting her periodic survey of the dungeon. Miriam had seized upon this chance encounter with the renowned Ashen Archmage and begged her to be taken on as an apprentice. Maria was notorious for refusing new students, and whenever she did accept one, they would invariably quit not long after. However, though it seemed a mere flight of fancy, the archmage had simply answered her, “Do as you please,” sour-looking as ever.

Thus Miriam had been accepted as Maria's apprentice and begun commuting to Maria's. Maria's illness, caused by the toxins of a curse dragon, seemed to be worsening by the year, so she needed someone to assist her in her daily life. Despite this, Maria seemed to spew invective at every little thing Miriam did, with nary a word of gratitude to be found. Moreover, the training was harsh, demanding exacting memorization of theories and techniques followed by immediate implementation. Maria showed no leniency even to a ten-year-old girl and never praised her even when she accomplished something.

At first, Miriam had held Maria in awe and felt indebted to her for saving her life. Moreover, she endured in the belief that this was what it took to become stronger. But as it turned out, Maria was absolutely hopeless with anything other than magic—she did not clean or cook, and never did she smile. With the passage of time, awe was ground away, replaced most recently by a buildup of frustration instead. When scolded, Miriam felt tempted to shout back but bit back on the urge. She feared expulsion, and the trouble that would make for her team. There was also the fact that Maria had said nothing when she saw Miriam's ears or tail; to her, talent in magic was everything. Miriam took some solace in that fact, though Maria would pull on her ears when angry.

In any case, Miriam couldn't deny her mounting irritation. Miriam was certainly a talented magician (and she would, in fact, go on to AAA-Rank); she wasn't one to boast of her talents, but it irked her considerably when she produced what she thought to be a good result, only to go completely unrecognized by her master.

Just now, she had been on the receiving end of an unreasonable scolding, and Miriam was seething within. "What's her problem?" she grumbled to herself, even as she dutifully brewed tea. "If I didn't come here, the room would never be cleaned, and she'd never eat a proper meal."

The longer she dwelled on it, the more complaints she found, seemingly in inexhaustible supply.

"Hey, what's taking so long with that tea?" Maria irritably shouted.

Without thinking, Miriam turned on the crone. "Shuuuut up! I can hear you without all the yelling! I'm not some deaf old woman like you!"

Miriam was instantly shocked when she realized what she had done and saw Maria staring at her with bulging eyes. *Now I've done it...* The realization instantly cooled her ardor, replacing it with the all-too-likely image of herself being thrown out the door.

But in the next instant, Maria burst into laughter. "Ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha—*hack, cough cough*—ha ha ha!"

Miriam rushed over to rub her master's back. She'd never seen her master make such expressions before.

Maria's laughing fit went on for a while longer before abating. "You cheeky little... *Pfft*... It's been a long time since anyone talked to me that way." The archmage rubbed the tears from her eyes and prodded her apprentice.

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Now, what are you dawdling for? Hurry and pour the tea, stupid disciple of mine." Somehow, Maria appeared to be amused, and it seemed that Miriam wasn't going to be dismissed after all.

Despite this episode, Maria's training never became any easier, nor did she

ease up on the vituperation in the slightest. But ever since that day, Miriam found herself venting her spleen back to her master more often, and Maria would occasionally favor Miriam's retorts with her laughter. Thus, their relationship as master and apprentice was forged.

## **The Capital Gourmet Tour**

During its wars with Tyldes and Dadan, the Rhodesian Empire had seen its borders fluctuate to the east and south. During these times, the folk of those lands would flow into the imperial capital to set down roots and leave descendants. Some had immigrated of their own accord, seeking their fortunes, while others were brought in the shackles of prisoners or slaves. Regardless of their origins, they had become part of the capital over the course of several generations, contributing to a unique culture that melded Rhodesian custom with Eastern and Southern influences.

"All right, here you go!" Maureen beamed as she held out a bowl filled to the brim with something dark and steamy. Angeline figured it must be some sort of stew, given the spoon sticking out of the brown liquid.

Angeline timidly accepted the bowl and hazarded a spoonful. She was immediately struck by its viscosity and the powerful flavor of shellfish. The spices were potent, and the stew was packed with all sorts of varied little bits of who-knows-what, besides the grains of rice settled at the bottom.

"It has a very strange taste... But it's good."

"Isn't it? It's a southern stew made with softened vegetables and crayfish—or was it shrimp? Oh well," Maureen explained, before enthusiastically starting on her own bowl.

Angeline had found herself on the outskirts of the imperial capital in Maureen's sole company. It was unusual for the two of them to be alone, and Angeline felt the awkwardness of it too. But her own party members had gone off on personal business, while Belgrieve and his old companions were busy catching up and looking after the twins. Angeline could have joined them, but she wanted to give them some space, showing some tact in her own way. As it turned out, Touya had also gone to the guild on his own, so Maureen had found

herself free. She had approached Angeline to suggest a gourmet tour of the capital, and Angeline had been more than happy to oblige.

The area they were in seemed to have a high population of immigrants from the southern Dadan Empire, and the air was filled with a mixture of unfamiliar scents. With all the food stalls, there were of course enticing and stimulating aromas mixed among them, but there were other, more unpleasant smells, reminiscent of rot. Aside from food, there were also lively tunes playing faintly nearby, of the sort that Lucille would probably have enjoyed.

Angeline made quick work of the stew and handed the emptied vessel back to the vendor. “It was good.”

“That’s just the beginning. Next up is meat—meat! Uh...” Maureen sniffed at the air. “This way!” She took off in a certain direction.

*Do elves have a sharp sense of smell or something?* Angeline wondered for a moment, before concluding this was probably a specialty of Maureen. *She’s got quite an appetite,* Angeline mused, feeling some complex mixture of amazed admiration and disgust.

It wasn’t long before they came across a stall serving grilled meat. Thick slices were skewered and stacked on a large spit turning over a charcoal fire. Whenever an order was made, the vendor would shave off the nicely seared outer layer and serve it wrapped in pita bread with vegetables.

“Oh, I’ve seen that before,” Angeline remarked.

“That’s right, they have this in places like Istafar too.”

The juice was practically gushing from the meat, and Angeline’s mouth was smeared by it with every bite. But she was an adventurer and paid it no heed beyond dabbing off the juices and sauce with her fingers. “*Nom...* Delicious, if a little spicy.”

“The spice mix and sauce ratios differ from store to store. It’s fun to compare them.”

“Can you even eat that much?”

“Huh? Is that a problem? I could easily polish off twenty of them.”

Angeline glanced down at Maureen's stomach. *Where exactly does it all go?* All she saw was the elf's slender, well-toned abdomen.

Though neither of them gave it much thought in general, Angeline was a pretty girl and Maureen was an elf, so their uncommon pairing drew attention wherever they went. When they became aware of the strange crowd beginning to form around them, the girls decided to head for a proper restaurant. Even so, they had fun in their own way just walking through the city and sampling from all the many kinds of food vendors they passed along the way.

"Here you go, fried squid and anchovies. We're pretty close to the ocean, so the seafood is great."

"Mmm... Crunchy!"

"And this one is a thin pancake made from bean flour rolled with dry-cured ham and vegetables."

"Mmm... Chewy!"

"This is sangria. It's wine mixed with juice and fruit. There aren't too many fruits in season right now, but it's still good."

"Very refreshing... Lovely!"

Maureen seemed to be quite the traveler, and she had many interesting stories to tell about all the various cuisines they stumbled across. Indeed, by the time they reached the restaurant they had set out to visit, Angeline was already stuffed.

"Oh good, we're here. I can't take you to a fancy place like the archduke's little lady, but this is a good one."

"I do prefer places like this, but...are you really still able to eat, Maureen?"

"Huh? Done so soon?"

"I mean, we snacked a lot... I think I'm full..."

"Oh, what a waste. They stuff the omelets here with all sorts of interesting ingredients... Oh, I've got it. They have sweets too, Angeline. How does that sound? There's always room for dessert!"

“Well, in that case...”

Thus, they entered the restaurant. While Angeline sipped her tea and nibbled on some light pastries, Maureen continued to devour all manner of dishes. Angeline had a taste or two of many of the dishes and ended up eating quite a lot.

*Next time we go out, I'll need to fast all morning if I want to survive,* Angeline thought as she watched Maureen order her third omelet.

## **An Old Story for Him and for Her**

It was night again, and Hinano wasn't fond of the night. Each time twilight descended over the sky, she felt a strange fear as if dawn might never come. It made her anxious and lonely, and every time she would end up crawling into her brother's bed, startling him awake without fail.

“What is it now?” he would ask. Without a word, she would nuzzle her face into his chest, and he, smiling a touch awkwardly, would gently pat her on the head. Her brother's palms were rough and calloused from holding a sword, but his touch somehow put her at ease.

“Hinano,” her brother said.

She looked up at him, noting his wry smile.

“At least say something before you crawl in.”

“Sorry.” But Hinano was strangely happy and nuzzled into him once more.

They lived with their mother, just the three of them. Their mother was quiet and frail but unfailingly kind, while her brother was cheery and full of smiles. Life in their small village in northern Keatai was peaceful.

But that would change whenever their father came home. Their father was a man from the West and an adventurer by trade. His job meant he was rarely around, but Hinano's hatred of him did not come from his absence. He was cold and strict, and he had never once smiled at either of his children. His presence in their lives was only ever a source of unease whenever he was around.

“He really is a kind man,” their mother would insist, but to Hinano, it always



felt more like her mother was trying to convince herself.

Hinano and her brother had no aspirations of becoming adventurers, but their father relentlessly drilled them in swordsmanship and magic nonetheless. His training entailed relentless thrashings with a wooden sword, leaving their bodies covered in bruises. Even as they wept, their father would only look down at them with cold eyes.

“You are a failure,” he eventually told Hinano. It seemed as though her father had no expectations of her. But those words would come to bring peace into her days. Her father’s harsh training became focused entirely on her brother. He would, in turn, gently teach those same techniques to her. He assured her they would prove useful someday, but teaching her seemed to help him digest the teachings as well. Hinano was far more receptive when her brother was the teacher in any case.

Many years passed, and her brother became so exceptionally skilled in swordsmanship and magic that it was a waste for him to remain in such a tiny village. Hinano had also become quite proficient under his tutelage, though she could not compare herself to him. At some point, they took in an elf woman who had lost her way. The elf, named Maureen, had an astonishing appetite and a laid-back personality which brought color and joy to their days. Her quirky responses to their queries often brought the siblings to laughter. However, her magic prowess was so great it astonished even her brother. It was from the elf maiden that Hinano truly picked up the essence of magic.

“Do all elves eat as much as you?” her brother asked.

Maureen cocked her head. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Hmm...”

The siblings watched wearily as Maureen demolished her fourth bowl of stew.

Although their food expenses had increased, her brother and Maureen began taking on adventurer jobs, bringing in more money than they would have otherwise earned from farmwork or darning tattered clothing. Their mother’s health hadn’t improved much, though her complexion seemed a bit healthier as their quality of life improved.

“Brother?”

One day, Hinano searched for her brother, carrying a basket of freshly dug potatoes. She thought perhaps he could help her wash them, but she couldn't find him anywhere. *Is he practicing magic with Maureen?*

She found him sitting behind the house, perched on the fence, gazing into the distance. “Brother?” she called.

He flinched, startled, before turning to her. “Oh, Hina... What's wrong?”

“I dug up some potatoes. Could you help wash them?”

“Sure. Yeah, let's do that.” Her brother wordlessly took the basket from her and walked to the well. Hinano hurried after him. They filled their bucket with water chilled by the mid-autumn weather and began washing the mud from the tubers. Hinano observed her brother as he squatted down next to the basket and cleaned the potatoes, discerning that something was wrong.

“You had a...scary look on your face.”

“Oh?”

“When you were in the backyard. Are you worried about something?”

She saw his brow furrow slightly before his expression quickly softened. “It's just about work. Being an adventurer is quite tough, you know.”

“Oh, I see.” *So that's all it is...* Her brother matched her smile, but she didn't notice the faint shadow behind his own.

Eventually, they finished cleaning the potatoes, and the two of them stood up to carry the dripping basket back to their home.

“Today, we'll have steamed potatoes and a stew of dried meats and root veggies,” he said.

“Yeah. Maureen eats a lot, so we need to make a bunch of it.”

“Ha ha ha... True enough.” Her brother's laugh had a lonesome ring to it, but the gaze he turned on his sister was of unalloyed fondness. “Hina...”

“Yes?”

“No...it's nothing,” he said, ruffling her hair.

*You're acting strange today*, Hinano thought even as she squirmed under his ticklish caress.

Hinano had a feeling that things were about to change, so she prayed that days like this would go on forever.

## **Delinquents in Droves**

The capital's cityscape could be completely different from one district to the next. Although the area near the imperial palace (lined as it was with the manors of nobles) was clean and orderly, the places where the common folk lived could be squalid, bearing the hallmarks of haphazard extensions slapped onto existing buildings. It was like a maze there. These were the parts of the city that adventurers were most familiar with. Some areas were dangerous, but such trouble was also an adventurer's bread and butter.

"Here, here, look right here! That's young me." Kasim grinned as he pointed at a statue that had been erected in a corner of the square. The figure of the statue had the same beard as Kasim, though its features did look a bit younger. But perhaps it had been too exposed to the elements, as many of its facial features had grown smooth, and even with the man himself standing right next to it, it was hard to tell it was him.

"The Hollow Lord, was it? The world must be ending if they're calling someone like you a hero," Percival cackled, a bottle of ale in one hand.

Some time had passed since their battle in the capital. They'd shared in the joys of reunion but still gone on their separate ways to see the sights of the metropolis. Percival and Kasim were trying to be mindful of the newly wedded couple, so for a change, they had gone out on the town on their own. With that said, it wasn't like they had any particular destination in mind. They walked around randomly, eating and drinking from the stalls along the street and insulting the selections of shady shops and armories.

"But they just got married, and they've already settled down. It's no fun."

"My thoughts exactly. Even if you try to tease them, they roll with the punches. It's boring."

“Bell’s one thing, but to think Satie would end up like that. Good grief, I really am getting old.”

“You haven’t changed inside, though.”

“Hey, same goes for you.”

The two of them left the square, continuing with their banter.

Winter had already come; the sky was covered in a dark layer of clouds, and though it wasn’t raining, the wind was cold enough to make them shiver. Percival toyed around with the empty bottle in his hand as his gaze swept over their surroundings. “How about we drink something warm?”

“Sounds nice.”

They made a beeline for a random pub. It was lit up red inside by the fireplace, and all the people crowded inside made it far warmer than it had been outside. Doffing his cape and hanging it on a chair, Percival looked around. “The drunkards are the same, no matter where you go... Distilled spirits, cut with warm water.”

“Heh heh heh—of course they are. I’ll take a hot wine, and when I say hot, I mean *hot*.”

“You got it,” answered the old man across the counter.

At a nearby table, five men were playing poker. By the look of them, most were day laborers. Although each game only saw a small bit of money exchanging hands, eventually one of them—a man dressed differently from the rest of the group—indignantly got up from the table. He was a youth who looked to be a merchant’s apprentice. “Dammit, I’m beat,” he said before leaving in a huff.

The remaining men began distributing copper coins over the table with a hearty laugh.

Percival grinned. “They’re conspiring together to cheat, they are,” he observed, lowering his voice. “Looks like it was too much for the young’un.”

“Heh heh heh... I love that sort of thing. Looks like fun. How about you get me in on it?” Kasim said loudly.

The men looked surprised for a moment, but they were quickly laughing again, inviting Kasim to their table. The cards were dealt out, and they went around the table making their bets and exchanging cards. Once the exchanges were over, the hands were revealed, and whoever had the strongest hand took the whole pot.

“All right, I win.”

Kasim immediately won the first hand. They acted a bit sad, but they played the next hand anyways. Although a different man won the next one, the one after that and the one after that both went to Kasim. Gradually, the copper coins were accumulating on Kasim’s side of the table. As he watched from behind, Percival asked for a second serving of spirits with an amused look on his face.

“You’re on a roll.”

“What did you expect?”

Their ulterior motives were clear enough. The men would purposely let him win at first to get him more absorbed in the game. Soon, the amount of money at stake would surely rise, and that’s where the four of them would conspire to strip him of everything he owned.

“One pair. It’s my loss,” Kasim conceded.

“Huh? Wh-What?” The day laborers seemed perplexed. But they regained their composure and the next hand was dealt.

“Oh, so close. Nearly had a flush.”

“Two pairs, but your hand is stronger.”

Each game, Kasim would take small losses, returning coin after coin to the other players. They were winning, and yet the men exchanged dissatisfied looks. Eventually, the mountain of coins had disappeared from in front of Kasim.

He stood. “Man, I thought I was lucky at first, but it was no good. Heh heh heh... You got all your money back. Don’t complain. Let’s go, Percy.”

With that, the two of them left the pub. Percival stroked his chin, seemingly

amused. “Hey, those were all ridiculous hands. Why did you keep saying stuff like one pair and two pair?” In Percival’s eyes, Kasim’s hands had been straights and flushes, nothing but winning hands.

Kasim chuckled. “Well, you know how it is. I cast illusion magic on their eyes—every hand I played came out looking exactly like I wanted it to. It was a good way to kill time.”

“I guess that just goes to show you shouldn’t cheat a magician. Now we should be getting home.”

“Yeah, we should.”

## **Just the Four of Us**

The capital of Rhodesia was often described as a city that never slept. Aside from the back alleys and outlying districts, the main thoroughfares were always bustling, be it day or night. Travelers and merchants from the East and West came and went in an unending stream.

“Here, hold this, Bunny.” Maitreya handed a glass flower vase wrapped in cloth to Falka. Even though he was already carrying plenty of parcels in his one remaining arm, he still managed to dexterously take it and place it in a bag.

Some time had passed since the commotion in the imperial capital. In the meantime, the two of them had been appointed to Benjamin’s service, and by now they had fully adapted to their new lives. Maitreya primarily assisted with paperwork, but she was now much better off financially than she had ever been as an adventurer. Thus, she had begun buying whatever trinkets and baubles caught her fancy and had no qualms whatsoever about putting Falka—now appointed as Benjamin’s guard—to work as her porter. Not that Falka seemed to particularly mind it, silently doing whatever she ordered. His passivity seemed to encourage Maitreya to push her luck even further.

Eventually, the duo began walking down a back alley. Unlike the city’s main avenues, it was dark and empty but for the rough-looking folks who lingered there. The ruffians glanced at the interlopers, but recognition of Falka’s royal guard uniform dissuaded them from any mischief, and soon enough, Maitreya

and Falka had wandered into a dark area with absolutely no one else around. When they were certain none were around to witness them, they both sank into the shadows, emerging in the crown prince's private chambers.

"Put that one over there..." Maitreya instructed Falka where to place each newly purchased decoration around the room. The vase was set on a table and filled with flowers, while the painting was hung on the wall. She had purchased a full set of silverware for the table, as well as a porcelain teapot with cups and a jewel-encrusted sugar bowl. Maitreya picked up each of her purchases and inspected them with satisfaction. "I made some good purchases, if I do say so myself."

She picked a sweet from a paper bag—a pastry of fried honey dough coated in chocolate. "Come, Bunny. Eat and rejoice."

Falka, who had been standing listlessly at attention, eagerly raced over and scooped up a sweet.

After some time, Benjamin returned with Francois in tow. Benjamin's eyes widened as he saw all the unfamiliar adornments in the room.

"Wh-What's all this?"

"Hey, Falka. You're supposed to be a guard. Where did you have to go that was so important that you abandoned His Highness?" Francois demanded. He had apparently guarded Benjamin in Falka's stead and bore down on Falka with palpable frustration.

Falka cocked his head to the side questioningly, still chewing on the confection. Maitreya had broken hers in two and was working on one of the halves herself.

"*Nom, nom...* You came at just the right time—go brew some tea."

Francois was outraged. "You little... Who do you think you're talking to like that?!"

Maitreya waved him off with an insolent look on her face. "The crown prince's attendant, right? Certainly you must *at least* know how to brew tea..."

"What?!" Francois gasped, frothing in rage.

“Easy there, Francois... Now, Maitreya, this *is* my room. Aren’t there a little too many of your personal effects here?”

“It’s only natural—I will be the future crown princess, after all.”

“How can you still be saying such impudent things? Do you understand your position?” Francois asked indignantly.

Maitreya was unfazed. “The work gets done smoothly, and it’s all thanks to me. You should be grateful. Do you think you people can manage without me?”

“Grr... But arbitrarily taking His Highness’s guard is—”

“He has you, doesn’t he? Or are you too weak to guard him?”

“Wench!”

“Come now, give it a rest... At least someone’s putting Falka’s strength to good use,” Benjamin said, trying his best to pacify Francois. *Why do I have to play peacemaker?* Maitreya was too good at riling people up, and Francois would always fall for her provocations far too easily. With the two of them around, the crown prince’s chambers were always boisterous.

Benjamin wearily sat down on the bed. “But you know, Maitreya, if something happened to me and Falka wasn’t around, then you’d be in a rough position too. Do you understand that?”

“Hmm... Point taken. Then, next time, you should come along to carry my things too. Oh, how *thoughtful* of me!”

“You fool!” Francois predictably rose to her bait. “There’d be a commotion if His Highness went into town!”

“I’d rather you protested on my behalf about being press-ganged into serving as her bag boy, Francois...”

“Huh? Oh, m-my apologies, Your Highness.” Francois hastily bowed his head.

Benjamin couldn’t stifle an odd chuckle. *He’s also gradually succumbing to Maitreya’s bad influence...*

The prince called for a maid to bring tea. He took a deep breath and looked around the room. During his long imprisonment, he had despaired of ever



returning here, and the remembrance of that dark time still brought tears to his eyes. He reflected that this chamber, which he had formerly only ever used for some of his nighttime dalliances, had now become headquarters to this rather odd bunch of companions. He found he didn't mind the change much, though he would have liked for Angeline to be there too.

“But... How can I win her over?” It seemed an insurmountable challenge to him. First, he would have to become as good a man as the Red Ogre. *What a long road that will surely be!*

In any case, he needed to focus on his duties. If ever their paths crossed again, he wanted to at least have improved enough to earn a smile from Angeline. Benjamin nodded, and turned his eyes to one of the stacks of papers when his maid returned with the tea. Benjamin took a sip and supposed there was no harm in enjoying a short break for tea before getting started.



**Volume 10**  
**Short Stories**

## On One Winter Day

“This is the bag for the good ones, right?” Kasim asked.

“That’s right—take care not to spill it,” Belgrieve answered.

Kasim took his wooden bowl, filled with a heaping pile of beans, and poured it into the cloth bag.

The beans, planted in the spring and harvested at the height of summer, had been dried in the sun from summer through autumn, finally to be sorted in the winter. During the harvest, good and bad beans would be mixed together, so it was necessary to carefully scrutinize them. The full, plump beans would be separated from the bug-eaten or shriveled ones, which would be used as feed for the sheep and chickens. Sorting beans was one of the handful of chores that would keep the village occupied during the long winter months spent indoors. It was a monotonous task but surprisingly engaging. Whenever someone started sorting beans in Belgrieve’s house, somebody else would inevitably pull up a seat to help, and what was otherwise a silent, solitary task would become a fun, chatty time, especially when there was tea to go around the table.

Belgrieve had finished sorting the beans in front of him. He let out a satisfied sigh as he looked around at the others. It was all adults today; the children had gone out to play as soon as they’d finished lunch, regardless of the falling snow. Byaku had gone out to keep an eye on them, followed by Angeline, who had been feeling competitive and insisted it was her job since she was the oldest. That meant Marguerite was going too, and Anessa and Miriam had been dragged along as well. Lucille, for her part, was dozing off atop a cushion on the floor.

Belgrieve felt there was something a bit humorous about watching Percival and Kasim carefully inspecting each tiny bean. Oddly enough, Graham seemed to be perfectly in his element at the task.

“Nice and quick, Yakumo,” Satie praised. “You seem to be a deft hand at this.”

Sure enough, Yakumo was quickly going through her beans with just a quick glance at each, front and back. She was fast but accurate.

Percival shot her a puzzled look. “You’re certainly a bundle of unexpected talents, aren’t you?”

“This is hardly a talent—I just did it a lot when I was a kid,” Yakumo replied. It was an odd point of similarity between Eastern and Western cultures that this was a common childhood chore. “In my homeland, bad beans like these would be steamed, mashed, and fermented.”

Belgrieve stroked his beard. “Fermented? Into liquor?”

“Certainly not. The fermented beans are salted—they’re a seasoning. It’s often thrown into soups.”

“Huh, sounds interesting. Could we do that here too?”

“I’m not so sure. The fermentation needs a starter, and the beans might be a different cultivar. These ones are long and thin; ours were round.”

It was a given that different cultures had different customs, and even if chores like this were similar, the uses of such foods could vary. *The world is both near and far; distant, yet close*, Belgrieve mused.

“Satie, could I have a refill on the tea?” Kasim asked lazily as he stretched in his chair.

“Why don’t you stretch your legs and get some yourself?” Satie scolded, but she got up anyway in spite of herself.

In years gone by, such a request would result in a heated back-and-forth between the friends until Belgrieve would ultimately step in and put a stop to the bickering. *Satie’s gotten a lot better at looking after people*, Belgrieve reflected.

Percival cocked his head curiously. “What’s got you grinning?”

“Nothing... Just reminiscing about the past.”

Yakumo chuckled. “Heh heh... Sorry for getting between you old friends.”

“Oh, n-no, I didn’t mean—”

“I’m aware. You’re as earnest as ever.”

Percival smirked. “He’s always been like that. Fun to tease, right?”

Belgrieve bashfully hung his head and scratched his cheek.

“That aside, why do you always have that stick in your mouth?” Kasim asked, still idly fiddling with the beans.

“Huh? Oh, this? I’m out of tobacco, and I needed something in its place,” Yakumo explained, sadly twitching the twig in her mouth back and forth. “Spring can’t come soon enough.”

“Yeah, my body’s starting to get stiff.”

“Oh, that works out perfectly, then, Percy. Can you go shovel the snow around the well? It’s been bothering me.” Satie had returned with a tea tray before any of them noticed, a cheeky grin on her face.

Percival frowned and averted his eyes. “Well, I mean... It was just, you know—a figure of speech...”

“You can do it after you take a breather, if you please. My, I’m so glad someone volunteered.” Satie set a cup in front of Percival with a smile that brooked no refusal.

Percival heaved a resigned sigh and accepted the cup.

“Heh heh heh... You shouldn’t run your mouth. Break a leg, Percy,” Kasim taunted.

“You’re working too.”

“Hey, I’ve got my bean sorting!” Kasim protested. But when he turned back to his pile of beans, he was surprised to find they had already been sorted and bagged. “They’re done...”

Belgrieve laughed. “Graham’s been doing it on his own.”

Graham, who had refrained from joining in on the conversation, had continued sorting silently and diligently, and he had apparently finished up while the others were distracted.

Percival wrapped his arm around Kasim’s shoulders. “Give it up.”

“Fine, I get it. Man, I was hoping for a nap...”

Kasim was still grumbling as Percival grabbed him by the scruff of the neck

and threw open the door, admitting the cold outside air. Beyond the endless falling snow, they could hear the boisterous sounds of the children at play.

## Morning Walk

Turnera became far busier as spring's warmth gradually encroached. The grass grew taller with each day, while insects, beasts, and birds gradually emerged from hibernation. The only snow to be seen could be found in the shade or capping the highest mountain peaks, and the world as a whole seemed to be rousing from the season of lifeless cold. The farmers had already been busy in the fields for some time now—nature would not wait on their convenience, and if they let the right time slip by, their crops wouldn't grow as abundantly as they needed for the village to remain self-sufficient through the next year. Even so, everyone was free to rest as they liked and take breaks during the working day. For the folks of Turnera, farming was a fact of life, but so was contriving time for relaxation in the midst of their toils.

After Angeline and her friends had departed for Orphen once more, the formerly crowded and bustling house had more or less settled down. Belgrieve was leaving for his morning walk, and Satie had decided to accompany him for a change. They had been half forced out the door to enjoy some rare private time as a married couple—not that Belgrieve minded the prodding by his friends.

"Seems like mornings are still a bit chilly," Satie said with a puff of icy vapor, her eyes on the horizon.

Early as it was, the sky was still fairly dark. Only the skyline above the mountains was beginning to redden with the first rays of dawn; the clouds beyond them were still cast in shadow. Even so, predawn twilight still offered enough light that they could see where they were going without trouble.

"Isn't it colder in elven territory?" Belgrieve asked.

"Maybe it was. But that was a long time ago. I've spent more time on this side than in my motherland."

*She's right, come to think of it...* Satie was a year younger than Belgrieve and had crossed into Estogal's lands in her teens. She had lived in human lands ever

since, so she truly had been there longer than she had lived in elven lands.

Satie lightly kicked at a tall blade of grass that was glistening in the faint sliver of morning sunlight.

“Frost... It really is cold here.”

“Yeah. It’s a bit too early to plant for the summer; late frost could kill the crops.”

The two walked along the edge of the forest, checking the fences and ensuring that there was no sign of any encroaching fiends. The sun finally emerged out of the void, and their world was soon awash in brilliant color, like nature itself let out a long-held breath. Usually, this was when Belgrieve’s patrol would end, but they decided to keep going for a bit longer. With so many freeloaders and children still around, it was rare for them to have time to walk together.

Satie giggled. “This takes me back.”

“Does it?”

“Before we went into a dungeon, there was a time when we walked together like this.”

“I don’t remember...” Belgrieve scratched his head. He felt that it could have happened, but it was beyond his recollection.

“You were so cute back then, Bell.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’d turn red the instant we teased you.”

“Can you blame me? And it was always three against one. I always wondered how the three of you would manage to come together just for that.”

“With Percy, it would become a fight, and Kasim knew how to roll with the punches. You know, you were the one with the best reactions. We were probably spoiled by that side of you.”

“Spoiled?”

“Yep, exactly. We had peace of mind, knowing whatever we did, you’d surely

forgive us.”

Belgrieve cracked a wry smile. “Do you still see me like that?”

“It’s not like it used to be. But maybe a little bit. The wedding and all the stuff that came after, that was a surprise to me.”

Thinking back to it made them both feel a bit sheepish. Their love for one another was no lie, but the memories of the commotion at the spring festival still made them blush.

Before they knew it, they had made it to the top of the hill which overlooked the entire village. This was also where they had shared a tender moment during the night of the spring festival, the memory of which contributed to their self-consciousness. Belgrieve was awkwardly looking around when Satie suddenly embraced him.

“Hey...” Belgrieve mumbled.

“Mmm... Love you!” Satie exclaimed.

She pressed her face into his chest and rubbed it against him. Belgrieve gently wrapped his arm around her back, smiling bashfully. That he didn’t pat her head as he would with Angeline was a bit of growth on his part.

The sun had finally risen with all its radiance, providing contrast to the chimney smoke that was still wafting into the sky from the village. The sky, wrapped in a thin veil of gray clouds, gradually turned blue, while the chill wind seemed to lose its bite.

“Before I first set off for Orphen, I stood here,” Belgrieve reminisced. “I still come here often. You can see the village well.”

“Indeed.” Satie took a deep breath. “Ah, nice and refreshing. This is a good place.”

“Do you...like Turnera?” Belgrieve asked.

Satie smiled. “I don’t see any reason *not* to like it. It’s a wonderful place, and everyone is kind—and more than anything, it was home to you and Ange.”

“I see...” For some reason, Belgrieve felt a surge of happiness when he heard his wife say that.



They watched as the smoke of breakfast cooking fires swirled up from the village. Eventually, Satie sighed. “Now it’s about time we got back. I’m sure everyone’s starving.”

“I guess so.”

Another day had just begun, and the two walked down the hill together.

## Sunbathing

While Angeline and her friends were on the road back to Orphen, springtime work in Turnera had resumed apace. Snow had become a scarce sight, the fields were blooming with a rainbow panoply of flowers, and all fauna large and small were becoming a more common sight. As the days grew warmer, the farmers had to contend less with the frost than with their own sweat, and it became more common for them to shed their coats and roll up their sleeves come noontide. They also faced a new dilemma—afternoon warmth was ideal both for working and for napping.

Kasim, who had never been keen on physical labor, watched over the children as a pretense to head out to the open plains. As the small ones picked flowers and raced about, he reclined in comfort, and the only part of him that was at work was his eyes. The kids who were a little older were helping in the fields—these ones were too young to do more than get underfoot, so they would be herded together with someone assigned to watch them more often than not.

Beside Kasim was Graham, holding a baby in each arm and another on his back, all soundly asleep.

“Ain’t that a heavy load, gramps?”

“No,” Graham answered with perfect composure. Three babies were practically no burden at all to such a legendary warrior. Two more cradles were set nearby, each containing yet another sleeping baby, kept content by the occasional rocking of their guardian’s hands.

The two men were perched on a small hill which gave them a vantage to see the croplands in the distance and the villagers busily moving about them. All the fields that sprawled beyond the village were used for wheat. These lands, which

had been ravaged by the ancient forest some time ago, had already been restored to their former glory.

Suddenly, Percival came up the hill from the direction of the village.

Kasim sat up and grinned. “Slacking off?”

“I don’t wanna hear that from you. Farming just isn’t for me.” Percival plopped down next to Kasim with a thud. “Try as I may, I just can’t work out how to use a hoe. It’s harder than swinging a sword ever was—and they all do it like it’s nothing! I don’t think I’m clumsy or what have you, but I just wasn’t made for that sort of work.”

They observed the villagers working diligently from a distance, piling up soil around the wheat stalks and mounds for the summer vegetables, or planting stakes for the bean vines to climb. Percival had become an adventurer in the first place precisely to avoid farmwork, so there was little fun to be had for him.

Percival quietly sat with Kasim and Graham until the pleasant warmth of the sunlight made him begin to drowse. He lay back with his hands behind his head and gazed up at the sky for a time, until Hal and Mal ran up and jumped on him.

“It’s Percy.”

“What are you doing? Not helping?”

Percival picked them both up. “We adults, we’ve got a lot of things going on. You kids needn’t worry about it,” he said, deftly evading the question as he tossed them into the air and caught them again. They were both squealing in delight before long.

Kasim laughed wearily. “You’re one hopeless old man.”

“Hey, I’m better than you.”

“Really?”

“Hey, you agree with me, right?” Percival posed the question to the twins in his arms. The two girls flapped their arms.

“Satie says you’re both no-good.”

“Percy and Kasim are both useless.”

“That little... Okay, go play with your friends.” The twins sped off to join the other children playing in the distance as soon as Percival set them down.

Kasim cackled. “We’re *both* useless, she says.”

“Good grief... She’s acting all grown up, that Satie.”

“Well, it can’t be helped. It’s not like we know anything outside the adventuring life.”

“Right. I guess the same could be said for Graham,” Percival said, his eyes flicking over to the elven warrior, only to see the space vacant. Before either of them had noticed, Graham had gotten up without a sound and had already walked some distance away, rocking one of the babes in his arms. All three of them were adventurers of peerless strength—yet in Turnera, that strength availed them nothing more than looking after children.

Percival flopped down again. He watched clouds of all sizes drift across the cerulean expanse, and the kites soaring in circles just below them. “It’s relaxing. We’ve been on edge for so long that I guess it balances out,” Percival muttered.

“Even once that dungeon’s set up, it doesn’t seem like it’ll be a tough one. Maybe keeping an eye out for the young’uns is just right for us,” Kasim said.

“More like keeping the riffraff that’s gonna flood in from the outside in check. I’d rather do that than *teach*.”

“That’s why they call you a troublesome old man.”

“Bell’s the kind one. If I started being kind too, I’d be taking away his job.”

“Well, I’d appreciate it if you were a little kinder, Percy.” Belgrieve had arrived with a basket slung over his back and a hoe in hand.

Percival smiled at him wryly. “Eavesdropping’s a nasty hobby.”

“Ha ha! Sorry about that. Could you help out with something? We need some raw muscle.”

“Well, if you don’t need any fine skill, then I’m your guy. What is it?”

“We need to move a stone.”

“Sounds like a job for me all right. Kasim, how about you make yourself

useful?”

“Well, I’ve got babysitting duty, you know,” Kasim said, rocking a cradle. All of a sudden, the baby began to cry, and Kasim frantically rocked it while trying to soothe the child with his voice. Belgrieve and Percival laughed aloud.

The sun began its gradual westward descent.

## **Sin and Punishment**

South of the village, the cemetery was bathed in spring’s light, devoid of the gloomy atmosphere one might expect from such a place. Yet there was something about the rows of solemn gravestones that would straighten the backs of visitors in respect. Various weeds had begun to sprout from the ground, and ants and small spiders scurried busily between them. The nearby stream was swelled by the snowmelt off the mountain and burbled more loudly than usual.

Charlotte stood in front of the grave of an elderly man named Orca, who had passed just a few days earlier. The new gravestone had been furnished with wildflowers, some of which she had brought herself. Today, it was just her and Byaku; it had been a while since they had been alone together. The village did not employ a dedicated caretaker for the graveyard, instead taking turns cleaning it whenever somebody found the free time. Charlotte and Byaku had found themselves with a gap in the otherwise busy spring schedule, so they had volunteered.

“So, where do we start?” Byaku asked.

“Um... Right, let’s split up. I’ll start from that side. Byaku, you can start from there.”

“Fine.”

Even just sweeping away the dead leaves from the gravestones made a significant difference. The two had arrived just after lunch and quickly got to work, silently cleaning the graves with their brooms. By the time the sun had just begun to crest the western mountains, their job was mostly finished. Charlotte relaxed her grip on the broom and looked over the cemetery once

more. The wind was still a little chilly, but the sunlight was warm, and her forehead was beaded with sweat from her labors.

“What’re you looking so gloomy about?” Byaku asked, pouring a cup of herbal tea from his canteen and passing it over to her.

Charlotte accepted it with a sigh. “I’ve been having nothing but bad dreams lately.”

Byaku gazed at her curiously. She took a sip and found herself looking at her hand—rather, at the finger that had once been adorned with a ring. That was back when she had journeyed across the lands as the “Saint of Solomon.”

“Back when I had Samigina’s ring... Back then, it was also nothing but nightmares for me.”

“I was wondering why you suddenly wanted to go to a cemetery. Did something trigger a memory?”

“I keep recalling what I did. Back then, I hated everything—the institutional church, of course, but also every one of the laymen who simply went about living their happy lives... I remember it all and think, ‘What horrible things I’ve done.’”

“Feeling guilty, huh?”

Charlotte hung her head. “I am very happy right now. But I know there are people out there whose happiness was destroyed because of me. It feels like me being happy myself is something terribly wrong... How can I be happy now? Do I even deserve to be?”

Though these questions troubled Charlotte, she did not know what to do about them, which only deepened her feelings of frustration and misery. Charlotte’s days in Turnera were warm; now that she was surrounded by kind and reliable adults, she was able to be a child again. The hatred she had once harbored in her heart for Vienna and the church had largely faded away, and she couldn’t imagine abandoning this peaceful life to pursue revenge now.

Charlotte sat down and hugged her knees. “Everyone seemed so lonely when Old Orca died, but then, they were smiling as they shared stories about him... It was beautiful. You know, I think it’s because he passed quietly and peacefully—

and because he *wasn't* cursed with a sad death. And perhaps what I did back then changed the fates of those who might have shared in his peace if not for me. When I think about it like that, it makes my heart hurt."

Byaku sat down beside her. "What do you want me to say? No one has the answers you're looking for," he answered curtly. "You never killed anyone directly. I did, and plenty of them. I'm much worse."

"But... In Bordeaux..."

"Either way... We don't have the power to change what happened, and whatever you want to do *now*, it won't amount to much. You've just got to endure it, no matter how much it torments you."

Charlotte closed her eyes as they began to sting in their depths. She recalled what Sasha had told her in Bordeaux—that bearing the suffering was her atonement and that she should live for others to balance the load. But as Byaku said, there was a limit to what she was capable of. Even if she tried to live for others, she could hardly *do* anything. Her powerlessness eventually spiraled to the grimmest extremity, and an obsession with atonement even at the cost of her life. Her eyes welled with tears; she buried her face in her knees and wept.

Byaku gruffly patted her on the head. "Don't be hasty—build up some power. You just gotta study and work until you've made enough people happy that you can be satisfied. If it's too heavy for you, I'll carry at least half of it."

Charlotte looked at him through eyes swimming with tears. "Are you sure?"

"I told you before—I am your attendant. You can do as you please."

"Thank you... Thank you, Byaku."

Byaku turned away bashfully. "Hmph... Let's go home. The sun's setting." He hoisted up their cleaning supplies and started walking. Charlotte got up and dusted off her clothes. She took another look around the cemetery before she brushed away her tears and turned to follow Byaku. The scent of dinners in progress wafted up from chimneys all over the village, carried to her on the wind that had begun to blow.

**Rock-On-My-Baby**

Every winter, Turnera turned into a snowy wonderland as far as the eye could see. Naturally, most of the villagers passed the season holed up in their homes; the only reasons to venture out were to draw water from the well, shovel snow, or bring in firewood.

Though Belgrieve had more space to work with after moving into the new residence, the house was bustling with more and more freeloaders, so there was hardly a day that could be described as quiet or somber. The voices of children playing were loud enough, but more often than not it was the sound of Lucille's guitar that filled the air.

The tunes Lucille played came from her homeland, the Dadan Empire to the distant south. The scales and rhythms of the songs she played were unfamiliar to northern Turnera, but there was something universally appealing about them, and it was hard to feel down whenever she performed. Naturally, that was except for those times when Lucille got too carried away and began to practically shout along with the music. Whenever that happened, Yakumo got her to pipe down with a stern whack.

Lucille was sitting on a cushion on the floor, strumming away at her instrument and singing softly under her breath. One might strain to pick up some of her words, but they were of the Southern language, and the meaning behind those words was unknown to anyone in these parts.

"Hey, what song is that?" Angeline asked. She was lounging on a nearby cushion.

"It's a song about a girl from the Northern lands," Lucille explained, never ceasing her strumming.

"Huh... You sing about things like that too?"

"There are all sorts of songs. Dadan is rich in music. Everyone loves to dance. Every day we shake it up, baby."

Angeline tried to picture what it was like in the warmer climate of the South. It had been quite hot at the Earth Navel; perhaps it was even hotter in Dadan. She recalled that Charlotte's homeland of Lucrecia was also south of Rhodesia and shared a border with Dadan. "Hey, Char," she called out.

Charlotte, who had been sorting beans at the table, turned. “What is it, sis?”

“Come here,” she said, beckoning.

Charlotte got up and tottered over to her. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s warm in Lucrecia, right? Is it warmer than Dadan?”

“Hmm... I’ve never been to Dadan before. But Lucrecia didn’t get much snow. Even when it did fall heavily enough to build upon the ground, it would melt right away.”

“It doesn’t snow in Dadan—and if it did, it certainly wouldn’t stick around,” said Lucille.

*Maybe that means Lucrecia is warm, while Dadan is hot,* Angeline reasoned.

While Charlotte was distracted, Lucille set her guitar on the floor and eagerly snuggled up to the girl, embracing her from behind.

“Eep!” Charlotte squeaked.

“You smell so good, Char. Let’s shake it up, Kitty.”

“Oh, give me a break already!” Charlotte cried.

While the two of them tussled, Angeline quietly reached for Lucille’s instrument and plucked one of the strings, eliciting a twanging sound. Turnera had its share of music lovers who would play instruments at festivals or banquets. Angeline realized that, though she had danced before, she had never played any instrument. “Hey, can I try playing a bit...?” she asked timidly.

“*Let’s try,*” Lucille answered in a language unfamiliar to anyone there.

*I don’t really get it, but that seemed to be a yes.* Angeline picked up the guitar and mimicked what she had seen Lucille do, holding its neck in her left hand while strumming with her right. This time, only a muffled sound came out when the fingers of her right hand caught on the strings, preventing them from vibrating properly.

“Hmm... This is surprisingly...difficult.”

While Angeline struggled, Mit, the twins, and a few other children had gathered around her, watching her with interest. Once Angeline noticed them,



she was suddenly stricken with diffidence and laid the instrument down.

Mit tilted his head. "Sis, are you quitting?"

"Well... It's hard..."

"Then I want to try."

"Me too."

The twins reached out for the instrument, only to get into a childish argument which almost broke into a tussle of their own. Lucille hurriedly snatched her instrument from their hands. "No, no—this is *my* guitar."

"Aw..."

The twins crossly protested the confiscation, but Lucille paid them no heed as she began to strum away again.

"'*Flowers over dango*,' as the ancients said. And what's over dango? That's shaking it up, baby. Here, have at it." Lucille lined up a wooden bucket, an empty bottle, and some other things that she found lying around before her.

"Now bang, bang, ba-da-bang. Shake it up!" she explained while hitting a small stick of kindling wood against them. Immediately the twins' eyes lit up as they each picked up sticks and began smacking the assortment of household goods.

"So good. Everybody have a good time." She strummed her strings with gusto, setting up an invigorating rhythm. The twins were no longer satisfied with the buckets and bottles and had begun smacking the wood floor as well in their growing enthusiasm. Their musicianship seemed to feed off one another's energy, and Lucille responded to them in turn. Mit swayed in place, unvarnished amusement on his face. Angeline and Charlotte could only watch with uncomprehending blank stares, unable to keep up with what was happening as the room grew ever louder.

Suddenly, the haft of a spear slowly reached from a hitherto quiet corner of the room and struck Lucille on the head. "Ow!" Lucille cried out.

Yakumo had a sour look on her face. "Quiet down. Stop making such a racket."

Lucille pouted. “I knew it... You need more rock in your life!”

Yakumo scoffed, but the other adults merely laughed—they had found the cacophonous play entertaining and saw no harm in it.

Should any of them venture outside, there would be nothing but unrelenting frost awaiting them. Even the racket they made had been utterly swallowed up by the falling snow, the world beyond their walls deaf to their performance.

## **The Northern Church**

When the church in Turnera was constructed, it had been made to adjoin the town square. The walls were built from white stone, which was rare in these parts, and the small stained glass windows admitted some multicolored light inside.

Father Maurice was the priest of Turnera’s Church of Vienna. He had initially hailed from Bordeaux, but he came to Turnera once his predecessor had passed on. At the time, there hadn’t been many clergymen who had wanted to be assigned to such a remote northern region, far removed from any major cities, so when the church asked for volunteers, almost everyone had been loath to raise their hand. In the end, Maurice had been the only man to put his name forth.

In short, he was a bit of an oddball. But in spite of his peculiarities, his simple faith and calm demeanor won over the people of Turnera in no time at all. During the spring festival, when the church’s statue would need to be carried to the village square, Maurice’s fussy, shouted directions had practically become a feature of the season.

The statue had been made by a stonemason who had come to the village back when it was no more than a settlement. The form of Almighty Vienna carved from milky white stone had gradually lost its sharply defined contours over the years, but it was still as lustrous as always if nothing else, given that Maurice would earnestly polish it every day.

Maurice was polishing the statue as was his routine before taking a short break to brew himself some tea. He heard the door open and somebody call

out, “Hello!” He looked up from his preparations to see it was Belgrieve who had come.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Belgrieve. Welcome to Vienna’s halls.”

Belgrieve looked at the polished statue and smiled. “Working hard as always, I see.”

“It’s just a natural expression of my faith.”

Belgrieve held out the basket he had brought with him. “I caught a big one, so I came to share some with you.”

“Oh, I’m very grateful.”

The basket contained a cut of venison wrapped in a large leaf. Belgrieve explained that he had caught the deer with one of his snares in the forest.

Though Maurice was a man of the cloth, he was nonetheless human. His creed dictated that he live simply, but he still delighted in the occasional indulgent meal. Maurice offered his thanks as well as some of the tea he had just brewed.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Belgrieve replied.

“I can’t be on the receiving end of charity all the time. Almighty Vienna teaches to give back to others for all we’ve been given. Please, make yourself at home.”

Belgrieve chuckled as he pulled up a nearby chair. Long ago, he had set off for the big city, only to return home disappointed and despondent. For a time, he had become the laughingstock of the village and an object of ridicule. But Maurice, who was an outsider himself and a simple, earnest man, had been one of the few who did not show such disdain for Belgrieve, and they had gotten to talking quite a lot during that time.

When the lent leaf tea finished brewing, its refreshing aroma filled the air. It was the same old flavor the two men had always known, but it was the familiarity that made it very comforting.

Maurice was a bit younger than Belgrieve, but he was still close to forty, and he was starting to get wrinkles on his face. When he’d first come to the village,

his pale complexion had set him apart from the other villagers, but he was now well tanned from helping out in the fields. Even so, the priest was still the most cultured and studied man in the village. He had integrated well into the community, but he was also well respected for the lessons he taught in the school attached to the church.

“Did I stop you at a busy time?” Maurice asked suddenly.

“No, not at all,” Belgrieve said, waving his hand dismissively. “I might as well take a moment to relax if you’re offering me tea.”

“I never thought we would have a dungeon here, after all. That must have you run ragged all over the place.”

“Ha ha! Well, I’m partly responsible for it... And with my comrades helping me, I can’t complain about the workload.” Belgrieve smiled wryly as he scratched his head.

The issue of Mit’s mana had resulted in a dungeon and a guild being constructed, and it was becoming a huge undertaking for the village. Belgrieve, who was at the center of it all, kept up his routine farming work while taking care of planning for the new developments. Maurice could tell this was more difficult than Belgrieve was letting on. “It just had to happen at the start of our busiest season too...” he said.

“Yes, I’ve got some work to do in the field after this, and then there’s going to be a meeting tonight... To be honest, I came to deliver the meat just to get myself a bit of a breather. This tea is exactly what I needed.” Belgrieve grinned mischievously. His playful side would show through every once in a while even after becoming venerable in the eyes of his neighbors.

Maurice smiled. “You’re a married man now. I doubt you have much time to kick back and take it easy.”

“Ha ha ha! Well...” Belgrieve took a sip to hide his bashful smile.

When his own laughter subsided, Father Maurice suddenly recalled something. “That’s right—Mr. Belgrieve, do you have any spare books that the children can read? I’d like to borrow a few for teaching materials.”

“Sure, if you’re fine with what I got for Ange. I can bring them around

tomorrow.”

“Oh no, I’ll come pick them up. I’m the one asking for a favor after all. Will tomorrow morning do?”

“Very well. I’ll set them aside for you, so even if I’m out, there’s bound to be someone around who can point them out to you.”

“Much obliged.”

Before too long, it was time for Belgrieve to be on his way. Maurice’s thoughts turned to his own duties once more as he cleaned up the tea service.

“I almost forgot—I need to get everything together for tomorrow.”

The priest recalled that he was scheduled to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic the following day, so his next task was to sort out all the materials scattered over his desk, one by one.

**Volume 11**  
**Short Stories**



## Cowberry Fields Forever

Though the mountain near Turnera was densely covered in trees, there were a few rocky places here and there where the tall trees couldn't grow. The lack of trees meant a good amount of sunlight made it to the surface, and thus, these areas were host to low-growing shrubs and creepers, which carpeted the ground. These plants were quite resistant to the cold and would grow freely in elven territory, but they fared far worse in warmer climates and could hardly be seen anywhere near Orphen.

Angeline supported her father with one arm and carried a basket in the other as they made their way down the mountain trail. A short distance ahead, Charlotte and Mit led the way with similar baskets, while Anessa and Miriam tagged along behind.

"Ah, not that way—we need to pass that rock on the left," Angeline called out as she noticed Charlotte glancing down an animal trail that veered off in the wrong direction.

"Okay, this way." Charlotte directed Mit down the correct path. The two children navigated the meandering way around boulders far larger than them. Gradually, the trees around them were getting shorter and sparser until they were hiking in the open sun. Craggy rocks of varying sizes poked out through the thick carpet of fallen leaves. The farther they went, the more rugged the terrain became.

Angeline already felt like jumping for joy at the knowledge that the cowberries were near, and she couldn't wipe the grin from her face. Her legs were trying to speed up on their own, but she restrained herself—she needed to help her father, as he was still injured. Owing to his condition, they were traveling slower than usual, but that just meant they had time to talk about all sorts of things along the way, and that was fun in its own right.

Belgrieve couldn't help from chuckling at Angeline's joyful expression. "You look happy."

"*I am* happy..." Angeline said, giving his arm a squeeze.

“Ahh, it really is nice and comfortable here...” Miriam said. She was walking behind them, languidly stretching her limbs as she walked.

Angeline nodded. “Yeah, my lungs feel refreshed.”

The sky was strikingly blue, and from this high up, they could see how busy Turnera was with one day to go before the autumn festival. Curiously, there were far more people around than ever before, not to mention the three Bordeaux sisters, who helped to liven up the mood. The statue of Vienna had already been carried out to the square—if one didn’t know any better, it might have looked like the festival was already underway.

Angeline and her friends had left that noisy scene behind to go pick cowberries. The goal was to offer them at tomorrow’s festival, but naturally, they wanted to eat their fill too—especially Angeline, who had been waiting for this moment for years. Eventually, they reached a place where the light of the westering sun glistening in the sky above seemed to hit just right. Among the leaves carpeting the ground, a great number of bright-red berries gleamed like gemstones. Charlotte and Mit cried out for joy.

“Found them!”

“Dad!” Angeline turned to Belgrieve with a fire in her eyes.

Belgrieve laughed and sat on a nearby stone. “Go and pick them to your heart’s content.”

Angeline bounded off into the cowberry patch, her basket at the ready. She danced through the plants cautiously in spite of her unbounded enthusiasm, taking care not to step on any of the berries, and stooped down to begin plucking them.

The ripe cowberries had been bathed in the chilly northern weather day and night and were now almost bursting with delicious juice. The skin of the overripe ones was too soft, and just the slightest touch would cause the juice to spill out. The best ones were just ripe enough to still have lustrous skins. It wasn’t just their flavor that made them special—cowberries had a fine, supple texture and popped pleasantly in the mouth when eaten fresh. Angeline carefully chose a large, plump berry to eat first.



“Mmm!”

The tart sweetness spread through her mouth with a taste enhanced by memories that had come back to her after far too long, confirming for her that her vivid recollection of their taste was more substantial than the effects of rose-tinted glasses. The familiar taste felt like coming home, and it even tasted better than she remembered from all those years ago. She wasted no time eating a second, a third, and then a fourth. The tartness puckered her lips, while the sweetness lingered long after the berry was gone.

“Wow, they’re amazing!”

“They’re pretty good.”

Miriam and Anessa were also entranced by their flavor, while Charlotte and Mit’s partiality for the berries went without saying. For a long while, they all filled not their baskets but their mouths.

With each berry Angeline ate, another memory would be roused. Before she’d left for Orphen at twelve, it had been a regular fall event for her to come here, and she had done so almost every year. Most of their harvest would be dried or made into preserves, so there was only a very brief period of time where she could enjoy them freshly picked.

After she had filled just over half of her basket, Angeline sat down beside Belgrieve.

“Are you done?”

“No, just resting... Here, some for you too.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Together, they snacked on the berries in her basket like they had done in years long past. To Angeline, the memories stirred by eating cowberries were as important as their taste and texture. It seemed every bite brought back something forgotten, be it the joy of foraging, being led by the hand down these mountain trails by her father, or resting by the fireplace replete with berries.

Angeline glanced to her side. Belgrieve had a gentle smile on his face as he

watched over his children and Angeline's friends gathering the cowberries.

*I'm glad I didn't forget... I'm glad I didn't become a demon.* Angeline felt a pull deep within her heart and grabbed her father's arm.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"Hee hee... It's nothing!" Angeline got up with her basket again. The sun was beginning to set; she would need to fill the basket up before they started on their way back.

*I'm Belgrieve's daughter. I'm here, where I belong.*

Once more, Angeline raced out into the thicket. In that moment, she was the same little girl she had been before she first set out for Orphen.

## **In the Big City**

Winter had arrived in Orphen as well. Though not as harsh as in Turnera, the city was also in the northern region and experienced biting-cold winds and sporadic snow from the heavy clouds that loomed above. With that said, it never got so bad that the roads became snowbound and unusable, not enough so to bring traffic and trade to a halt. Even in winter, Orphen remained bustling as usual, with an unending parade of travelers to and from the city from all parts.

As noon rolled around, the weathered white guild building had calmed somewhat from the morning rush. The floor was dampened with the melted snow that had clung to the clothing of visitors, and a cleaner was busily mopping it all up. At the counter, Yuri stamped a seal onto a document and handed it to a young adventurer. "Okay, and that's a job well done. Please take this to the exchange point for your reward," she told the girl.

"Hey, hey, Yuri... Did you hear about the Black-Haired Valkyrie's father?" the adventurer asked.

"Hmm? Did something happen to Mr. Belgrieve?"

"I heard he got married! Wasn't Angeline trying to get you two together? You missed out!" the adventurer said, chuckling.

Yuri smiled wryly and lightly prodded her on the forehead. “That’s fine by me. He married someone he knew from way back when, you know. If we went through with whatever Ange was pushing, it would have been an even bigger mess.”

“Really? But— Ah, gotta go! Thanks, and see ya.” It seemed like the adventurer had more to say, but one of her comrades had called out to her and she ran off in a hurry.

Yuri chuckled. *The young ones sure are energetic...*

The desk had quieted down, so Yuri decided to take a break and handed her duties over to another receptionist. *It’s lunchtime already; I wonder what Lionel’s up to*, she thought as she headed to the guild master’s office.

When she walked in, it was to find Lionel slouched back in his chair and staring off vacantly into the air.

Yuri couldn’t help but giggle. “Penny for your thoughts, Leo?”

Lionel jolted out of his reverie and sat up straight. “I was just thinking about how busy today’s been...”

“We still have the afternoon ahead of us, you know.”

Lionel stretched out. “I know... Luckily, things are finally starting to get on track. It’s gotten easier for me now that the job’s more systemized.”

The reforms triggered by the massive fiend outbreak were finally showing results. The guild had partnered with major trading firms to establish supply routes for various materials, the various programs that had been implemented to improve the quality of their adventurers were bearing fruit, and they were now resting on a far firmer foundation. Many saw the extended absence of Angeline—Orphen’s ace—as an opportunity to make a name for themselves.

“Do you think Ange’s crossed the checkpoint by now?”

“Yeah, right about now, I think.”

A few days prior, Angeline and her party had returned to Orphen, but they had already set off on a journey to the east after just a few days of rest and preparation. It would likely be a long while before they were all reunited again.

“It’s going to be a long journey, going all the way to Buryou,” said Yuri. “But I’m sure they’ll do just fine.”

“Agreed. Anyways, Ms. Ange was pretty happy when she was talking about Turnera nonstop at the farewell party. It must be a fun place,” Lionel mumbled as he cleared up the clutter on his desk.

Yuri shook her head. “It’s not just her. You’ve been talking about it a lot lately.”

“I mean, am I wrong? You feel the same way, don’t you, Yuri?”

“Well, yes. But I have fond memories of Orphen. Despite its faults, it’s where I’ve spent the most enjoyable years of my life.”

“Ah, the past. It’s a distant, faded place now. But the memories of when we were active adventurers are still the most vivid. I can understand how Mr. Belgrieve feels. It’s good that we got the old party back together.” Lionel’s gaze became distant again.

Among her former comrades who were now involved in the guild’s operations, Yuri had known Lionel the longest. Their relationship traced back to when they had both been just starting as adventurers. The feelings she harbored towards him had taken root in those days, but their long-standing friendship had settled into a comfortable camaraderie. Thanks to Lionel’s obliviousness, Yuri’s subtle advances—which she had been making since their days of adventuring together—had fallen flat, perpetually setting back any relationship developments that might have happened.

“We’re getting old... Both of us have got a few more wrinkles too,” Lionel said with a cynical laugh.

Yuri frowned. “You’re as tactless as ever.”

“Now, now, can’t I get away with a bit of teasing? We go way back.”

Yuri sighed. “You really don’t get it, do you...?”

Recently, she had become suspicious that this man was doing it on purpose. She had parted ways with him after leaving the adventuring life, frustrated with their stagnant relationship. But now that she was back and spending her daily

life alongside him, she felt a sense of peace. Still, it was a little irksome that she would have to be the one to admit her feelings first. Moreover, she felt at ease with their current relationship. She would think to herself, “I wish I could be as dramatic as younger women,” but she could never bring herself to go for it. Yet hearing Angeline speak excitedly about Belgrieve’s relationship with Satie did stir a sense of envy in her.

While Yuri was fidgeting, Lionel stretched again with a loud groan and got up. “You haven’t had lunch, have you? How about we go get something together?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure, why not. Fawn’s Inn?”

“That’s the one. Their lunch meals can’t be beat.”

“The daily special’s too hit or miss for me. I’m thinking stew and pita.”

“Is that so?”

These inconsequential conversations were fun enough. *And in the end, perhaps it’s fine if things stay this way a bit longer*, Yuri mused.

The drawn-out game of cat and mouse seemed set to go on for a while longer.

## Senior Recreation

Far above Turnera, a black kite circled round and round in the sky, searching for prey far below. Wispy clouds like faint brush strokes were streaked across the blue sky, while the warmth of the spring sunlight poured down to add luster to the lush and green leaves. Such a fine spring day was abruptly interrupted by a loud coughing fit in Belgrieve’s backyard.

“*Cough, hack, gag...* Argh, how irksome!” Maria the Ashen scowled behind the sleeve she held up to her face.

Mit, seated across the table from her, watched her in confusion. “Are you okay, Maria?”

“Hmph. It’s the usual.”

“Huh. So it’s normal...”

Maria turned to Graham who was standing off to the side, an unsettled expression on her face. “He’s a demon, no doubt about that. I never expected him to be this docile, though.”

“I do not know everything myself, but Mit does seem a little different from other demons. You could say he is a composite of several qualities present in other demons though.”

“Solomon’s spell sequences are convoluted combinations of all sorts of factors... It’s plausible that something happened to cause savagery to be lost in his equation...”

It was at that point in the conversation that Cheborg the Destroyer lumbered over. “Hey! How long are you gonna talk about such difficult things? You can’t keep hogging the Paladin to yourself; it’s not fair!”

“You’re noisy wherever you go, huh... Didn’t you have a bout?”

“Huh? What? You say something, Maria?” he shouted.

“I apologize for all the noise,” Dortos the Silverhead said wearily. He had accompanied Cheborg over to their table.

“I do not mind,” Graham said with a slight smile.

Then Charlotte came over with a tray. “Tea is ready.”

With the long winter over and another spring festival—squeezed into an already busy season—behind them, it was time to focus on doing test runs of Turnera’s dungeon. That was when the elderly adventurers had showed up unexpectedly with the pretext of inspecting the new dungeon, but it was clear they had come mostly for the fun of it. Dortos and Cheborg, for their part, could feel age catching up to them, and the steady decline of their physical capabilities. Both of them had aspired to be like Graham the Paladin in their youth, and they wanted to meet him one last time while they were still of sound body and mind. That was what had drawn the two of them to Turnera, and they had immediately challenged the ancient elf to friendly duels for honor. It was less about winning and more an affirmation of how far they had come over the course of so many years. Both battles had ended with big smiles; if judged by victory, Graham had won the day, but that seemed trivial to all of

them.

Cheborg crossed his arms and laughed. “But another battle will only make things better! I was sure you’d gone and died somewhere by now, I was!”

“I might as well have. If it hadn’t been for the strange twist of fate that brought me here, I would have rotted away in retirement.”

“That didn’t feel like the swordsmanship of a man on the verge of decrepitude. Still, it is strange to think how many decades it has been since I last sparred with you...”

The three old men delved into reminiscing over their tea. Maria glared at them before breaking into another coughing fit. “*Cough, cough...* Being around you lot is making me feel old too.”

“Do you want some more tea, Granny Maria?” asked Charlotte.

She shook her head. “No need. Mit, come here. There’s something I need to look into.”

“But I need to do chores,” Mit said. He returned her gaze completely undaunted, when most folks found Maria a little scary even in ordinary conversation.

Maria frowned. “What chores?”

“Farmwork. Spring is a busy time.”

Spring was indeed a busy time for farmers. Though the wheat had been trodden and the potatoes had been planted before the spring festival, they still needed to prepare the fields for the summer and release the sheep into the plains. And that wasn’t all; there were always buildings in need of repair after being damaged by the winter snow, and the irrigation channels needed to be cleaned, and plenty else besides. Belgrieve and the others had gone out to help early in the morning and had yet to come home.

“I see...” Maria sighed.

Charlotte giggled. “Mit is a hard worker, you know.”

“I get it, I get it... Tsk, this is going to be a drawn-out project...” Maria complained, slouching over in annoyance.

“It seems you have an excuse to stay in Turnera now, Maria,” Dortos mused, stroking his beard.

“Shut up— *Cough*... What about you two? How long are you going to stick around?”

“So sad to see us go?” Cheborg asked loudly. “We’ll stay as long as you’re here!”

“Who the hell would be sad to get rid of you?! Any more of your damnable nonsense and I’ll tear you to pieces!”

“Maria, no foul language. It becomes a bad habit and corrodes the soul,” Mit chided.

Maria stared at him, taken aback. Cheborg burst into laughter, while Dortos shook with barely restrained mirth.

“That’s what dad often tells Byaku,” said Charlotte.

“Yeah.” Mit nodded. “That’s why I won’t use foul language either.”

“Hey, Paladin... Is this kid *really* a demon?”

“You assessed him too. Did you not arrive at the same conclusion?”

Graham’s words left Maria scratching her head and heaving a sigh. “Solomon himself would be surprised to find a demon lecturing someone on good behavior... But whatever. If it’s going to take time, then I’ll kick back and take it easy. Charlotte, do we have any more tea?”

“Yes, by all means. Do you want some more too?” Charlotte offered, turning towards the men.

The old men were still shaking in laughter as they took their seats at the table in the yard. The sun was slightly lower in the sky now, but it would be a while longer before Belgrieve and the others returned. They were sure to be surprised by these unexpected guests.

## About Homecoming

Winter had come to Turnera. Thick snow clouds covered the sky day and



night, blanketing not only the mountains but also the village's surroundings in pristine white.

Belgrieve's home had lost much of its youthful energy with the departure of Angeline and her party members, but the household remained lively thanks to the young children who remained. Though the shuttered windows kept the house dim during the day, there was always a fire burning in the fireplace to keep it warm. However, they couldn't stay cooped up every hour of every day—even in winter, there was always work to be done outside.

Satie drew some water from the well and stopped to gaze at the northern mountains. She seemed to be lost in thought and heaved a soft sigh. Charlotte, who was out fetching firewood, cocked her head to the side.

"What's wrong, mom?"

"Huh? Wrong? What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were sighing..."

"Was I? Ha ha! I didn't mean to." Satie played it off with laughter and hoisted up her pail of water. "I was just thinking a bit about my homeland."

"Your homeland... You mean elven territory? Is it beyond those mountains?"

"Yep. A little farther east, though... It's cold out here, isn't it? Let's head back in for now."

Hal and Mal were playing with Mit in the alcove and seemed to be trying to build something with wooden blocks. Graham watched over them while Percival and Kasim faced one another over a chessboard, and Belgrieve and Byaku sorted beans by the fire.

"How's the snow?" Belgrieve asked, looking up from the sorting.

"It's calmed down for now—the wind too," Satie answered.

She poured the water into a jug and brushed the snow off her coat. Charlotte, after setting down the firewood, doffed her coat and hung it on the wall.

"Elven territory has even more snow, right?"

"That's true. The place I lived was relatively close to human lands—like

Turnera, it was at the foot of a mountain, but the snow on the mountain slopes never melted all throughout the year. The wind that came from that mountain was so cold that the nights were chilly even during the summer.”

“That’s tough to imagine...” Charlotte gazed at her adoptive mother in amazement. She had been born in the warm climate of Lucrecia and couldn’t even fathom what life was like in the continent’s northernmost extremities.

Satie removed her coat as she reminisced. “Every day, we’d search for things in the forest, till the soil, weave with vines—life wasn’t dissimilar to what we have here. In all the years I lived there, I found it dull, and for many years after I thought I had no attachment to my homeland, but...living peacefully in Turnera makes me oddly nostalgic about those times.”

“Sounds like homesickness to me,” Percival chimed in as he moved one of his pieces.

Satie pouted. “Definitely not. I was just remembering a few things,” she said as she began stacking clean dishes.

Kasim laughed. “Come to think of it, even Satie had a home. Are you really okay with marrying her without even paying a visit to her folks, Bell?”

Belgrieve was caught off guard by the sudden attention. “Her folks? I guess I ought to...”

“There’s no need, really. Don’t give him any funny ideas, Kasim.”

“You sure? I think talking to them a little would just be good manners...”

Belgrieve seemed rather troubled over it, so Satie hugged him from behind. “It’s fine, I tell you. Unlike Ange, I never liked *my* parents all that much. They were strict, always trying to force me to live my life how they thought an elf should live. It was suffocating...”

“But I bet they still loved you as a daughter,” said Kasim. “Now that you’re a parent, you understand, don’t you?”

“Ugh... That’s, well, I suppose...” Satie stumbled over her words.

Belgrieve chuckled. “I’m interested in seeing your homeland. I’m sure it’s a beautiful place.”

“It kinda feels like...we talked about this before, Bell. A long time ago.”

“Did we?”

Charlotte’s eyes had begun to sparkle with interest. “I’d love to see what it’s like there... I’m curious about Maggie’s home too. She’s elven royalty, right?”

“My homeland was a little far from Maggie’s... But I do hope she can reconcile with her mom and dad... Right, Graham?”

Graham—who had been watching the children at play—glanced at Satie and nodded.

Belgrieve poured another pile of beans into the basket. “We’ll be busy for a while. Too busy to travel...but I bet Ange will be back by the time we get the chance.”

“Yeah... Hmm, what shall we do? And how am I supposed to feel when I see them? Their runaway daughter suddenly comes home with a husband and children. Wouldn’t that just be trouble for them? Urgh... Heeey, Beeell, are you suuure we have to go?”

“Are you *that* against it?”

“Well, no, it’s just...embarrassing.” Satie draped herself over Belgrieve from behind and ruffled his hair.

Percival laughed. “You’re starting to resemble Ange lately...”

“What?! It’s the other way around! Ange takes after *me*!”

Her sudden boasting got a few laughs. It seemed the rather awkward homecoming would have to wait.

## You Were There

The night of the fall festival was long and even after the sun had set, they gathered around a fire that blazed red in the village square and laughed over shared stories. Villagers and visitors alike exchanged drinks and thought about the impending winter. To all who lived in the north, the long and cold winter was a communal experience. The night air was full of complaints and boasting,

the occasional drunken insult, and sudden bursts of yelling or laughter.

Belgrieve was seated in a corner of the square, his face a little flushed from drink. The nights were already cold enough that he wore a coat to ward off the biting cold, but he still enjoyed the relief of the cool evening breeze washing over him.

The fall festival was one last hurrah before everyone would be shut away in their home, but it was also meant to welcome home the spirits of ancestors who returned for the winter. These spirits would then be sent forth once more on the lanterns Turnera's villagers would send floating down the river when the spring festival came around. Thus, amid the revelry in honor of the dearly departed were moments of silence to reflect on the memories of those who had passed, as happened at every fall festival.

Belgrieve could no longer recall his parents' faces, retaining only a vague image of his mother and a mere shadow of his father in his memory. They had never sat for a portrait all their lives, and with the passage of time and the accumulation of cares and responsibilities, Belgrieve's memories had gradually failed him. Even so, he could still remember a moment in his early childhood when he had stood before the fall festival bonfire with his mother and father. He could still vividly recall the warmth of his mother's hand that he had felt through his gloves and the view from when his father had hoisted him up atop his shoulders.

There was a saying around these parts: "Someone remembered never truly dies." Belgrieve took it to heart—as he saw it, if the ancestors did truly return, it would only be the ones that still existed in memory. Those who had been forgotten would be dead in the truest sense. He sighed and watched as the frosty vapor dissolved into the night sky illuminated by brilliantly sparkling stars.

At that moment, Angeline joined him, toting a bottle of cider. "Found you!" she cried happily and took the seat beside him. "Here, dad," she said, offering him a wooden cup.

"Thanks."

The two of them drank cider together. Angeline let out a relieved sigh and gazed up at the night sky. "Do you think grandpa and grandma are here...?"

“I hope so.”

Angeline hugged a knee to her body and sniffled, her nose slightly red from either the chilly weather or the alcohol. “Even though we can’t see them, there must be plenty of dead people around us right now...”

“Yeah. They’re probably dancing around the fire with everyone else.”

There was a lively circle of dancers around the fire. Lucille was strumming her instrument in tune with the band of nomadic musicians.

“I wish Ishmael could have enjoyed this too...” Angeline muttered wistfully.

“Yeah, daddy feels the same way.”

Angeline looked up at him. “Really? But he turned out to be Schwartz...”

“Maybe so—but that wasn’t who he was when we journeyed to the Earth Navel together. He helped however he could, and he genuinely cared about us.”

“But...”

“I... I saw Schwartz’s real face. It was exactly the same face as Ishmael’s.”

Angeline seemed startled. “Really? But if it was the same false persona spell that mom was talking about, then...”

“Was he *really* just a false persona?”

“Huh?”

“This is just wild conjecture, but I think Ishmael may have been Schwartz’s past self. That’s why he could function so naturally as a separate person. From what I’ve heard, Schwartz was a human who managed to live an exceptionally long life thanks to magic. Before that, back when he was a mere novice magician...perhaps he was simple and kind, just like that.”

“Do you think so...?” Angeline murmured, eyes downcast.

Belgrieve patted her head, smiling. “I’d like to think so.”

“Why...?”

“Because if that’s true, it means that Ishmael was truly there. He wasn’t just a creation from nothing. He was there with us, sharing the same time. I take a

little comfort in that, at least.”

Angeline mulled that over. “Yeah,” she agreed, nodding.

Even if Schwartz had cast Ishmael aside, deeming him unnecessary, Ishmael *had* truly been there when they knew him, and before that as well. For a time, they had entrusted their lives to one another on that long journey they shared—that *had* been real.

Angeline looked up at the sky. “If that’s true...maybe Ishmael’s here right now.”

“Ha ha! Maybe... I hope so.”

Today’s festival was one to welcome the dead. And perhaps Ishmael was among them.

Someone remembered would never truly die—then, as long as they remembered him, Ishmael was surely here with them too.

Belgrieve poured another cider for himself and Angeline, and without saying a word, they toasted the man’s memory and drank from their cups.

They were here now, and he had been there then, and that was no illusion.

## **The Traveling Peddler**

The lights of Bordeaux flickered just down the road beneath the twinkling stars scattered across the sky. The distant mountains and forests had become deep, foreboding shadows, and it was like only the places still ablaze with the light of human activity seemed to still exist, suspended in this sea of darkness.

“We’re running a little late...” The peddler glanced back over the wares in her wagon, taking quick stock of the many sacks of spices she had bought for cheap. She hadn’t gone out of her way for them and had only ended up with the inventory because they had been available at the last place she had done business. One deal had led to another, and she had managed to obtain this unexpected stock.

Business dealings often led to idle pleasantries which often put her behind schedule, but courtesy and conversation were a merchant’s bread and butter. It

didn't matter how busy she was, or how high-quality her merchandise was, if she didn't indulge her customer's desire for small talk—which was a surefire way to lose business. That was why, earlier today, she had lent her ears to a customer's essentially inconsequential boasting while she passed the time with a cup of tea. As long as she could keep her business partners in a good mood, she could turn that goodwill into better deals. Moreover, spices didn't often lose their value; they would be seen as useful, high-quality goods wherever she went, and their value would actually rise the farther she traveled from where they were produced. Fetching the finest price would be akin to proving her worth as a merchant. Bordeaux was an agricultural zone, but they chiefly produced grain, not spices, so she was bound to find opportunities there. She also happened to be personally acquainted with Countess Bordeaux, so it was incredibly easy to do business in the region, and House Bordeaux itself could personally be a buyer of these high-quality spices.

“I'll drop by the estate, and then... It's been a while since I've been to the ocean. I guess I'll buy some goods there and head to Elvgren.”

*Come to think of it, I only started centering my trading around these northern climes after I met the Black-Haired Valkyrie, Angeline...*

Back then, the peddler had coincidentally ventured to a village north of Bordeaux, just as she was considering where to travel next. Even if they could get an S-Rank guard for dirt cheap, there weren't many peddlers willing to go to a village on the northernmost outskirts of the duchy. But she had had nothing better to do, so she had decided to take Angeline's fare and head north. Along the way, Angeline had wound up saving the youngest sister of the countess, Seren, who had been taken captive by mountain bandits, and from there they had turned around and headed straight back to Bordeaux.

After Angeline had seen Seren to her home, she had left without meeting the countess, leaving the peddler behind to explain the situation in her stead. She had received a warm welcome, and they had even accommodated her by purchasing some of her produce and other goods at a fair price. She had made Bordeaux her base of operations ever since, and for the past few years, her regular route had taken her around Bordeaux, Orphen, and Elvgren. Of course, she would also head to Turnera when the opportunity presented itself. She'd

been born in the city of Estogal and didn't use to fare so well in the cold, but all of her dealings in the northern territories had long since accustomed her to their climes.

Bordeaux was close now. It wasn't on the same level as Orphen, but it was still rather large, and as it was one of the key points in northern trade routes, the torches at its gate would remain lit throughout the night.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she finally passed through Bordeaux's gates. Thanks to Helvetica's effective administration, the surrounding lands maintained good public order, but there was always the chance of encountering a fiend from time to time.

Though they were acquainted, the peddler felt it would be rude to visit the lord's estate at this late hour, so she parked her wagon at the usual inn, one frequented by traveling peddlers which employed guards to watch the wagons at night. That meant she didn't have to unload everything.

She clambered down from her coach, her puffs of frosty breath melting into the night sky. "Ah... It's still so cold."

The inn's first floor was a pub, and she weaved her way through the noisy crowd to find a spot at the corner of the bar. She ordered mulled wine and rubbed her cold hands together as she listened to a nearby conversation about the dungeon in Turnera. This newly formed dungeon had become a hot topic among merchants and adventurers alike. Since Angeline's father, Belgrieve, was going to take charge of the guild there, it would probably shape up nicely enough—that was how she saw it at least.

The peddler lived her life on the road. When she passed through a village like Turnera, she would sometimes feel jealous of those who lived rooted to the soil they'd grown up in. Even so, she knew that traveling suited her best. She certainly didn't want to enter the violent world of adventurers, but she loved getting to travel to all sorts of places and experiencing them in all manner of seasons.

As she nursed her wine, she pondered what to stock up on if she did end up going to Elvgren. Her musings were interrupted by a familiar voice raucously booming near the door. "Oh, not to worry! I just thought I'd have a glass before



I returned to the manor! I'm not going to stay long!"

She glanced over to see Sasha, the middle Bordeaux sister, sauntering in. Her armor was grimy—evidently, she had been out on some sort of request. When Sasha made her way to the bar, she spotted the female peddler. "Oh! It's been some time! I didn't know you were here!"

"I just arrived myself... Are you on your way home from work, Sasha?"

"Indeed! I must give it my all every day if I want to catch up to Angeline and Master Belgrieve. Yes, I'll ensure that Angeline and her friends hardly recognize me by the time they make it back from the east! One ale, please!" she called out to the bartender, taking the seat next to the peddler. Though she was already an AAA-Rank adventurer, Sasha wasn't content with her status and was a veritable bundle of ambition. "That's right—I've been thinking of going to Turnera to see how Seren's doing. Do you need a guard? If you do, I'll take the job for cheap."

"Huh? Oh, well, what to do...?" She had been thinking about Elvgren, but Turnera was appealing too. In spite of its humble appearances, Turnera had managed to charm a great many people, herself included. "I...I'll be counting on you, then. But I need to stock up on a few things, so I can't depart immediately."

"Naturally. I'll follow your schedule. Will you be stopping by our home?"

"Yes, I think I'll go tomorrow."

"Splendid! Then let us discuss the details tomorrow! Fare thee well!" Sasha polished off the ale in her tankard with a single gulp and slapped a copper coin down onto the table, then went on her way. She had come and gone like a storm.

The peddler dwelled on her erstwhile companion for a moment before snapping to and immediately turning her thoughts to what she should buy—not just for trading but also as gifts for her friends as well. When she thought about it like that, she began to feel a bit excited.

## Rediscovering *S-Rank Daughter*

*My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer*, or *S-Rank Daughter* for short...

This time around, we've gathered up all the random short stories I wrote over the years. Back when this was a web novel, it was available for everyone to read on their computers and cell phones completely free of charge. How, then, could I possibly make this series worth anyone's hard-earned cash?

To make it worthwhile—on top of the usual rewrites and additions—I put out special short stories, each roughly one to two thousand characters. The stories were distributed as exclusives for each bookstore with around six or seven written per volume. Once I tallied them all up, I found I'd written eighty stories totaling over a hundred and seventy thousand characters—more than an entire volume of the main series.

Understandably, very few people were keen on buying several copies of the same book at twelve hundred yen a pop, and there were frequent requests for a short story collection after the publication of the final volume.

As an author, it felt like such a shame to let such a large amount of writing collect dust, but despite my pleas, the store-exclusive nature of these stories made it very difficult to give them a general release. After all, an exclusive is defined by its exclusivity, and this exclusivity would only be undermined by public availability.

However, thanks to my editor I-san's efforts, we compiled these stories into a single volume. I am truly grateful; the time I spent writing has been justified and then some. While some of my early writing can be quite flawed—in fact I often found myself covering my eyes—I hope that you can see that as part of the entertainment factor.

As I write this in late September 2023 (completed in October), it has been exactly six years since I began posting this series online in September 2017. That's enough time for a kid to get through all of elementary school—a truly

daunting thought indeed. The author, who was still in his twenties when it all started, has made it into his mid-thirties (not that it really matters).

Right after I completed the series, I was filled with a strong desire to write something new, and so my attachment to this series waned. But as time passed, I began to see it in a more objective light. Despite the many cringeworthy sections, some parts turned out so well that I can hardly believe I was the one who wrote them. Retreading this story has proven to be quite an interesting experience.

With that said, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on various parts of this work. This will not be a systematic or organized examination but rather a meandering recollection written as the thoughts come to me. I would like to apologize in advance for the disorganized nature of this afterword.

Since this is intended for readers who have finished the main story, I will not be avoiding spoilers. As a matter of fact, I've convinced myself that only people who have read the main series will ever pick up this book. If you are somehow an exception to this rule, I highly recommend finishing it first, whether in web or book format.

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To start off, let's go into the inspiration for this series. As mentioned in the afterword of volume 11 (the final volume), it all started with an attempt to depict a character who doesn't personally see much success but has earned the respect of those who are successful.

The author has a fondness for good old American rock, especially the more obscure tracks from the '60s and '70s from the American South. His favorite band, The Band, originally gained fame as Bob Dylan's backup group. Of the five members, four were Canadian, and before Bob Dylan, they were backing the rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins. By the time they made their debut as their own thing, they already had ten years of experience under their belt—it's a long story, and I'll refrain from delving too deeply into their history here.

Now, you can't say The Band was obscure in their day, and the fact they are still so well remembered speaks volumes about their place in rock history. Their music did, however, diverge from the popular psychedelic rock of the time,

having a more rustic, “country” sound. Their high technical skill and high-level compositions likely appealed more to connoisseurs than the general public (the author wasn’t there at the time and offers a humble apology if this is incorrect). One thing for sure, however, is that they were very highly respected by fellow musicians who still to this day perform endless covers of their songs.

This sort of understated, unpretentious music became the perfect backdrop for our middle-aged male protagonist. “The Weight” in particular, a song about shouldering burdens, was essentially the theme song for this series. Beyond The Band, the author also drew inspiration from Irish music groups like Planxty and the Chieftains, swamp rock musicians like Marc Benno and Don Nix, prewar blues, and rock legends like Bob Dylan and Van Morrison. Additionally, many characters and names were taken from various musicians.

I realize this has suddenly started to sound like liner notes, but it’s relevant. Trust me. This has to do with the story. In any case, that’s mostly where the inspiration for the story and characters came from. In short, the goal was to create a calm, restrained, and mature story. Yet at the same time, it would feel suffocating if it was too serious.

At the time, I enjoyed writing and reading, but I had far too little experience writing a fully developed narrative. As a start, I attempted to create a short story that wrapped itself up within a hundred thousand characters: a comedic tale where a father-loving daughter loses her mind at her inability to return home, spreading her father’s name (unbeknownst to him), her building frustration leading her to fight increasingly powerful monsters, and finally a legendary demon. Meanwhile, on the father’s end, various people would come and go, with mishaps here and there. Ultimately, they would reunite in a somewhat emotional finale. It wasn’t supposed to be serious, which was why such flippant words like “S-Rank” and “Adventurer” were used in the title. It became a pitiful title I hesitate to read aloud. What happened to the maturity I was going for? But contrary to the author’s expectations, the story became strangely popular.

It’s not really worth mentioning at this point, but this work was originally published on a website called “Shosetsuka ni Naro.” Back home, we call works like these “Naro Novels.” The site has rankings that fluctuate based on

bookmarks and review scores, and the story rose to number one on the daily rankings within a week. As luck would have it, it came out during a time when middle-aged protagonists were the trend (a boomer boom, one might call it), so perhaps it was simply riding the wave. But scores were high, and reviews just kept coming in, and that caused the author to get greedy—a greed for recognition possessed him, spurring him to write more. Flattery can make you do some crazy things.

While the story was mostly started without much forethought, there was, for what it was worth, a rough sketch of Belgrieve's backstory. It wasn't planned out anyways. Who was to say where the story would go? And so, there were some general plot threads I had in mind just in case I decided to continue on a whim. But I'm the sort who reconsiders details as I write, and some parts have changed greatly from how I'd originally thought them out. In fact, most of it is completely different. Sometimes I got irritated at what people were saying in the comments about how this or that doesn't make sense, and I'd throw in some exposition to spell it out in the next chapter. I can still vividly remember the process of planning and writing at the same time.

In any case, this is a story fundamentally centered around Belgrieve and Angeline. There are quite a few works where non-blood-related parent-and-child relationships develop into forbidden love, but I had no intention of putting in any romantic development in this work and strictly adhered to a familial relationship. That was the one thing I wanted to remain clear-cut. Perhaps this consistency was one of the reasons some readers stuck around to the end.

You could say this is a character-driven series. It isn't that there's a story in which the characters find themselves entangled; the characters are first and foremost, and their pasts and journeys through life construct the story. Of course, this can't be entirely the case—some characters were added purely due to the plot, and some characters got more focus to progress it. Honestly, it's hard to say which gives way to which. Despite this, Angeline returning to Belgrieve remained the ultimate destination all throughout, and the author broke his back trying to direct the story in that direction.

Now, let's talk about the characters.

I don't really remember where the inspiration for Belgrieve as a character

came from. It feels like I combined various elements from all over the place. His name itself was likely chosen because I liked the sound of it. Perhaps I was thinking about Beowulf, or griffins, or what have you. In a world flooded with Western fantasies, I'm personally just happy that his name didn't overlap with anyone else's. Naming characters is one of this author's greatest weaknesses. As for his defining feature—his prosthetic leg—I'm not quite sure where that idea originated either. It likely stemmed from a desire to give him a distinctive characteristic.

Oh, but now that I've written down that ambiguity, it's coming back to me. Yes, it was Inoue Hisashi's stage play *Kirameku Seiza*. I remember performing in it in high school, and it featured a wounded war veteran. In the play, it was his hand. He replaced it with a prosthetic and was tormented by phantom pain. I think that was where I got the idea. I did put a fair bit of thought into how someone with a prosthetic leg would move, and if they could do so inconspicuously with a peg leg, but in a fantasy world with a mysterious power called mana, I decided to just go with it. Balancing realism with fantasy is always a challenge.

The notable things about his appearance would have to be his red hair and beard. Since the author has a beard as well, it was easy to describe the gestures and mannerisms of someone with one. The red hair was a rather arbitrary choice. In the initial drafts, it was more of a brownish red, but it became more of a vibrant red to make his character stand out. I think it turned out all right in the end. Thus, his appearance was established, and his personality was solidified as I wrote. The idea was to make him unnaturally virtuous, which was how he turned out like that.

I say unnatural, but if he really were, he'd alienate readers, and even I'd find him off-putting to write. So, while highlighting his goodness, I tried to make him worry and struggle just as anyone would. I think virtue isn't about being inherently good but about striving to be better. In Belgrieve's case, I wrote him to be straightforward without any eccentricities. As an author, I also put in some traits embodying my ideal, and though I can't say if it turned out for the better or not, he was at least well received. Initially, I planned for Belgrieve to have some darkness in his heart while putting on the face of a saint—somebody

who was always kind and reliable, yet showing glimpses of a curious knack for brutality now and then. His battle with the icehund in volume 1 is the only vestige of that. Making him too dark would make the whole story grim. So, Belgrieve ultimately softened over time with that planned darkness manifesting as his regrets surrounding his separation from his past comrades. In a sense, it skewed his character in one direction.

By contrast, Angeline became a more outlandish character over time. To be honest with you, Angeline being a demon wasn't originally planned to be part of her story. I'd only thought through it as far as her being unwanted and abandoned for being born with black hair. Turnera wasn't an isolated village in the middle of nowhere either; there were supposed to be other villages and towns nearby, and she really was just an abandoned child from one of them. But the core of her character hasn't changed. She loves her father, and she's really strong. That is the crux of Angeline. Had the story ended with the first volume as initially intended, she could have been left like that. However, a shift from comedy to a more serious narrative required human drama. Not everything can be solved with strength.

And so, Angeline became a character who was even more brooding than Belgrieve. Perhaps it was to be expected from someone her age. While Belgrieve was mature in spirit but had to undergo physical growth (or rather, combat improvements), Angeline was nearly the strongest character despite her emotional instability. It wasn't my intention, but it served as a good contrast. In the first place, after going on and on about her father's teachings, having her experience no growth at all would put Belgrieve's character into question. This was a natural development. She starts to question her own thoughts, finds herself bewildered by a sense of envy she had never anticipated, and is tortured by a sense of guilt. It was very fun to write about a character struggling with such emotions. Her name, as readers of the final volume's afterword already know, comes from removing "Ev" from "Evangeline." She was named exactly how Belgrieve laid it out, from both in-and out-of-universe perspectives. As for where Evangeline came from, it's the name of a song by The Band.

The story revolves around these two, although early on I had planned for

Belgrieve to have a younger brother who would in turn be Angeline's uncle. His family would be running a shop in Orphen, and Angeline would be freeloading with him. Having family in Orphen likely contributed to the premise of Angeline setting out for the big city at the young age of twelve. However, the father-daughter relationship was the core of the story, so the part about the uncle's family faded away. I think that was the right decision. At this point, I can't even remember what story I was planning to tell with the initial setup.

So who is the main character: the father or the daughter? I was asked this numerous times during serialization. The story generally progresses through both perspectives, setting them up as deuteragonists, but the *author* considers Belgrieve to be the main character. His past becomes the heart of the story, while Angeline simply plays a crucial role in it. It's not exactly wrong to say Angeline is also a main character, but she is not *the* main character.

Yet while I say that, I originally didn't intend for Belgrieve to step a single foot outside of Turnera. The premise was for Angeline to cause trouble outside, which would bring various folks to the village. By the second volume, however, he'd already left for Bordeaux. My shoddy skills as a writer made it difficult to have an entire story take place in a single location, and Belgrieve—the main character, I remind you—would forever remain passive if I didn't have him move. I likely determined that this would not be appealing as an adventure fantasy.

Shifting the story from comedic to somewhat serious also played a part, and in the end, Angeline—who was primarily a gag character—became a more appealing, developing young adult. The character design turned out quite different from what the author had initially expected. Looking at the image board drawn up before publication, we have Angeline with her hair tied up, carrying all sorts of pouches and bags to fit a more rustic sort of look. Adventuring was supposed to be a grimy and unfashionable trade, and Angeline was supposed to be a little more reserved. When novelization came around, toi8-san slimmed her down considerably, which was for the best. The story would have likely been a little different had he kept her rustic design. Adding a visual to an idea can be fascinating like that. Similarly, the vibe of manga Angeline differed quite a bit from the author's intentions. However, the motion



and emotions expressed in Urushibara Kyu-san's manga version are incredibly charming. As the manga started its run while the novel was still being written, the manga's visuals ended up influencing the story too.

Now on to Angeline's party members—they were both thrown together in about ten seconds each. That isn't a slight against them; this author had been writing as a hobby for a long time by then and had several models for characters lying around. Retracing old works, templates for a levelheaded character and an airhead were picked out and decorated with backstories. Anessa was actually supposed to be named Vanessa at first, but the "V" seemed too harsh for her character, so it was removed. If so, then as Vanessa is to Vanny, shouldn't her nickname be Anny? Her "Anne" is to give her a bit of distinctness. Miriam, despite not being intended as such, turned out to be quite a strategically designed character—a cat-eared, busty magician. What else could you ask for? She stands out the most, in a sense. I probably had Miriam Makeba on the mind when I named her. Maybe the album was playing in the background.

Both girls came to admire Belgrieve as a father figure, but back when we were going down the comedy route, this was a little more pronounced. Anessa, as such a steady person, is bad at relying on others and tries to do everything on her own, a mentality that constantly stresses her out. And Miriam, though outwardly cheerful, is scarred by anti-beast-man prejudice and won't open up to anyone. Having the two of them open their hearts to Belgrieve was supposed to be the storyline of volume 2, but their exaggerated desire for fatherliness seemed out of place post-genre-shift, and only Miriam's subtler emotional journey remained. It was also swept aside as the scene changed to Bordeaux.

The three Bordeaux sisters wound up strangely popular with readers. Having distinct personalities made them easy to understand; that surely played a part. But it's a surprise to me, seeing how they were created in such a short span of time. Perhaps it's the ability to easily understand what a character is all about that's important. They were initially all created as mostly gag characters with strong personalities.

Personally, I enjoy "idiot characters" like Sasha. Even after the narrative switched to a more serious tone, her foolish antics reminiscent of the early

comedic beats provided some sense of relief to me as the author. She is a character I find very easy to write, and she often helps to enhance other characters through her misunderstandings and reckless actions. She's the sort that shines more as a supporting character than as part of the main cast.

Helvetica and Seren are both adorable in their own ways. This author seems to have a penchant for the dynamic of a reliable younger character reining in an older character who tends to go overboard. Characters with fun interactions are enjoyable to write about. I think the additional scenes in the novel version helped to further define the personality of each of them. Quite a few readers expressed disappointment when Helvetica dropped out of the heroine race so early, but in my view, Helvetica is more a countess than a lovestruck girl; her trajectory was inevitable.

Seren is still a growing girl struggling, worrying, and experiencing life. She ultimately landed herself quite the interesting position as governor of Turnera. Personally, I have a fondness for serious characters who get teased. There's something charming about their occasional lapses and cute moments, don't you think? The author might or might not feel endeared to Anessa because of this; he should have thrown in a little more drama for her.

Looking at it now, it's nothing but female characters. The author enjoys writing girls more than boys, so it was bound to happen, though this might lead to the mistaken notion that this is a harem story.

Ashcroft, a rare and valuable young male character, deserved more depth, but he strayed from the storyline, and my limitations as a writer became apparent. When you really get to the nitty-gritty, this author is absolutely terrible at writing young men—especially men around Ashcroft's age. As a fellow man, other men tend to seem foolish to him.

On the other hand, the other young man, Byaku, was easier to write thanks to his better-defined personality and adolescent age. His background as a young boy in an evil organization harboring a demon is peak middle school delusion levels of writing, but therein lies the essence of fantasy. I quite enjoy seeing prickly characters grow, and watching him curse as he gets teased by older girls is also divine.

Introduced alongside Byaku, Charlotte was not originally designed as a little girl but was instead meant to be a woman in her twenties. Her introduction was supposed to firmly establish the organization pulling the strings, of which she would be an executive member. Hers would have been the first shot fired in the war with the protagonists. Though she acted high and mighty, looking down on everyone she came across, deep down she was nothing more than a petty coward. Drowning in the power granted to her—far beyond what she deserved—she would be abandoned by the organization she pledged herself to and ultimately would face a pitiful downfall. That was her initial fate.

During her battle with Lionel and Cheborg in Orphen, I wanted to write a scene of an adult woman fearfully wailing and sobbing as she clung to her younger, apathetic bodyguard. However, the mental image of that one was pretty harsh, and I had my qualms about making the big bad of the series a cut-and-dried evil organization. I didn't want to make a story where the bad guys could be defeated and everyone lived happily ever after. At the same time, I also didn't want to make it too grim either. This led Charlotte to become a somewhat more justifiable child character, which I think was spot-on. She and Byaku became characters embodying the theme of repentance. It's a topic without clear answers even in reality and there will be critics regardless of how you depict it in a fictional work. Personally, it was gratifying to include it in the narrative. I doubt it would have gone so well had Charlotte been an adult.

Then came Yakumo and Lucille, who came to fetch Charlotte. On their first appearance, there was a handful of voices saying that they did not fit with the world. However, they fit within *the author's world*, so he forcefully pushed through with it. Yakumo is a character from the eastern land of Buryou, and Lucille—as you may have guessed from me gushing about American rock and its influences on this story—comes from Dadan, a southern country I crafted centered around that rock culture. Lucille's name was taken from a Little Richard song. As Buryou and Dadan were never visited within the story, their lack of development may have caused some dissonance with the world-building, but the author isn't too worried about it. Those distant lands had nothing to do with the main story, and rather than having the author present everything, I believe it's more enjoyable for readers to use the scattered hints to stoke their imaginations. Just look at it in the same way Michael Ende

referred to “another story” in *The Neverending Story*. Lucille remains my favorite character. Shake it up, baby!

Since the name came up, let’s talk about Orphen. Orphen is a key city in the northern regions; not only is it at the intersection of various trade routes, it’s also conveniently located next to a fair few dungeons, attracting merchants and adventurers alike. I often refer to it as the big city, which might be strange if you interpret that as the capital, but I just mean it’s a big city. Owing to the large adventurer’s guild the city houses, most adventurers out to make a name for themselves will head to Orphen rather than any of the other towns in the area. But this setup poses a challenge for the author. Given that this was supposed to be a comedy novel paying homage to “Naro Novels,” it largely follows in the footsteps of template isekai and parts of the setting can be pretty lax. For instance, the concept of “adventurers” is way too vague. If they’re supposed to be the ones braving danger, then they should be heading to dungeons and uncharted lands to bring back treasure or off fighting some dangerous creatures. So, what are they doing in a big city? Shouldn’t adventuring typically happen away from all the hustle and bustle, in a place where there’s still some unknown to be explored? Furthermore, the fiend-slaying part is also questionable. Sure, it’s fine to call them up in emergencies, but the calamities and threats that show up in populated areas should primarily be handled by the governing bodies. The fact that it’s entirely left up to adventurers is just wrong. What are the soldiers and the military doing?

There’s so much wrong here that it’s making my head hurt, even though I’m the one who wrote it. You can probably see all the traces of my efforts to patch things up post hoc, but it’s still quite awful. Since it was a story about adventurers, I should have put more focus on the dungeons and structured the story around them, but the sudden popularity got to my head, sending me down a semi-impromptu writing spree with little thought to consistency. With that in mind, volume 1 is particularly hard to read for me.

Anyway, the one overseeing these ambiguous adventuring folks, or mercenaries, or whatever they may be, is the guild master Lionel. He was supposed to be a sluggish, good-for-nothing character, but the crisis had already begun by the start of the story, so I didn’t have many chances to make

use of his good-for-nothing-ness. He's a former S-Rank adventurer but doesn't give off the impression of being particularly strong. Is he actually strong? Maybe. Even the author isn't too sure about that. Lionel Richie was playing at the time, so that's how he got the name.

Starting the story in the middle of the crisis was a bit of a mistake. Not only did I lose the chance to depict Lionel's laziness, I also couldn't display Angeline as her usual self. She was in a bad mood from the moment she was introduced, making it difficult to grasp her actual personality.

She would have given off quite a different impression if she was first shown as the proficient S-Rank adventurer she truly was, neither fawning over Belgrieve nor in a perpetually bad mood. This is something I am reflecting on.

The retired older adventurers were one of the aspects I wanted to write from chapter one, and I had a good bit of fun with them. I personally enjoy stories featuring elderly characters who put in the work, and I wanted to put in some strong old folks in my own story. I'm satisfied that I got to include them.

Dortos already existed in my old creative notes, and he already had his "Silverhead" moniker. There are some differences in his backstory, but his appearance, the fact that he doesn't wear armor, and his way of speaking were all maintained. So essentially, he came straight out of my old notes. There are actually a few other characters like that.

At this point, I don't have much to say about Cheborg. He's exactly what it says on the tin, with no hidden sides. It's the same with Sasha and Duncan; their simplicity makes them easy to write and prevents the atmosphere from ever getting too dark, making them a priceless asset to the author. His banchoesque character design matched my vision perfectly, and I was delighted when the design sheet for him came out.

Maria was borrowed from a previous abandoned work. However, the character's name in that work was Marguerite, which was transferred to the elf princess; her backstory was kept with just a change of name. Despite her youthful appearance, she's an elderly woman with a sharp tongue and poor health. She's got just about as many things going for her as her apprentice, Miriam. And she's even an archmage on top of that. This is totally just a

reflection of the author's preferences at this point—how incorrigible. But I do love her character. I believe I managed to portray her relationship with Miriam well, where despite everything—all the insults and quarrels—they somehow get along quite well. And I think that's wonderful.

Lionel's old comrades are mostly side characters so I didn't put too much effort into them. Yuri was just based on a character template, and Edgar was from a previous work. Only Gilmenja was changed up a bit; she was originally a man, but it felt a bit strange to have a man accompany Angeline on her journey, so I made her a woman. Her personality also comes from a past work of mine; the male iteration of her character spoke a lot less. Rosetta was quickly whipped up as one of Belgrieve's wife candidates, but she really didn't leave much of an impression. Handling religious characters is difficult, and that's part of it, but I also think she didn't get nearly enough screen time to distinguish herself. I wish I had more thoroughly portrayed the conflict and balance between faith and daily life, but her position as a side character meant I couldn't devote too much of the book to her.

Now let's move over to Turnera.

Turnera, hometown of Belgrieve and Angeline, is located in the northernmost reaches of the duchy with the vast and deep forests of elven territory stretching out just beyond the northern mountain range. Most of the work done over the year is in preparation for the grueling winter. Although it is a rural area with no well-maintained roads, the land is fertile, there are few fiends, it is abundant with the blessings of nature, and it is a relatively peaceful place.

Believe it or not, I was a farmer once upon a time, and I paid a fair bit of attention to the depiction of farmwork and seasons. I live in Kyushu right now, but I once resided in a remote part of Yamanashi beyond Okutama, and I drew on those experiences for the portrayals of the snowscapes. As mentioned earlier, Turnera wasn't initially meant to be so far away, but considering that Belgrieve's comrades couldn't find him after he left Orphen and the fact it had to be far enough away to make it difficult for Angeline to return home, I wound up placing it at a considerable distance.

Of course, this is a world where travel is limited to walking and wagons, so regardless of the actual distance, it takes a fair bit of time to reach. That's why I

introduced the peddler as a means of transportation. The blue-haired peddler remained nameless to the end. Or rather, I never decided on a name. I never intended to—her lack of a name is her defining character trait. Despite having no name, she appeared quite frequently and at key moments, putting her in a rather interesting position.

Kerry, the one in the village who understands Belgrieve best, was put together on the spot. I get the feeling that he's what became of the missing uncle character I brought up earlier. He's Belgrieve's childhood friend who leads a life completely unrelated to adventuring, but he's an affable man who helps out when he can. From the comments I've read, some readers have come under the mistaken impression that he's the village chief, but Kerry's just a prominent member of the village. Hoffman's the chief. With that said, there were initially plans to make Kerry chief, but I disliked the idea of making the childhood friend the chief and instated Hoffman instead.

Hoffman is also one of Belgrieve's confidants, but there's a storyline that I didn't manage to depict in the main story where Hoffman was rather cold and curt—though not openly hostile—to Belgrieve when he first returned. The guilt he felt over that later strengthened his trust in Belgrieve. It wouldn't have been possible to depict this changing attitude with Kerry, who was always on Belgrieve's side. Since it wasn't depicted in the main story, it probably doesn't matter much to the readers.

In any case, there aren't too many named characters among the villagers, but most are very supportive of Belgrieve and those newcomers. This may be criticized as being overly convenient. I've said it time and again, but this is mainly because I didn't want the story to be too bleak. The author lived in the countryside and knows both the good and the bad of living out there. If I wanted to portray the conservatism and xenophobia of the countryside, I could depict it in vivid detail, but that would stray from the main plot and would not be an enjoyable read. A story contains its own reality, and even if something feels completely realistic to us, if it is unrealistic in the story world, then it isn't realistic at all.

Personally speaking, I'm not a big fan of the idea of large industries entering the countryside and changing the environment. It makes me think of how all

the local mom and pops went on the decline when the large shopping mall moved in. However, that is from the perspective of those of us who live in the modern day, having experienced all the predicaments of modern man. To the people who live in that world, their hearts race at the start of something new. And House Bordeaux's road development is already underway. Once exchange with the outside world speeds up, change will come sooner or later. To force it to be that Turnera will never change—that's what feels more overly convenient to me. And so, Turnera saw an increase in outsiders and, ultimately, the creation of a dungeon.

The first outsider was Duncan. I remember absolutely nothing about his character creation. I probably didn't put much thought into it. But, since it didn't take thought to make him, it doesn't take thought to write him. With hearty, carefree characters, it is thankfully very easy to write their interactions with others. He is younger than Belgrieve but too old to be considered young, and I think that's interesting in and of itself. Things would have still worked out if he wasn't around, but he helped to spice up the story a bit. However, just imagining the all-male household at the start of volume 3 is making me sweat.

The lone woman who joined that household—Marguerite—had a completely different character initially. She was certainly a troublemaker, but she was more of a bubbly character with a girly manner of speech, a little flippant and frivolous. With little thought, she managed to make it out of elven lands—so far so good. But then, she encountered an exceptionally large fiend which caused her to flee in a panic. That was what would have brought her to Turnera—quite a pathetic introduction it would have been. A character like that could have been endearing if done right, but one misstep would make them more annoying than anything else. The author wasn't confident enough in his ability to pull it off, and he also thought that personality would be a bit too light for her interactions with Graham. She was changed greatly into a strong-minded tomboy. Though she's still a girl, she acts like she's climbed out of a shonen manga, which I think was the right choice. I also enjoyed her lively interactions after she joined up with Angeline and her friends.

Graham came from some old creative notes. Thinking back on it now, Graham, the Elven Paladin, already existed in my head back in middle school.



That character wasn't an old man, but he was already an elf who wielded a greatsword. Tolkien was the one who shaped the modern fantasy image of elves, but with so many fantasy works circulating today, elves come in a variety of types and with various characteristics—from their lifespans to their appearance, it's all over the place. In this work, I made it so that elves aren't too different from humans. Much like how there was a time when humanity was not limited to *Homo sapiens*, or how cats exist with tigers and dogs with wolves, or horses with donkeys, I envisioned elves as close yet distant neighbors.

Hence, Graham is not exceptionally old. I kept the numbers a bit vague, as it would be difficult to keep them straight otherwise, but he's probably a little over a hundred. He is the strongest character in the story, beyond Angeline and even surpassing Percival. It is incredibly difficult to manage a "strongest" character type, but I managed to contain it somehow or another: Graham is declining with age, and his somewhat philosophical nature keeps him from seeking the limelight. Though he doesn't appear that frequently, I believe he became someone with a strong presence.

In a sense, his sword did more than he did. Angeline described the sword as a beautiful girl, and in the "Naro Novel" genre, she would have likely immediately taken on human form. But a sword is a sword, and she remained a sword to the end. Though she spoke now and then, Belgrieve could barely hear her voice due to his lack of talent. I think that made for an even more interesting effect. What exactly was she saying? I hope that the readers can all picture it on their own.

Mit, who entered the story through Graham and his sword, was initially not planned to appear at all. The fragment of Ba'al that flew to Turnera would have taken on the form of a fiend and stood before Belgrieve. However, combat prowess wasn't supposed to be so important on the Belgrieve side of things. Rather than fighting and winning, the concept evolved to have Belgrieve—a character who carried on a near gag-character-level of fatherliness and broad-mindedness—use those characteristics to embrace even the enemy they were supposed to defeat. That's how it turned out the way it did, and thanks to that, I managed to weave in a good story using the ancient forest in volume 6.

Here, I'd like to touch on Belgrieve's past comrades.

Kasim's character wasn't solidified at the start. He didn't even exist in the

early stages. When I got to around chapter 9, there was only Belgrieve, Percival, and Satie, but three people felt like too few to challenge a dungeon. Thus, he was hastily tacked on. Naturally, he would not have appeared at all if this story had ended at volume 1.

However, as the story went on and Belgrieve's past became central to the narrative, a reunion with Kasim became inevitable. Unlike Percival and Satie, Kasim had no clear concept. I had a clear reference for his looks, so that was determined quickly enough, but his personality was still up in the air. Initially, he was still street-smart, but a bit more subdued and timid, and used "boku" to refer to himself. But his personality overlapped with Belgrieve's character and felt a bit lacking. After doing some thinking, I changed his personal pronoun to "oiri," and that immediately set things in motion. I was surprised by how much of an image a self-identifier could carry. With his experience and his skills, combined with his aloof personality, he became someone who could tease anyone he wanted, making him incredibly easy to write. His romance with Sierra was not part of the initial plan, but it was included to take into account how just as much time had passed for the other members as it had for Belgrieve. I also had a desire to write about the difficulty of controlling attachments and emotions.

Generally speaking, this story only features strong individuals. They're all among the top the world has to offer, with Graham foremost among them, but even if they might be physically strong, not many of them are emotionally mature. Percival became such a character. A part of me feels like it's a bit much to drag the failings of his teen years all the way into his forties, but unlike the real world where the virtual world can provide a bit of escapism, human encounters are once in a lifetime for him. Emotional wounds inflicted during such a sensitive time cut deep, and I thought perhaps it might be possible.

Going off his original backstory, he was supposed to have not only skill but status as well. He was envisioned as a famed swordsman who held back the fiends of the frontier. He never smiled and was indifferent to others—traits that made it to the final draft—but he was a bit calmer and strangely accommodating to Angeline, who would always raise a ruckus about Belgrieve being her father. The story surrounding his past with Belgrieve was not meant

to be adventurous. His chance meeting with Belgrieve was also supposed to be far more subdued. But when I got to writing it, it somehow devolved into a fistfight. Yakumo and Lucille getting involved was added after I considered what developments they might have faced since their last appearance. This led to the creation of the Earth Navel, gradually solidifying Percival into a man who fought there, day in and day out, like a man possessed. As with Kasim, Percival and Satie both had clear visual inspiration. Considering his inspiration, Percival may as well have been bald and fat, but for fiction's sake, he was designed to look cool. Within this author's mind, he's quite a popular guy and has more main-character energy than Belgrieve.

Satie already existed in those old notes. She wasn't an elf back then, but she was still a master combatant who fought with a sword and supernatural abilities. Personalitywise, she was supposed to be a composed, adult woman, but the way the characters bounced off one another had her turn into more of a tomboy. Her name likely came from Erik Satie. She was not supposed to marry Belgrieve at the start. Her being Angeline's mother had been decided from around the time I decided to extend the story past volume 1, but she was envisioned as more of a farsighted character who didn't even think about getting involved with romance. As I kept writing, it eventually just became inevitable, and so it was. Though she appeared many times in flashbacks, it's odd how the main love interest only showed up in person towards the endgame.

Reflecting on Touya (Hinano) and Maureen, honestly, I regret not fully utilizing their characters. At first, Touya was a normal male character, but he somehow became a cross-dressing girl. I suppose I wanted to contrast the father-daughter dynamic that Belgrieve and Angeline had going on, but I feel I could have inserted some more drama for them. An age-gap romance between Percival and Hinano was tempting, but I couldn't delve into it. Seeing as the imperial capital arc was the climax of Belgrieve's overarching story to face his past, I had to tone down the drama with the side character. You could call this a failing of story structure.

Just between you and me, after the party descended from the Earth Navel to Istafar, I intended to insert a few more episodes from the eastern countries. In

the first draft, Satie was in the east rather than the imperial capital. In a mountain temple, she would guard Solomon's Key from being misused by Schwartz and other organizations trying to use the demons (I've traveled through Nepal and Ladakh before, and I was going to model the region after them). If the story had taken that detour, Touya would have probably remained a boy and I might have thrown in a bit of romance with Angeline (that would remain unrealized). Maybe it could have been with Anessa or Miriam instead, but it doesn't matter now. Regardless, the story felt like it was going to drag on and become overly complicated, so for simplicity's sake, I wrapped things up in the imperial capital. Whether this was better or worse remains uncertain. While I managed to tie up various story beats that sprung up post-reunion with Kasim, developments between Percival and Satie seemed to go by at a breakneck pace, and I often think to myself that I didn't leave them enough episodes to get to know one another again. Perhaps a slight detour would have been better to delve deeper into their characters.

Lastly, I'll touch on the antagonists of the story.

Initially, it was straightforward. There was an evil organization behind the curtains scheming with Solomon-related plots. Our main cast would be caught up in their schemes, culminating in a fight and triumph against a final boss. Schwartz and Charlotte were planned out as executives of this organization. However, having everything end with the defeat of a villain didn't fit with the themes of the story, and I wanted to bring the fact that Angeline was the one who took Belgrieve's leg to the climax. I ultimately refrained from setting up an organizational antagonist. The fake prince could have been explored more deeply, but I determined his conversation with Angeline was enough. His character was straightforward, nothing more than a desire to rule the world with immense power. There was no depth to it. I think that it flowed well for Francois rather than any of the main cast to defeat him.

There was a bit more I wanted to delve into with Francois. In "Naro Novels," there's a trend of showing no mercy to those who oppose the protagonist. It's a bad trend in my eyes, and I find such instant catharsis to be off-putting. Thus, I wanted to explore his family issues, his drive for vengeance, and his hostility towards Angeline. I wanted to dive into what he truly wanted, but the story was

panning out simultaneously in multiple places, and I couldn't keep the spotlight on Francois for too long. I feel his portrayal came out a bit lacking.

The episode at Archduke Estogal's estate where noblemen swarmed Angeline made it feel like this had abruptly become a shojo novel, and I regret not doing anything with the bit. It would have been nice to depict the dark finesse of high society, but I couldn't delve that deep into it.

Archduke Estogal was a character who lamented the distorted relationship he had with his sons due to his status. I considered having him divulge these feelings to Angeline as she left, touched by the respect she had for her father, but it was shelved as it was difficult to connect it to anything that happened afterward. The eldest son Fernand, despite his talent and good looks, was supposed to have a cold, mysterious side to him. The point being that I wanted to weave the twisted nature of the entire archduke house into the story.

Villard was fine as an idiot, but Liselotte's fiancé, Oswald, could have been intriguing if fleshed out more. However, since the storyline centered around meeting Kasim, most characters apart from Francois turned out neutral, neither harmful nor beneficial.

In that regard, we have Count Malta, who turned out to be a simple and clear villain. In his case, he really was a mere villain who was ultimately executed. I regret that my lack of writing skills only highlighted his incompetence instead of his madness driven by a lust for power. Had I portrayed these aspects better, I think that the contrast between House Bordeaux and the other noble houses would have been more striking, but the results are a bit lackluster. It's challenging to depict a captivating bad guy.

Maitreya, like Schwartz and Charlotte, was imagined as an executive of the organization. I never planned for her to become an ally, but honestly, I found her adorable while writing her. Troublingly enough, strengthening the protagonists too much diluted the mystery of the antagonists. She proved a surprisingly good duo with Falka, the rabbit-eared swordsman, and it was hard to just write her off. Even now, I wonder if it was all right to give the bodhisattva's name to someone like her.

The templar knights Falka and Donovan were supposed to be a little more

involved with the plot. Initially, the imperial capital arc was supposed to be longer, involving Lucrecia's curia eyeing Graham's holy sword and that turning into a grand adventure. But this seemed like it would make for a messy and convoluted story, so I tried to keep it simple and whittled it down to Belgrieve's. Incidentally, Donovan's name was borrowed from a Scottish musician, while Falka's name came from the Malian bluesman Ali Farka Touré.

In the original draft, Belgrieve and his old party members would head to the capital while Angeline and her party would head east under Touya's guidance. The imperial capital side would unveil the dark sides of Lucrecia and the Rhodesian Empire, while in the east, Angeline would meet Satie and delve deeper into the story of Solomon before heading to the capital to reunite with Belgrieve. The templars would be deeply involved with the Lucrecian side of things, but I cut their story short to avoid drawing things out. I think it would have gone quite differently if I had included these elements.

Hector and Salazar were characters created after I decided to end the story at the capital. I wanted Hector to be a formidable adversary, but the protagonists' overwhelming strength prevented me from using him to his full potential. He's not bad as a character, but I regret not giving him more time to shine as a villain. The parent-child dynamic with Touya (Hinano) wasn't part of the initial plan, but I added it to contrast Belgrieve and Angeline's relationship. I think it would have been more enthralling if I'd delved deeper into Touya's character, and I can't deny that it suffers from a lack of depth.

Salazar's concept of shifting between all ages and genders was formulated in a different work and transferred over. The way he has no distinction between good and evil and operates only to sate his own curiosity makes him quite like Schwartz, in a way. Look at him, then look at Elmer from the library; I guess it's true that there are no decent archmages in the world.

Schwartz went through various changes throughout the writing process. As I've mentioned a few times already, this story started out with a clear-cut evil organization, of which Schwartz was an executive. However, he was never loyal to the organization, using it solely to further his own goals. Regardless, him being a self-serving character who simply used others remained consistent from the start. Once the organization idea was scrapped, depictions of the enemy

side were drastically reduced. For this reason, I couldn't delve too deeply into the characters, but perhaps that served to bolster their mystery somewhat.

Ishmael was a rather risky character. He was difficult to utilize, and it was hard to tell if I'd sufficiently explained the various magics and theories surrounding him. Take false persona magic for instance: there are various restrictions written into it and it's far from omnipotent, but if I wanted to show off its downsides, I would need to create an incident to depict them, and the question remains whether I managed to express this fully or not. Personally, I preferred his development in the novelized version, and I'm glad I deviated from the web version on that one. When this was being serialized online, it was published chapter by chapter and I was trying to jam a flashy development into each chapter. Ishmael's story culminated in a battle in Orphen. In the novelized version, I did away with this battle, focusing instead on the dialogue with Angeline to enhance the mystery.

The concept of the flow of events touches on the existence of metanarratives, so I was hesitant about how I would depict that within the story. It's a concept that's hard to put into words, and if I didn't phrase it properly, I risked misinterpretation. Nevertheless, I believe I managed to get the gist across with the final conversation between Belgrieve and Schwartz.

Originally, Schwartz would succeed in turning Angeline into a demon, only to be helpless against her demon form and killed. If we had gone with this plot, the story would have taken place in Orphen. But if I did that, the fundamental concept of the story—of Angeline returning to Belgrieve—would collapse. The idea was tossed out, and the scene changed to Turnera. And in the end, Schwartz fulfilled his ultimate goal and disappeared.

There was a fair bit of criticism against the villain's ultimate triumph, but this story never placed a focus on that sort of catharsis. It was always a story of nothing more than Angeline returning to Belgrieve; thwarting evil, saving the world—that all had nothing to do with it. To put it bluntly, whatever happened to that pitiful Schwartz didn't matter. I do wonder if it was right from an entertainment standpoint, but I just couldn't imagine the story ending with Belgrieve and Angeline vanquishing evil. Narratively, the thing they have to confront is not an evil organization plotting world domination—it is the dark

parts within themselves. Belgrieve is no hero of justice. He is nothing more than a father who thinks the world of his daughter. Of course, it's not that the author anticipated any of this; the characters turned out like that as a result of the story moving and shifting on its own. You could call it a story that went with the flow.

I've written everything that came to mind, and this has become quite a scattered bit of text, but it is through this chaotic process that this work was delivered to the public. I have so many regrets looking back that I don't even know what to say. But this is from the perspective of the person who wrote it, and if you had fun reading it, then I'll be glad that I managed to write a surprisingly enjoyable book. Otherwise, there's no way we would have been able to get to eleven volumes.

Fun fact: when the book was first transitioning from web to page, I considered changing the title. As the author, I don't like the lengthy title any more than you do. I discussed my options with my editor at the time, and we planned to release it with the new and improved title "Welcome Home, Angeline." However, concerns about losing the webnovel's readership with the title change led to the original title being maintained, much to my dismay. I even had the abbreviated title "WHAn" thought out.

It's all in the past now, and complaining about it now won't change anything. Dear readers, I hope you enjoyed the story for what it is. You don't need to overthink this and that and get depressed over it—that's the author's job.

On another note, I went to Turnera the other day. The dungeon is up and running now, bustling with a good number of adventurers. Seren Bordeaux, the governor, is doing a good job managing the village, and I haven't heard about any conflicts between the villagers and adventurers. Her two sisters apparently drop in now and then, strengthening the image of Turnera as a key point in the north. I met Belgrieve too, for the first time in quite a long time. I tried asking if he was busy, what with all the guild master work, but that doesn't seem to be the case. In the end, he says he mostly finds himself working out in the field.

Angeline occasionally sends letters. She writes from all the towns she stops by on her eastward journey. Though it takes time for mail to arrive from such distant lands, and it's impossible for him to write back while she's on the move,



Belgrieve told me that he always feels a special sort of joy when he gets a letter from his daughter. He is still hopelessly attached to his daughter. What are we going to do with this man?

Angeline hates me, so she never sends anything my way. Until I dropped by Belgrieve's place, I had no idea where those girls were or what they were doing, but judging by Belgrieve's letters, they've apparently made it through Tyldes and crossed into Keatai. However, letters from there take a long time to arrive, so they have to be farther along than that. Maybe they're in Buryou already.

I was sure she'd be back by the time I paid a visit, but it seems her return is still a long way off. The journey is too fun, each letter crammed tight with poor handwriting detailing all that happened on each leg of the journey. To think that daddy's girl is finally on the road to becoming independent... I can hardly contain my emotions. Of course, I have no way of knowing if her misplaced attempts at filial piety are going awry now that she's out from under her father's watchful eye.

Satie has no intention of returning to the adventurer's life and shows absolutely no interest in the dungeon. She usually spends her days doing housework, looking after the kids, and working in the field, but she sometimes appears at the guild counter to work the reception desk. The adventurers, apropos of nothing, have started to believe that encountering the elf receptionist brings good luck.

Percival is still in Turnera, but now that things have calmed down around the dungeon, Kasim has set off on a journey to see Sierra. He'll probably be back soon enough. Percival seemed a bit bored without his partner in crime to mess around with, but he didn't seem to mind being admired by all the young adventurers.

Graham continues to live out his days looking after children, but now that there are more adventurers around, he is often sought for advice in all facets of life. Though his dignified presence shields him from being swarmed, he's still kept quite busy. His holy sword sulks at its lack of use.

Mit has grown more, and his voice has already started to change. This fragment of a demon grows so very fast, and he's as tall as Byaku now. His skills

are gradually improving under the tutelage of the best swordsmen and mages in the land. I hear that Hal and Mal often follow him around.

Charlotte has likewise grown taller too as her childish features gradually fade. She's gotten quite a bit better with magic, and her innate mana lets her use some powerful spells. According to her, she wants to form a party with Mit and venture into the dungeon someday. But the more she grows towards adulthood, the more her past mistakes have begun to haunt her. One day, once she can make it without anyone's protection, she will likely go to Bordeaux and then Lucrecia to settle her fate.

Her attendant, Byaku, has mellowed out quite a bit. He doesn't speak much, and he's as blunt as ever, but lately, he's started to smile more and has even shown a bit of playfulness. I remember how happy Charlotte was when she told me all about it. What's going to happen when he reunites with Angeline? I can't wait to see it.

It seems like the story still continues even after the book is over... How unsettling. The tale has long left the author's hands and now resides in the minds of the readers. How it evolves from there is beyond my control, and there's little I can do when the characters all move on their own. Of course, there may be some difference in how they move between your head and in mine.

Angeline isn't returning anytime soon and is still on the road to eastern lands. With all the drama that takes place on the way there and the events that transpire on the way back, I'm sure she'll have a bottomless bag of stories by the time she returns. Whether it be in Turnera or in Orphen, everyone is likely experiencing drama of their own. Whether these episodes are written or not, who's to say?

One thing is for sure: the name of the Red Ogre is gradually spreading through those distant, eastern lands.

-Mojikakiya December 2023

## **Cover and Color Illustration Gallery**



































































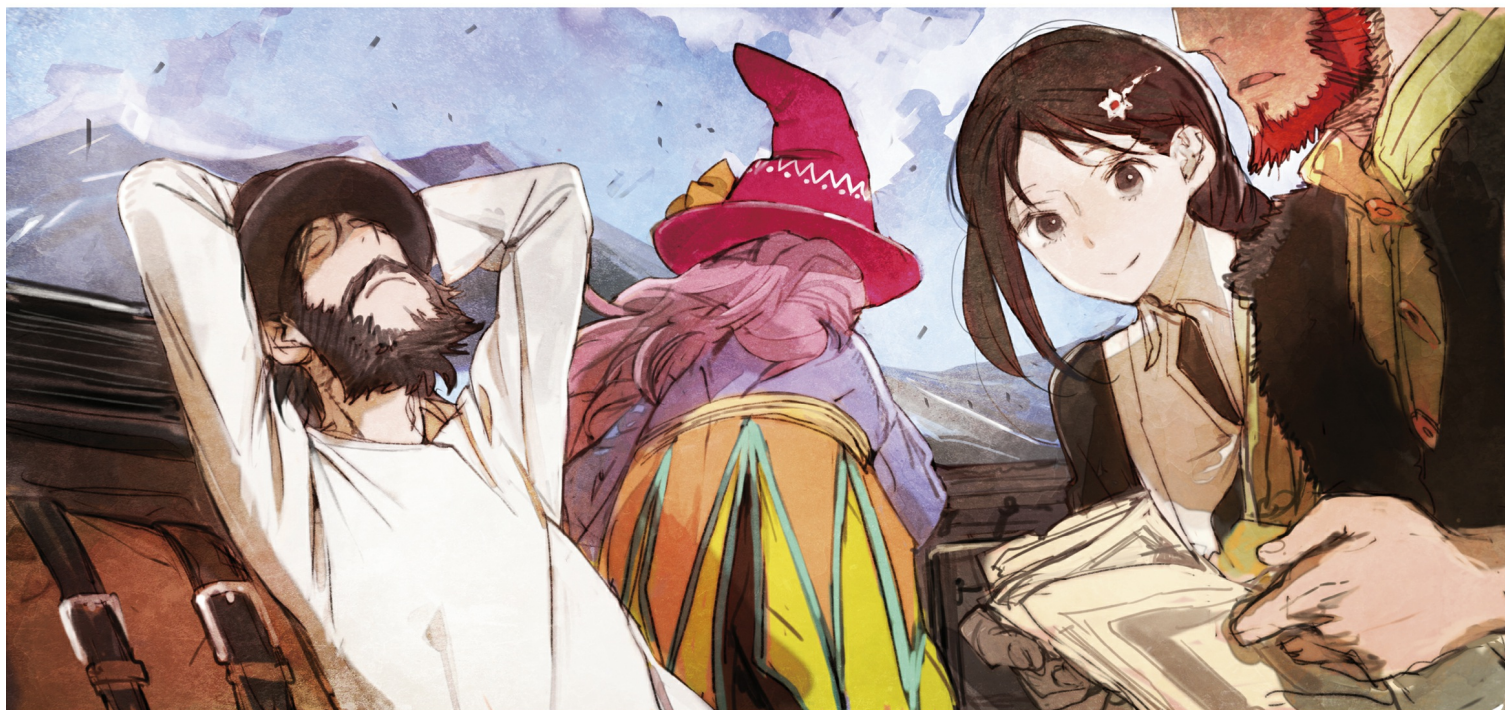
















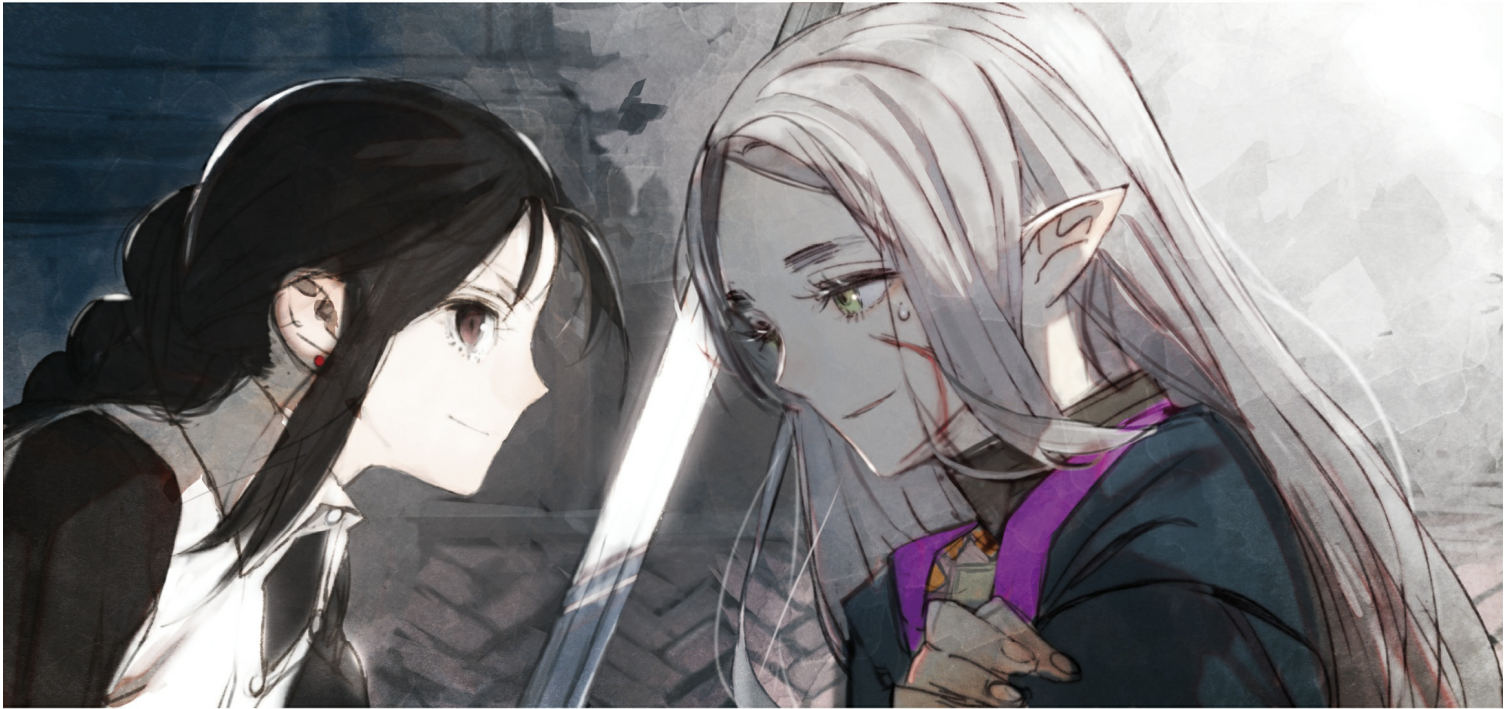
































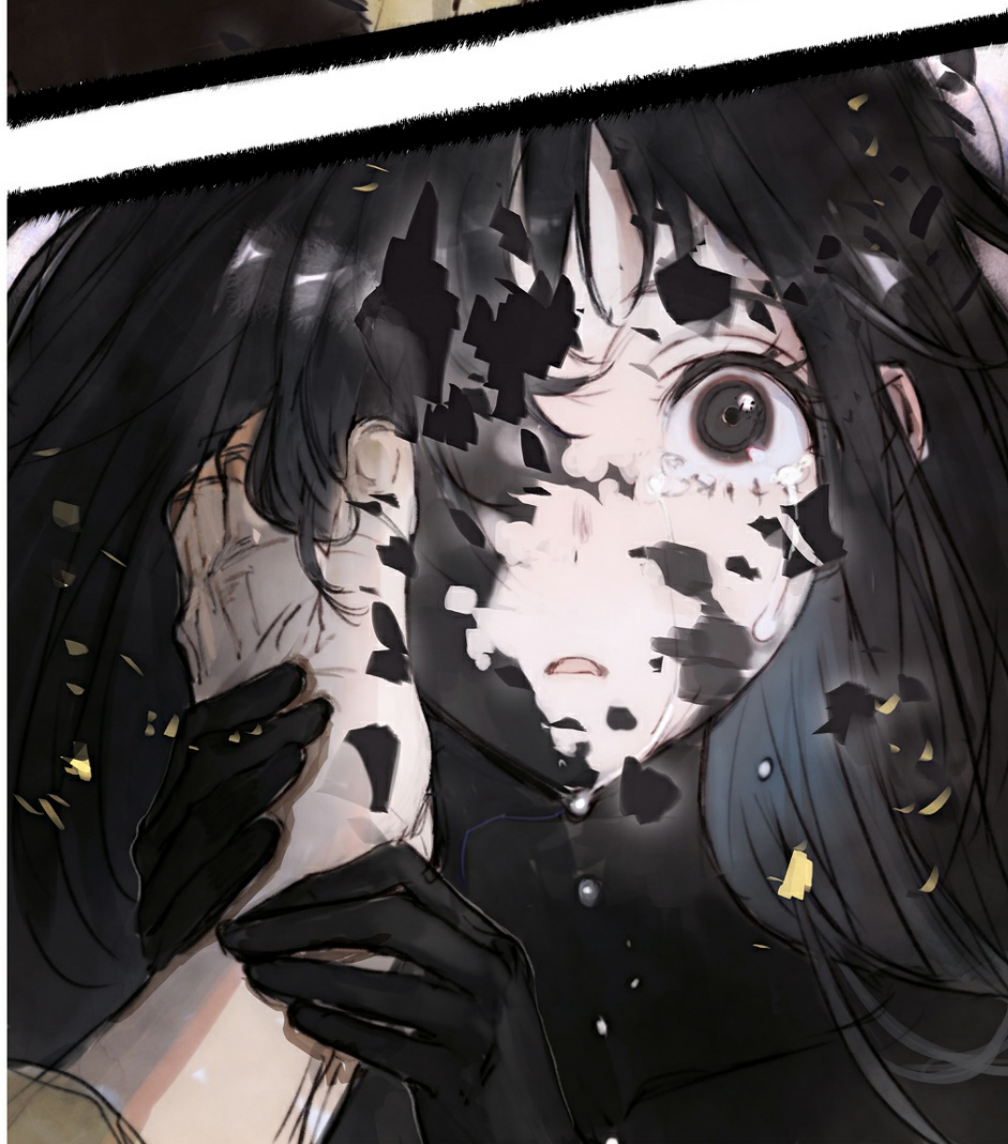














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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Short Story Collection by MOJIKAKIYA

Translated by Roy Nukia Edited by Brandon Koepp

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