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

CHARACTERS

Belgrieve

A former adventurer whose dreams were shattered long ago. An injury forced him to return to his hometown, but part of him could never give up on adventuring. This inspired his daughter to follow his path, and even now, he continues to train. He is quite bothered by the moniker “Red Ogre” his daughter gave him.

Angeline

An S-Rank adventurer renowned as the “Black-Haired Valkyrie.” Abandoned in the forest as a baby, she was picked up and raised as Belgrieve’s daughter. She loves her father.

Miriam

A member of Angeline’s party who specializes in magic. An AAA-Rank adventurer.

Anessa

The mediator, negotiator, and archer of Angeline’s party. She and Miriam hail from the same orphanage. An AAA-Rank adventurer.

Duncan

An easygoing adventurer seeking worthy opponents to duel. He came to Turnera for a match with the famed swordmaster known as the “Red Ogre.”

Charlotte

A girl who was incited by a mysterious organization into raising the dead all around Bordeaux and caused quite a stir. She tries to turn over a new leaf after experiencing Belgrieve’s warmth.

Seren

The youngest sister who, despite her lingering youthful innocence, supports her older sisters with the aptitude she has shown for governance.

STORY

With her party members along for the ride, Angeline returned to her home in Turnera for the first time in years. However, her father became convinced that she was going at the adventurer trade half-heartedly. He gave her an ultimatum:

“If you want to continue as an adventurer, then beat me in this match.”

And so, father and daughter locked blades. At first, Angeline was reluctant to fight, but she picked up on her father’s true intentions and showed him the full capabilities of an S-Rank adventurer.

The next day, the village reached an agreement on a deal to maintain the local roads. Belgrieve was tasked with passing the message to the region’s governor, Countess Helvetica Bordeaux. Angeline and her friends were about to leave anyway, so Belgrieve hitched a ride with them and left Turnera for the first time in a very long time. At the end of their journey to the countess’s city, the party received a warm welcome from the three Bordeaux sisters. This pleasant atmosphere was short-lived as they were suddenly dragged into a major incident caused by a political rival and an organization wishing to resurrect demons. Bordeaux was plunged into crisis by Charlotte, a girl consumed by hatred, and Byaku, a boy with mysterious powers. However, with the help of the father and daughter duo, the pair were driven away.

And thus, Belgrieve and Angeline returned to their daily routines.

“I’m off, dad!”

“Come home safe and sound!”

MY DAUGHTER
LEFT THE NEST
AND RETURNED
AN S-RANK
ADVENTURER



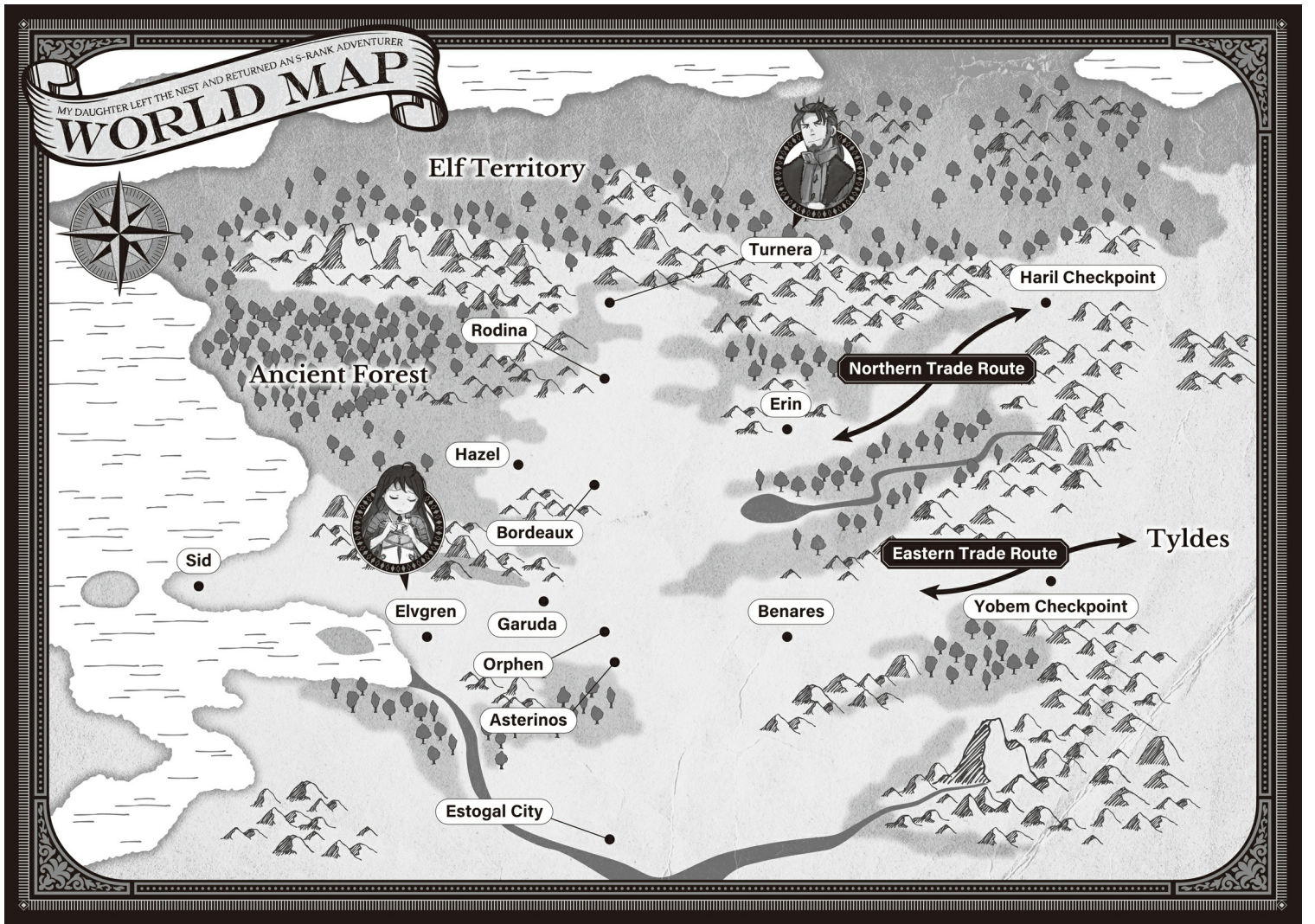


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Chapter 28: A Faint Swishing and Rustling

A faint swishing and rustling could be heard as someone ran. It was almost as though they were gliding, just barely grazing the ground.

It was a woman, or at least so it seemed; perhaps the term “girl” would be more appropriate. Her soft, silky, silver hair was crudely bundled behind her head. She had a slender sword at her waist, and the shawl over her shoulders flapped in the wind. While her face was comely and her eyes full of spirit, what stood out most were her sharp ears, which extended outwards from the top and gradually narrowed to a point.

It was dark in this forest of withered trees. There was not a single leaf on any of the branches, and shriveled-up thorn bushes blocked the path in dense clusters. The sky was dark and cloudy, but there was no hint of rain; the heavy ashen hues simply loomed overhead to create a terrible dreariness.

Several bizarre fiends were hot on the girl’s trail. They were lizards, each the size of a human child, though instead of running on all fours, they kicked off the ground with their muscular rear legs. Their eyes had no eyelids, and their blue, scaly skin glistened with some strange, slimy substance.

A side glance at one of the creatures about to flank her made the girl click her tongue.

“How persistent...”

She drew the slender sword at her waist and leaped sideways, maintaining her speed all the while. In the blink of an eye, one fiend had been skewered. With a nimble turn, she pounced in another direction, beheading another fiend that had come at her from behind. Her skills were quite remarkable.

After easily taking out several of the fiends chasing her, the girl sent a sharp look behind her; there were still a good deal more of them farther back. After thinking for a moment, she quickly sheathed her blade and took off.

“I don’t have time to deal with these small fries...”

She sensed out the fiends behind as she ran. Despite her waifish build, she carried herself as if she did not know the meaning of fatigue as she nimbly dodged past trees and leaped over thickets

She did not know how long she had run, but gradually she could feel a thin miasma wafting in the air and a peculiar mana prickling her skin.

The girl stopped. A questionable grin crossed her face.

“Finally found you.”

She drew her blade and began walking towards the source of the mana.

A black, shadowy figure in the form of a four-legged beast cowered there. The tip of its long tail squirmed like a snake while its leopard-like head swayed left and right, a black liquid trickling from what was supposedly its mouth.

The shadow muttered something under its breath, as though it were pleading, or perhaps lamenting. “W-Want to...re...turn...m-master...”

“Oh, I’ll return you—to nothing, that is.”

With a ferocious smile on her face, the girl took her stance and sprung upon her foe.

○

The air of early summer was gradually taking over. The plants and leaves that had sprouted and grown out in spring had slowly changed from their youthful bright greens to darker, seasoned shades, and Turnera’s forests were now a deep emerald color through and through. The plains outside the village were covered in a verdant carpet, which the sheep were devouring obsessively.

After the first big job of early summer, which was harvesting the wheat, came the shearing of the sheep. They would round up the sheep that had eaten their fill of soft sprouts all spring long and shave off their abundant coats. Once they were stripped of their wool, the refreshed sheep would get back to their grazing.

Even during the summer, Turnera’s nights were pleasantly cool, but in spite of the daytime temperature not being that bad, the sun blasting down without mercy made it feel so much worse. On one such day for shearing, Belgrieve sat

in the yard at Kerry's house, looking after the small children. He held a baby in his arms while he watched toddlers draw on the ground, taking occasional glances at the shearing work being carried out over yonder.

There were plenty of houses that kept sheep, but none had nearly as many as Kerry. He hired several villagers around this time of year, and the shearing would always become a lively event. Once that was over, next came the carding, the yarn spinning, and then the knitting.

With specialized shearing scissors, even the experienced shearers took forty to fifty minutes per head, and the inexperienced ones could take twice that. The seasoned hands would teach by example before putting the younger ones up to it, but there was always a ruckus every year about how one of the sheep escaped, or how another was hurt by mistake. By the time these young ones could pull it off without error, it would be time for the next generation of kids to learn shearing.

Belgrieve had participated up to a few years ago, but lately, he found himself looking after the children. The village youths were hard at work, while their mothers were busy helping with making lunch and washing the sheared wool. Belgrieve was strangely well-liked by children, and a majority of the villagers felt at ease leaving the job to him; thus, this duty naturally fell to him.

When the baby began crying, Belgrieve slipped a hand under his shirt, sticking his thumb out in a gap between the buttons. The child giggled and gleefully suckled on it. Belgrieve was well used to this.

As he was watching over the children, a stocky man came up to him. The man was dressed like an adventurer and carried a battle-axe in his hands. His brown hair was beginning to thin, but his beard was growing thick as though to compensate.

The man narrowed his sociable eyes, smiling as he spoke to Belgrieve. "Ha ha ha, that's the Bell I know. Even a baby is no match for you!"

"Glad to see you back, Duncan. How was it today?"

"Same as usual, but I must say, I was shocked by the skill of this village's youths. They must have quite the master! Ha ha ha ha!"

“What are you saying, good grief...” Belgrieve stood with a wry smile and handed the baby off to Duncan. “Can you take over for a bit? I’m thirsty.”

“Hmm?”

The baby burst into tears the moment it was in Duncan’s hands. Duncan frantically tried to soothe the child, but this only made it cry harder, creating even more of a mess.

“Wait, Bell! What do I do about this?!”

“Just wait a second.”

Belgrieve rushed into the kitchen, slipping between the women busily preparing lunch, and gulped down a ladleful of water. When he returned, the children were crowded around Duncan, clambering up his shoulders and back. His stocky build was, evidently, quite easy to scale.

“Ha ha, look who’s popular?”

“I-I’m not used to this...” Duncan looked utterly confused as they played tug-of-war with his beard.

Belgrieve chuckled and took the crying baby from his arms. It immediately calmed down the moment it was in his embrace.

Around two months had gone by since Belgrieve had returned from Bordeaux. The snow in Turnera had completely melted while he was away, and the fresh green wheat was golden before he knew it.

Shockingly, Duncan had been the first to welcome him back. Duncan was an adventurer who traveled the lands searching for strong foes to spar with. After hearing a rumor about a certain Red Ogre, he made the trek all the way to Turnera, only to fail to recognize Belgrieve in the town of Rodina along the way.

Upon arriving in Turnera and learning Belgrieve was absent, Duncan decided to await his return instead of leaving. During that time, he helped with some of the jobs around the village and taught the youths some of the basics of combat. With his open personality, he had blended into Turnera in no time at all.

Belgrieve had apologized for playing dumb in Rodina, but Duncan did not seem to mind. He insisted that, had they fought in Rodina, he would never have

come to Turnera. He even thanked Belgrieve for it, as he had taken quite a liking to the village.

Duncan's visit during Belgrieve's absence had actually been quite beneficial. The maintenance of the roads was put off, so naturally, the villagers were disappointed. But a more pressing matter had emerged, preventing the delay from causing too much of an uproar.

This issue took the form of an outbreak of weak fiends ranging from E-to D-Rank. Although low ranking, these fiends were still a threat to civilians. The village youths could handle swords and had sturdy bodies to match, but they lacked real combat experience—casualties would have been unavoidable for as long as they remained greenhorns.

That was when the wandering adventurer showed his stuff. He did not simply exterminate them on his own—he gathered volunteers that Belgrieve had trained in the sword and directed them against the fiendish foes.

In hardly any time at all, the young men and women figured out how to apply their master's teachings, and by now, they had formed small parties (similarly to adventurers) to take care of fiends on their own. There had yet to be any deaths or heavy injuries.

Looks like there's no place left for me, Belgrieve thought.

Duncan sat down beside him. "It all happens so fast," he said. "It's like I've already laid down my roots here."

"We're glad to have you. Why not settle down and find a wife while you're at it?" Belgrieve said it as a joke, but Duncan replied with a hearty laugh.

"Ha ha ha! Not a bad idea!"

There was a shout from the shearers. One of the sheep had broken free and flipped over the young man holding it down. The air was filled with the yells of the experienced shearer who was teaching him and a chorus of laughter around them.

Belgrieve watched with a smile before turning to Duncan.

"So how was it? Any leads on what's causing it?"

Duncan folded his arms. “I tried following the mana to its source, but I lost it. I’m ashamed to say searching isn’t my specialty. I’m more of a fighter.”

“Hmm...”

Maybe I should go out then, thought Belgrieve.

Although adventurers often ended up fighting, their work could be largely classified into three categories: hunting, gathering, and searching.

Hunting jobs could be completed just by defeating the designated fiends or bandits, so an adventurer’s combat strength was everything. Adventurers taking these jobs needed to be knowledgeable about fiends, but their predecessors had left plenty of data, so oftentimes some light research before a job was enough.

Gathering requests involved finding materials. When the request was for the hides, fangs, claws, or shells of fiends, their duties overlapped with the hunters, but most times, the target would be some plant or mineral. Based on where these materials were harvested, some jobs could be done without any combat abilities at all. The herb gathering done by newbie adventurers fell under this category, and it was a job everyone did at least once in their adventuring career.

Searching jobs sent adventurers off to dungeons, deep forests, and mountains. These requests could entail hunting down high-ranking fiends in the depths of a dungeon, gathering materials from it, or perhaps finding a hidden treasure—these jobs came in all forms. However, what tied them together was the cycle of combat and investigation that would span several days, and they required not only combat skills, but careful preparation and shrewd attentiveness. They were several times more difficult than simple hunting and gathering requests.

Adventurers also fell into different types, and Duncan was just as he appeared—an adventurer who specialized in hunting. His strength put him at AA-Rank, but it was purely the strength of his arms that got him there; he wasn’t well-suited for jobs that required more finesse. His love for combat had taken him all across the land.

In his adventuring days, Belgrieve would take on any job that came to him. He

hunted, he gathered, and he entered dungeons as well. He'd only done proper work for around two years, but he had no memories of ever having a day off during that time. Taking request after request, there were times he nearly died. However, everything was an experience, and these experiences honed his senses for the next job.

In any case, an increase in fiends either meant there were mana pools forming around Turnera's mountains, or that a powerful fiend had perhaps wandered in. As long as there was no barrier put up, fiends would gather where there was mana in abundance. There was also a tendency for low-ranking fiends to gather beneath a stronger one. If the mana continued storing up, the land itself could potentially shift and change into a dungeon. The fiends would likely continue popping up without end until the cause was tracked down.

It had only been low-ranking fiends thus far. However, there was no telling if or when a stronger one would come. Perhaps this would be fine in a larger settlement with permanently stationed adventurers, but Turnera had nothing like a guild.

Perhaps it was fine for now. If Belgrieve ever died, however, someone else would have to take up the defenses. The fiends would appear whether he was there or not. With that in mind, this was the perfect training.

It was, of course, quite ominous for these fiends to keep appearing for reasons unknown. Whether he took care of it or left it be, he needed to at least identify the cause.

An irksome fly had been circling Belgrieve's face for a while now; he frowned as he waved it off with a hand. The escaped sheep was still running around, with yells and laughter abounding.

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“Not enough fatherium...”

In downtown Elvgren, a town by the sea, Angeline wearily slumped down at a table outside a food stall. She rested her chin on the table, letting the energy drain from her limbs.

Anessa wiped away some sweat, a strained smile on her face. “Too soon, ain’t

it...”

“Not too soon. Two months already...” Angeline turned her head so her cheek was pressed flat against the surface.

Meanwhile, Miriam was in a daze. Her fluffy ears were strong against the cold but did not hold up very well against the summer heat.

After returning to Orphen, they were back to the laid-back adventurer life they had been blessed with so long ago. They could take jobs whenever they wanted to and do whatever they wanted otherwise. This was the life of a high-rank adventurer that the lower ranks envied. Their daily life could not even be compared to what it was like during the mass outbreak of fiends caused by the demon.

Hearing that iron-coral was fetching a good price, they had set out for Elvgren and searched the nearby dungeon. Cutting down the fishy-smelling sea fiends in their wake, they gathered an ample amount of the resource. They had already arranged to transport it to Orphen, so there was nothing left to do. Their work was over, but they were there anyway. Why not enjoy some of Elvgren’s delicious seafood and wine before leaving?

As Angeline sipped her nicely chilled wine, she thought back to many things. She remembered how lonely she felt as she watched her father’s back disappear from sight in Bordeaux, and how she nearly rushed off to Turnera after him. She knew it wasn’t right and was glad Anessa and Miriam had stopped her. After returning to Orphen, she had done work in Benares and Asterinos, but nearly everything would remind her of the joy she felt at her reunion with Belgrieve and the dreariness of parting again. She felt strangely unsettled; the fact she could still do her work just fine came down to her being an S-Rank adventurer.

She refilled her empty glass from the earthen jug on the table.

“I’m sure dad is feeling lonely...”

“Mr. Bell, eh... He had plenty of work to do. Maybe he doesn’t have the time to feel lonely.”

“Grr...”

“Turnera was so nice and cool...” Miriam muttered, shaking her head and wiping away her sweat.

Anessa shoved a glass of ice water into her hands. “Here, water. That’s why I said we should eat inside.”

“The wind suddenly stopped...” Miriam savored the water before letting out a long breath. The sunshade, which had been flapping in the sea breeze only moments before, was now as stiff as a corpse.

Elvgren was a town west of Orphen. It had flourished on its maritime and seafood industries, and while not as vast as Orphen, it was still large and populous. There was a sea dungeon nearby, so there were a good number of adventurers as well.

The climate should not have been so different from Orphen, but it was by the sea, and at a lower altitude. The air was a bit lazier, there was a fishy smell about, and when the wind wasn’t blowing, it felt hotter than the big city. Of course, the heat was only natural in summer.

“I want to come to the beach with dad...” Angeline muttered, staring at the sun’s reflection in the sea. Belgrieve was not a good swimmer, but surely he would enjoy a seaside stroll.

The ice in Miriam’s cup jangled as she asked, “Ever think about finding a boyfriend, Ange?”

“Why?”

“I mean, you won’t feel so lonely here if you have someone like that around.”

“What I seek from dad is not the same thing I would seek from a boyfriend... In the first place, the men in Orphen are no good...pathetic. What about you, Merry?”

“No way, I can’t trust boys my age. I don’t want them to know I’m a beast-man either. More importantly, there aren’t any cool guys around us.”

“Aren’t your standards a bit too high?”

Seeing Anessa’s fed-up face, the two exchanged meaningful smiles.

“Trying to play it cool, I see.”

“Then do you know anyone nice, Anne...or are your standards too high...?”

“Shut it. I’m fine. I wasn’t looking for one to begin with...”

“Hmm.”

“Fine, we’ll leave it at that...”

“Ah, what’s with that tone?! You’ve got it wrong! Right now, I’m just having fun working... Hey, listen to me!”

Ignoring Anessa’s frantic defense, Angeline and Miriam returned to their wine. The alcohol filled their empty stomachs.

Angeline continued staring absentmindedly into the distance. There were cumulonimbus clouds settling into the blue sky she could see beyond the sunshade. The wine sloshed around uncomfortably against the sides of her stomach.

“I’m hungry... How long is this food going to take...?”

“Hey, you know?”

“Hmm...?”

“You think Mr. Bell ever plans on finding a wife?”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Angeline asked sullenly.

Miriam propped up her head with her hand. “I mean, he wouldn’t be lonely in Turnera if he had a wife. But he didn’t seem to take it seriously when Helvetica kissed him, so maybe he’s not interested.”

“He was a bit embarrassed though.”

“Hmph... Like hell that little girl is marrying my dad.”

“You’re the little girl here...”

“What do you think, Ange? What sort of person would you want to be your mom?” Miriam asked.

Angeline’s eyes wandered as she thought. “She’d need to have that motherly thing going for her, I guess.”

“Motherly, eh...”

“So...breasts?”

“No, if it was that simple, it would mean Merry has motherliness.”

And with that, Angeline and Anessa looked at Miriam.

“Yeah... That’s not it.”

“Nope.”

“What’s your problem?” Miriam pouted.

Anessa bitterly took a sip of wine. “Anyways, everyone sees Mr. Bell as a father, so it would have to be someone who can overcome his fatherliness.”

“Right, that’s the thing. There are different types of affection... Not parent and child, but man and woman... Yes, like a beast... No, I take that back, dad is a gentleman.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about... But you’re right, I don’t feel any of that sort of love towards Mr. Bell. I’ve never had a father so I’m not quite sure, but this feels like what it would be like if I did have one.”

“Right? I like Mr. Bell and all, and I want him to pamper me, but I don’t really see him as boyfriend material.”

“Just what I was thinking. Sure, I feel at ease with him around, but if you asked me if I wanted to marry him, you know...”

“I would never even allow it to get to that point. Anne, Merry, you both lack what it takes to be my mom.”

Miriam stuck out her tongue. “I don’t want a daughter like you either.”

“Hmm... So we agree on that.”

“That we do.”

They exchanged a high five.

Anessa sighed. “What are you people doing...?”

“Yes...” Angeline swigged what was left of her wine. “We’ll have to search for a proper bride then.”

“That sounds fun.”

“It’s my potential mother we’re talking about, so we need to be careful...”

“No... Come on now. Shouldn’t Mr. Bell be the one deciding?”

“We’ll never find anyone if we leave it to dad... He’s a late bloomer.”

“Ah, but maybe he’ll find someone nice in Turnera.”

“Not possible. He’d already be married by now.”

“Urk... That...may be true.”

“Of course, dad will make the final decision. But if there’s no one in Turnera, we’ll have to search for candidates on our end. Heh heh heh, this is starting to get fun...”

“Mr. Bell’s wife, huh... But if we do find him a wife, and he falls in love with her, won’t he have less time for you, Ange?”

“What?!”

Miriam’s joking words hit Angeline like a bolt of lightning. She held her head, collapsing to the table.



“Ah... Ahh... Wh-What do I do? What should I do?!”

“You...hadn’t even thought about that?”

“Oh dear, looks like bride hunting will have to wait.”

The wind began picking up again as the food was brought to their table: Elvgren-style paella, shucked oysters, and fried hake, all letting off an ever-enticing steam.

Chapter 29: Early in the Morning, at the Edge of the Yard

Early in the morning, at the edge of the yard, Belgrieve faced Duncan with a sword in one hand. He leaned his weight onto his artificial leg, swaying irregularly to and fro. Duncan stared at him, his battle-axe held in a high stance.

Turnera was cool in the early morning. Mist still lingered here and there, catching the faint light of the sun that had yet to fully rise. Once that happened, its heat would press down all at once, and then training would be the least of their worries.

While Belgrieve swayed, he did not make a move, and Duncan was so tense he had frozen as well. Occasionally, the tips of his toes would twitch ever so slightly, measuring the distance ahead.

After a while, it was Duncan who took the initiative. He closed in with one fell swoop and swung down with a powerful blow. Belgrieve's eyes shot open, but he kept his movements to a bare minimum, dodging and swinging his sword in tandem.

Still, Duncan was a veteran warrior. He twisted to evade the blade, immediately jumping back to make some distance.

Belgrieve sighed and loosened his stance. "I've still got a long way to go... Thank you, Duncan."

"No, that should be my line. I was wide open after you evaded that. Ha ha ha!" Duncan smiled, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Until Belgrieve returned, Duncan had been staying at Kerry's house. He began operating with Belgrieve the moment he was back, accompanying him during training and on his early morning patrols.

Ever since he fought the undead with his aching body, Belgrieve had attempted to develop a fighting style that used as little strength as necessary. The elven elixir had taken his pain away, but he knew he could not win against

Father Time—there was no telling when his fierce sword style would injure his body again. When that time came, there would be no recovery from it; he did not even know if he would see another elven elixir as long as he lived.

With that said, he trained with Duncan—the only other experienced fighter in Turnera—every morning. Belgrieve had always focused on reacting to his opponent's attacks, so he was able to dodge easily enough, but his counters would hardly land on an opponent of Duncan's caliber. While he used to channel all his strength into his attacks, he now wanted to hone his techniques—make them smarter such that he could still fell an enemy in one blow without using so much power. He was trying to find such a method but wasn't getting anywhere. In fact, he could only barely manage it if he used his mana to increase his affinity with his sword, but...

"This is troublesome... My body's not listening to me these days."

"Ha ha ha, not much you can do! This training's to get it to listen!"

"Right...but this is just making me anxious... I don't know when I'll get injured again."

"I see... I'm pretty sure you're more than strong enough to protect Turnera though."

"I'm not so sure. I'll need to get my own stamp of approval first," Belgrieve said with a shrug.

He decided it was high time to get to the bottom of why the fiends were appearing.

Not so long ago, the influence of a demon had caused mass outbreaks around Orphen, and there were plenty of high-ranking fiends during that time. This had been what had prevented Angeline from coming home.

However, there had only been low-ranking ones around Turnera until now. Perhaps something powerful had arrived, though maybe not at the level of a demon. Otherwise, there must be something causing mana to pool—that would be the more troublesome possibility. With a strong fiend, he could simply hunt it down, but if it was mana pooling, he would need a skilled magician to deal with it. Belgrieve had the knowledge in his head, but he was a swordsman.

In any case, Duncan wasn't good at searching, so Belgrieve would have to go himself. He wanted to complete his fighting style before then; he hesitated to venture out with half-baked abilities. Needless to say, it wasn't going so well.

"Still, Bell, you're amazing, polishing completely new movements at your age," Duncan said as he stretched.

Belgrieve smiled. "You'll understand eventually. Once you're over forty, see, the years suddenly catch up to you. How should I put this... You feel a strange impatience—as though things can't stay the same anymore."

"Hmm... I thought I was already getting old when I hit thirty."

"It's a little different—getting old, and actually feeling your age. For example, your body suddenly isn't moving like it used to, and you have more white hairs than before. They're just little things, but they make you feel incredibly lonely. You long for how things used to be, and then it feels like even your heart's gotten so much older. Maybe I'm not explaining it so well, but it's so peculiarly stifling when I feel it myself."

"I see... I think I understand where you're coming from. I'm thirty-seven, but sometimes I'm struck by this sudden loneliness. I wonder if I've forgotten something behind me."

"Forgotten something... Maybe that's it. I thought I was living as best I could, but looking back, what exactly did I accomplish...?"

"What are you talking about? Bell, you raised the Black-Haired Valkyrie, you did. I haven't faced her before, but I've heard plenty of rumors."

"I see... Right. Maybe that kid's the best thing that's happened to me." Belgrieve stood with a bashful laugh. "All right, enough of that dreary stuff. Let's have dinner."

"Ha ha ha, no need to be embarrassed about it! I'm not vulgar enough to sneer at a parent who adores his child!"

Duncan patted Belgrieve on the shoulder before striding into the house. Belgrieve followed, awkwardly scratching his cheek.

The rain began early in the morning. When she sluggishly entered the guildhall, Angeline grimaced; the lobby was exceptionally crowded.

“Looks like business is still booming...”

A party of young novices was raising a ruckus in front of the counter. In the corner, the middle-aged adventurers sat around the tables. Employees busily came and went, and the receptionist’s troubled smile was ever present.

They headed to the counter reserved for higher-ranking members to see what work was available. The cracks from when Angeline had smacked the marble still remained, and she thought it was high time they patched them up.

The middle-aged woman sitting behind the counter smiled at her cheerfully.

“Good morning, Ange.”

“Morning, Yuri... You have anything for me?”

“Hmm, right. Give me a minute.”

Yuri flipped through the file on her desk. Her hair, a deep blue like the ocean, draped over the papers. Mildly annoyed, Yuri brushed it aside, collecting it behind her.

She had once been a member of Lionel’s party. After retirement, she moved to the imperial capital, but during the fiend outbreak, Lionel contacted her, and she came as fast as she could. Unfortunately for her, the matter had been settled by the time she arrived.

Still, her journey was not wasted, as she put her efforts into rebuilding and reforming the guild. Most of the time, she worked at the counter for high-rankers, but as she had once been a high-ranker herself, she did not feel intimidated no matter whom she was dealing with and she fulfilled her duty with a smile. Furthermore, having someone around from the old days he could talk to gave Lionel a sense of respite.

Angeline observed Yuri closely. She said she was turning thirty-seven—not exactly young, but she did not give off an elderly impression by any means. Her wrinkles were inconspicuous, her skin was glossy, and she carried herself with an elegant demeanor. What’s more, she was incredibly composed and

professional, which wasn't to say she was unaccommodating—she had a playful side to her and a sense of humor. The mole beside her eye had a strange sensuality to it. She had only been in Orphen for a few months, but many adventurers had already fallen for her. Of course, Yuri did not take them seriously.

Why is she not married? Angeline wondered. But also, she thought she wouldn't mind having her as a mother. Surely she was overflowing with motherliness.

If Belgrieve married, Angeline feared the possibility of being left in the dust. She mulled it over, pondered it some more, and continued ruminating over what she would do. At times, she convinced herself she didn't have to find him a bride.

Yet she had always been drawn to the concept of having a mother, and she knew Belgrieve was not the sort of man who would disregard her the moment he was married. And so, she made her final decision.

Perhaps Yuri could be her mother. The woman looked like she would pamper her, and perhaps she could get a little brother or sister out of the deal. The thought of this caused Angeline to break out into an eerie chuckle.

Yuri cocked her head a bit. "What's wrong, Ange?"

"Yuri..."

"What?"

"Do you want to meet my father to discuss the prospect of marriage...?"

"Huh?!" Yuri's gaze rose from the file, her eyes darting left and right. "Wh-What's this, all of a sudden?"

"My father is always alone, and I feel bad for him... I guarantee he is an incredibly good man."

"Umm... Your father is the Red Ogre, right? I-I'm not so sure I would be a good match for him..."

"That's not true at all... Certainly, my dad is incredibly strong, but Yuri, weren't you an AAA-Rank...?"

“That was when I was active... I was just a server at a small tavern after I returned to the imperial capital.”

I see, so that's why she always has such a good posture, Angeline thought.

Yuri fidgeted, flustered. She was used to being hit on by men, so she dealt with them rather easily, but as was to be expected, she had never had a girl come up to her and ask if she wanted to marry her father.

“In any case, please consider it... You're beautiful, and my dad is a very good person...”

“O-Oh... I don't really know how to reply...”

As she turned red, Lionel shambled out from the door behind her. He was visibly drained, stubble scattered unevenly around his chin, mouth, and cheeks.

“Yuri, can I see the request book... Ah, Ms. Ange. Good morning...”

“Morning, Guild Master... Sleep deprived again?” Angeline asked, eliciting weak laughter from him.

“Pretty much. Our investors are pushing all sorts of work onto me... Pulling all-nighters is pretty rough at my age. My mouth is full of the flavor of nutrient tonics... How long has it been since I've had a proper meal? I get the feeling I'm not any better off than when we had a fiend outbreak on our hands...”

Watching Lionel grumble to himself, Yuri sent him a tired smile. “It's always complaints with you, Leo.”

“Don't be unreasonable, please. If, on top of everything else, you take away my ability to complain about it, this old man really will croak...”

“You're fine. They say you've got a lot left in you when you can still joke about dying.”

“I don't even know anymore... Ah, I'll be taking these ones.” Lionel took a few sheets of paper from the file and looked around.

“What about Ed and Gil? They around yet?”

“Yes, well, they only just got back yesterday. I think they're still asleep.”

“Sounds nice. I'd like to sleep too...”

“Now, now, just a bit more. You can pull through.”

“Agh...” Lionel heaved an envious sigh.

Angeline narrowed her eyes. They were former party members, but still, Lionel and Yuri got along rather nicely. She could feel a deep sense of trust between them.

“Hey...”

“Hm? What is it, Ms. Ange?”

“Are you two an item...?”

“Huh... Why do you ask?”

“I mean, you get along well... You trust each other, right?”

“I mean, we just watch each other’s backs... But I don’t think that equates to being a couple.” Lionel dubiously furrowed his brow.

Yuri calmly touched a finger to her cheek. “Hmm...” Her head was slightly cocked to the side. “Rather than trust, it’s like I can’t leave him be... He was the strongest in our party, but he’s always been a bit unreliable, old Leo.”

“I’m well aware I lack any semblance of talent... I don’t even know why I’m in this position now. Being a guild master was supposed to be a do-nothing job...”

“Ah, by Vienna. How long are you going to complain?! You have everyone helping out, so get a grip, would you?!”

“I know, I know... It’s just, lately, my work’s been haunting me even in my dreams...” Lionel sorrowfully cast his eyes down in shame. Yuri giggled while patting him on the head.

Even if they weren’t lovers, there was a stable bond of trust between them. Rather than being head over heels, it was as if they took each other’s presence as a simple fact of life. This was powerful.

“An unexpected rival... But there’s still the option of stealing her love...” Angeline’s cheeks turned red as she imagined it.

Lionel looked at her curiously. “What...? Do you like me, Ms. Ange?”

“Huh...? Of course not. What gave you that idea, Guild Master...?”

“I mean, you were mumbling about stealing love and rivals, or something...”

“I’m not talking about myself. I would never fall for you. It’s impossible...”

“I knew that, but it’s a bit hurtful when you say that to my face...” Lionel groaned.

Yuri chuckled a bit. “You’re old enough to be her father, Leo. It feels criminal just thinking about it.”

“Don’t go there, please. I don’t want to be treated as a criminal on top of everything else... Kidding, just kidding...”

Angeline leaned in, her hands planted on the counter. “Yuri... Please consider the matter with my dad seriously. He’s not unreliable like the guild master...”

“You’re a very nosy little girl!” Yuri poked Angeline in the forehead.

“Ms. Ange’s father, huh...” Lionel said, also slouching against the table. “Mr. Elmore wouldn’t stop praising him last time I went to Bordeaux... Ahh, if only he’d return to adventuring and come work for us... Right—hey, Yuri, how about you marry Ms. Ange’s dad and drag him to Orphen? Doesn’t that sound like a good idea?”

“Stupid Leo! What do you think romance is?!” Yuri’s fist found its way into Lionel’s cheek, although there was hardly any force behind it.

At the same time, Dortos emerged from the door in the back with rage on his face.

“Lionel! How long does it take to pick up a few papers?!”

“Wait, Mr. Dortos, you have it all wrong! I’m just taking a slight breather!”

“Silence! Get over here already!”

Grabbing Lionel by the scruff of the neck, Dortos stormed into the back.

Yuri drew a relieved breath of air and returned to flipping through the file. “Now Ange, about that request...”

“Yeah,” Angeline said.

Chapter 30: From the Bare Mountain, a Figure Descended

From the bare mountain, a figure descended. It was tall, wrapped in an ashen cloak, and shouldering a massive sword that towered over its body. A hood was pulled down to obscure its face; however, the strands of hair that peeked out were silver and smooth as silk thread, and its angular jawline seemed masculine.

The man looked around as he slowly made his way down. His cloak flapped and billowed in the wind, and he had to take hold of his hood to keep it in place.

“That bloody tomboy... Where did she go?”

He seemed to be searching for someone, and he had been at it for quite a while. There was a palpable irritation in his voice as he muttered to himself.

He looked down at the forest that stretched over the base of the mountain. The ground he was standing on was so high up that there was only low grass around him, and hardly any trees, all of which gave him a fine view of the village near the foot of the mountain. When he strained his eyes, he could make out flocks of sheep and the dogs chasing them, as well as the herdboys nearby.

After a moment's thought, he decided to head for the village.

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A dead grayhound fell to the ground. The young man who had swung his sword swiftly retreated while another youth switched places with him, thrusting a spear forth to impale another grayhound that was pouncing from behind its fallen brethren.

“Good, that's the way to do it! Don't get too big for your britches! Take them out consistently, one by one!”

Belgrieve kept at the ready, able to join the fray at any moment. He kept wary

of their surroundings as he gave orders to the village youths. They had established a formation uphill from the forest, luring the grayhunds to charge at them from below. The terrain advantage had been theirs before the battle even began.

There were roughly ten youths helping him out, fighting the fiends as a unified force. At regular intervals, a few of them would venture out to draw in the grayhunds, then retreat so the ones in the back with the spears could deal with them.

Belgrieve and Duncan supervised from both flanks, fully prepared to rush in the moment things turned sour, but otherwise stood back; Turnera would be a far safer place if the villagers grew accustomed to combat.

The battle, which lasted just under an hour, ended in their victory. A few injuries were sustained, but none were severe. These were decent results, and Belgrieve went around patting his young fighters on the shoulders.

“Well done. You’re getting there.”

“Heh heh, you think I could be an adventurer, Mr. Bell?”

“Up to you. But Angus would be pretty sad if you left the village.”

“Urk... But, you know...”

“And it’s not that easy out there. Duncan and I, we were the lucky ones. If you become an adventurer, you’ll be toeing the line between life and death. Even if you don’t die, you could lose a leg like me.” Belgrieve tapped his peg leg against the ground.

The young man hung his head. “I know, but...”

“Ha ha... Anyways, you did good today. Let’s go home.” Belgrieve spurred the small group down the path. Fighting fiends was a good experience, but it would also change the hearts of the younger generation that only knew Turnera’s idyllic lifestyle.

There wasn’t much entertainment to be had in the countryside. Quite a few of them already longed for a life of adventure, and this began to feel like a realistic goal after they had fought and slain some fiends for real. The second

and third sons had a bit of freedom, but there were houses where even their heirs began yearning for the adventurer life, and their parents looked on with conflicted faces.

Belgrieve shared their view. He had been an adventurer, so he was reluctant to stand in the way of their dreams, but raising Angeline had taught him how to worry as a father. Furthermore, letting the heirs leave would also be a loss to the village. Although there was little that could be done to put a damper on their enthusiasm with fiends appearing one after another, Belgrieve still felt some remorse, having had a hand in spurring these youths towards the world beyond Turnera.

“I know it can’t stay the same forever...”

But when things did start changing, where was he supposed to stand? He had lived over forty years and still didn’t have an answer. It was all unknown—in fact, the things he felt he had figured out were dwarfed by the vast amount of things he just wasn’t certain about anymore.

They returned to a village enveloped in a somewhat festive air. A caravan had arrived a while ago, and now tents were erected in the town square where various goods were lined up while travelers played their folk tunes.

After telling his students to maintain their weapons properly, he let them go on their way. They scattered into groups; some went home, while others headed straight for the stalls. After training them up a bit more until they could handle the village’s defenses on their own, Belgrieve intended to join Duncan in investigating the cause of the outbreak. The youths were skilled, but not fully accustomed to combat. They could fight, but they were no adventurers. These were children he had watched for all their young lives, and he had even been there for some of their births; he did not want even a single one of them to die.

Duncan leaned his battle-axe against his shoulder. “The kids here all have potential. They could become fine adventurers with a bit of training,” he said.

“Yeah, but that’s why it’s so complicated. If they all leave, then the village is done for.”

“Hmm... That is...difficult. I left my homeland myself, so I understand where they’re coming from.”

“I’m not oblivious to their feelings either. But I also understand how the people of Turnera feel, and ultimately, I’ve been tilling the fields here a lot longer than the time I spent as an adventurer.”

“Ha ha ha! I’m in awe that you became as strong as you are!” Duncan gave a thunderous laugh, patting Belgrieve on the shoulder. “I always thought the best training was the thrill of the hunt! But you got to where I am with your own path, Bell! I guess flexibility goes a long way!”

“I’m not so sure. I think my daughter Ange played a large part in that...”

Namely, it was his stubborn desire to not lose to her. Her abnormal skill and talent had undoubtedly been quite the motivation for Belgrieve to keep up his training even when he was past his prime. From time to time, he would think, *I doubt I would have trained my sword to this degree if I had kept my leg and continued as an adventurer.* Perhaps instead of his leg, he would have gone on to lose his life on some other occasion.

“Que será, será, and all that.”

“Hmm? What was that?”

“Just talking to myself,” Belgrieve said with a grin.

Duncan smiled back and began walking. “Now, how about lunch? I’m starving!”

Belgrieve was about to walk after him when he heard a commotion brewing in the village square, causing a suspicious look to cross his face. “Duncan.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“I’ll catch up with you.”

“Something come up?” Duncan looked at him quizzically but continued on his way to the house.

When Belgrieve arrived at the square, he found an unfamiliar man standing there. The villagers seemed surprised, keeping their distance while murmuring amongst themselves.

The man was tall and clad in a gray cloak with a large sword slung across his back. His long, silky, silver hair and clean-cut features were eye-catching on

their own; however, what stood out the most were his pointed ears, which elicited awe from the humans.

“Th-That’s an elf, isn’t it?”

“Silver hair, pointed ears... No doubt about it.”

“What’s an elf doing here...?”

The elf in question looked around bashfully. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to startle anyone...”

His voice was solemn and stately, but had a peculiarly reassuring tone to it. The villagers exchanged glances, not knowing what to do. This had made him even harder to approach, and their troubled whispers only grew more intense.

Turnera was located at the northernmost point of the dukedom, with elf territory beyond the northern mountain range. There, the cold was even harsher than in Turnera, and the forests even denser. Humans rarely ever set foot in those lands, nor did the elves often visit the dukedom. There was no proactive exchange between the two nations. At most, a handful of peddlers would do business on both sides.

The organ that produced mana was far more developed in elves than it was in humans, and this excess mana allowed many of them to achieve immense longevity. This was similar to how Maria, a human adventurer, had used magic to halt the effects of aging, but on a completely different level.

Both their men and women were beautiful without exception; they were a race that preferred to live a peaceful life of seclusion, valuing spirituality over wealth and fame. Humans regarded elves as lofty, high-minded beings, and the lack of cultural exchange did not help. Generally speaking, they were treated with awe and seen as difficult to approach.

For Belgrieve, this was not his first time meeting an elf. He recalled the elf girl who had once fought by his side and stepped forward with a sense of nostalgia.

“Welcome to Turnera, Mr. Elf. My name is Belgrieve. If it is no inconvenience, might I ask what your business is?”

The elf looked at Belgrieve and smiled. With their longevity, the elves were

supposed to maintain a youthful appearance even long into their seemingly interminable lifespans, but this man had deep wrinkles and creases carved into his face, his very being exuding the weight of years lived.

“You have my gratitude. It seems I’ve scared them...”

“Ha ha, they’ve never seen an elf before. Please overlook it.”

“I apologize for my own lack of consideration.”

Belgrieve guided the courteous elf to his own humble abode.

The sudden appearance of an elf had Duncan open his eyes wide, but his innate heartiness kept him from complaining. “Ha ha ha! You’re always surprising me, Bell!”

“Sorry about that, Duncan... Sorry it’s such a mess here, but please have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

The elf propped his sword against the wall and sat down. Belgrieve brewed a cup of tea and placed it in front of him.

“Please have some.”

“Much obliged...”

The old elf seemed to relish the flavor. Belgrieve patted his chest, relieved it was to his guest’s liking as he sat down across from him.

Duncan looked at the elf, then his sword. He narrowed his eyes and stroked his beard. “Hmm... That sword is quite the weapon.”

The elf returned his stare. “Oh, you can tell?”

“My name is Duncan. I am a traveling warrior of sorts and am currently mooching off of Belgrieve here. Might I know your name...?”

“How rude of me. I am called Graham.”

This name startled both Belgrieve and Duncan.



“You wouldn’t happen to be Graham, the paladin elf, would you...?” asked Belgrieve.

Graham answered with a slight smile, “I have been called that before.”

“Ooh... To think I would meet an elven hero out here... I am honored.”

“It’s all in the past, Sir Duncan. I’m but an old man now. You don’t need to stand on formality with me.” Graham took another sip of tea, his lips twisted in a complicated smile.

Paladin Graham was known as “The Holy Knight” or “The Paladin,” monikers attributed to the noble image of his race on top of countless accolades even beyond slaying demons and dragons. He was a bona fide living legend—the first elf to make a name for himself as an adventurer. Whenever humans spoke of elves, most would at least mention his heroic tales. He was so famous that he featured in children’s fairy tales. What could someone of his caliber need in Turnera?

“So what brings you to Turnera, Sir Graham?”

“Hmm, truth be told, I’m searching for someone.”

It can’t be anyone ordinary, thought Belgrieve.

Duncan tousled his beard. “That someone is around these parts?”

“I’m not certain, but I tried searching around places she might be, and this is where I ended up... My age is catching up to me, you see. I felt weary, so I stopped by your village which I saw from the mountain.”

“The person you’re searching for is a woman then?”

Graham nodded. “Indeed, a rather troublesome lass... She does not understand her own position.”

“Oh? Is she someone important?”

“Yes.” Graham sighed. “She’s the sole daughter of Oberon, king of the Western Forest.”

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Angeline rested her chin on her arms which were folded atop the table and

gazed at the drops of condensation on the outside of her glass. The smaller ones would gradually grow, then mix and fuse with the ones around them to grow even larger, until they finally dripped away.

She could hear children frolicking in the yard. A refreshing summer breeze blew through the open window, billowing the faded curtains. It was so sunny outside, and yet so strangely dim and haunting within.

She was at the orphanage adjacent to a church in downtown Orphen. It was a two-story building made of wood and stone. There was a vegetable garden in the yard that the sisters carefully maintained day after day, filled with the sort of beautiful produce that Anessa would often bring over.

Ever since she learned that Anessa and Miriam had grown up here, Angeline would drop in from time to time. After gifting them with sugar, floral tea, and some furnishings the orphanage needed, the children and the sisters happily welcomed her.

That day, they had arrived in the morning and helped with some cleaning and maintaining the garden. However, despite her own insistence, Angeline was treated as a special guest. As she watched the two girls interact so closely with the sisters, she felt a sense of alienation, even though she knew they didn't intend to make her feel that way. It wasn't as though she despised socializing, but she had no motivation to strike up a conversation. So after she had finished helping out, she retreated to the kitchen and spaced out. She had already been here numerous times and was free to help and rest as she pleased. It was as if she was more there to play than to volunteer, and even if that wasn't so, she always came with mountains of gifts. No one would complain.

Anessa entered through the wooden door with a basket full of vegetables. They were all so glossy it was clear they had been plucked moments ago. After setting them on the table, Anessa looked at Angeline doubtfully.

"What are you doing?"

"Relaxing..."

"I can tell that much... But aren't you too lethargic? What would Mr. Bell say if he could see you?"

Angeline pursed her lips. “Nothing... My dad would be very kind and considerate.”

“Good grief...” Anessa sighed before pulling a few vegetables from the basket. “I’m making lunch. How about helping out?”

“Sure.” Angeline stood.

At that moment, a sudden clamor manifested in several children bursting in from the back door. The orphanage taught them many skills, from reading and writing, to housework, to helping around the garden; of course, cooking was also a part of their daily routine.

“Hey, where are your manners? You have to wash your hands first!” a young sister said in a clear voice as one of the younger children reached for a pot with dirt-caked hands.

It was up to the church sisters to corral the rowdy children. The director of the orphanage who had raised Anessa and Miriam had grown quite old, while the sister in the kitchen was comparatively young. Her name was Rosetta, and she was cheerful and kind. The children adored her, and she got along quite nicely with Angeline.

Angeline patted the head of a nearby child as she said, “What are we making today, Ms. Rosetta?”

“Right, we’ve got plenty of vegetables, so let’s stew them and make pasta! Take care of the dough, Ange! Anne, go get some water for the pot!”

Sister Rosetta donned an apron, adjusted her ultramarine-colored coif, and tied back her curly, bright-brown hair. She rolled up her sleeves and issued precise orders to the children while she lit a flame under the pot, before moving on to deftly slicing vegetables with her knife.

Angeline kneaded the pasta dough as she watched the sister work from behind. Her hips were so prominent that she could make them out clearly through the loose-fitting habit—those were childbearing hips indeed. Angeline had been convinced that motherliness rested in the chest, but it seemed that the bottom also factored into the equation. She nodded to herself.

Anessa had nice hips, but hers were toned and not very motherly. Rosetta

had her beat in size, by any case. *Then is softness what it means to be motherly?* Angeline wondered.

As she watched Rosetta cook and give instructions to the children, she wondered what it would be like if Rosetta was her mother. Of course, Rosetta was still only twenty-nine years old. Perhaps she was a bit too young, but she was cheerful and energetic when she was dealing with children. There were freckles on her cheeks, and though she wasn't exactly beautiful, she had large, round eyes and an adorable face. She was more like a big sister than a mother, but that wasn't too bad either. As she was always vivacious in anything she did, she would surely support Belgrieve, come sun or rain.

Angeline's hands hadn't stopped moving as she made her observations. Rosetta gave an amused laugh. "You sure you aren't overdoing it, Ange? Really giving it your all, I see."

"Hmm..." Angeline rolled the dough into a ball, cut it in half, then took out a rolling pin and began stretching it. She had kneaded it so hard that she was having a hard time rolling it out.

Rosetta hummed a tune as she shoved the chopped vegetables into a pot. Anessa added dried herbs sparingly and said, "Looks like the harassment has stopped lately."

"Right, right. Those cultists or whoever they were. They were pretty noisy for a while, but they've gone remarkably quiet. A relief, if you ask me."

For a short period of time, a peculiar group had been giving sermons about the glory of Solomon and his demons. Angeline had confronted a demon directly, so she could tell that it was not the sort of entity that would bring any benefit to humanity if worshiped. However, those who weren't so well informed and were dissatisfied with their circumstances might cling to anything that was different from the current institution.

Apparently, the group had come to the orphanage, which was also part of a church in Vienna, and denounced the goddess and the entire curia of Lucrecian churches, scaring the children immensely. Nothing was broken and no one was kidnapped, so it didn't cause very much upheaval.

Suddenly, Angeline thought back to the turmoil in Bordeaux. The albino girl

Count Malta brought along had also said something about Solomon. Come to think of it, the cultists in Orphen had calmed down as soon as she returned from Bordeaux. Perhaps the girl—and the boy Angeline fought near the manor—had something to do with the cult.

She thought over these things, absentmindedly working with her hands, and by the time she realized it, the dough was so thin she could see the cutting board through it.

“Hmm... I can’t get distracted,” she said with a grimace, pinching it up with her fingers.

Rosetta chuckled. “What’s this, Ange? You’re messing up a lot today. The heat getting to you?”

“Not exactly... Have you ever thought about marriage, Ms. Rosetta?”

Rosetta looked taken aback at this. “Huh... That came out of nowhere.”

“I just thought you’d make a fine bride... You’re a good cook and all.”

“O-Oh, look at you, you little brat! Don’t go teasing adults!” Rosetta prodded her, her face a bright red.

Angeline frowned. “I’m not teasing... Hey, would you like to meet my father to discuss the prospect of marriage?”

“Eh? Wait, what are you talking about?!”

“Dad is a bit older, but...he’s a very good person.”

“Hey now, Ange! You’re taking this joke too far!”

“I’m serious... I think I would be fine with you as my mother...”

“Th-That’s not the problem...”

“No good...? You’re cute, Ms. Rosetta, and you’re a hard worker. I think you’ll be a good wife...”

“Ah, er... I mean...”

Angeline stared at her with absolutely serious eyes, and Rosetta didn’t know whether to act troubled or bashful. She opened and closed her mouth blankly, her eyes cast down. Meanwhile, the children ran around poking her.

Then came a thud, as Anessa tapped a fist against Angeline's head.

"What nonsensical thing's gotten to you now?"

"It's not nonsense... I'm serious."

"Mr. Bell's the one who's supposed to make the call on that one. You can't go off on your own all willy-nilly."

"That's why it's just a meeting... Nothing definite. Every fated encounter needs an opportunity."

"I mean, I guess..."

"Please think about it, Ms. Rosetta... My dad is a good man."

"Ah, for crying out loud! Let's get back to cooking! We're only halfway done!"

Keeping her response noncommittal, Rosetta headed for the sink. It was then that Miriam entered the kitchen, a shopping bag in hand.

"Am I late...? Why's your face so red, Rosetta?"

"It's nothing!" Rosetta said loudly.

Chapter 31: The Trees Twisted in Unnatural Ways

The trees twisted in unnatural ways, locking together to form a labyrinth. The air was damp and didn't feel very comfortable on the skin. These winds reached deep into the twisted web of branches, blowing across a small clearing. The branches extended over this open space like a dome. The thick layer of leaves hid the sky away, and the ground looked as if the sun hadn't touched it for centuries.

A small child sat at the sloped center. The child couldn't have been much older than five. Its black, drooping hair flowed over its shoulders and down its back, splaying over the ground around it. There was no way to tell if it was a boy or a girl. Its hollow eyes swam through space, never locking onto anything in particular. It swayed vaguely left and right, struggling to find its balance.

"Mm...mmm..."

The child seemed to be muttering something, but all that escaped its mouth were sounds without meaning. It seemed as though it had forgotten how to form words.

Eventually, the child timidly rose to its feet, unsteadily shambling around the clearing. The wind shook the branches, causing leaves to fall. One of them fell onto the child's shoulder and stuck to its hair. It plucked it out and shoved it into its mouth, chewed, then swallowed. Then, it gathered up all the nearby fallen leaves and began gorging on those as well.

"Mm..."

In the midst of its meal, the hair draped over its face entered its mouth. The hair would not tear no matter how hard it tried, and while it tried chewing for a while, it eventually gave up and spat it out. For a while, the child walked around the clearing, but soon enough, it was back at the center. It squatted down, then lazily flopped onto the floor.

"Mmm..." It stuck a thumb into its mouth and closed its eyes. The only sounds

it could hear were the whistling wind and the rustling branches.

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“So you’re telling me she fights demons on her own?”

“Correct, though I don’t know how long that will last. They are far more powerful than standard fiends,” Graham said, taking another sip of tea.

According to him, the daughter of the king of the Western Forest was going around subjugating demons. It was a surprise to hear that demons were reviving all over the lands, but even more so to hear that the elven princess could defeat them without assistance.

Duncan let out a long breath of admiration. “What an incredible talent she must have... I heard it took a bunch of retired S-Ranks and the active high-ranking adventurers just to take down a single demon near Orphen.”

“It is a difference in mana, Sir Duncan. Only those well-versed in handling mana can take them on.”

“Then you have to be a magician or something?”

“Not exactly. If I were to break mana down to its essentials, it is simply internal strength given direction. We elves called it ‘ki’ in our ancient tongue. Have you ever wondered why those who aren’t magicians can inject mana into their weapons?”

Come to think of it, this was true. Neither Belgrieve nor Duncan had the ability to manifest mana as magic externally. At most, they could use enchanted tools that reacted to their own mana to take effect.

However, they were conscious of the flow of mana when it flowed directly into their weapons. In order to handle one’s weapon as an extension of the body, it was essential to use mana as an intermediary to connect one’s senses to the weapon. Both Belgrieve and Duncan could do this unconsciously, but it was clearly a peculiar thing once it was pointed out.

“Your skill with the blade is not determined by pure physical might, is it? A master swordsman hardly uses any strength, merely swinging his weapon with mana. The elves are far more versed in mana and its uses. She was especially

talented, much to our chagrin. And then, she fled the forest..."

"I see... Meaning if you can put enough mana into your weapon, it is not difficult to hunt down a demon."

"That depends. Some of them are stronger than others. It would be difficult to take on a powerful one alone. Furthermore, they are essentially immortal. You can deplete their power for a time, but it is impossible to eliminate them."

Duncan made a dubious face. "I'm pretty thickheaded...but if you think the elf princess is gonna come here, then that must mean the outbreak in fiends in Turnera must be..."

Graham closed his eyes. "I can't say for certain, but the possibility is high. That's why I've come here."

"Good gods..." Belgrieve scratched his head.

"To be clear, nothing is certain, Sir Belgrieve. The fiends you've faced were all low ranking, weren't they?"

"Yes... But there's a high possibility, right?"

"Indeed. The mana I feel here is similar, but not exactly the same. That's what I don't understand... I'll need to look into it."

Belgrieve nodded. They needed to find the source of the fiend outbreak sooner or later. Thus, he led the two of them out of the village to have a look at the forest.

As he walked between the trees, Graham honed his ears and narrowed his eyes.

"What is it, Graham?"

"I definitely feel something strange. However..." Graham frowned and cocked his head. "It is very strange indeed. If a demon's mana were influencing the land, there would have been a large change to the forest itself."

"Huh?"

From what they could see, the forest hadn't undergone any particular transformations. Graham hadn't noted anything either as he looked down over

Turnera from the mountain. The three ventured farther in until the trees grew so thick there wasn't a gap for light to filter through and a strangely chill air lingered about.

They could hear sheep bleating in the distance, and looking back, the peaceful grasslands beyond the trees from whence they came were still visible. A wave of white light reflected off the low grass each time the wind brushed over it.

"The influence is contained deep within the forest, it seems," Graham muttered. "Few fiends venture out to the plains."

"Yeah... Does that mean the forest has become a dungeon?"

"Not yet, but the mana lingers in the forest and the fiends are drawn to it. If it were the doing of one of those things, however, the trees would be twisted unnaturally, their life force distorted..."

"Then instead of a demon, could it be the influence of another high-ranking fiend?"

"Possibly...but the nature of this mana is very familiar. The troubling thing is how little we know about demons."

Suddenly, there was a feeling of hostility emanating from farther in the woods. The three of them reached for their weapons in tandem as four grayhounds bounded through the trees. Duncan's battle-axe cleaved through the head of the first one immediately, while Belgrieve used as small a movement as he could muster to decapitate the next. Seemingly a split second after Graham had drawn his weapon, the last two were bisected.

It all happened in an instant. The three of them tucked their weapons away and examined the corpses littering the ground.

"Splendid handiwork, both of you," Graham said, with a hand on his chin.

"What are you talking about? We are mere infants compared to you."

"I got a good eyeful of the Paladin's sword—a sharp draw, despite the size of the blade! I heard your weapon was called a holy sword, but if I may be so rude, Sir Graham, could I take a look at it?"

"Hmm..." Graham hesitated for a moment before quickly drawing his sword.

It was an unrefined piece without any ornamentation, but the edge was certainly sharp and lacked even a single blemish. It let off an air so intimidating, it was almost as if they could hear the growling of a beast, and both Belgrieve and Duncan inadvertently held their breath.

“This weapon is alive,” Graham said, giving it a swing. He handled it lightly, as though he was completely disregarding its heft. The growling of the sword made the air tremble around it, and the blade flickered like a mirage. “There is a peculiar tree that grows at the ends of the east—steelwood, they call it. It extracts metals from the soil below, processes them within its trunk, and then hangs these refined metals from its branches like fruit. The steel it grows is of supremely high quality, but is difficult to process. Once you actually manage to make a weapon of it, the result is a sword that is greatly in tune with its wielder.”

“A living mineral... Astounding.”

“I see... Color me impressed. That really is no ordinary sword.”

Belgrieve and Duncan observed it closely. The sword glimmered menacingly, making it clear that anyone apart from Graham who even touched it would be torn asunder.

They called it quits there and returned to the village. Now that Graham was with them, it seemed possible to venture into the depths of the woods to pin down the source. However, Graham’s objective was to find the elf princess, who was apparently incredibly perceptive to mana. She would definitely sense the mana of the forest and come here eventually. Thus, he wanted to leave the forest in its abnormal state until then, and in exchange, he would protect Turnera as well.

It was a relief to have someone of his mastery with them, so Belgrieve and Duncan graciously accepted the offer. It was hard to deny that the childish desire to see a hero’s blade up close had played some part, though that was a trivial factor.

“I’m sorry for being so selfish. But if I don’t lay a trap like this, that tomboy will slip away again.”

“Ha ha ha! Well, if you’ve got so much free time on your hands, how about

teaching me a thing or two? I'd love to spar with you one of these days, Sir Graham!"

"I don't mind. I just hope there's anything you can learn from these old bones."

"What are you saying? I didn't feel a hint of age in your swing! My, to be able to exchange blows with both the Paladin and the Red Ogre! I'm a lucky man!"

Belgrieve gave a tired smile. "Duncan, you can't put me up there with Sir Graham. You've already figured it out after fighting me, right? I'm not as good of a swordsman as you make me out to be."

"Not exactly, Bell. Perhaps you are my equal for now, but your sword is still developing. I am but a brazen intruder along the way. You don't realize how much you've motivated me."

"Urgh..."

You're making a pretty big deal out of this, Belgrieve thought as he scratched his cheek. Then, he recalled something and turned to Graham.

"Sir Graham."

"Is something wrong?"

"It's not exactly related, but do you know of an elven woman called Satie?"

Graham furrowed his brow in thought. "Satie... No, I'm sorry. I do not remember anyone by that name."

"I see... Thank you."

"A friend of yours?"

"Yes, we got to know one another in Orphen. She was an elf, and an adventurer. It wasn't for long, but we were in the same party."

"Hmm... Did she return to elf territory?"

"I don't know. We parted ways a long time ago..."

Graham folded his arms. "How long ago?"

"Roughly twenty-five or twenty-six years back."

“I left the dukedom thirty years ago... I do not know anything that happened there after I was gone,” Graham said apologetically.

Belgrieve smiled. “Is that so... Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help.”

“Not at all... Okay, Duncan. It’s a bit late, but how about we cook up some lunch?”

“I’ve been waiting for this.”

“I hope it’s to your tastes, Sir Graham...”

“Much obliged.” Graham calmly closed his eyes in thought.

○

The wooden building was jam-packed with strange tools and scrap. These included a number of flasks connected with glass tubes, wooden contraptions, large iron spheres, and leather-bound grimoires. Perhaps it was too much of a pain to arrange them all, or their owner did not care as long as she remembered their placements. In any case, they formed a chaotic mess around the house.

It was in a small village a short distance from Orphen. The villagers grew vegetables and raised livestock, mainly making a living by selling them in the big city. However, it had also become the haunt of magicians after the former S-Rank adventurer, Maria the Ashen, had taken up residence.

The blood of the curse dragon had beset her with an incurable ailment, but even before that, Maria hated noisy and crowded places. However, the abundant goods in Orphen were convenient for her magic research, so it felt like too much of a pain to move out into the countryside.

Instead, Maria set up a hermitage in this small village, spending day and night immersed in her research. Magicians from all over rushed in with their grimoires and artifacts after hearing the rumors of her residency, and before she knew it, a large, white building had been erected right beside the hermitage. More and more often, students with their hearts set on the magic arts would knock on her door, presenting her with nominal tuition fees.

When Angeline dropped by, Maria was spacing out in her chair. The windows were shut, with heavy curtains drawn over them, making the room dim in spite of being the middle of the day. A strange blend of scents—half perfume, half herb—filled the room.

“Granny Maria,” Angeline called. Maria turned to her with a frown.

“Oh, Ange...”

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling sick...?”

“I always feel sick, you idiot. *Hack...*”

Miriam grimaced and began throwing open the windows. A gentle breeze puffed up the curtains, scattering dust into the air. “It’s your fault for holing up in this filthy house, stupid hag!”

“Shut up, you idiot disciple! Just when I thought you hadn’t stopped by in a while, the first thing you say is a complaint! *Cough!*”

“What’s wrong with calling out stupidity when I see it?! If you don’t go out and take in the sun more, you’ll shrivel up like fish jerky!” Miriam rolled up her sleeves and began tidying the table closest to her. Maria stood in a panic to stop her.

“Stop! If you move things, I won’t know where they are anymore!”

“Shut uuuup! I cleaned up the last time I was here! How is it already so messy? Books go on the bookshelf! Empty vials go on the rack if you’re not using them! Why can’t you do something so simple?!”

“No! Not that one, you imbecile! I was going to read that later! I was going to use that vial right away too! Can’t you tell I put them where I need them to be?! *Hack, cough!*” she said, falling into a coughing fit.

“Aw, can it, hag. You think it would have so much dust piled over it if you were going to use it right away?! Ange! Anne! Take the hag out, she’s getting in the way!”

Angeline and Anessa led Maria out with wry smiles on their faces. It seemed Maria was trying to wail about something over her coughing fit, but Miriam completely ignored her as she removed her hat, tied back her hair, and began

cleaning like it was second nature to her.

The weather outside was delightful; the scent of fresh green grass wafted in on the wind. At times a strange medicinal scent would blend with this from the experiments running in the building next door. Squinting at the brilliant downpour of sunlight, Maria steadied her breathing and complained, “That blasted cat, she really knows how to get under my skin... She’s always such a busybody with me.”

Anessa giggled. “She’s not actually that tidy at our house. She leaves her clothes lying around everywhere.”

“It’s because Merry really cares for you, Maria. And you love her too, don’t you?”

“Silence. *Hack*... What are you here for? Did you come to play?”

“No, we came for this.”

Angeline produced something from her sack: a translucent, amber-colored mass, hard as stone. Maria took it and observed it closely.

“I see. Your party took the request.”

“Yeah, the sap of the ohma tree. Merry already had a look at it, so the purity should be first-class...”

“*Hack*... Well done, I guess. Good work.” Maria lowered herself onto a bench and sighed. Anessa circled around to rub her shoulders.

Angeline sat on the ground observing the old magician. She wore several layers of robes despite it being midsummer, with a scarf wrapped over that. Apparently, her illness made it so she could not maintain her body heat. While Angeline and Anessa were sweating profusely, she had not shed a single drop.

Her face was so youthful she looked to be in her twenties, but her back was curled, and seeing Anessa rub her shoulders, she was the spitting image of an old woman. *Youth is not an issue of appearance*, thought Angeline. But even taking that (and her foul mouth) into consideration, Maria was an appealing woman.

“Hey, Granny Maria. Why are you single?”

“Hmph. That was sudden... *Hack.*”

“I mean you’re beautiful, and you don’t age... I thought you would be popular.”

“Course I am. You shoulda seen me, I had men at my beck and call.”

“But you never married?”

“You think there’s a man out there who could match me?”

“My dad...?” Ange suggested after a beat.

“Huh?”

“Now c’mon, Ange...” Anessa sighed.

Maria was frowning, not quite understanding what they were talking about.

Taking a break from her cleaning, Miriam came out and said, “No way, no how. This old hag isn’t fit for Mr. Bell. There must be a reason why she’s alone at her age, and I don’t mean that in a good sense. *Pffft*, hee hee...”

“Bite your tongue, stupid cat. How about you? Got any love stories of your own? Oh, and how *young* you are.”

“Grr... Well... I don’t.”

Maria sneered, proudly lording over Miriam.

“Hah, can’t even snare a man with those needlessly large tits of yours? Go handle your own affairs before you start nosing around others. This is why you’re so unpopular, stupid.”

“Sh-Shut up!” Miriam screamed, her face a bright red.

Anessa giggled. “You can’t win against the wisdom of the ages, Merry.”

“Grrrr... Now that it’s come to this, I’ll catch myself the best guy in the world! Just you watch, hag!”

“Ha, you do that. If you can. *Cough, hack...*”

“Goddammit!”

Miriam stamped her foot in frustration. Even as she coughed her lungs up, Maria smiled.

They really get along. If Maria becomes my mother, Miriam probably comes along as a set, Angeline reasoned. However, something felt off about calling Maria “mom” when she was already used to calling her “granny.”

In any case, what was Belgrieve’s type? Older or younger? Energetic or subdued? When she gave it some thought, she realized they had never talked about it before. A father and daughter did not usually talk about such things.

“What sort of woman does dad like anyways...?” Angeline muttered.

Maria narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “You’ve been going on about that for a while now. What, are you searching for a bride or something?”

“I am...and you’re a candidate, granny. An older woman would also be quite lovely...”

“Pffft?! *Cough, hack, gag...*” Maria burst into a coughing fit, and Anessa hurriedly rubbed her on the back.

Miriam pursed her lips. “I’m telling you it won’t work out! With this hag, Bell will just be caring for the elderly!”

“But Merry. Didn’t you say Turnera’s air would be good for her...?”

“Whoa! Whoa!” Miriam waved her hands to cut Angeline off.

Having finally calmed down, Maria raised her face to glare at Angeline. She had coughed so much her eyes were teary. “Y-You say some outrageous things... Ange! Quit messing around with me!”

“You always have the right to be happy, no matter how old you are, granny...”

“Quit being a creep! Dammit, where does she get it from, this precocious brat... Stop calling me granny then!”

Angeline gave that a moment’s thought. “Can I take that as a provisional ‘yes’?”

“Like hell! Ah, you’re such a pain! *Hack! Cough! Hack!*”

“You need to stop shouting, Ms. Maria...” Anessa admonished. “Ange, cut it out already. You shouldn’t tease people too much.”

“Urk, but I was being serious...”

Maria, Yuri, and Rosetta—none of them had given very promising replies. *It sure is hard to find a wife*, thought Angeline.

Chapter 32: Why Did I Ever Think to Become an Adventurer?

Why did I ever think to become an adventurer? The red-haired boy never had a clear answer to that question. Everyone had their own dreams and ambitions, and it wasn't as if he was trying to get rich quick. When his parents died and he was left alone, he just knew it was what he had to do.

"I didn't know what else to do," the boy said with an awkward laugh.

The elf girl stared at him with her clear, emerald eyes, a slight smile on her face. "I see... Yeah, me too. I couldn't think of anything else."

"That's pretty funny. You're an elf; I thought being an adventurer would be the last thing on your list."

The elf girl giggled at this. "Well, I'm not the first one. Don't you know about the elf hero?"

"More or less. The thing is, I've never seen an elf apart from you. It has to be pretty rare for an elf to go adventuring."

"I wanted to see the world. To go to all sorts of places and meet all sorts of people. Somewhere far away."

"From my point of view, elven territory is somewhere far away, you know. I always wanted to check it out."

"Oh really? You'll find it's a very boring place, I assure you," said the girl as she happily sipped her mulled wine.

The boy grinned, propping his head up with a hand. "I don't know. It would all be fresh to me. I'm sure I'd love it there."

"Hmm... I guess it can be rather exciting to venture into the unknown. The elves have things only elves know, but so do the humans."

"That means we can teach each other."

“Hee hee, that sounds lovely.”

Then a cold wind blew from behind them, and the pub was suddenly abuzz with excitement. The red-haired boy turned just as some S-Rank adventurers stepped through the door. They were already surrounded by young adventurers badgering them for stories. The stocky man with a military cap and cape let out a grand laugh, while the tall, bearded one beside him closed his eyes, clearly fed up with the situation.

The elf girl let out a deep, longing sigh, brushing her silver hair aside.

“The Destroyer and Silverhead... Must be nice, being S-Rank. I want to be one someday. Then I can go even farther away without anyone bothering me.”

“Ha ha, I’m sure you can make it.”

“And you?”

“Me? I’m not so sure... It’s not like I’m anything special.”

The boy played it off with a chuckle, but the elf girl pressed her hands against his cheeks. “So quick to belittle yourself. It’s a bad habit of yours. I hate that fake smile you put up.”

“Ah... Sorry.”

“You’ll need more than a ‘sorry’ for that.” She frowned. “How about you pick up the tab today?”

“Uhh... Well, not that I mind, but...” The boy scratched his head.

She let her frown slip away as a mischievous laugh spilled from her lips and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s do our best tomorrow.”

“Yeah... But they sure are running late.”

The boy glanced around, somewhat bashfully. His party members hadn’t arrived yet—a fact which hadn’t bothered him moments ago, but now he was suddenly embarrassed to be alone with this girl.

“What’s wrong? You’re fidgeting.”

The elf girl peered into his eyes. Her pale skin was flushed peach-colored from the mulled wine. Her strangely sweet breath tickled his nose, flustering him

further. He could feel his earlobes heating up.

Her emerald eyes glinted puckishly. “You can be pretty cute, you know that?”

“Please don’t tease me.”

The red-haired boy chewed over words left unsaid as he turned the other way.

○

Before daybreak, Belgrieve took Duncan and Graham around the village. The morning haze was especially thick that day, and while the light trickled into the sky, they could hardly see what was ahead of them.

“It will be hard to walk today.”

“Yeah... It’s like walking through a cloud. Let’s proceed slowly.”

The mist exacerbated the unpleasant dampness. Belgrieve’s bangs stuck fast to his brow as if they had been weighed down.

When the sun did eventually rise, solitary beams of light pierced the haze. The fog quickly lifted, bringing vivid life to the dull scene around them. The dew-dropped plains glistened as the morning rays bounced all around them.

Graham let out a long breath. “A beautiful sight... You don’t see this often in elven lands.”

“Oh? I heard your territory is abundant in nature’s blessings. Is that incorrect?” Duncan asked.

“It’s mostly forest,” said Graham. “There are hardly any gentle plains to watch the morning sun from.”

“I see...”

“I like forests, don’t get me wrong. But after visiting all sorts of places, there are many other things I would rather see.”

“I understand well. That’s the joy of the journey.”

Belgrieve quietly listened to the two travelers talking. His trip to Bordeaux, while short, had definitely been fun. There was always an irresistible charm to leaving the same old sights behind. *I can’t leave Turnera for now, but maybe*

when things settle down... Where should I go next?

Soon the haze had cleared entirely and the sun had risen over the thin clouds veiling the distant mountains. A blue sky spread out overhead, the faint moon being the last vestige of the night. The three returned to the village.

A few days had gone by since Graham first visited Turnera. Belgrieve's house, now filled with men, took on a different air than when Angeline and her party members had visited. Following Belgrieve's schedule, they would go on patrol every morning and evening and spend some time after that training.

Graham's sword skills were not flashy—he moved only as much as was necessary, using his explosive resonance with his blade to launch fearsome blows. *This is close to what I'm aiming for*, thought Belgrieve. Every morning and evening, he would spar and struggle to chase after the technique.

The villagers were initially taken aback by the old elf, but with Belgrieve and Duncan as their go-betweens, they were slowly and timidly making contact. Graham was quiet and soft-spoken, never affecting an overbearing attitude. He didn't answer questions with the abstruse philosophical responses the elves were known for, and the villagers were gradually warming up to him.

The elf princess had yet to appear. According to Graham, elves spent most of their lives in forests, and a good number of them could become quite disoriented when they left the woods behind. Perhaps the princess was one of them.

It was still sheep-shearing season, and Kerry's house was boisterous every day. Once again, Belgrieve was tasked with looking after the children, and he was watching over them with a baby in his arms. The village youths were gradually becoming deft hands at their craft, and the sheep were running amok less frequently.

Duncan and Graham were out slaying fiends. The fiends had yet to leave the forest thus far, but once they were numerous enough, there was a high chance they would overflow to the outside. They needed to keep their numbers in check.

Kerry came over, wiping his brow, and took a seat beside Belgrieve. "Good grief, it's especially busy this year."

“Right, one last push until they’re used to the job.”

“Ha ha, no doubt about that. Hey, Bell, you think Mr. Graham likes this place?”

“I think so. At least, he doesn’t feel negative about it.”

“I see... It’s kinda gratifying for an elf to be fond of us.”

“Despite that, you’ve yet to have a proper conversation with him. Quit acting so reserved.”

“I mean, hear me out... I have no idea what to say. Unlike you, I can’t swing a sword.”

“Just have some small talk with him. Just because he’s an elf, that doesn’t mean he’s always thinking about things that are beyond you. He eats and sleeps just like us.”

“Then next time I invite you to drink...please bring him along.”

“Got it. I’m sure he’ll be happy.”

Turnera lay at the northern edge of the dukedom. The elven territory was right across the mountains, but those northern peaks were tall and steep, and hardly anyone wanted to brave the journey. What meager trade did exist with the elves was all carried out far down the eastern road where the passage was less dangerous.

For this reason, one might say that Turnera was both the closest and furthest from elven lands. The kids in the village would grow up hearing stories about the lives of elves just over the mountains. Naturally, they were happy to meet one of those beings that had only existed in legend, but they didn’t know how to interact with him.

The sun was climbing high in the sky, and it was almost time for lunch. It was the right time for Duncan to return, but something must have been keeping him. He had Graham with him, so there was little to worry about, but his absence still weighed on Belgrieve’s mind.

He returned the baby that had begun crying out of hunger to its mother and was helping to set the table when a young farmhand raced in.

“Mr. Bell! Mr. Bell!”

Belgrieve frowned. “What’s wrong? Did a fiend come out?”

“Nah, that ain’t it! Come with me! Another elf! A woman this time!”

Belgrieve followed as an uproar brewed behind him. He cut across the path, leaving the village. A girl stood where golden fields of harvested autumn wheat met with green fields of freshly planted spring wheat.

I see, she’s an elf. Her eyes were a dull, faded turquoise, while her long, glossy silver hair was pulled back artlessly behind her head. Her chest was clad in a cloth wrap and she wore a fur coat over that. A slender sword hung from the belt of her shorts, with which she wore a pair of high-laced boots. This was a rare outfit for elves, who tended to stray from clothing that exposed their skin. Elf appearances did not necessarily match up with their ages, but this elf looked more like a girl than a lady.

What’s more, she was clearly displeased. She scoffed after taking just a glance at Belgrieve, glaring at him sharply.

“To run away as soon as you see my face. Humans are rather rude life-forms, you are.”

Belgrieve sighed and lowered his head. “My apologies. We’re not used to elves around here, please forgive them.”

“So who are you? The boss man?”

“My name is Belgrieve. I’m just a farmer.”

“Ha!” The girl gave an amused laugh. “Where in the world do you find a farmer who comes fully armed? Don’t mess with me, old man.”

Belgrieve placed a hand on the sword at his waist. “Sometimes I switch my spade for a sword when I have to defend myself.”

“Hmm...” She looked at him defiantly. “Defend yourself, eh. So you’re here to duke it out with me?”

“Not at all.”

Belgrieve hurriedly placed his sword, sheath and all, on the ground to signal

his lack of ill intent. The elf girl had reached for the hilt of her slender sword by then, but she released her stance, unconcerned.

“Tsk. You’re no fun.”

Smiling bitterly at this detestably belligerent girl, Belgrieve said, “I take it you’re the daughter of Oberon of the Western Forest?”

The next instant, the girl closed in fast as the wind and grabbed Belgrieve by his shirt collar. Her sharp eyes pierced through him as she radiated a surprising degree of malice. Even Belgrieve gulped, feeling somewhat overpowered.

Still, he stared back at her firmly and asked, “So it’s true?”

“Hey, where did you hear that, you bastard?”

Her forceful, threatening question was drowned out by a rumbling sound. The girl opened her eyes wide, frantically backing off and holding her stomach.

“Y-You! Pick a better time, dammit!”

She beat at her belly angrily, but it cried out again.

“Are you...hungry?”

“I...I’m not! It’s not like I ran out of lembas and haven’t eaten anything since yesterday... A-And even if I am hungry, what’s it to you?” the girl wailed, her face red as she tried to smooth over the situation.

Belgrieve smiled. “We were just preparing for lunch. If it pleases you, we would be greatly honored by the attendance of an elven princess.”

“Grr... Y-You leave me no choice.”

The elf princess looked incredibly frustrated, knowing he was being tactful, but she could not win against her hunger. She obediently followed Belgrieve into the village.

○

With things as they were, Belgrieve led her to his house; the villagers would have been silent as though at a funeral if he brought her to Kerry’s place. He couldn’t bring himself to do that, especially when the girl was in such a bad mood. If the villagers shut their mouths out of fear, that would possibly provoke

her anger.

The house was a bit of a mess, so he sat her down at a table in the yard. The meal he sprinted to Kerry's house for was still piping hot when he returned—a meat and vegetable stew accompanied by thin bread spread with goat butter.

At first, the princess ate slowly and warily, but she gradually began to eat more voraciously and abandoned all caution. She was clearly famished.

They had nothing that could be described as a conversation, though her expression softened somewhat after eating her fill. Perhaps her frenzy had been driven by her empty stomach.

Sitting across from her, Belgrieve watched as her eyes drowsily closed. According to Graham, this girl had been going around subjugating demons. The intensity she had as she grabbed him was certainly impressive, but knowing that she had nearly starved after running out of food, he was surprised she had been able to travel at all.

He couldn't tell if she was daring or just reckless. She spoke quite roughly as well, hardly fitting the noble image he had of a princess, elven or otherwise.

"Did the meal suit your tastes?" Belgrieve asked.

This question jolted her out of her trance, and she quickly opened her eyes before she could doze off in her seat. "It was...decent, I suppose."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Tsk." She awkwardly scratched her cheek.

"If I may be so bold, may I ask your name?"

"Before that—how do you know about me, old man?"

"Sir Graham stopped by. He is currently staying in this village."

The elf princess jumped to her feet. "M-My granduncle?! You gotta be screwing with me!"

She hurriedly turned to run away but was interrupted by a low voice.

"Marguerite."

"Urk!" The princess froze. She timidly turned towards the voice to find

Graham looking at her indignantly. Duncan was behind him with a conflicted expression on his face.

Graham silently beckoned to her. The elven princess bristled, walking forth so timidly it was as if her brazenness had been an act. She couldn't bring herself to meet Graham's straightforward eyes head-on.

"Honorable granduncle... What are you doing here?"

"I knew you were following the mana of those things." Graham folded his arms and sighed. "It may have indirectly been my fault... But what are you trying to accomplish? Oberon is very worried. Please don't go off on your own."

The princess—or rather, Marguerite—raised a sullen face, this time glaring straight at Graham. "Father is worried? Likely story."

"Don't say anything thoughtless. There isn't a father in the world that doesn't worry for his child."

"There is—*my* father, for one. He doesn't see me for me. He only thinks about the western tribe."

"That is how a king must be. Please understand how Oberon feels."

"So it doesn't matter how I feel? I should just shut up, and let myself be sheltered from the world?" Marguerite was growing increasingly irritated. "You've got another thing coming, granduncle. I'll make him recognize me whether he likes it or not. I've already taken out three of them. I got the one killing the south forest, and the one in the abandoned mine."

"Marguerite... It doesn't matter how many times you defeat them. You're barely scratching the surface. There's no value in fame you did nothing to earn."

"Not my problem. That's how *you* made a name for yourself. I'm not spending the rest of my life in that puny forest. I want to see what it's like far away," Marguerite said and then turned. "You'll have to recognize me too if I defeat this one." She kicked off the ground and raced away like the wind.

Graham closed his eyes. "She always pestered me for tales of adventure, but I never should have indulged her..."

"Sir Graham... Are you all right?" Belgrieve reservedly approached the man.

“I’m sorry you had to witness something so unsightly.”

“Not at all... Are you related to her?”

“She’s my grandniece. Oberon is my nephew...”

This came as a shock to Belgrieve—the blood flowing through the elven hero’s veins belonged to royalty.

However, the elves were generally a peaceful and spiritually oriented bunch. They were the furthest removed from adventurers whose actions were driven by gold and fame. How had Graham been treated then, after choosing that path? How did he feel now, confronting Marguerite who ran away because she admired him so?

Maybe that’s why a dark shadow falls over his face from time to time, Belgrieve reasoned.

Graham sighed. “I bear some responsibility, in any case. I have to chase after her.”

At this, Duncan stepped forward. “Then so shall I!”

But Graham shook his head. “This is my job. I can’t bring you into a...family dispute.”

And with that, Graham was gone. After seeing him off, Belgrieve turned to Duncan.

“You took your time today. What happened?”

“After we sent the young ones home, Sir Graham ventured farther into the forest. However, it seemed a peculiar mana was twisting the space, and we returned after he determined it would take a long time to reach the center.”

In short, the forest was well on its way to becoming a dungeon; things could easily take a turn for the worse. But Marguerite had headed off to the forest with Graham following behind. Marguerite had already defeated three demons, and Graham’s skills went without saying.

Doesn’t look like there’s any place for us, Belgrieve thought as he stroked his beard. “I don’t want to say it, but...maybe it was divine providence that Sir Graham and Marguerite came here...”

“I was thinking the same. No demon would be able to stand against those two. Still, that elf princess is quite the skilled girl. I would love to spar with her someday!”

Belgrieve smiled wryly, seeing that Duncan was his usual self. He envied the fact that even this wasn't enough to throw him off.

Chapter 33: She Was Tired—Exhausted, Even

She was tired—exhausted, even. She was at the usual pub, with the doors and windows left open for the summer season. An evening wind blew over her, and the lamp hanging from the eaves outside the door cast long shadows into the building.

Angeline sat absentmindedly at the counter, among the flickering shadows of drunkards. Miriam and Anessa were not with her today. Across the table, the pub master silently cooked and poured liquor into cups.

She had yet to find anyone willing to entertain the thought of marrying her father. Yuri, Rosetta, and Maria did not seem especially enthusiastic. She asked a few more times after the first, but they continued to dodge the question.

But they won't meet a man better than my dad, Angeline thought. This put her in a bit of a bad mood—they all had terrible taste.

“Hmm.”

The pub master placed sautéed duck and chilled wine in front of her. Angeline took a mouthful of the wine. They must have renewed their magic fridge recently, because the drink was pleasantly chilly.

Come to think of it, the pub master also seemed to be a bachelor. It was hard to tell since he rarely spoke, but he was probably around the same age as Belgrieve. She never saw any kids around the establishment, nor did she see any hints that he had a wife. Wasn't it lonely for a middle-aged man to be single?

“Hey,” Angeline spoke up, as the master dropped a knob of butter into his pan. “Are you married?”

He answered after a beat: “No.”

She wasn't placing an order, so the master continued to disinterestedly face the stove. Angeline went on regardless.

“Ever thought about marriage?”

“Couldn’t say.”

He dropped an egg into the melted butter, nimbly mixing it up. Then he threw in a pinch of salt and spices, producing a pleasant, savory scent.

“Are you lonely?”

“Don’t have time to feel lonely,” he replied after a moment.

He shook the pan, sliding the lightly cooked eggs to the edge and onto a plate, then poured sauce from a small pot over the dish.

“Table four.”

“Right on it.”

A young waiter took off with the plate. The master swiftly washed the frying pan before greasing it again, this time with a small bit of olive oil, and started making a stir-fry of eggplant and bacon.

Angeline pensively stuffed her face with duck and thoughtfully sipped her wine.

“My dad is probably around the same age as you. But he’s single...”

“Did she pass away?”

“No. I’m adopted; he never had a wife.”

“I see.”

A husky voice placed an order behind her. The master glanced at it and nodded. He took a cup and filled it from a pot on the shelf.

“Table four.”

“I thought I’d find a wife for him, so I tried asking a few people, but none of them seemed up for it... I wonder why.”

The master silently poured wine into his frying pan. A torrent of steam rose from it before he added crushed tomatoes and spices to the pan and let the concoction simmer.

“I don’t really know. Can’t say much about someone I’ve never seen before.”

“Should I bring around a portrait or something?”

“That’s up to you.”

The boiled tomato stew was poured into a shallow bowl with a thin loaf of bread and handed to the waiter.

“Table three.”

“Right on.”

“A portrait... That might be nice. Hey, Master, do you know any skilled painters...?”

“I don’t. Did you seriously go around asking loads of people?”

“Yeah. It’s better to have more options.”

Without turning to Angeline, the master took cheese and salami off the shelf, cutting and plating them. He drizzled olive oil over the top and set it down for the seat beside Angeline. Then he submerged sausages in boiling water and began washing up a plate that came back.

“Can’t say I recommend that.”

“Why not...?”

“Sure, your father would have his pick, but how about you think about how those women would feel? No one would want to go out there just to be turned down.”

Angeline grimaced. Perhaps that was true. What if someone made the trek to distant Turnera with determination only to be shot down? How sad would that be? Angeline had been treating the matter quite lightly, but it was a life-altering decision.

She could not possibly rank the three women she had reached out to. They all had their merits and flaws, and it felt terribly unfair that only one could win out in the end. She got a feeling she might be damaging the relationship between them.

Am I being irresponsible? Angeline wondered, feeling gloomy.

“You may be right.”

“Well, it’s not like what I say means anything here.”

He dried off the washed plate and tucked it away. He extracted the sausages, plated them with pickled mustard, and set them down at another counter seat. Then, he tossed butter into the pan again.

Angeline downed the rest of her wine in one gulp, then fished around her wallet and placed a coin on the table.

“I need a whole bottle, Master.”

The master silently uncorked a bottle for her. Angeline poured herself drink after drink, and after her third glass, she let out a deep breath and held up her reddened cheeks with her hands.

“But I want a mom... What should I do?”

“You can’t just go around arranging marriages. You’re putting people on guard. It’s not like you’re a noble.”

“I see... You’re right.”

In that case, instead of spelling it out, perhaps she could just ask if they wanted to visit Turnera for the heck of it. Once they met Belgrieve there, they would surely understand his charms. And that would be the end of it.

Angeline giggled, and the master looked at her suspiciously. “What?”

“Hee hee... Thank you, Master. I never knew you could talk this much...” Angeline said, as she polished off the last piece of duck. She took out another coin.

The master frowned, taking the empty sauté plate. “What can I get you?”

“Picked olive and sausage...and raw tomato.”

She ended up drinking until the dead of night. The wind was brisk by the time she left, and while there were bars here and there that were still open, most households had their lights turned out, their residents already in bed. The breeze felt comfortable against her drink-flushed cheeks.

Angeline squinted as she slowly followed the road home. The moonlight shone down on the stone pavement. A cat crossed the street, then another

chased after it. But there were hardly any people about. She would pass by the occasional drunkard or soldier on patrol. The soldiers would stop her, as she was a girl walking around at night, but they immediately gave in once they saw her S-Rank plate.

“When I return in the fall... Hmm, Yuri has her receptionist job, and Rosetta is busy at the orphanage... I guess that just leaves Maria.”

Angeline intended to go home again at the start of fall. She wanted to eat freshly plucked cowberries, and she was already missing Belgrieve. However, she didn't want to return too soon—that would surely make him suspicious of her ability to make it on her own. She had to pull through the summer. The excitement that came with looking forward to her future plans made it worth the wait.

She had intended to walk straight home, but the moon was pretty and the wind was cool, so she decided to walk a bit more.

Compared to Turnera, life in Orphen was dizzying. It all went by so fast that when she finally found the time for a leisurely stroll, it felt far more relaxing. She felt a nice, airy sensation as the drink flowed through her system.

Streetlamps lined the sides of the road, lighting the path with vermilion flames. As she trudged on and on, she saw a figure enter the side street ahead. Angeline quietly followed, her suspicion piqued.

She could tell even in the dark—it was a boy and girl standing side by side. They were both white-haired; the boy was around fifteen, the girl no more than ten. It was Byaku and Charlotte, the ones she had fought in Bordeaux.



Angeline suppressed her presence, tailing them silently until she decided to call out to them. “Oi!” As Byaku turned, she grabbed him by the neck and pinned him against the wall.

“Don’t move. Shout and I’ll cut him.”

Charlotte hurriedly covered her mouth before she could scream.

Angeline glared at Byaku. “Why are you here...?”

“Who knows?”

Angeline kneed him in the stomach, eliciting a pained groan.

“I haven’t forgiven you for what you did in Bordeaux...”

“*Gah...* So what? Gonna kill us then?”

“That would be what’s best for the world,” Angeline said as she grabbed the hilt of her sword. Something soft pressed against her hand, and when she looked she saw Charlotte desperately clinging to her arm.

“I-I’m begging you! Please don’t kill Byaku!”

“Let go. I won’t hold back just because you’re a child...”

“Please! I apologize! I’m sorry! I’ll do anything it takes for you to forgive us! So please, at least spare his life!”

“Let go.”

Angeline grimaced as Charlotte burst into tears, violently shaking the girl off. Charlotte fell to the ground in a spray of coins.

“You’re loaded,” said Angeline. “What? Are you robbers now...?”

“We were planning on returning it,” Byaku muttered.

She turned back to him. “What?”

“I admit it, we scammed people out of their money. We decided to call it quits after you beat us up. We’re going around refunding all the folks who bought our amulets.”

“Do you think I’ll believe you?”

“I don’t. I just said it for her honor.”

Angeline looked at Charlotte, who was now clinging to her feet. On closer inspection, her clothes were torn and filthy, and her sleeves were tattered. Even Byaku looked worse for wear.

Suddenly, what she was doing seemed idiotic to her. She unhanded Byaku, who fell to his knees in a coughing fit.

“I haven’t forgiven you, but...I won’t sully my blade against someone who won’t even fight back.”

“Thank you so much! Waaaah!”

Charlotte wailed, still clinging to her legs. Byaku held his throat, scowling as he looked at Angeline.

“Where’s all that power coming from in those twig arms of yours?”

“Shut up.” Angeline stood Charlotte up and forced a handkerchief into her hands. “How long are you going to cry for...? You’re making it look like this is all my fault.”

“Waah... I-I’m sorry...” Charlotte wiped off her face.

After a deep sigh, Angeline said, “I have loads of things I want to ask you two... Especially you.” She gestured at Byaku. “You talked as if you knew about me.”

“I can’t answer anything right now,” said Byaku.

“Why? What do you—”

Before she could finish, she felt a sudden murderous intent and drew her sword. A knife flew out of the darkness from the depths of the alley. Angeline grabbed Charlotte as she knocked it down with her blade.

There was a stench that pricked her nose. “Poison? Nasty stuff...” The knife didn’t seem to have been aimed at her. She glanced at Byaku. “Someone must hate you a lot.”

“None of your business.” Byaku waved his hand. There was a crunching of barrels and garbage as several people leaped out of the darkness, all wearing

the same clothes and masks.

Charlotte's face stiffened in fear.

"The Inquisition!"

"Huh...? What's that?" Angeline said as she intercepted the sword of an assailant.

Their attackers were incredibly nimble, running along the building walls to surround them.

Angeline took her stance as she shoved Charlotte onto Byaku. "Who are they...? Do you know them? Why are they after you?"

"Y-Yes, of course. They're from Lucrecia's—"

Several silver blades closed in before Charlotte could finish—all of them sharp and aimed precisely at their vitals. Their movements rivaled those of high-ranking adventurers.

But Angeline was no ordinary warrior. The fact that they aimed for her vitals only made them easier to predict and deal with. She parried a blade and kicked the first assailant, then smacked her hilt into the temple of the second. The mask flew off, revealing a young man. But his eyes were hollow and filled with madness.

"What? He's like a doll..."

"Don't let your guard down."

There was a sound above them—one had tried to get the drop on them, but Byaku sent the assassin flying with his magic.

Angeline glared at Byaku. "I never let my guard down... I knew he was there."

"Hmph... They erase their sense of self with magic and medicine. They'll chase you down to their last breath."

"That's foul..." Angeline frowned, seeing the attacker move with the exact same deftness despite being bloodied and injured. She hated these sorts of things.

The area was covered in a pale light as Byaku uncloaked his three-dimensional

magic circles. This was accompanied by a terrible sound—one of their assailants had been crushed flat beneath it.

“Why do I have to deal with this?”

But those without sanity could not be negotiated with. If they would chase them down to death, then killing was the only option. Angeline shook off her slight hesitation, beheading her encroaching foe.

Byaku was strong enough that even Sasha had been backed into a corner when facing him; once he joined forces with Angeline, their attackers stood no chance. The battle was over in an instant, and then the alley was filled with dead silence.

Angeline wiped the blood from her sword with a frown. “Agh... I can never get used to killing people. Makes me sick.”

She had now sobered up too, even though she had been so pleasantly drunk before. She sighed, then nudged her chin towards Byaku and Charlotte.

“Come. I don’t know what the situation is, but I have things to ask you.”

Byaku looked at Charlotte, who nodded.

“Yes... We’re in your care.”

The girl was shaking. Looking at her like this, she seemed like any ordinary little girl. *Did this child really turn Bordeaux upside down with undead?* Angeline had to wonder. There was undoubtedly someone pulling the strings.

They swiftly slipped away from the backstreets and hastened to her lodging house. It was a small room, but not so small as to feel cramped for three people.

Angeline drew the curtains and locked the door.

“Sit,” she instructed.

Charlotte fidgeted as she timidly took a seat. Byaku stood behind her.

Angeline placed a kettle of water over a flamestone stove. The stones would let off a tremendous heat when arranged correctly. Stoves using them went for a high price, but the cost was no object to Angeline.

She stripped off her coat before sitting across from Charlotte. Angeline observed the girl—she had lost her hat somewhere. Her soft, silky white hair was disheveled, and she had conspicuous split ends. There were light bruises on her arms and cheek, and her clothes were filthy too.

“What is the Inquisition?”

“They are a secret organization from Lucrecia. They covertly deal with heretics and those who oppose the papacy.”

“Hmm... So why are they after you?”

Charlotte seemed lost. It took some time before she mustered the resolve to speak at length: about how she was born to a Lucrecian cardinal; how she was dragged into a power struggle and labeled a heretic for her albinism; how her parents gave their lives to let her escape; how she wandered before meeting those attempting to revive Solomon, and ended up touring the empire as a saint of the cult; and finally, her travels after being defeated in Bordeaux.

Angeline gave a satisfied nod. The reason the cult’s activities had died down in Orphen was because this girl had stopped inciting them. The organization had no strong foundation; it had gained zealous followers on the spot from Charlotte’s speeches and “miracles.” Apart from the fraudulent talismans they distributed, they had no proper organizational structure or management. With no leaders, it was clear why they had fallen apart.

Charlotte’s spirits sank the more she spoke.

“I really believed—if I gained followers, I was sure Solomon would help me do something about the rotten clergy of the Vienna cult. I knew somewhere in my heart it would never happen, that we were scamming. But my eyes were so blinded by revenge, I refused to see it...” Charlotte sniffled. “Once I lost my ring, I decided it was time to stop... I hate Vienna, but revenge wouldn’t make mother and father happy.”

Angeline narrowed her eyes coldly. “And yet, you turned Count Bordeaux into an undead fiend...?”

Charlotte froze. Her shoulders quivered. Her eyes let out tear after tear. “E-Even... Even I don’t know why I did that! I-I didn’t...know! I just hated it... I

wasn't thinking..."

She sobbed to the point she could no longer form words. Angeline frowned, thinking the girl was strangely shameless about it.

Finally, Byaku opened his mouth. "Count Malta was the one who suggested using the former Count of Bordeaux."

"How fishy. You expect me to believe that?"

"I'm not telling you to believe. I'm stating a fact. The matter stands whether you believe it or not."

"But, but... If I hadn't done that..."

Presented with an albino girl clasping her chest, sobbing, and heaving, Angeline's mouth remained stretched into a straight line. She would not waver so easily. She recalled how painful it was just imagining herself in the same situation.

Then, she wondered what Belgrieve would have done. He wouldn't have forgiven her just like that, but he wouldn't hold it over her either. Angeline couldn't imagine him acting so sharply out of personal resentment either. Charlotte was still ten years old, and it would be immature to denounce her for not always being rational. For whom did she harbor such anger at Charlotte? Belgrieve wouldn't be happy if she bullied someone for her own selfish rage.

Angeline closed her eyes to contain her emotions. Her anger was not mistaken. But at the very least, she did not have the right to judge them. It made sense to bring them before Helvetica in Bordeaux.

"You're pretty beaten up..." Angeline said, opening her eyes. She reached out and stroked the bruises on Charlotte's cheeks. Either ticklish or in pain, Charlotte lurched back. Her eyes were tired and red.

"I went to the people who bought talismans, and told them I was sorry, and to please take their money back... But they called me a liar and hit me. Byaku helped me when they were going to get more violent than that... But now that the Inquisition has their eyes on us..."

Angeline added floral tea to the boiling water before responding. "By the

sound of things, you'll be a traitor in the eyes of whoever was supporting you. The Inquisition sees you as heretics. You'll be targeted no matter where you go..."

"Ugh..." Charlotte covered her face.

Angeline placed a cup of tea in front of her. "Drink. It will help you calm down." Then she turned to Byaku. "I can't let you run free. You have the answers I need—it would be troublesome if you were erased. I'll let you stay, at least for the night."

"You sure you can trust us? I could strangle you in your sleep."

"Do you think I'd lose to the likes of you? Just settle down already."

Byaku furrowed his brow but said nothing. Taking that as an affirmative, Angeline patted Charlotte on the head. "You're ruining your beautiful hair... Let's go to the bathhouse tomorrow."

"Huh...but..."

"I haven't forgiven you. But that's why I need to bring you to Bordeaux so you can apologize. Okay? I'll protect you until then."

"O-Oh!"

Charlotte cracked a slight, relieved smile. Her face was simply that of an innocent ten-year-old girl.

Chapter 34: Night Turned to Morning

Night turned to morning, but Graham and Marguerite had yet to return. The space within the forest was twisted, so maybe it would take some time to conquer. Or perhaps there were other factors at play. In any case, it was about time for Belgrieve to begin worrying.

“I can’t imagine anything bad happening to those two, but...”

“You can never know. Perhaps the demon was stronger than expected... Bell! Let’s go help out after all!” Duncan said with heated fervor.

It was certainly curious. However, if they were up against a foe even those two could not match, Belgrieve doubted he would be of any assistance. No—perhaps if they were injured and retreating, he could at least offer support.

He prayed they were simply taking their time on a long and twisted trail, and that if it was something worse, perhaps he could help out. Both Belgrieve and Duncan were confident enough with their weapons—at least, confident that they wouldn’t drag anyone down. Their efforts would not be wasted, in any case.

“Got it... Let’s go. But we’re not good enough for a demon. Watch the situation closely and don’t do anything reckless.”

“Well said, Bell! Ha ha ha! I’m raring to go!”

Does he really get it? Belgrieve wondered, though Duncan’s never-changing cheer certainly helped keep him settled as well.

They each picked up their weapons and headed out. It was a cloudy morning, their shadows only faintly lingering at their feet.

Into the woods they went, defeating low-grade fiends along the way. The farther they ventured in, the more everything seemed to turn a pale, ashen shade. The trees, the ground, and everything else were gradually losing their features. In this empty whiteness, the shadows that still loomed seemed all the more ominous.

Belgrieve had walked these woods for over twenty years, but this was all completely new. He took out a compass, and the needle spun around wildly—it did not seem he would be getting his bearings anytime soon. At this time of day, the winds mostly blew towards the mountain, yet even the winds seemed to shift irregularly in every direction.

After choosing a single direction and walking, they soon realized they were back where they had started, with only the corpse of a fiend as proof.

“Looks like it really is twisted in here...”

“Any idea where we’re headed, Bell?” Duncan said, resting his battle-axe against his shoulder.

Belgrieve tapped his peg leg against the ground and looked upward. The sky beyond the leaves was a pale gray, and the faint shadows made it hard to tell where the sun was shining from.

“How troublesome... This isn’t the forest I know...”

“Hmm... Now what?” Duncan stuck his weapon into the ground and leaned against it.

For a while, Belgrieve looked around, but he eventually began walking to test his theory.

Duncan followed, rather startled. “You know the way?”

“No, I’m going off a hunch.”

“A...hunch?” Duncan furrowed his brow anxiously, but Belgrieve returned a smile.

“It might seem laughable, but when thinking it out doesn’t work, we can try relying on our innate animalistic instincts.”

“I...see. If you say so...”

Duncan didn’t seem so convinced, but he decided to trust Belgrieve. He tagged along, keeping a close watch of their surroundings.

After walking a while, they came to where the tree roots twisted into knots beneath their feet. In this place, moss, lichen, and other such things spread far

and wide like a carpet, and the trees towered high above, their branches entangled in convoluted ways to form a ceiling of sorts.

“It’s changed considerably...”

Belgrieve cautiously took in the lay of the land, assessing the wind, any traces of fiends, and the directions he could be attacked from if it came to combat. While he pressed on with instinct and rule of thumb, he was still trying to find some sort of logic behind the situation.

That was when a wind blew from directly overhead. There was a rustling sound as one of the branches swayed.

Belgrieve looked upward. “I see... I’ve got it.” He began to walk away.

Duncan rushed to keep up. “Wh-What do you mean, Bell? I don’t get any of this...”

“We get plenty of southward winds this time of year. The heart of the forest is to the north. We should get there if we follow wherever the wind blows.”

“B-But the wind is blowing from all directions...”

“Within the forest, yes. But it looks like it doesn’t stretch as far as the skies. The winds up there blow in one direction.”

Duncan gazed up at what could only faintly be seen by the light trickling through the gaps in the canopy above. The leaves at the very top did seem to be rustling in a consistent direction.

“I’m impressed... That’s quite the observation.”

“The strong gust was what gave it away. Maybe the forest fae sent it down for me,” Belgrieve joked.

The duo moved quite a bit faster now that they knew where they were going. At times, they would look up to check the wind direction before proceeding farther. It seemed as though the fiends they encountered were gradually growing stronger.

Duncan cleaved through the head of a spiderlike foe with the end of his axe. “Good grief, more of them are coming out now.”

“Yeah... But they’re B-Rank at most. That wouldn’t even slow those two down...”

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes and looked around. The trees were growing thicker, and their branches were tangling with ivy and bushes as if to form a wall. It was a labyrinth of trees; it seemed this area really was becoming a dungeon.

When he looked up, the branches had finally become so entwined that the gaps were all filled and he couldn’t see the sky.

Belgrieve sighed. “All right... We’ll have to steel ourselves now, Duncan.”

“Ha ha ha, I was ready from the start! Onwards!”

Belgrieve looked back with a wry smile. Although they had marked the trees on the way there, he didn’t know if that would be useful or not. But what good would it do to shy away now? He let out a deep breath and set his sights ahead.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

○

She could hear the grating sound of trees rubbing against each other as they moved like wild creatures, their branches twisting and covering the clearing with a domed ceiling.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Marguerite gritted her teeth. Her surroundings were littered with fiend corpses, but beyond them lurked countless more of their living brethren, their hostility directed straight at her.

Across from the fiends was a child. The child sat on a branch, its feet dangling and swinging. Its long black hair trailed in the wind, and its black eyes watched Marguerite with a peculiar sense of sorrow.

“Pitying me, eh... The hell do you think you are?” Marguerite readied her slender sword and raced forth swiftly.

The fiends advanced the moment she made her move. Marguerite grimaced in frustration as she began slicing through them with the grace of a dancer.

These fiends were not high ranking, but they were troublesome in large numbers. While Marguerite was quite powerful, she was a fencer with no magic

to make clearing the field easier, and couldn't help but be at a disadvantage against an enemy who could overwhelm her with sheer numbers.

Even so, Marguerite was undeterred and moved without ever losing her momentum. The black blood of fiends sprayed into the air, staining her pale skin. She swung her sword with fearsome skill, not letting a single foe get near enough to attack her. Still, the fiends closed in like a surging wave.

The child on the branch sorrowfully closed its eyes and pointed a finger at Marguerite.

Feeling a sudden sense of dread, Marguerite leaped from the spot. A black shadow clambered up from where she had been, taking on a grotesque form. It barely maintained a humanoid likeness, but its parts were constantly shifting.

A beady eye burst open on its otherwise featureless black shadow face. Then, just as she thought one hideous eye was enough, the air was filled with uncanny pops as several more eyes filled the thing's face. Immediately, they fixed their eldritch gaze on the elf girl, and she could feel their madness creeping over her.

But Marguerite only gripped her sword tighter, a ferocious smile on her lips. "Fine... Have it your way!" she shouted.

The shadowy fiend came at her. Marguerite raised a war cry as she met it with her blade.

Graham watched the scene with folded arms from behind. He was outside the clearing, where the branches crossed like bars to prevent any intrusion. He had not drawn his sword, nor did he seem to have any intention of assisting Marguerite. He simply observed her fight, his eyes a bit cold as he let out a sigh that could be taken as either disappointment or resignation.

"I don't get it..." he said.

Chasing after Marguerite, Graham had managed to catch up with her rather quickly. She was an elf who was accustomed to moving through the forests, but she wasn't so skillful at exploring dungeons. It was all too easy for Graham to find her.

The elf princess would not lend an ear to his persistent attempts to persuade her, and Graham eventually folded, leaving her to do whatever she wanted. She

would need to learn firsthand the error of her ways, and he was hoping she would come to some kind of realization in the midst of combat.

Marguerite showed no such signs as yet, continuing to swing her sword with reckless abandon.

“It’s strong. But that doesn’t explain...”

Graham looked at the child on the branch. It watched Marguerite with a sad light in its eyes.

This was most peculiar. The quality of its mana was similar to the beings called demons. However, he could only feel a faint hint of it from the child; instead, the mana filled the entirety of the tree-forged dome, drawing the fiends to attack.

Graham continued to observe it.

Perhaps the mana had originally come from the child, and had been released to form this peculiar scenery. At the very least, the child seemed to be at the epicenter, and to be in control. However, even if the mana originated there, that did not mean that slaying the child would make it go away; there was a chance it would run amok once it lost its controller instead.

Even the seasoned warrior Graham couldn’t make sense of it. Despite possessing mana equal to a demon, the child never used it directly, and instead only allowed the mana to influence its surroundings.

“It’s almost as if it’s made a home for itself,” Graham muttered. It seemed as though Marguerite hadn’t realized this. She saw the child as a demon and was convinced that killing it would resolve the situation.

Graham remembered being stupid and reckless in his youth. There was a time when he sincerely thought he simply had to cut down everything that stood in his way. He had disregarded the warnings of seasoned adventurers as mere ramblings of old men.

The fact that he understood how she felt made him even less keen on convincing her. It was simply far too difficult to stop a rampaging youth.

That was when he felt a presence behind him. Graham turned to face it, only

to utter “My word” in surprise.

There stood Belgrieve and Duncan, both of whom were staring quizzically at the dome.

“Gentlemen... What brings you here?”

“Well, the night came and went, and we thought something might have happened to you two,” said Duncan.

Graham narrowed his eyes. “I see. It’s already that late?”

“You couldn’t tell? I figured you’d at least be able to tell when the sun rises and sets here...”

“The distortions must be making time move differently. Here, the sun hasn’t even set.”

Duncan’s eyes widened, but Belgrieve had already vaguely suspected it. He nodded, then asked, “Where are we...?”

“The transformed heart of the forest. It’s on a small scale, but this is where the mana is amassing.”

“Marguerite!” Duncan shouted, having peered into the dome. He turned to Graham. “We have to help her!”

But Graham calmly shook his head. “This is my lesson to her... If words avail nothing, she must learn from experience.”

“B-But it’s a demon! If anything happens...”

“You need not worry, Sir Duncan. As far as I can tell, it is not strong enough to kill Marguerite.”

“O-Oh...”

Duncan clasped the branch barrier unsatisfied, his eyes fixed on the battle.

Belgrieve watched with a frown. “Is that child the demon?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Its mana is similar, but it is a mystery.”

“I see...”

It was quite hard to pin down. As far as Belgrieve could see, the child did not

seem sinister. Putting the fiends aside, the child did not seem to give off any malice or ill intent. He wondered if he would be able to cut the kid down if he was put in that position.

Not that this seemed to matter to Marguerite. She saw the child as something she had to defeat—something that filled Graham with a deep sense of shame.

As someone with a daughter who fought fiends, Belgrieve could understand how Graham felt, as well as why some drastic measures were needed to encourage Marguerite's growth. However, this seemed quite half-hearted as far as he was concerned, and it irritated him a bit.

Under the watchful eyes of the three men, Marguerite sliced through the grotesque shadow monstrosity and charged at the child. The child wagged a finger—a shadow crept from the surrounding darkness, gaining mass to stand before the elven princess.

“You’re in the way!”

She cut a sharp line with her blade through the shadow, which split and melted away. With one graceful leap, she had reached her foe.

“Drop dead!”



Marguerite twisted her body. She drew her sword back and then snapped forward like an unbound spring.

The child remained motionless, simply staring at Marguerite and muttering, “Lone...ly...”

And then, the moment she thought her sword would reach, Marguerite froze. She felt something pulling at her from behind, and when she turned back, she saw shadowy tendrils wrapped around her leg.

She was yanked back, slammed against the ground before she could prepare herself for the fall.

“Gah... Agh!” She groaned as the air was forced from her lungs. Her mind was sent into a frenzy by a degree of pain she hadn’t felt in a long time.

Did I let my guard down? If I lose here, it will be exactly as granduncle says. You’ve gotta be screwing with me!

“To hell with that!”

Marguerite forced herself up, slicing away the fiends coming at her. She tore her leg free and mustered her strength to take another leap.

The child’s eyes grew sadder and sadder as it watched. “Scary...” it muttered under its breath.

It waved a finger, and a shadow extended straight from the darkness behind it, planting itself firmly into Marguerite’s stomach. The blood was rushing to her head, making her late to react. She took the full brunt of the blow and was sent flying back.

She nevertheless managed to land safely and rose unsteadily to her feet. She could taste iron in her mouth. The fiends around her converged at once, knowing they wouldn’t get a better chance. While Marguerite wanted to fight them off, her body wouldn’t do what she told it to.

“Grrr... Dammit!”

She tried to take her stance only to stagger, but was held steady by a large hand. Marguerite lifted her face in surprise. It was Belgrieve, with a stern look on his face.

“Old man... Why are you...?”

“We can talk later. Graham,” he said, pushing Marguerite behind him for Graham to catch. Belgrieve drew his sword to fend off the fiends.

Duncan flourished his battle-axe before bursting into combat. The sight of this caused the princess to stir.

“Not yet!” she cried. “I’m not done yet...”

“Marguerite.”

Her body twitched at this solemn tone.

“Grand...uncle...”

“Be reasonable.”

There was a moment of silence. “Dammit,” she whispered and hung her head.

As he carved through fiends of all sorts, Belgrieve made his way to the child. He towered over it, and it looked up at him with those same sad eyes. Belgrieve’s expression softened and he sheathed his sword.

The child blinked.

Then Belgrieve was off. He hurried back to Graham. “Let’s leave. There’s no point in doing any more than this.”

“Did you figure something out?”

“It really is just a kid, and it’s scared. It’s only defending itself because we attacked.”

“Hmm... So that’s how it looks to you too.” Graham hoisted Marguerite over his shoulder. “Retreat.”

“We’re leaving, Duncan!”

“Right, on it! I’ll take the rear!”

With Duncan at the tail end, the four left the dome and ran. The child saw them off with a perplexed face. The fiends that had crowded in were gone before anyone knew it, and all that remained was the sound of the wind shaking the trees.

The child’s eyes wandered as he muttered, “Lonely...”

Chapter 35: Say That Something like Affection Was Given Form

Say that something like affection was given form. Such was the curious quandary proposed by the robed man.

He went on, "Then what happens to what's left behind?"

"Hmm." The man in white sitting across from him laughed. "Solomon sure did something stupid. Sure, he made them immortal, but their egos can just be broken apart like that? Sounds like a pain to me."

"The homunculi want to return to Solomon. Their affection drives their every action. Solomon artificially implanted that part of their egos himself; they're made to adore him. For this very reason, the homunculi that lose the object of their affection go mad."

"So, about Ba'al."

"His affection was at the forefront, and thus, only his affection managed to escape." The robed man placed a dark gemstone on the table. "Awaken him, and you will release only hatred and destruction."

"Sounds good to me. He'll be far easier to use without his creepy love for Solomon."

"If you can control him, that is." The robed man tucked the stone away with a frown.

It was a dazzling room. The high-class furnishings were decadently ornamented, the whole room illuminated by the chandelier hanging from the ceiling which burned with magic flame.

The man in white stood and walked to the window. He stared out at the lights of the night sky, flickering here and there. Then, he turned with a sinister smile.

"Still, I'm surprised you got here so fast."

“I just regained the power I lent to Caim’s brat.”

“Ah, teleportation. His name was Byaku, right? You assigned him to the cardinal’s daughter. What happened after that? Are they doing a good job, firing people up?”

“They betrayed us. Samigina was destroyed—it will be some time before it revives. With their ray of hope gone, it will be difficult to move those idiots who fell for her incitement. Soon, we’ll have lost them all.”

The man in white seemed quite amused at this. “Ha ha, a complete failure then... So what next?”

“Who knows? I could capture the girl for experimentation, but she’s not that valuable. Of course, the Church of Vienna’s out to get her, so she might be erased before we can even reach her.”

“Heh heh, to them, she’s a spark that could blow them sky-high. Of course they’ll erase her now that they know she’s alive. Is the Inquisition on her trail yet?”

“The nobles and agitators we got on board with our religion are being picked off one by one. Perhaps they’re cleaning house while they’re at it.”

“Good grief. I guess the cult’s going to be retired then. You’ll have to move more carefully now.”

“That was always my intention. The cult was smoke and mirrors—I’m not going to rely on something without substance.” Plucking a cup from the table, the robed man took a sip of tea. “The ones up north were crushed by that elf tomboy. Berith, Ose, and Morax were destroyed. It will take time for them to revive.”

“You win some, you lose some. And we’re going to win in the end,” the man in white said with glee.

The robed man grimaced. “Have you heard about an adventurer called the Black-Haired Valkyrie?”

“Who?”

“She’s the one who beat Ba’al. She also contained the uproar in Bordeaux.”

“Hmm, not bad. What about her?”

“As you can guess by the name, her hair is black. So are her eyes.”

Hearing this, the man in white sat, looking rather amused. He propped up an elbow on the table and leaned forward. “She’s not dyeing it, is she? How does it look to you?”

“I haven’t seen her personally, but there’s a high chance. I intend to look into it.”

“Heh heh, it will be pretty funny if she’s a success.”

“Don’t be stupid. It’ll be even worse if she’s a complete success.”

“You have a point. Aw, it’s on us for letting her get away.”

“Hmm... I’m leaving. Look out for yourself.”

“Naturally. So what happened to Ba’al’s affection or whatnot?”

“Not my problem. We have his core here. That fragment will fall apart on its own once the mana runs out.”

The robed man placed a hand to his chest. His form flickered like a mirage, and then it was like he had never been there at all.

○

Though they had left in the morning, the sun had set by the time they returned to the village. They had supposedly only been gone for a short time, and the experience of this discrepancy in the flow of time was startling to them. They had in fact been gone for an entire day, and the village youths had formed a search party to look for them—a welcome development as far as Belgrieve was concerned.

Marguerite had been quite worked up in battle, but once she had calmed down while Graham carried her on his back, her wounds and exertions caught up with her and sapped all of her energy. She had drifted off along the way, and now lay sleeping on the bed.

Her slumbering face belied her nature; one would never guess she was the sort to curse or run rampant with her sword.

With a sidelong glance at her, Graham sighed. “What a troublesome girl,” he said. “I hope she learns something from this.”

“You have my sympathy, Sir Graham,” Belgrieve said with a smile as he brewed another pot of tea.

Duncan looked at him with his arms folded. “You surprised me back there, Bell. You were faster than the wind when Marguerite was sent flying! I thought you were right beside me but a moment before!”

“I forgot myself...and overexerted a bit.”

“Not at all. She was spared from serious injury thanks to you.” Graham looked at Marguerite and closed his eyes. “It seems I’m terrible at raising disciples. Marguerite picked up the sword, but never picked up any discipline... I tried to be stern with her as if she was my own daughter.” Graham launched into a tale.

Marguerite had grown up without much love from her father Oberon, king of the Western Forest, who had to shoulder the responsibilities of being the head of his clan. He was unable to give her any special attention, and she was mostly raised by her mother and wet nurse.

Around that time, Graham had settled in the western woods to live a life of retirement. After his many years of adventuring, he had neither wife nor children to return to. He had cast aside the life of an elf to venture into the outside world, and faced strong criticism when he returned.

Even so, he had slain demons and other high-ranking fiends, and these deeds were regarded as heroic by the elves as well. He was gradually accepted back into elven society, and some of the starry-eyed young ones would drop by to hear his tales.

“Oberon looked up to me too. It was never made public, but he would often come to seek my counsel, as I had knowledge of the world outside.”

“I see...”

“His visits meant I would see Marguerite as well. She was interested in the world, and wanted to hear the stories of my travels.”

Marguerite simply couldn’t settle for a quiet life. She was far more curious

than the typical elf, and her eyes would glimmer each time Graham spoke of a fiend laid to rest. She would always urge him to tell more and more.

“Marguerite was terribly envious of how I made a name for myself.”

“Do you mean she wanted to be recognized?” Belgrieve asked.

He nodded. “Elves do not place much emphasis on individuality. We are free from the chains of self, achieving greater spiritual peace and harmony by becoming one with nature. But Marguerite was different. She wanted to be acknowledged as an individual...and my stories admittedly spurred her on.”

“Well ain’t that the sorta thing anyone her age would think? Back when I was young, I set off from home with nothing but a dream...”

“That’s the difference between elves and humans, Sir Duncan. Both Marguerite and I—we are heretics, cut off from the common sense of our species.”

Was she one of them too? Belgrieve thought back to the elven girl in his memories.

In any case, after many twists and turns, Graham taught Marguerite the blade. The elves did not have anything against combat. Fiends were no strangers to their lands, and they hunted for meat as well. It was admirable for an elf to learn how to handle a weapon.

Marguerite improved at a frightening rate. She had inherited strong mana with her royal blood, and once Graham taught her how to use it, she had picked up several sword styles in the blink of an eye. She combined them all and polished them into her own personal technique.

Her talent only made her yearn for Graham’s path even more than before. Finally the day came for her to take flight with a sword in hand.

“Elves are cold to those who leave. They are beings who disrupt the harmony of the tribe. Oberon and his queen Titania had to adopt the same attitude to keep the tribe together.”

“And that’s why you were entrusted with finding her?”

“Oberon is always busy, you see. Perhaps I’ve spent more time with

Marguerite than he has..." Graham sighed. "An elf who leaves the forest leads a lonesome existence—always receiving funny looks, and feared more often than not. But even if she returned home, it would take time before she was accepted again. I wanted to stop her precisely because I had experienced this firsthand."

"That's none of your business, granduncle."

The three of them turned to the voice. Marguerite was sitting up, scratching her head drowsily.

"You're up... How do you feel?"

"Satisfied yet, granduncle? It turned out just how you wanted it to."

Marguerite sharply glared at Graham.

Graham looked back with a furrowed brow. "Why must you be so cynical about it...? I've never denied your way of life. However, you'll only drive yourself into a corner if you keep acting recklessly."

"I'm tired of all the lectures..." Marguerite tried to stand, but pain caused her to fall to her knees with a grimace.

Duncan hurriedly raced over to her. "Not a good idea. Your wounds haven't closed yet!"

"Don't touch me!" Marguerite slapped his hand away, growling like a beast. She turned to Belgrieve with a self-deprecating smile. "I'm sure you're all laughing, the lot of you! Some stupid little girl charged in recklessly and got done in, huh? Must have been quite the show!"

"Marguerite!" Graham stood, enraged. "That's enough! Duncan and Belgrieve rushed out to find you because they were worried! And this is how you repay them? If you keep pushing people away, then who will ever recognize you? Who in their right mind would praise you?! Answer me!"

Marguerite silently bit her lip. She teetered to her feet and swiftly but unsteadily left the house.

"Miss Marguerite!" Duncan started off to chase her.

"Leave her, Duncan! How stupid can that girl be... My patience has run out!"

Graham fell into a chair. This was the first time the soft-spoken man had ever

shown his anger, and it was enough for Duncan to freeze in his tracks.

However, it wasn't enough for Belgrieve, who headed for the door.

Graham grimaced. "You don't have to chase her."

"You know that's not true, Sir Graham. I have a daughter myself, so I understand how you feel...and that your anger is directed at yourself as well."

"But..."

"You're clashing precisely because of how close you are. I apologize for meddling, but I think I should go. Will you leave it to me?"

"You have my gratitude. I don't know how I can thank you."

Belgrieve left with a smile.

The clouds had cleared up during the day, and a starry sky was spread out above. There was no moon that night, but this allowed the stars to shine with greater intensity.

One shadow lingered at the end of the yard—Marguerite, who hadn't been able to go far owing to her injuries. She leaned against the fence, breathing heavily as she stared fixedly at the ground near her feet.

When Belgrieve slowly approached her, she spoke without looking at him. "What's your problem, old man? I don't need your sympathy."

"Ha ha, that's not what I'm here for. I thought we could talk a bit."

Belgrieve stood beside her, his back against the same fence. Marguerite sullenly turned away.

"Hmph... I've got nothing to say to you."

"Are you sure? I'm something of a swordsman myself, and I think your skill in the blade is worthy of respect. Despite using a rapier, your slashes were as sharp and fierce as a longsword. Your synergy with your sword must be quite strong."

Marguerite's brow twitched. "P-Pretty much..." she hesitantly muttered.

"What sort of training do you do?"

“I mean...the usual stuff, right? I practice my swings, trace the steps of each form, meditate while focusing on the flow of my mana. Then thrusting and slashing at targets. I don't do anything special.”

“I see... Your movements were unique, like you've pieced multiple styles together. I'm surprised you polished it up to that degree. Color me impressed.”

“R-Really...? Hee hee...”

She nearly laughed before she caught herself and immediately covered it up with a sharp frown.

Belgrieve chuckled. “I have a daughter, you see. She's working as an adventurer in a city to the south. She's overly doting, but she's overflowing with talent in swordsmanship.”

“Hmm... Who's stronger? Me or her?”

“Oh, I couldn't say. My daughter's quite something, you know. She's slain a demon too...”

“Hey, old man...”

“What's wrong?”

“I'm still eighteen. Don't be so respectful, it's creeping me out. I left the forest already; why should I still be treated like a princess?”

“I see, then I guess I'll take you up on that.”

“Good... So how many demons has that daughter of yours taken down?”

“One, as far as I know.”

Marguerite grinned triumphantly. “I got three of the bastards. Looks like I'm stronger.”

“That may be true... But I don't know who would come out on top if you actually fought.”

“Of course I would. You know who I learned the sword from? My granduncle, that's who! Who taught your daughter?”

Belgrieve gave a troubled laugh, stroking his beard. “I did. Looks like you've got the better master by far.”

“Ah ha ha ha! Are you that strong, old man?” Marguerite burst out laughing. However, the laughter made her wounds ache, and even as she chuckled, her brow was knit with tension.

Belgrieve patted her on the back. “I’m not strong. In my case, my daughter’s natural talents were a cut above the rest.”

“Hey, you’re making it sound like I don’t got talent.”

“There’s no need to look at it like that. I’m sure you’re undoubtedly a bundle of talent. Maybe you’d be just as strong even if Sir Graham wasn’t your master.”

Marguerite frowned at that. “Wrong. I’m definitely a genius, but I got even stronger because of my granduncle. Your daughter would be even stronger if he taught her.”

“I see... You trust Sir Graham quite a lot.”

“Huh?!”

I fell for it! Her cheeks turned red as she looked the other way.

Belgrieve could sense that Marguerite wasn’t stupid. However, youth was quite a troubling thing. The baseless confidence that came from it could be a strength at times, but could become shackling at other times. It didn’t take long for a small bit of stubbornness to snowball past the point of no return. Belgrieve remembered it well.

When he lost his leg, he insisted to his comrades that he was just fine. He continued on as an adventurer, taking up odd jobs that didn’t involve combat, and kept up a smile. He went on even as every step chipped away his self-esteem—he despised the very thought of showing weakness. Ultimately, it became too painful, and he had to run away to Turnera. He hadn’t said a word to any of them, and since then, he had no idea where any of his old comrades were. This was what came of hiding his weakness and stubbornly putting up a strong front.

Belgrieve stared at the sky with a poker face. “I’m not trying to dismiss your feelings. I know them too well.”

“Hmph... Anyone can say that.”

“But not everyone can mean it. I used to be an adventurer. I had hopes and dreams, and confidence. I never doubted that I would one day take hold of my ideal future.”

“So...what happened?”

“This happened.”

Belgrieve kicked his peg leg against the fence.

Marguerite looked at it doubtfully. “You lost your leg...?”

“Yeah... But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t become an adventurer. The thing is, I don’t think it’s a waste of time to listen to me, or Graham or Duncan. We know how failure feels. You loved hearing about Sir Graham’s travels, right?”

“Yeah.”

Belgrieve smiled brightly and gently patted her on the shoulder. “Are you hungry? Do you want to go back inside?”

“Fine,” she conceded after a moment.

Belgrieve helped support her unsteady steps as she made her way back. Once inside, Marguerite timidly peeked at Graham, who sat with a grim look on his face.

The moment he saw her, he apologetically closed his eyes. “Maggie... I said too much. I’m sorry.”

“Y-Yeah... Me too. Sorry...”

Her cheeks flushed red. She hadn’t heard that nickname in a while.



They're both pretty awkward, Belgrieve thought with a smile. Duncan let out a relieved sigh, then a hearty laugh.

"Marguerite! I request a duel once your wounds heal up!"

"S-Sure! I'm not losing to any old fart!"

"Ha ha ha! I won't go down easily!"

Belgrieve hung the pot over the fire and thought of the child in the forest. He didn't seem like an opponent to be defeated; perhaps there was some other way to resolve this.

"If we could understand each other, at least..."

"Hmm? What's wrong, Bell?"

"No... It's nothing. Could you fetch some potatoes, Duncan?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Belgrieve glanced at Graham. Graham nodded, with a serene face. His gratitude was palpable.

Chapter 36: She Woke to Something Soft and Reassuringly Warm

She woke to something soft and reassuringly warm in her arms. Angeline looked down, suspiciously, to see a white head of hair. For some reason, she was snuggling with a young girl.

“Oh, right... I only have one bed.”

As Angeline twisted to get away, Charlotte wriggled and clung to her. The sleeping girl rubbed her face into Angeline’s chest.

“Mmm...mother...”

“Hmm... I don’t have that much motherliness, you know...”

And so, Angeline lay there a while longer, her eyes scanning the room. Byaku sat on the sofa with his arms folded and his head drooping—asleep, as far as she could tell.

She made sure her sword was still propped against the bed before clinging to Charlotte again. She was really quite soft.

“She makes for a splendid hug pillow... But I need to get her into a bath.”

The grime was not doing her any favors, and she would normally (probably) smell at least a bit better. Angeline held her a while, enjoying the sensation, but once she saw that it was already light outside the window, she pinched Charlotte’s cheek.

“Mmm...what...?” Charlotte mumbled as her eyes cracked open. However, it seemed she remembered all sorts of things the moment she saw Angeline. She frantically sprung up from the bed. “G-Good morning, ma’am! Umm, it’s been so long since I slept in a proper bed, so I, er...”

“You don’t have to be so scared... I’m not going to eat you.”

“U-Urgh...”

“For now, breakfast... Hey, get up.” Angeline walked over to the sofa and lightly kicked Byaku’s leg.

“I’m already awake. What do you want?” Byaku answered without raising his head.

“You, help set the table.”

With a long, heavy sigh, Byaku stood and began taking plates off the shelf. Charlotte fidgeted while looking up at Angeline. “Umm... What should I...?”

“Wash your face. Then help me.”

Charlotte hurriedly made for the sink where she splashed water over her face. She wiped off with a towel before turning to Angeline.

“All washed up!”

“Okay, come here.”

Angeline tied Charlotte’s hair back, then instructed her to chop the leafy greens. Meanwhile, she got a pan going over the flamestone stove and tossed in bacon and eggs. The sound of sizzling and a fragrant scent filled the room. Charlotte gulped.

They warmed up the bread Angeline had left over. Breakfast consisted of a simple salad with bacon and eggs. Byaku indifferently gnawed on it with the same expressionless face as ever, but Charlotte was moved to tears.

Angeline was rather startled as she sipped her tea. “You’re making a big deal out of it... Is it really that good?”

“Yesh... I mean, a warm meal. How long has it been?”

You had that much money in your bag, and didn’t use a single coin? Angeline wondered. Her impression of the girl improved a bit. At the very least she seemed remorseful. However, she had committed deeds so vile they resulted in several deaths. Angeline did not know how much atonement was warranted, but at the very least, she would have to properly apologize to the people of Bordeaux. Then, the folks there would hand down their sentence. Of course it would be rather harsh, but that was what it meant to make things right.

“Not that we’re headed to Bordeaux just yet...”

Planning ahead was important. If they went unprepared, perhaps they would end up bringing even more trouble to Bordeaux. *No, wait, couldn't Byaku use teleportation or something?*

"Hey."

"What?"

"You're able to teleport, right? How far can you go?"

Byaku frowned. "I used to be able to go anywhere I remembered... Not anymore. It was taken away."

"Taken?"

"That magic was something I borrowed. They cut us off, so they took it away."

Angeline grimaced. She had never heard anything about borrowing magic before. However, she couldn't see any reason for Byaku to lie in this situation.

"But can't you use three-dimensional spell sequences?"

"I learned that myself. The teleportation magic, not so much."

"You can loan out magic?"

"That's the sort of folks we're dealing with," Byaku said, sipping his floral tea.

Angeline felt profoundly let down. If only Byaku could use that spell, it would have been so much easier to go to Turnera.

"How useless..."

"Well, sorry about that."

In any case, that meant they couldn't go to Bordeaux just yet. They would have to observe their enemies and deal with them first. At the very least, there were more allies in Orphen than there would be on the road. It would be far safer if they went off with Maria and Yuri at the beginning of spring—and that would settle Belgrieve's engagement as well.

"Two birds, one stone..." Angeline nodded to herself before biting off a chunk of bread.

After breakfast was over, she wondered what to do next. Usually, she would

head off to the guild to check for available jobs with Anessa and Miriam. If there were any good ones, they would head off to do them, and if not, they'd take it easy—sometimes on their own, and other times the three of them would go out to have fun together.

Whatever happened, she would first need to go to the guild. If everything went well, perhaps she would be able to place Charlotte under their protection. They were up against a group attempting to revive the demons, as well as Lucrecia's Inquisition. Angeline would have been able to deal with either of them relatively easily, but being targeted by two organizations at the same time was a bit much. Even if the guild wouldn't help, just having Anessa and Miriam's assistance would make things quite a bit easier.

She cleaned the dishes, changed her clothes, and strapped her sword to her hip.

Charlotte looked at her curiously. "Umm, what do you want us to do...?"

"Come with me. We're going to the guild."

"I don't recommend it," Byaku said with a scowl.

"Why?"

"We fought your guild master before."

Angeline sighed. "You really bring a lot of baggage, you know that...?"

"Ah... Sorry," Charlotte said with downcast eyes.

Angeline gently patted her on the head. "Well, that's fine. Orphen's guild has nothing on me..."

"Who are you supposed to be?" Byaku cynically asked.

Angeline laughed. "I'm an S-Rank adventurer. I've made quite a name for myself, unlike you... I'll have to hear your story one of these days."

Angeline pushed Charlotte out of the room, and Byaku listlessly followed behind.

The blue sky was cast in clouds so thin it was as if each was a faint stroke of white paint—good weather all around. Still, Charlotte seemed quite on edge

while she walked beside her, as if she was expecting to be attacked again.

Angeline shook her head and grasped Charlotte's hand. The girl looked up at her, startled.

"Don't worry. I'm with you."

"Okay!" Charlotte joyfully squeezed her hand in return.

This isn't bad, Angeline thought. It was almost like she had a little sister. *Little sister...* That term had quite a sweet ring to it. A completely different kind of charm than a mother—not one who watches over you, but one who lets you experience the joy of pampering someone.

Angeline stared at Charlotte. "Can I call you...Char?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course!"

"You can call me big sis."

Charlotte timidly turned to her. "Umm... Then, b-big sis...?"

"Very good."

Very good indeed. Angeline felt a peculiar sense of satisfaction as she made for the guild on light feet. Despite his fed-up frown, Byaku silently tagged along.

Suddenly, Angeline turned. "How old are you?"

"What?" The boy winced.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen, I think... What about it?"

Angeline grinned. "Then you can call me big sis too."

Byaku gave her a sour look. "Don't mess with me..."

"Heh heh, look at you, all bashful..."

"I ain't bashful!" Byaku shouted, enraged.

Angeline mischievously picked up the pace, while Charlotte matched her stride with a giggle. Byaku watched them bitterly, but still took care he wasn't left behind.

The guild was as lively as ever. Trade was booming with fall soon to come, and there were many bodyguard requests that came with that. Many adventurers would journey far and wide, coming in from one guard request only to leave again for another.

Anessa and Miriam were already at the desk, talking to Yuri. When Angeline called out to them, they turned.

“Good morning, Ange. I thought a search request would be...” Anessa cut herself off, a tinge of suspicion entering her eyes. “Who’s the kid?”

“My sister.”

“Oh... Wait, what?!”

“Does that mean...?”

“You?!”

Anessa opened and closed her mouth blankly, with Miriam giggling all the while. After collecting herself, the magician took a good look at Charlotte.

“Hmm, I get the feeling I’ve seen her somewhere before... Where was it?”

“Ah! Bordeaux!” Anessa cried after a moment.

Startled, Charlotte jumped before shrinking back.

“Don’t scare her like that...” Angeline chided with a pout.

“But if I’m remembering right, she’s the one who made a mess of Bordeaux with Count Malta. What’s she doing here...?”

“That’s exactly what I want to talk about. Yuri?”

“How can I help you?”

“Is the guild master in?”

“He most certainly is. Though he’s quite out of it, as usual.”

Yuri opened the door behind the counter and beckoned them in. Anessa and Miriam tagged along with quizzical looks on their faces.

After going through the door and a short distance down the corridor, they arrived at the guild master’s room. It had previously been something of a

personal room for Lionel—there was a bed and a desk, as well as a sofa and table to welcome visitors. All of these were now buried under paperwork. The previous guild master had expanded the room far larger than it needed to be, and the room was thus often used for meetings now.

A haggard Lionel was poring over paperwork as they entered. Dortos was doing the same from a table in the corner. Cheborg—a man most definitely not suited for desk work—was doing nothing in particular from his seat on the sofa. He folded his hands behind his head, leaning his weight into the backrest. The sofa cried out in pain as the giant man pushed against it.

“Morning,” Angeline called. The three men raised their heads.

“Ga ha ha ha!” Cheborg greeted her with a hearty laugh. “Rare to see you around here, Ange!”

“Long time no see, Muscle General... You look well.”

“I’m never not well! I’m too well! Give me something to do!”

Dortos stood in a huff and prodded at Cheborg. “I don’t want to hear that from you... Did something happen, Ange?”

“Yeah. I want to discuss something...”

“This is definitely going to be trouble, isn’t it? This old man here sees some faces he definitely recognizes...” Lionel sighed, his eyes locked onto Charlotte and Byaku. It seemed Charlotte recognized Lionel and Cheborg as well; timid as she was, she apologetically lowered her head.

“We, um...caused you quite a bit of trouble...”

Suddenly, Cheborg was on his feet, giddy. “Hey, you’re that damn brat from back then! Ga ha ha ha! I won’t let my guard down this time! Come at me!”

“Eep...” Cheborg’s hulking stature and intensity caused Charlotte to hurriedly scamper behind Angeline.

Angeline tiredly shook her head. “Not today, General.”

“Huh?! What? You say something, Ange?”

“You just shut up and sit down. I don’t understand the situation, but you

came here to talk, didn't you?" Dortos asked.

"Yeah... Where are Ed and Gil?"

"I sent them off for a bit of negotiation... Heh...heh heh... They're about to learn a bit of my stress..." Lionel said with a sickly smile. He pushed the mountainous pile of papers aside so the party could sit around the guest table. There weren't enough chairs, so the girls crammed onto the sofa while Byaku leaned against the wall.

Lionel took one deep breath to muster his resolve before looking at Angeline. "So what's going on?" he asked.

"They're being targeted."

"R-Really? What do you mean...?"

With some input from Charlotte and Byaku, Angeline explained the gist of things: of the existence of those attempting to revive and use the demons, and of the presumed plot of Lucrecia's Inquisition.

"At the very least, I believe it will be to our detriment if we allow this child to be killed on our watch..."

"Hmm..." Dortos stroked his beard. "I have heard of the political upheaval in Lucrecia. Then it stands to reason you are Balmung's daughter."

Charlotte froze for a moment. "I am." Her eyes were teary—it had been so long since she had heard her father's name.

"In short, the curia fears the folks who could lift up little Charlotte here as a political rival. It was never made public, but the political upheaval made it clear just how many holes there were in the system, you see... And if the opposing faction gets their hands on Balmung's daughter, they'll have a just cause to rally around. She's a must-have for anyone against the current establishment..."

"Ga ha ha! So they're trying to erase her before their rivals get to her! Now that's no fun at all!"

"They can sic the Inquisition on them as long as it's in the name of heretic hunting."

"Yes...and Char did actually incite the heretics, so she's an easy target."

“That’s not all, right?” said Anessa. “Since Lucrecia somehow knows her whereabouts, that means the people trying to use her will also be moving behind the scenes.”

Dortos nodded pensively. “But we don’t know if we can trust them. I can only imagine how they’ll use her as a puppet.”

“Is there anyone you can trust in Lucrecia...?” Angeline asked Charlotte.

The girl shook her head. Nearly everyone she knew from back then surely had been branded a heretic and dealt with accordingly. She couldn’t imagine anyone there would risk their own health and well-being to help her out.

Lionel sighed. “The inquisitors... I’ve heard rumors, but didn’t think they really existed... I just hope we don’t make an enemy of the church...”

“If it’s a secret society, I doubt they’d want to go public with it. I don’t think they’ll be able to lay down too much pressure,” Anessa said, and Lionel held his head.

“I hope so. But those in power do occasionally do wild and unpredictable things... I don’t know what those folks out to revive the demons are thinking, but they don’t seem like the sort of people who would just leave her alone. I’m beat... Are they the people who started all this cult nonsense?”

Charlotte shook her head. “I don’t really know... But they wanted to take down Vienna, saying the church was the root of all evil. Although I have not met or spoken to the person who reached out to me since...”

“Hmm... So they want to overthrow the state? Is there some noble behind this? In any case, they’re definitely up to no good.”

“Ga ha ha ha ha! But they’re quite formidable from what I hear! I’ll bet they can take a punch or two! Interesting!”

“But you know,” Miriam said, “doesn’t that mean those two factions are against one another?”

“That’s right,” said Anessa. “That is the silver lining here.”

“But we shouldn’t count on them crushing one another. At the very least, everyone apart from the folks trying to manipulate Charlotte wants her dead.”

“That’s the thing. I’m somewhat thankful we know who we’re up against, but this old man could do without another uproar over a demon if you catch my drift...”

With all the adults discussing the situation, Charlotte timidly opened her mouth. “Umm... A-Are you going to help me? But I, er, did a lot of bad things...”

“Ga ha ha ha!” Cheborg laughed. “Kids don’t need to worry about that stuff! Just sit tight!”

“But people died... I fear I’m going to get the death sentence... Otherwise, I’ll never be forgiven.”

Angeline frowned. She held Charlotte’s face in her hands, forcing it in her direction. Her black eyes stared straight at her. “Do you want to die?” she asked before releasing her cheeks.

Charlotte’s eyes widened and her head shook.

“Then don’t bring up a death sentence so lightly... Your death will not take back any of the bad things you did.”

“Ugh...”

“It’s good that you at least recognize what you’ve done. We can think of a proper apology later. Until then, it would be very troublesome if you were killed or kidnapped by anyone... Do you understand?”

“Yes...” Charlotte pursed her lips and nodded. She was under their protection now, and it seemed she had mustered the resolve to do anything in her power to atone for what she’d done.

Angeline smiled. “Don’t worry. Your big sis can handle it...”

Charlotte smiled through her tears.

In any case, the main members of Orphen’s guild had decided to protect her, which was quite a relief for Angeline. She had considered at least a few of them refusing, fearing hostility from the church. However, they were all good people who acted as if helping the girl out was the only option.

Orphen’s guild was large; there was no guarantee every adventurer would take her side. However, it was very reassuring to have the guild master and the

other former S-Ranks on their side. This was enough of a fighting force that they could probably handle the matter without any outside assistance.

Once the matter was settled, Angeline, Charlotte, Byaku, Anessa, and Miriam left the guild. It would be a day off from work, and Angeline intended to buy all the necessities for her two guests.

“First, a bath. You’re both a bit dirty...”

“Ah, so that’s what that stench is. Girls like you need to keep clean,” Miriam said with a grimace before ruffling Charlotte’s hair. As a beast-man, she had a sharper sense of smell.

Anessa sighed, looking somewhat doubtful of the whole situation. “Good grief... I don’t know how we got here.”

Even so, she did not seem to harbor any antagonism towards Charlotte. She stood on the opposite side from Miriam, holding the girl’s hand and walking at her pace. Charlotte seemed happy.

Meanwhile, Byaku went on without a single word, lagging behind. Even in the previous conversation, he only chimed in to give a bit of information about the organization that had been backing him.

Angeline slowed down a bit to get beside him. “There’s plenty of things I want to hear from you.”

“Then you should have asked back there. I would’ve been forced to answer.”

Angeline scoffed. “You’re not like Charlotte. She’s a normal human, but I thought you wouldn’t want your identity getting out...”

“Hmph... I thought you were a blockhead. Color me impressed.”

“Naturally. I am the daughter of the Red Ogre Belgrieve. I did not become S-Rank purely by the strength of my sword arm.”

“Daughter, huh...” Byaku begrudgingly spat the words. “You sure had it easy.”

“On the contrary. And why are you so serious? Dad told me before, ‘You better shake off that edgy pessimism of youth. Otherwise, one day in the future, you’ll suddenly find yourself writhing on the ground in pain as you think back on what led you to that end.’”

“The hell’s up with your old man...” Byaku sighed. After a moment of silence, he finally opened his mouth. “There’s a demon living inside me. His name’s Caim...”

“Hmm.”

So it’s true, Angeline thought. She had already had a vague idea of this. When she last fought Byaku, he had transformed and the mana she sensed from him was quite close to what she remembered from her first fight against a demon.

“But it felt a bit different from the other one I fought...”

“The demons were originally homunculi created by Solomon. They’re immortal and have high mana and combat capabilities, but the loss of their master has filled them with madness.”

“I heard about that before... So why is one of those homunculi inside of you?”

“There was an experiment to see if a homunculus could be born as a human child.”

“What do you mean?”

“They never told me the specifics... But they were apparently trying to pass down those powerful abilities while doing away with all the memories and madness... I was one of those experiments. Unfortunately, the bloody thing’s will is still inside of me, so I’m apparently a failure.”

“Wow... Crazy stuff.”

“Shut up. Not like it doesn’t concern you.” Byaku glared at Angeline. “You’re probably one of them too.”

“What?” Angeline blinked. She burst into a grin. “You think I’m a demon? Ha ha ha!”

“Have you never questioned your own strength?”

Angeline proudly stuck out her chest. “You can thank my dad for that.”

“This again... Think about it seriously. Your potential clearly comes from a homunculus.”

“Then why did my dad pick me up in Turnera?”

“How should I know?”

“Going off your story, you were in the capital. That means the experiments were conducted in the capital. Turnera is quite a long way from there, you know. I was practically a newborn when I was picked up—it just doesn’t add up. In the first place, why would I be thrown away, then?”

Byaku gave a resigned sigh. “Fine, think whatever you want... Anyways, I don’t get any of the homunculus’s memories while I’m in control. So I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“I see... Just forget about it. I now know it has nothing to do with me.”

“Tsk.”

Seeing Byaku irritably click his tongue, Angeline chuckled and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“I get it. You’re lonely too. Don’t worry, big sis is here for you.”

“What about you is ‘big sister’ material...?”

“Don’t be like that. Heh heh, I’ll take you back to Turnera one of these days.”

“You’re a real pain, you know that?”

That was around the time the others reached the bathhouse and called out to the stragglers. The two of them picked up their pace.

Chapter 37: All Dolled Up in Pretty Clothes

“Good.”

“Whoa, it’s perfect for her. Cute.”

“She was cute to begin with, so everything looks good on her... All right, this one next.”

“U-Umm...er...”

All dolled up in pretty clothes, Charlotte stood there twiddling her thumbs. Angeline and Miriam brought her one outfit after another, and she had become their dress-up doll. While Anessa stood in the back looking rather bored with this whole situation, she too shrewdly held a few sets of clothes she wanted to see on the girl.

After refreshing themselves at the bathhouse, they next went to buy Charlotte clothes. It wasn’t a luxurious shop, but it was an upright establishment that never tried to scam its customers, and it was one of Angeline’s favorite stores.

Both Charlotte and Byaku had been wearing the exact same clothes they had worn during the uproar in Bordeaux, and the fabrics were all stained, dusty, and torn. The bath would have been pointless if they were going to continue wearing those.

Charlotte looked mortified and ashamed to let the girls take care of her clothing as well. However, Angeline insisted they would attract attention leading along a dirty child, and somewhat forcefully dragged her there. This soon turned out to be just a front—she was clearly enjoying herself.

“Try this one on next, ’kay?”

“H-Hey, what about the ones I picked out...”

“Oh my, at first you didn’t look interested. How cunning you are, Anne.”

“If you wanted to join us, you could have said so from the start. Oho ho ho...”

“Grr... Wh-What does it matter?”

“I didn’t say you’re wrong. Now let’s see what Anne’s capable of...”

This time, Charlotte wore the clothes Anessa chose out. At first, Charlotte had been ashamedly trying to make herself look smaller, but she was a girl and a former noble; it seemed she did feel joy in wearing pretty clothing. She gradually got into it, grabbing the hem of her skirt to curtsy and leaning into poses. It was not long before she was enjoying herself, and the three adventurers giggled as she did.

Byaku, meanwhile, was looking on in amazement. *How did that haughty, impertinent, and oblivious brat become so meek?* he wondered.

“It’s all because of that stupid woman and her red-haired old man. What’s wrong with them...?”

As far as Byaku was concerned, both Angeline and Belgrieve viewed the world through rose-tinted lenses. He would have felt quite a bit more at peace if Angeline had just killed him and Charlotte rather than helping them out. But it seemed her naivety was infecting Charlotte.

Just one warm hand, just one word, the warmth of family... Like hell that’s enough to change someone’s life, Byaku thought, smoldering in quiet rage. He felt something terribly unpleasant, as though his sense of values was being toppled from its fundamental foundation.

He had been ridiculed as a failure, made to live at the very bottom rung, and then forced to murder. His whole life, he had been used as a tool. To make matters worse, there was a demon beyond comprehension eating away at his insides. It was vague even how much of himself was actually him. The pessimism nurtured within him had him convinced that not just the world, but even his entire life was completely inconsequential.

When he was assigned as Charlotte’s attendant, he simply thought it was somewhat of a pain. Time and again, he would look at the girl whose eyes blazed in vengeance, and who put on a far stronger front than necessary, and he would deride her in his head.

But Charlotte was like him in the strangest ways. Her vengeful objective was

indeed a dark one, but he envied that she had something that drove her forward. He even found it rather endearing. He knew she was afraid of blood, and so he refrained from killing when he could. At this point, perhaps that was for the best.

And now, seeing her smiling, freed of her dark chains, Byaku was assailed by a great mishmash of emotions. He was a faint bit relieved, but envious far more than that.

Envious? Of what? The words echoed in his head. *"I get it. You're lonely too. Don't worry, big sis is here for you."*

"Tsk."

To hell with big sisters. This is idiotic. Surely she crawled out from the same hole I did.

Byaku clicked his tongue again and averted his eyes from the girls. It was around that time that Miriam finally came up and stared deep into his face. Byaku silently ignored her for a while, but eventually, it grew quite disconcerting, and he glared back.

"What's your problem?"

"Hmm... I was just wondering what clothes would look good on you."

"Huh?"

His shoulders were grasped firmly. Angeline smiled at him.

"We've decided what to get for Charlotte... You're next."

"Wha... You gotta be kidding me."

"Don't be shy, don't be shy. How about we start with this..."

Like hell I'm becoming your dress-up doll! Byaku screamed in his head as he hurriedly tried to free himself and flee, but Angeline immediately pinned him down. He once again shuddered at the intimidating air of an S-Rank adventurer.

"W-Wench! Don't screw with me!"

"I am not screwing around... Merry, strip him."

"Ma'am, yes ma'am!"

“S-Stop!”

Byaku’s eyes darted around as he desperately sought out help. His sights locked onto Charlotte. She was wearing a plain but pretty dress, bashfully showing it off to him.

“Byaku, I think I like this!”

“You too...” His face froze in despair.

They left the shop after a bit of quarreling. It was already afternoon by then, and the sun had begun its descent to the west. They had been so engrossed in picking clothes they had neglected lunch, so that was next on the agenda.

Her soft, comfortable clothing put Charlotte in a fine mood, and she would frequently grab the girls by the hand or hug them. She could hardly contain herself. Angeline felt relieved to see her finally acting as a ten-year-old girl should.

Byaku, on the other hand, was weary and haggard, dragging his feet behind them. After being forced into so many clothes, he was more tired mentally than physically.

They walked through the downtown area, heading for the usual pub. Laundry dangled above them from strings stretched between the tall buildings sandwiching the street. Without warning, a chicken would take off from a side street, children would wander around with runny noses, and men who couldn’t find work would sit by the wayside staring absentmindedly into space. It was a normal day in Orphen.

There were no signs of an impending attack as of yet. Angeline could tell if anyone was looking at them with ill intent, and she was confident she could deal with it. It would be tiring to keep up her guard the entire time. She knew she had to have fun when she got the chance.

Suddenly Charlotte looked a bit restless and a little out of place.

“I need...to return the money...”

This was the same place she had given her speech and sold her amulets.

Angeline frowned. “They’ll smack you. You’ve already had horrible things

done to you, right...?”

“Yeah...but I have to return it.”

Charlotte placed a hand to the bruise on her cheek that had faded considerably.

With a wry smile, Anessa patted her on the head. “Do you really have to? Whether the amulets were real or not, having some hope to cling to is what’s gonna help them through it. And the people here grow bored of things easily. If the amulets have no effects, they’ll forget about them soon enough.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. I’m not saying it’s their fault for falling for it, just you don’t have to get so worked up... You’ll all be happier if you can forget about it,” said Angeline.

Charlotte bit her lip. “But then how can I atone...”

Miriam chuckled and ruffled the girl’s hair. Her hair gave off a sweet, floral scent after her bath.

“There are plenty of other ways. Well, for now, let’s put those difficult things aside and get some lunch.”

“Yes, that sounds right... I’m starving,” Angeline said, patting her stomach.

Gripping Charlotte’s hand, Miriam asked, “What do you like to eat, Char?”

After fidgeting a bit, Charlotte hesitantly said, “Umm... I like fish. In Lucrecia, see, there were all sorts of freshly caught fish!”

“Fish?” Anessa said. “Now that sounds nice. The seafood in Elvgren was great, but Lucrecia’s food sounds nice too.”

Charlotte proudly stuck out her chest. “Hee hee, I’m sure it’s even better there than Elvgren! That salted anchovy pasta is downright addicting!”

“Salted anchovies... I’ve been able to stomach them lately.”

“That look Mr. Bell gave when he tried them was a sight to behold,” Miriam said with a giggle.

“Yeah, it was like a smack to the face,” Anessa said, similarly smiling.

Charlotte tilted her head. “Who’s Mr. Bell?”

“My dad.”

“Your father...?”

“Indeed. He’s known as the Red Ogre Belgrieve. He’s tall with red hair and incredibly strong and cool.”

Charlotte spaced out, her eyes wandering in thought. “His hair is...red?”

“It is. Not too common, right? One of his legs is fake, but he’s even stronger than me. I’ll have to let you meet him one of these days...”

After hearing this, Charlotte looked like she would cry again. But she burst into a smile and clung to Angeline.

Angeline was taken aback, but still, she stroked Charlotte’s head.

“What’s wrong, Char...?”

“I’m so happy! Hee hee... Thank you, big sis!”

Charlotte laughed as she rubbed her face into Angeline’s clothing. Angeline didn’t really get it, but for now, decided to continue petting her. Her washed and oiled hair was just right, after all.

Behind them, Byaku heaved a deep sigh.

○

Sheep-shearing season was over, and so was the harvest. The wheat fields were tilled, the vast expanse of grain changing from golden to brown. However, the leaves on the trees were still green, and the light up above came from a summer sun.

The sheep gnawed on the grass with refreshed looks on their faces while newborn lambs romped around nearby. No matter how much they ate, it did not seem like they were putting a dent in the grassy plains.

Some time had passed since the elven master and his student came to Turnera. The villagers had some trouble growing used to the soft-spoken and dignified Graham, but they quickly took to Marguerite, who was cheerful, lively, and somewhat rough around the edges. Her fine looks played a part in having

many of the village youths being more accepting of the foreigners.

Their days were still occupied with fending off fiends, but they had yet to venture into the depths of the forest again. Belgrieve did not think that defeating the mysterious child would solve the situation, and Graham seemed to share this opinion. From what they had seen from Marguerite's battle, he was the sort of foe Graham could dispatch without breaking a sweat, and so they decided it was not too risky to watch and wait.

With that said, they kept wary but passed the days with curious tranquility.

"Yeah, lembas I'm telling you. Oh, this is great stuff! Anyways, I ate it all before I got here!"

Marguerite spoke in high spirits, a wood cup in one hand. The young men flocked to her, listening with rapt faces. While Marguerite's attire was somewhat boorish, her face and her natural mannerisms were a sight to behold; so much so that one couldn't help but keep an eye on her. The young men of Turnera couldn't help themselves, as they only ever knew the village girls and traveling folk. The girls, meanwhile, were somewhat miffed.

There was a modest banquet in Kerry's yard. Kerry, who had been wanting to be on better terms with the elves, invited Graham and Marguerite through Belgrieve.

It was supposed to be more of a family gathering, but the information leaked somehow, and the young men and women of the village all showed up, making it a far bigger gathering than it was supposed to be. On top of cider, a cask of Kerry's precious grape wine was begrudgingly cracked open. Kerry closed his eyes, telling himself it was a cheap price to pay if it would help the villagers accept the elves.

While he was also a guest at the banquet, Belgrieve sat silently and watched Marguerite and the village folk enjoying their youth. Turnera hardly had any interaction with the outside world of men, yet suddenly they were sharing drinks with elves, who were even further away from their ordinary lives than that. *How curious*, he thought.

"Then guess what! The suspension bridge was swinging... Huh? It's empty. Hey, Bell, you got any more wine?"

Marguerite came over to him waving with her empty cup.

Belgrieve smiled. “Are you sure you’re not drinking too much, Maggie?”

“What are you talkin’ about? I’m not even tipsy yet. The wine here goes down nice and easy, right?”

“You’re gonna make Kerry cry, you know. He’s already down two barrels,” said Belgrieve.

However, Kerry—who was sitting beside him—burst into laughter. “Bwa ha ha ha! The wine will have a story to go with it if it can satisfy an elf princess! Oi, you lot, get another barrel from the cellar!”

The young men raced off to the cellar, each vying to have the honor of presenting Marguerite with her next drink. “You don’t all have to go,” Kerry muttered to himself.

The other elf, Graham, was sitting quietly. His face hung and his body swayed from side to side. There was still a little wine left in his cup. Surprisingly, it seemed the old elf was not so strong when it came to holding his liquor. As the drink got around to the other villagers, they urged the elf hero to drink more and more, and so he did—but he was already dozing off as a result.

Duncan patted him on the shoulder. “How are you holding up, Graham? If you’re sleepy, I can take you back.”

“Sor...sorry...”

Graham blinked his hazy eyes as he tried to stand, only to stumble and fall back into his chair.

Marguerite cackled. “You’re still such a lightweight, granduncle! You’ve only had five or six cups, right?”

“Maggie... Drink in moderation... Overconfidence shall be...your downfall...” Graham shut his eyes, the crease on his brow growing deeper.

Duncan supported him by the shoulder, holding the man up with a laugh. “Oh, to think the Paladin would have such a weakness, ha ha ha! It was a splendid feast, Kerry. I will be taking my leave first. Now, Graham, Sir Graham, I’ll help you walk. Let us go.”

“My...apologies... I am...inade...ad uh...apple...?” Graham muttered something under his breath, his head shaking limply to and fro. He was evidently at his limit. Duncan practically had to drag him off. The two had gotten quite close after living together.

Belgrieve felt it was time to leave as well, but he couldn't leave Marguerite on her own. He sat quietly, slowly savoring his wine.

As she enthusiastically drank from the new cask, Marguerite endlessly told tales of travels and fiends, and the land across the mountains. But night eventually came, and the villagers scattered to sleep for the early morning ahead. The village youths reluctantly left as well, and Kerry's yard grew silent once more.

Kerry yawned. “Man, that sure was lively.”

“Yeah... Are you all right, Kerry? We went through more of your cellar than expected...”

“Hey, don't worry about it, Bell. Thanks to that, we all know how easy it is to get along with the elves. But let's keep it more of a secret next time we have one of these get-togethers, eh?”

“Ha ha, I see. Glad to hear it.”

Perhaps it wouldn't be the same for elves living among their own kind, but the ones who left to the outside world would be keener on getting to know humans. Belgrieve patted his chest, relieved.

That was when Marguerite pranced over. She had drunk a considerable amount but did not look drunk in the slightest.

“Aww, they all left.”

“I think we should get going too. We have an early morning.”

“I haven't drunk enough... Hey, Bell. Keep me company a bit longer. Duncan and granduncle ran away.” Marguerite sullenly kicked a stone at her feet.

Belgrieve kneaded his beard, looking rather troubled, but Kerry smacked his back with a laugh. “Go drink until you're satisfied! The cellar's all yours! I'm going to sleep, but I think I can trust you two!”

“Just what I wanted to hear! You’re a good man, Kerry!” Marguerite laughed.

“No, I’d feel bad... How about we just take a bit home with us? Let’s start again when we get back, okay?”

Marguerite nodded, and the two said their goodbyes to Kerry.

They each carried a large bottle of cider back with them down the moonlit path. The moon was so bright they didn’t need a lamp to light their way.

Marguerite had a skip in her step; in fact, it almost looked as if she was dancing. Her glossy silver hair shimmered like glass in the moonlight.

“You look happy.”

“Heh heh...” Marguerite bashfully chuckled, then lined up beside him and matched his pace.

“This has always been a dream of mine. Getting together, drinking, and talking about pointless stuff.”

“Hmm. You don’t do that in elven territory?”

“We have banquets, yeah. But everyone’s so, well, sophisticated. They don’t laugh aloud or mess around, none of that. They always talk about philosophical or practical concepts with serious faces. How should I put it... Their banquets are a sort of intellectual exchange to deepen their thoughts and knowledge. Yeah, something like that. It’s suffocating to me.”

That didn’t sound so bad to an adventurer who was always talking about pointless things.

Marguerite folded her hands behind her head. “Hey, how about we go to the forest again? I won’t let my guard down this time. I’ll listen to what my granduncle says too. How about it, Bell?”

“Hmm... Well, I feel pretty lost on the matter. I can’t help but think about that kid.”

“But the kid is the cause of all this, right? Won’t it be over if we beat it down?”

“I’m not so sure. I get the feeling it isn’t that simple. According to Graham, the

massive mana filling that space seemed to be cut off from the child.”

Marguerite folded her arms and thought. “Those old elves back home are always talking and talking, and nothing gets done. That’s why I’ve gotten to thinking it’s best to just get out there and crush the problem at the root. Am I wrong here?”

The evening dew was beginning to set in, and he could see a dampness growing on the tops of his shoes when he stepped on the grass. Belgrieve looked out into the distance.

“It will solve it if he really is the cause of all this. But we should put in some effort to make sure he is the real cause. It’s easy when you have a clear bad guy, but there are plenty of times where they aren’t really the root of the problem.”

“Urgh... I hate that sort of thing. I wish the world was simpler than that, where good people are good and evil people are evil, see. Beat up the bad guy, and then it’s happily ever after. My granduncle’s stories all got resolved after he took down an atrocious fiend. It would be a whole lot easier if that worked on bad people.”

“Ha ha, right... But fiends aside, people aren’t good or evil. It would be a lot easier if you could take every obstacle down without a moment’s hesitation, but you end up missing so many of the little things. The small things hidden by the thrill of victory and cheers of acclaim.”

“Then what do you think I should do, Bell? What sort of world is ideal for you?”

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek. “Turnera is almost everything I know... But I think it’s important for people to properly confront things. It’s amazing if the answer comes easily, and that makes it a lot quicker, but...” He stroked his beard. “I think there is meaning in thinking and caution too. Life is not just pure repetition, and proceeding smoothly isn’t all there is to it. So you gotta think and hesitate and live on regardless. I’m sure that’s when you discover new things and grow. That is the sort of life I cherish.”

“Is that how it works? I wouldn’t really know.”

“Ha ha... I’m getting pretty old. You’re still young, Maggie...”

Marguerite stuck out her lips into a pout and prodded Belgrieve. “Don’t treat me like a child.”

“That’s a bad habit of yours. You’re too quick to start sulking.”

“I ain’t sulking, stupid.”

Marguerite bounded off. In the distance, he saw her throw open the door to his house.

“Granduncle!” she shouted. “Are you asleep?!”

“Whoa, Maggie?! Don’t startle me like that!”

There was a din—a crashing sound, perhaps from Duncan falling out of his chair. Belgrieve slowly made his way towards the house. Putting aside whether they were defeating the child or not, it would be best to get another look at the situation. All of a sudden, he wondered, *What would Angeline do in this situation?*

Chapter 38: Once the Feast Was Over and Night Had Fallen

Once the feast was over and night had fallen, clouds formed and grew dense until they completely covered the sky. At dawn, it was difficult to tell where the night ended and the morning began, as everything was a uniform shade of gray.

The air was strangely hot and humid, and the sheep, goats, and dogs were oddly unsettled. The livestock scattered in random directions the instant they were let loose to graze; the dogs, whose job it was to herd them, ran back and forth in a chaotic panic.

From the early hours, Belgrieve was called to help gather the sheep up, and he realized he too was feeling restless. His heart fluttered even as he stood silently, and it only grew worse when he moved about.

“It’s a strange day...” he muttered.

However, it was not as if he didn’t have a hunch as to the cause. Belgrieve glanced at the forest. The trees swaying in the breeze looked no different than usual, but he felt something was off. Perhaps the effects of the mana had finally begun to manifest outside.

It was about noon when Kerry’s last sheep was found and Belgrieve returned home. Graham was hungover, lying on the bed.

“How are you holding up, Sir Graham?”

“My head hurts... It didn’t use to be like this. When I was a lad...”

“Aha ha, get yourself together, granduncle,” said Marguerite, who was completely unfazed despite all the alcohol she had consumed.

Graham bit his lip in frustration. “I have no excuse... It just had to be now of all times...”

“Do you know what’s happening?” Belgrieve asked.

Graham nodded. “The flow of mana from the forest changed... This is too sudden. Something must have happened in there.”

“I see, as I thought... How bothersome.”

“Right, you go to sleep, granduncle. I’ll go and have a look.” And with that, Marguerite stood, sword in hand.

Belgrieve fixed his own blade at his hip. “I’ll go too.”

“I’ll be fine alone, I tell ya. Just going to have a look is all.”

“I hope that’s all there is to it, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

That was when Duncan—who had been helping a different household chase their sheep—walked in through the front door. “What a strange feeling in the air!” he said. “Something bad’s about to happen, mark my words.”

“Duncan, I’m headed off to the forest with Maggie.”

“Hmm? Then so shall I!”

“No, I want you to look after the village. Time moves differently in there, and we’ll have trouble if fiends come out while we’re away. Sir Graham’s not in the best condition.”

Belgrieve had also considered sending Duncan and Marguerite out together. However, Duncan himself would admit he was unsuited for dungeon exploration. And while Marguerite had experience fighting demons, she was still just a greenhorn when it came to every other adventuring skill.

This would have been Graham’s time, but if he couldn’t move, then Belgrieve knew he would have to handle it himself.

Graham lifted himself up, grimacing at his headache.

“I’m sorry... This is my fault.”

“You didn’t turn down a single glass of wine, because you wanted to wipe away those folks’ preconceptions about the elves!” Duncan answered with a hearty laugh. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Though Graham barely spoke at the table, he drank every glass offered to him, smiling a bit proudly every time he made it to the bottom. The villagers

were delighted to see this. An elf was no longer someone up in the clouds—it was possible to share a drink in the backyard. It was as if the distance between them had shrunk all at once. Understanding this, Graham continued to drink despite being a lightweight. Awkward as he was, he was doing his best to mingle.

Belgrieve and Duncan both understood this, so neither even considered teasing him for his shameful display, though Marguerite seemed to enjoy pointing it out regardless.

Duncan turned to Belgrieve. “All right, got it. Leave the village to me. You two, pin down what’s causing this.”

“Thank you, Duncan... Let’s go, Maggie.”

“Onward!”

The two left for the forest with their weapons. Simply standing before the entrance was enough to sense the abnormality. There was a tepid wind blowing, carrying the faint scent of raw meat. Something felt wrong.

Marguerite screwed up her face. “It’s changed quite a bit in one day... Did the brat finally show its true colors?”

“I don’t know... We’ll have to check. Stick close to me.”

“Don’t treat me like a kid!”

They took the first step together. The trees were entangled in peculiar ways, and their leaves had taken on a dark purple hue. The invigorating smell of foliage was gone entirely, replaced by an astringent stench of something decaying. The roots of the trees had tried to worm their way out of the ground, spreading over the rocks and dirt as if to block the path.

This was no longer the forest he knew like the back of his hand. Belgrieve looked around, not knowing quite how to feel.

“This is bad... Will it ever turn back?”

“The trees haven’t withered yet. But at this rate, it’s inevitable. I know of forests that died because of demons.”

He could sense more fiends about than usual. The two drew their swords the

same moment several burst through the undergrowth. On top of the usual grayhunds and giant toads, there were chaoshunds and ogres—both high-ranking fiends—mixed in.

“We might have waited a bit too long...”

“Yeah! That’s why I said we had to get it over with already!” Marguerite said as she gracefully leaped at their foes, instantly turning several into silent lumps of flesh.

Belgrieve, as usual, focused on counterattacking whatever came at him—his movements were more precise now than before, and he used his leg like a pivot advantageously, drifting along far more smoothly than he had formerly been capable of. His two months of training with Duncan and Graham were finally bearing fruit.

He was quite surprised (and delighted) to see he was more than a match for high-ranking fiends. *I didn’t think I had that much growing left to do at my age.*

However, the fiends came with seemingly no end in sight. They surmounted the corpses of their brethren, their roars filled with hatred and vengeance for the fallen.

Belgrieve retreated a few steps and sheathed his sword. “Maggie! Get back!”

He hadn’t even finished speaking before producing oil meal from his tool sack and scattering it. It was oil processed into a fine powder and sold throughout the continent as a cheap fire starter. Marguerite was behind him in a flash, but not before her brow knit at the familiar smell.

“Hey, Bell! Fire’s a bad idea here!”

But Belgrieve took out his charmed igniter all the same, swiftly swinging it to spark a flame. The moment it made contact with the oil meal, it flared up and caused the fiends to stop in their tracks, perplexed. Belgrieve took this opportunity to race farther into the forest.

“Follow me!”

“R-Right on! But won’t that start a forest fire?”

“No need to worry. There’s a watering hole nearby. The ground is covered in

moss with high moisture content. There aren't any dead leaves this time of year, so it shouldn't spread far."

I see, thought Marguerite. She hadn't been paying much attention to it, but there was definitely a damp sensation under her feet. Marguerite stared at Belgrieve, looking slightly awed. "Color me impressed. I guess battle's not just about skill."

"That's how adventurers are. You should keep that in mind. I'm sure it will prove useful someday."

The two raced behind the fiends that had been halted by the flames. At times, Belgrieve would look at the sky, checking the wind's direction and adjusting their course bit by bit. The warping of the trees was growing worse, and a heavy miasma of mana began to weigh down on his shoulders.

"Tsk." Marguerite clicked her tongue. "This is some sickening stuff... This is why those demons are so..."

"You're sure it's a demon?" Belgrieve asked after a moment.

"Hmm... The mana quality feels pretty close. Though it's a bit different from the ones I defeated."

Defeating the fiends that attacked them along the way, it took just under an hour to arrive at the same dome from before. The trunks of the surrounding trees were terribly warped, but the ones comprising the dome were in perfect order. These trees towered at regular intervals almost like the pillars of a great temple.

Marguerite gripped her sword with a grin. "I won't let my guard down this time... It's payback time."

"C'mon now, Maggie. No going off on your own. Follow my lead."

"I-I get it already!"

There was no entrance into the dome. The tree branches grew out and tangled into a sturdy lattice, which Belgrieve had to cut through to force his way in.

It was filled to the brim with that noxious air inside. The leaves had been

green before, but now they had all withered and died. Was it the miasma's doing? Belgrieve swiftly searched out the child.

"There!"

It was there, lying flat at the center of the dome, its long hair spread out. It did not seem to be asleep.

Belgrieve swiftly raced over to it. Its eyes were closed, its breathing labored and shallow and its body soaking in sweat. This was not sleep—it was too exhausted to move.

"What happened...?"

Belgrieve produced a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped some sweat away as he looked around. The foul air made him feel sick.

Marguerite looked down over the child with a frown. "So this is happening because it's on the verge of death... And that's somehow making the forest even worse? I don't get it."

"We don't know if it's the cause, Maggie. How does its mana look? Is it similar to a demon?"

Marguerite furrowed her brow, stooped down, and peered into the child's face.

"No, that ain't it."

"Then..."

"It's not 'similar.' That *is* a demon, plain and simple," she said as she drew her blade. "Suppressed it so well I couldn't tell until I came this close. It's the cause for sure, Bell."

Belgrieve frantically held back her blade. "Wait, wait, then we should be even more careful. The child's condition is killing the forest. Kill it, and we might go past the point of no return."

"It's trying to go out with a bang. Trying to take as many people down with it as it can."

"I don't think so. Otherwise, you wouldn't have to come so close to sense its

power. In the first place, we don't know why it's dying."

"Bell. Don't be misled by its appearance. Will you take responsibility if your mistake puts Turnera in danger?"

"Yeah. I will. If that happens, I'll kill the child even if I need to sacrifice my life to do it. The village will be fine with Sir Graham there." The intensity in Belgrieve's voice was enough to silence even Marguerite.

Then, a tremor ran through the dome. The withered leaves scattered into the air, and the branches and trunks folded with a loud snap. The two looked up.

"Ah!" Marguerite's eyes shot open, her sword at the ready.

A most peculiar fiend had broken in through the side of the dome. On all fours, it towered far higher than a human, its shadowy black body in constant flux. The faces of various fiends would surface then fade, over and over again. All that remained constant was the steady pulsation.

Marguerite noticed goose bumps had risen on her skin. "D-Disgusting! The hell's that supposed to be?!"

"Looks like the fiends melded together."

"Th-That happens?"

"From time to time, in high-ranking dungeons... Or so I've heard. I've never seen it myself."

Apparently, the distorted mana had caused the fiends to mesh into one another, producing something else entirely. The grotesque abomination oozed miasma from its entire body and released a roar that eluded description. It was agonizing to hear, almost like a child crying in pain. Tears flowed from its ever-changing eyes.

"Scary... Scary..." Marguerite looked between the child and the fiend. "That creepy thing sucked the mana out of the brat... That's what's causing this!"

"It's coming, Maggie!"

Belgrieve grabbed the child and jumped to the side. Marguerite leaped in the opposite direction. With a howl, the fiend charged through the space where they had been standing. The ground quaked with each massive step it took.

“Bell!” shouted Marguerite. “You’re not gonna tell me not to kill this one, are you?!”

“I won’t! Don’t let your guard down!”

“Of course! I’ll end this in a flash!”

Marguerite twisted her body, slickly closing in on the fiend. Her sword flashed as she unleashed several dozen slashes in an instant. The fiend’s forelimbs fell to the ground in tatters.

“Hah! Not as frightening as it...” she started to say, only to fall into dumbfounded silence. The fragments of its forelimbs each formed into a smaller fiend, and the grotesque fiend also stretched its ebony mass forward, quickly restoring what was lost. Marguerite froze up for a moment, but she quickly renewed her grip on her blade, a fierce smile on her face.

“Interesting... I’ll kill you ’til you’re dead for good!”

The larger fiend raised its forelimb to attack, but Marguerite lopped it off on the return slash, then made mincemeat of the small ones flocking around her.

With a side glance at her, Belgrieve kept on his toes but took the time to inspect the child. It still seemed to be in pain, but perhaps the abomination had paused sucking mana to fight Marguerite, as the child’s expression looked a little softer.

“A demon, eh?”

Was it all right for there to be a demon like this? Belgrieve had heard they were artificial life-forms created by the great sorcerer Solomon. But if demons were like this, then what exactly did Solomon create them for?

It was a mystery, but in any case, he needed to concentrate on what was before his eyes.

Belgrieve escaped the dome, carrying away the child in his arms. He didn’t know if it would work, but he fed it a medicinal pill and wrapped it in his mantle, laying it somewhere safe. The child opened its eyes a crack, and Belgrieve felt like its black pupils took him in.

“Don’t you die on me,” he said, then looked back to the dome.

Marguerite flew about with elegant movements that seemed as though she was unshackled by gravity, raining blow after blow on the fiend. However, it regenerated no matter how many times she sliced it, and she did not seem to be making any progress. The mana-filled air permeating that space seemed to be lending the fiend strength.

However, amalgamations of that sort always had a core somewhere. Without a single unifying core, it would be impossible for so many creatures to be as one. With one last look at the child, he drew his sword and rushed in.

“Maggie! Don’t slash blindly! Try to aim at its core!”

“A core?! What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what it looks like! But its body must be built around it. Try tracing back to where it regenerates from!”

“I see...”

Marguerite took a great leap, pouring mana into her blade to lop off its head. However, more black substance stretched out from its torso, regenerating even that. It seemed the core was in the chest.

Skill-wise, Marguerite was clearly his superior. Belgrieve focused on support, defeating the fiends that separated off of the large one. Meanwhile, Marguerite continued shaving away at its chest. She worked at it faster than it could repair itself. The fiend cried out and flailed, but she remained unshaken, single-mindedly tearing through flesh to find the core.

“Is that it?”

A slice revealed a portion colored differently from the rest. Its dark flesh quickly grew to cover it. Marguerite coiled her body like a spring and thrust with her sword, stabbing with the tip. The abomination raised an ear-piercing shriek.

“Ha, with that—”

The moment Marguerite relaxed, the fiend’s chest abruptly fell to pieces, each fragment taking on the form of a different fiend and surrounding her in the blink of an eye.

Marguerite pulled at her sword, but the core she had pierced had melted like

tar, sticking fast to the blade and holding it there. As she faltered, the sharp fangs of a fiend approached.

“Crap!”

She inadvertently closed her eyes and took the impact. However, the pain she was expecting never came to her. Instead, an unexpected blow knocked her onto the ground.

“Stupid!” an angry voice said. “Who cowers on the battlefield?!”

She opened her eyes just in time to see Belgrieve kick the fiend whose fangs were locked with his sword.

“B-Bell...”

“On your feet! It’s not over yet!”

Belgrieve pulled a dagger from his belt and unleashed a sharp throw. The point stuck into a fiend approaching Marguerite from behind, which fell screaming onto its back.

Marguerite stood there for a moment, biting her lip at her own fecklessness. Then she coiled and sprung forth, grabbed the hilt of her weapon, and violently yanked it out of the crumbling goop that had once been a core.

“Son of a...!”

She kicked off from the ground and immediately butchered several fiends at once. Her sword was fierce, packed with her rage. *I let my guard down again. You’ve gotta be screwing with me!*

Before long, the fiends were dealt with. Marguerite and Belgrieve both stopped for a breather.

“Are you all right, Maggie?”

“Far from it. You warned me, but I...”

“Now you know for next time. I’m the one who said it would be over if you destroyed the core. I’m sorry,” Belgrieve said as he took a seat. He produced bandages from his pouch.

Marguerite looked at him, shocked, and only then noticed the blood running

down his left arm.

“Bell, you were injured...?”

“It’s nothing serious.” Belgrieve gave a wry smile as he rolled up his sleeve and slathered ointment on his shoulder wound. “Sorry, could you wrap it up for me?”

“Yeah.”

Marguerite timidly approached. She squatted down and took the bandages before inspecting the wound—it looked as though a set of fangs had torn through it.

“Is this from when you covered me?” she asked with a frown.

“Really, it’s nothing,” he said again. “Don’t worry about it. It’s my responsibility for misreading the situation.”

Wrong. I’m the one who was careless. Marguerite panicked, realizing her tears had been building as she wrapped the bandages around him. She had caused trouble again by getting in over her head. It was so idiotic.

“Hey... What should I do? What can I do to become like my granduncle and you?”

“Well, let’s see... An adventurer lives and dies by split-second decisions. You can’t make a rational decision with blood rushing to your head. Never lose your cool, always keep another set of eyes in the back of your head... I don’t know if I’m a good example to follow, but that’s what I always keep in mind.”

Come to think of it, I remember teaching this to Angeline once upon a time, thought Belgrieve.

There was another tremor of mana. The two lifted their faces to see the grotesque fiend forming itself once more at the center of the dome. Its melted core reshaped itself, wriggling bits growing out of it like mold, taking on the faces of fiends that would appear and fade.

“Th-There’s even more fiends in the core... I’ll finish it for good!” Marguerite stood with her sword out, but Belgrieve stopped her.

“There’s no end to this. Let’s withdraw; I’m worried about that child.”

“B-But...”

The fiend formed its body at a tremendous pace. It was dubious whether they would get away or not if they did run. Marguerite focused more power into her sword arm, resolving to guard them from behind until they did.

However, that was when a gray mantle fluttered into view.

“G-Granduncle...!”

“You did well, Maggie. It’s my turn.” Graham gave an awkward smile before shifting his eyes to Belgrieve. “Sorry, Bell. I caused more trouble for you.”

Belgrieve cheerfully smiled back. “How long has it been outside?”

“It’s already night.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Could be better.” Graham drew his sword from his back. The living blade growled and glimmered. His mana soared to unimaginable levels; with furious synergy, he lifted the sword over his head and swung downward with a step.

The next instant was wrapped in an explosive shock wave; the abominable fiend was scattered to nothing. But that wasn’t all. The glistening mana radiating from his blade cleared the twisted miasma filling the air. It immediately became much easier to breathe.

His sword was impressive enough to call a “sacred blade,” and his skills were worthy of the name “Paladin.” Belgrieve was in awe at the swordsmanship of this living legend.

Taking a deep breath, Graham tucked his sword away. There was sweat on his brow—one swing was enough to exhaust him. He looked at Belgrieve with a bitter smile. “I’ve grown old. I’m already winded.”

“Ha, but that was extraordinary... Thank you, Sir Graham. You saved us.” Belgrieve tapped him on the shoulder. “Now what about the child...?”

He jogged over to the child, who was still exactly where he’d left it. Its eyes were closed as it laid there quietly. Belgrieve held his breath as he checked its pulse.

“Just sleeping...”

Its breathing was calm. Belgrieve patted his chest in relief, then picked the child up. It grumbled in its sleep and buried its head into his chest. The trees rustled noisily as the twisted branches slowly returned to how they once were. The darkness descended abruptly as the time difference vanished, and through the branches, he could see a sky dotted with stars.

○

“I can only guess at the specifics, but presumably rather than a gradual change, it was the sort of magic that brought about an explosive transformation the moment one stepped into a given space. Otherwise, I cannot explain how it was undone so quickly.”

“I see... Then what about this child...?”

“From its vital organs to the makeup of its body, it is impeccably human. However, the mana residing within tells a different story. It is nearly identical to what demons possess. Though it doesn’t have much left; perhaps it used up its mana to construct its body. It’s not in too much danger.”

“You can tell that much? I couldn’t pick up on any of that...”

“You need to study a bit more, Marguerite.”

“Urk... I-I’ll do my best.”

“The terrifying thing is...how close to a human it became. I’ve fought many of them in my day, but this is a mystery to me.”

“But what was that bizarre fiend? Why was the child about to die?”

“This is only my supposition, but the mana of a demon and a human are completely different. When it constructed a human body, this discrepancy caused most of the mana to be ejected. Its influence caused the fiends attracted by it to meld together and suck up what little mana remained. This rapid loss caused its body to weaken. Perhaps that is the reason.”

“Hee hee, still, that creepy thing was nothing to you, granduncle!”

“Grr, how envious! I never got to see a serious strike from Sir Graham!”

“Ha ha, sorry, Duncan. I’m glad the village is safe... Ah, hey now, that’s not food!” Belgrieve quickly scooped up the child gnawing on the wood by the fireplace. Its black eyes stared up at him.

A day of peculiar weather was followed by a fine, crisp morning. The sheep and dogs that had been in such turmoil had calmed down and were out in the fields as usual. Fiends were scarce again; the forest was back to its usual state, and the village was back to its unchanging days.

The child Belgrieve brought back had lost all its mana. It seemed to have no idea who it was, innocently clinging onto him. A former demon had no home to return to, so ultimately Belgrieve saw no choice but to raise it himself.

Watching Belgrieve rock the child, Marguerite asked, “So what are we doing with it?”

“Well... I can’t just toss it out after all that. I’ll raise it.”

“Raise it... That’s a demon we’re talking about. You sure about that?”

“It lost most of its mana, right?”

“Well, true...”

The child clambered up his back, wrapping its arms around his neck and grabbing his beard curiously. Belgrieve patted it on the head, letting it do as it pleased.

“I don’t think this child is dangerous.”

Marguerite thought for a moment. “Well, this is your house.” She shrugged. “It’s your call.”

It seemed Duncan and Graham had no objections from the start. *Looks like my family’s grown*, he observed. But this wasn’t too bad. *I wonder how Ange will react?*

“Que será, será...” he murmured, too faintly to reach a single ear.

Chapter 39: Her Fingers Moved as Though Each Had a Life of Its Own

Her fingers moved as if each had a life of its own, delicately and dexterously. A comb passed through the softened expanse of white hair, which was then quickly braided and arranged. Through all of this, Charlotte looked relaxed as could be.

“All right, you’re done.” Yuri smiled as she tied the ribbon. Charlotte smiled widely at the mirror. Her long hair had been garnished with a tasteful braid over her right ear which was fastened with a sky-blue ribbon that complemented her white hair.

Charlotte stroked her mane as she looked at Yuri over her shoulder.

“Thank you! Tee hee...”

“Heh heh, you’re very welcome. You have such pretty hair, Char—it’s such a pleasure to work with.”

“So fine material makes for fine craft... Good job,” Angeline chimed in from the sideline, giving a thumbs-up.

Charlotte stood, circling around behind Angeline and pushing her on the back.

“I’ll do it for you, sis! Sit down!”

“Oh...? Very well, let’s see what you’ve got.” Angeline sat before the mirror, and Charlotte began to fiddle with her black hair.

They had come to Yuri’s house to play. It was a day off from work, and both Anessa and Miriam had other business to attend to, so Angeline had come with Charlotte and Byaku.

Yuri lived in a rented room a short distance from the guild building. While her room was filled with a decent amount of things, it was kept clean and tidy. *If it was a mess, perhaps I’d have to reconsider her as Belgrieve’s wife candidate,* Angeline arbitrarily thought to herself. But she was relieved—Yuri would make

a good mother after all.

About ten days had passed since Angeline took Charlotte under her wing. There were no attacks in that time, nor any hint of more assailants. *Did the assassins forget about them? Was the mission proving to be more trouble than it was worth? Or did the two forces clash and destroy one another?* If they never showed up, then Angeline had no complaints, but she wished they would at least tell her in advance.

It was quite tiresome to maintain vigilance all the time. She needed to strain her senses and always had to carry a weapon so she could react to any sudden situation. Angeline was used to exploring dungeons and guarding clients, but it still drained her after so long.

That was what made it so nice to drop in on somebody strong like Yuri—it was an opportunity to finally catch her breath. Although Yuri had stepped away from the front lines, she was a former AAA-Rank adventurer. Perhaps because she had returned to a position where she interacted with many adventurers, her eyes were still sharp and discerning. It was nice for Angeline to have someone dependable around she could trust to have her back.

As Charlotte tampered with her hair, Angeline glanced at Byaku, who was leaning against the wall with his arms folded, looking quite bored.

The boy's strength was also at the level of a high-ranking adventurer. Granted, he had taken them by surprise, but he still managed to fend off Lionel and Cheborg. In Bordeaux, he had managed to overwhelm the joint efforts of Sasha, Ashcroft, and Elmore. He was nothing to scoff at.

However, for some reason Angeline felt she shouldn't let Byaku fight. She didn't care about the demon and whatnot; she felt reluctant to throw a boy into battle when he was younger than her and not even an adventurer.

Angeline wouldn't go as far as to say she was going to protect him. However, she wanted to keep him out of battle if she could. A lifetime of blood and battle had cast a dark shadow somewhere in his heart—not that she meant to tell him any of this. Nevertheless, Angeline was resolved to fight for the both of them and was determined to make him call her his big sister one of these days. A little sister who looked up to her was delightful, but an impertinent little

brother was also an experience in itself.

“Hee hee...family...”

What face will father make when I bring them back? He'll be surprised, but he won't look displeased—I'm sure he'll give them a warm welcome. Then we can all pick cowberries together.

Angeline cracked a smile as she imagined Belgrieve's astonishment at their growing family; she never could have even imagined that the house was already filled with freeloaders.

“All right, you're done!”

Charlotte's voice returned her to her senses. She lifted her face to her own reflection. Her unkempt and loose black hair had been neatly combed and gathered into a large black braid over her right shoulder.



“Oh... This is...”

“I thought a braid would suit you!”

“I don’t know why, but this is somewhat embarrassing... Still, it’s wonderful. Thank you, Char.”

“Yay!”

Charlotte beamed as Angeline patted her. She stood on her tiptoes, pushing her head harder into Angeline’s stroking hand. Angeline had continued to dote on her for ten days, and the girl had become quite fond of her.

From behind, Yuri pinched Angeline’s cheek. “Since you’re at it, how about some makeup, Ange?”

“Ah... No, makeup is a bit...”

As Angeline recoiled, Charlotte clung to her.

“Eh? Why? Why? You’re so cute, sis. I’m sure makeup will make you even cuter!”

“No, it’s just not my thing. Or, how should I put this...”

“You’ll never get a boyfriend like that. Life’s about trying new things. Now let’s do it.”

“The thing is...I hate it when something is painted on my face. It reminds me of all the bug repellent I’ve had to smear on in the dungeon...”

She heard chuckling, so she turned to see Byaku, who could barely contain himself.

Angeline frowned. “What?”

“You’d be closer to a fiend than a beauty if you dolled yourself up. You made the right choice.”

Angeline pursed her lips sullenly. But she was quickly struck by inspiration, which turned her frown into a mischievous smile. She turned to Yuri.

“Hey, forget about me. Let’s doll him up with pretty clothes too.”

The expression disappeared from Byaku’s face. He immediately turned on his

heels and headed for the door. However, Angeline grabbed him and pinned him to the wall in the blink of an eye.

“R-Release me! I’m fine!”

“Hi ‘fine,’ I’m Ange.”

“The hell’s wrong with you?!”

“It’s just a big sis joke... Accept it, Bucky... I’ll make you cute.”

“Don’t call me Bucky! Hey, someone help— Wait, why are you picking out clothes?!” Byaku cried out in despair as he saw Charlotte helping Yuri pick out women’s clothing. Charlotte happily picked up a set and held it out.

“I think this would look good on you, Byaku!”

“Don’t mess with me, you cheeky brat!”

“Eh? Do you think so? I think this one is better.”

“You old spinster! Don’t get carried away!”

“My, my, Bucky boy. You can’t say that to a lady, you know. Perhaps some punishment is in order?”

With a grin, Yuri changed her choice out for a dress covered in frills. Byaku turned pale. The nightmare of the clothing store came back to him—the moment his dignity had been completely trampled on. *Even those evil folks who used me as a tool weren’t this heartless...* Perhaps that was an exaggeration, but he was certainly not used to this sort of humiliation.

His heart and the emotions he thought had died out long ago were forcefully wrenched open, making him confused, perplexed, and afraid. It felt as though something was changing deep within him.

Byaku pushed his back into the wall, detesting the thought of letting them do what they wanted, only for Angeline to drag him out and get him in a full nelson from behind.

“Keep up that cool act and you’ll never have fun... Life’s about enjoying it when you can.”

“Shut up! To say the least, I’m not enjoying this at all!”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it...”

“Like hell it’s fine!”

Angeline’s lips curved into a sharp frown, and she tapped him on the head. “What will you accomplish if you keep rejecting everyone around you like that...? You have a whole life ahead of you. Do you intend to be scowling through all of it?”

“What does that have to do with wearing women’s clothing?!”

Angeline grinned. “Because that’s what seems to make you the most emotional. With anything that doesn’t concern you, you forcefully stifle your emotions and act all unconcerned...”

Sure enough, with delicious food, beautiful scenery, and board games, Byaku would always take a step back and watch, completely stone-faced, as if he was at pains to avoid attracting any attention. He had escaped an environment of being used, yet now that he was free, it didn’t seem as if he had changed at all. He wasn’t even considering changing, and this was something Angeline couldn’t stand. He was dyeing his own life in shades of gray, and she couldn’t see any point to that at all.

Still, Byaku continued to scowl. “Brazenly breaking into someone’s heart. I can’t stand it—we both crawled out of the same hole.”

“I don’t care if you hate me... But Char will be sad if you keep frowning forever.”

Byaku furrowed his brow and looked at Charlotte, who was whispering and giggling with Yuri as they hunted for clothes together. It was as if she was a completely different person from the girl who fled from Lucrecia and toured the land as Solomon’s priestess.

Byaku closed his eyes with a resigned sigh.

“Dammit...”

“Heh heh... You’re a good kid deep down. Big sis can tell...”

“Shut it with that ‘sister’ schtick. It’s stupid...”

Angeline smiled and put more strength into her arms.

“Now, Ms. Yuri. The makeup, if you will.”

“Leave it to me. Heh heh, this is going to be fun.”

Yuri rummaged for her tools. Meanwhile Byaku—still in Angeline’s grappling hold—looked as though he had resigned himself to his fate, though he still seemed somewhat unsettled.

“Hold on...”

“What?”

“You’re a woman, right?”

Angeline’s expression was suspicious. “I am... Why are you asking?”

Byaku squirmed a bit just to be sure, then cocked his head. “I don’t feel anything...”

A somewhat serious fist collided with Byaku’s head.

○

Angeline left Yuri’s house, leading along a frolicking Charlotte and a haggard Byaku. Byaku had looked unexpectedly cute with makeup and women’s clothing, making the girls terribly excited. It went without saying that he kept a sour face the whole time.

The three of them joined the great throngs in search of a place to eat lunch. There were so many people coming and going that they could lose one another all too easily. Angeline held Charlotte’s hand, and Charlotte held Byaku’s.

The sky was painted with a few meager clouds, but they did nothing to shield them from the hot, strong sun. On top of this, all the people coming and going worked up a terrible cloud of dust, and just walking through that was excruciating.

As Angeline looked around for a nearby restaurant, Charlotte spoke to Byaku.

“Hey, Byaku. What do you want to eat?”

“Nothing in particular. Just have whatever you want.”

“Seriously! Sis will give you an earful if you tell her that!”

“She’s already won you over, eh.” Byaku heaved a fed-up sigh.

Angeline entered an alley and began following a narrow side street. There was a small flight of stairs, then a sloping road. But she knew there was a small diner through there that she would visit from time to time.

A nice, cool breeze flooded out as they opened the door. The owner was a has-been magician who cast cooling magic on his establishment. He wasn’t a former magician for nothing; the temperature was perfectly regulated. However, despite how comfortable the store was, the lack of any notable sign outside meant there weren’t many customers.

She looked around the seats, her eyes stopping on a familiar face. Angeline raced up and tapped the woman on the shoulder.

“Granny Maria!”

Sitting peacefully and drinking something, Maria seemed quite peeved when she turned.

“Ange... You come to the strangest places.”

“I rarely ever see you in town, granny... What’s wrong?”

“Hmph. Shortage of materials. I wanted to inspect the ingredients myself, so I came here... And it’s as dusty and unsanitary as ever, this place,” Maria said as she adjusted her muffler. The bag at her feet most likely contained the material she needed.

“You changed your hair, Ange?”

“Hee hee, you can tell...?”

Angeline happily reached out for her braid. After a small sip from her glass, Maria glanced at Charlotte and Byaku.

“So what’s with the kids?”

“My little brother and sister.”

“Huh?”

“Kidding. They’re freeloading at my place.”

“Don’t tell pointless lies...”

“Sorry, heh heh. This is Charlotte, and this is Byaku. Introduce yourselves...”
On Angeline’s urging, Charlotte gave a formal introduction, while Byaku barely nodded.

Maria narrowed her eyes. “You have quite a bit of mana for a little girl. Meanwhile, the whelp’s mana is strange. What are you?”

“Who knows?”

“Ha, a cheeky brat you are. Keep those circles of yours in check.”

Byaku’s brow twitched. Angeline looked at Byaku suspiciously.

“You’re keeping those three-dimensional circles of yours flying around? Those invisible ones?”

“Pretty much. For sneak attacks.”

“That’s quite impressive, combining autonomous defense with invisibility. But it’s crude. You should be able to piece them together better than that.”

“None of your business...”

“Silence. It makes me itchy when I see magic misused so flagrantly.”

Maria muttered something under her breath and waved her finger. The magic circles around them could now be seen—Byaku’s eyes narrowed in shock.

“Look. Right here, your spell sequences are only running along the surface. This here should be a sphere. Over there, make the pyramids and tetrahedrons intersect. For that cube, you can’t just focus on the frame. You need to cover the whole surface, or the mana will leak out.”

“Tsk...”

She must have been right on the money as Byaku had no comeback. Angeline giggled and reached for the chair across from Maria.

“Can I sit here?”

“Do whatever you want. Just don’t make too much noise.”

Maria slouched into her chair and took a deep breath.

As Charlotte sat, she timidly asked, “Granny...?”

“Yeah, Granny Maria. She’s an amazing magician. She stopped aging with magic, and she’s already sixty-eight...or is it sixty-nine?”

“I’m still a sprightly young maiden.”

“Amazing,” Charlotte said, staring closely at Maria. She saw the uneven layers of clothing and tilted her head quizzically. “Umm, aren’t you hot like that...?”

“Ah? I’m still cold. That’s what illness does to you.”

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”

“Hmph, of course you didn’t. Now quit worrying about me and order already.” Maria shooed the girl away and pressed her cup to her lips.

They ate a meal that, while not spectacularly delicious, was nowhere near bad either. Throughout the meal, Angeline continued to chat with Maria.

“You’re not coughing today, granny.”

“Pretty much. I’m trying out a new medicine... But the materials are too expensive. I’ll have to use it sparingly.”

“Hmm... Making progress in your research?”

“I can’t tell. I wouldn’t have trouble if I could tell what works and what doesn’t.”

Angeline wanted Charlotte to have some means of protecting herself. But she was clearly unsuited to using a sword, and spears, axes, and bows seemed hopeless as well. The girl had an immense amount of mana in her body, enough to have caused such chaos in Bordeaux. If she had to fight, it would probably be through magic.

However, Angeline was not a magician, and the magic Byaku used was too advanced. Miriam was not a good teacher, so she had been considering discussing the matter with Maria one of these days. Perhaps it was a blessing to meet her here. Seeing how she swiftly explained the fundamentals of Byaku’s own magic to him, there could hardly be a better teacher.

“Hey, granny. Char has a lot of mana, right...? You think she can pick up a spell or two?”

“Hmm.” Maria stared at Charlotte, whose expression was stiff. She knit her brow in thought. “Mana capacity doesn’t determine talent. Won’t know until she tries.”

“Would you teach her if I asked you to?”

“Sure, but I’m a harsh teacher. I despise half measures.”

“I see... Then let’s go to Turnera, granny.”

“Huh?”

That came straight out of the blue. Maria blinked a few times.

“You need to work on your conversation skills... How does this lead to that?”

“These kids are being targeted. It’s dangerous to stay in Orphen.”

“And what’s that got to do with anything?”

“That’s why I need to take them to Turnera. It will probably be safer there. If you’re going to teach her magic, then inevitably, you will have to go to Turnera.”

Maria shook her head. “Don’t be daft. I can’t get any of the materials I need in Turnera. It’s not like I want a laid-back retirement. Fighting is a pain, but I want to continue my research.”

“The air in Turnera is nice and clean. I’m sure it will do wonders for your lungs. My dad can look after you if you marry him...”

Maria shrugged. “This again. I don’t want a daughter like you, and I’m not interested in your father.”

Angeline stuck out her lips. “Hmph, you say that because you don’t know him... But whatever. Come to Turnera anyways, regardless of dad... It will be good for your recuperation. And the road will be safer with you along...”

Maria appeared to give this some thought. “I’ll consider it when I reach a good stopping point in my research,” she said before finishing off the rest of her glass.

Chapter 40: They Ended Up Lazing About

They ended up lazing about and chatting until it was nearly evening, and by the time they left the shop, the western horizon was tinged a faint red. The vermilion sky above made it look as if the clouds had been baked in an oven, and the shadows gave them incredibly distinct contours. Night gradually began to loom overhead, with stars peeking out at twilight's zenith.

As a cool evening wind blew over them, Charlotte looked at the sky and sighed. She looked a little anxious.

"What's wrong?" Angeline asked, tilting her head quizzically.

Charlotte hesitated for a moment before answering, "I don't know if it's right for me to have so much fun."

She closed her eyes for a moment; she was likely thinking back to a bad memory, as her eyes glistened a bit when she opened them again. It was like the plates of a scale rising and falling, with her happiness on one side, and her mistakes on the other.

Although she had been unjustly driven out of her homeland, that was no excuse for the ill deeds she had committed against uninvolved strangers. Everything she couldn't see while blinded by vengeance was now coming back to weigh on her heart. She wondered to herself if she truly had the right to be happy.

Angeline gently patted her on the head. "Don't worry about that... There's plenty of fun to be had just in being alive."

"Thank you, sis," Charlotte said, taking Angeline's hand.

They stopped by a street market on the way back. Wagons of all shapes and sizes had put up awnings there and played the part of street stalls. All sorts of cooking ingredients colored the racks beneath their eaves. The market was booming with city folk shopping for dinner, while street performers put on extravagant shows and wandering musicians strummed tunes by the roadside—

it was almost as if a festival was going on.

There was even a large wagon with a magic fridge selling fish, with a sign advertising that the catch came from Elvgren. Although the fish were not freshly caught, the cooling kept them looking glossy and incredibly appetizing. The moment she saw the sign, Charlotte tugged on Angeline's hand.

"Hey, sis. Let's buy some fish today!"

"Hmm... Not a bad idea..."

They had eaten meat for lunch, so a seafood dinner didn't sound half bad. Angeline began hunting for a good deal when she heard a gasp from behind. She turned to see several men glaring at Charlotte. Charlotte was quivering.

"Hey, the con artist's at it again!"

"Think you can shamelessly show your face around town, damn brat?!"

"Eek... I-I'm sorry!"

Seeing Charlotte cower so fearfully brought sadistic smiles to their faces.

"You're nothing but trouble, you know that? How much damage do you think you've done to us?"

"To hell with Solomon. Lies, all of it! How are you gonna settle this, huh?"

As Charlotte bit her lip, Byaku wearily stepped out in front. "We already returned your money. What do you want now?"

"The hell did you say?! Impudent trash, you're clearly not repentant at all!"

An arm reached out to grab Byaku's collar, only for Angeline to snatch it by the wrist.

"Stop," she firmly declared.

"Wh-What's your deal... It's got nothing to do with you!"

"I won't say these kids did nothing wrong. But they returned your money and apologized... It's not very adult of you to bully them just because you can."

"Say that again, wench! Don't look down on us!"

"What are you people doing?!" someone exclaimed in a booming voice—it

was Sister Rosetta, shopping basket in hand. She stood there firmly and glared at the men. “Adults ganging up on a child! Don’t you feel any sense of shame?! You will make the Goddess cry, acting like that!”

“Grr, they just keep coming...”

“Hey, picking a fight with a sister of Vienna isn’t a good idea...”

The men, who harbored some feelings of guilt for having temporarily sided with a heretic cult, fled. Angeline breathed a sigh of relief and patted Charlotte, who was clinging to her.

“Thank you, Ms. Rosetta.”

“Don’t worry about it. Did they do anything to you? Those children are...”

Rosetta looked at Charlotte and Byaku. Charlotte was hiding behind Angeline with a frown, while Byaku stood there silently.

“This is Charlotte, and that’s Byaku. They’re mooching off of me for various reasons.”

“Hmm, I see. A pleasure to meet both of you. My name is Rosetta; I’m a sister working at a nearby orphanage,” Rosetta said with a cheerful smile. However Charlotte remained sullenly silent, and Byaku merely acknowledged the sister with a slight nod.

Rosetta scratched her cheek with a somewhat troubled laugh. “Looks like they hate me...”

“Char... Don’t be rude to her.”

“I mean...”

“No means no. She saved you, and Ms. Rosetta is one of my mother candidates...”

“Ange! You’re still on about that nonsense?” Rosetta prodded Angeline’s forehead.

“It’s not nonsense... I’m serious,” Angeline poutingly replied.

“Oh come on...” Rosetta sighed.

“A Vienna cult sister isn’t worthy of you, sis...” the girl muttered.

Rosetta's eyes widened a bit as she looked at Charlotte. "Looks like something happened... If you'd like, I would be more than willing to hear your story."

"I've got nothing to say to you..."

"Don't be like that. The light of the Great Goddess's compassion extends to every corner of the earth. It is our duty to guide her lost lambs."

"What compassion?! It's all a fantasy!" Charlotte yelled, causing passersby to stop in their tracks and stare at her suspiciously.

The fishmonger grimaced. "Hey, ladies," he said. "You're kinda interfering with business. Can you take this elsewhere?"

So the four of them headed to a corner of the lively crowd. With so many people coming and going, they were a hindrance no matter where they stood, and so they entered a side street to speak among the shadows of buildings.

Charlotte remained despondent, so Angeline explained the gist of her story in her place: how Charlotte hailed from Lucrecia as the daughter of the cardinal, and how she lost both her parents to political strife. Once the story was over, Sister Rosetta quietly formed a small crest in the air in front of her chest and offered a prayer.

"You've gone through so much. It must have been hard," she said with a gentle expression.

"Hmph, I don't need your sympathy. I don't believe in anything your church has to say."

Rosetta furrowed her brow, a troubled look on her face. "Yes... Well, I mean, believers come in all sorts. There are people who would use their position and authority to do evil. But there are also those who offer devout prayer and live in peace. Almighty Vienna will never abandon those—"

"That's a lie!" Charlotte cut her off. Her fist was clenched and there were tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "They were pious! They offered their prayers every morning and night, and thanked Vienna for their happiness! They were never resentful, they never acted out! So why didn't your goddess save mother and father?! Why... Why?!"

Overwhelmed by emotion, Charlotte lunged at Rosetta with a loud voice, flailing her tiny fists as tears streamed down her face. Though she knew that her rage was unreasonable, she could not bottle up her surging feelings—the tears fell unceasingly the moment her parents' faces crossed her mind.

Rosetta sorrowfully closed her eyes and placed a gentle hand on Charlotte's head. "I'm sorry. I don't have an answer for you."

"I knew it! I knew you would say that! You hypocrite!"

"Calm down, Char. Rosetta didn't do anything wrong."

But Rosetta held up a hand before Ange could say more than that.

"Can you stand back for a bit, Ange?"

"Fine."

Angeline retreated to watch over the situation with Byaku. Rosetta stooped down, placing her hand on Charlotte's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I was irresponsible..."

"Hmph!" Charlotte's nose was running now. "You will never understand how I feel!"

"Yeah... I won't. I'm not sure I ever will. Even so." Rosetta gently stroked the girl. "I want you to pray. Not for what happened, but so that your future may be blessed. So you may overcome your harsh past."

"How idiotic! You're just paying lip service!"

"That's not it. I mean, you're with Ange now, aren't you? You've still got a whole future ahead of you. You managed to return to a warm world from your path of vengeance. You mustn't reject that!"

"Ugh... Shut up! Shut up, shut up!" Charlotte angrily thrust Rosetta away. Helplessness, anger, and sorrow—various emotions swirled within her, and she burst from the alley once they were too much to bear. She knew running would get her nowhere, but she couldn't bear the thought of staying even a second longer.

However, she quickly collided with something. Charlotte raised her face, her eyes meeting with the doubtful look of a soldier on patrol.

“What are you doing here?” asked the soldier.

Rosetta raced over and smiled. “Good evening, Soldier. We appreciate the work you do around here. Um, it’s nothing really. We were just talking.”

“Talking back there? At this time of day? That’s dangerous. You might run into a bad egg. A-A-A bad egg, a bad... Wh-What a bad...ch-child you are...” The soldier’s eyes became unfocused, his pupils losing their light. He suddenly drew the sword from his waist.

“B-B-Bad children must...must be killed, right?”

“Eek!”

Charlotte shrunk back as the sword came down at her and she shut her eyes tight. However, she found herself enveloped in a soft warmth before crashing into the ground.

Angeline called out from behind, “Rosetta! Char!”

Charlotte’s eyes snapped open. She felt none of the pain she was expecting. “Huh?! Why...”

Rosetta was embracing her, a feeble smile on her face. “Ow, ow... Are you okay?”

“No... No!”

Charlotte desperately clung to the woman who had been her hated enemy only a moment ago. She felt something sticky and caught a glimpse of red on her hands. Rosetta’s emerald-green vestments were turning a sickly black as the fluid spread from her back. The items from her shopping basket scattered across the ground.

Charlotte fell into a daze, her face a picture of despair.

Even now, the soldier continued swinging his sword, only to be knocked off his feet by a flying kick from Ange. The soldier collapsed, only to rise up like a marionette.

Clicking her tongue, Angeline kicked him again. “I didn’t sense a thing until the last second... I’m so stupid!”

She had taken such great care to keep on her toes, yet this was the result. She despised her own shameful failure. Surely her father would never make such a mistake.

Suddenly, the area was filled with murderous presences, and knives came flying from every direction. Angeline brandished her sword to guard Charlotte and Rosetta, but the knives fell before they reached anywhere close.

“Quit spacing out,” said Byaku, who stood to guard her back. His circles must have flown around unseen.

Hoisting Rosetta onto her back, Angeline grabbed Charlotte by the hand and pulled her to her feet.

“It’s my... It’s all my...”

“Char! Get a grip!”

The air filled with the sound of footsteps as the presences approached. They were soldiers of the capital, and though their eyes were also empty and doll-like, they moved fiercely, racing along the walls just as the masked assailants had done before.

Angeline sheathed her sword and held Charlotte close.

“Byaku, they’re being controlled! No killing them!”

“Tsk...” Byaku swung his arm. His invisible circles blasted a group of soldiers away. “No dawdling! Get out of the alley!” he shouted.

“You’re coming with us! I’ll protect you—you don’t have to fight!”

Otherwise, he’ll never open his heart, Angeline thought as she smashed the pommel of her sword into the solar plexus of a soldier blocking their path. She used her free hand to drag Byaku’s arm.

They raced out into the main street. It was dim; the sun had nearly set. There was still light from the stalls and the lanterns hanging from the eaves; the shadows of shoppers shifted as one living being.

Rosetta breathed feebly from Angeline’s back. She wasn’t dead yet. But she had taken the brunt of a slash protecting Charlotte, and she was bleeding terribly. She would certainly die if nothing was done.

She left Charlotte—who still wasn't all the way there—to Byaku, and let her mind race.

“The orphanage...is a no go... Then, the guild!”

The orphanage was nearby, but they couldn't drag the sisters and children into it. It would be impossible to protect any more people alone.

Angeline weaved her way through the crowd and Byaku followed behind. She could sense the controlled soldiers following. At times, these puppets would receive hateful stares from the people whom they brushed against with their elbows and shoulders.

Angeline puzzled over them while she ran. Someone had to be controlling them; until that person was defeated, the soldiers would pursue them even to their last breaths. This practitioner had to be watching them from somewhere, whether by magic or from a good hiding spot. They couldn't be far, seeing that the spell had such fine control.

However, Rosetta's treatment took priority. The guild had a stock of elixirs, and she prayed the sister's heart didn't stop beating before they arrived.

She sensed people racing parallel to her atop the buildings on both sides. Their assailant had to be watching from above. *I could take care of them if my hands were free*, Angeline thought, gritting her teeth.

The crowds worked in their favor, and Angeline managed to reach the guild building. She burst inside, sending waves through the adventurers loitering around the lobby. Paying them no mind, Angeline jumped at the counter.

“An elixir! Get me an elixir!”

The receptionist jumped and shrieked. “Ahhh, Angeline?! D-Did something happen?!”

“No time to explain... She'll die if you don't hurry!”

The receptionist's expression tightened as she saw Rosetta.

“Understood! I'll get her to the sick bay!”

“Got it... Is the guild master in? Or Silver, or General, I don't care who...”

“There was a call from one of the noble investors, so they all left...”

“Argh! Just when I needed them...”

Angeline entrusted Rosetta to her care, then turned to Byaku. Byaku was frowning, while Charlotte was still in a daze.

“Byaku, let me see her...”

The moment Angeline reached out was the same moment the manipulated soldiers flooded into the building. There were even more of them than when they first started the chase. Some were bleeding, others with their arms and legs clearly broken, but still, they held weapons and lurched on with hollow eyes.

The adventurers in the guild stood abruptly, readying their own weapons. They raised gruff, intimidating cries, ready to fend off these intruders at any moment. Angeline hurriedly reined them in.

“Wait! These people are being controlled! Don’t kill them!” she said as she pulled her sheathed sword from her waist. “We’ll be fine once I take care of the practitioner. Hold them back until then!”

“That’s a tall order,” one of the adventurers complained as they drew back. The soldiers raised their weapons and pushed forward.

And then, there was a large boom and a flash, and many soldiers in the back were sent flying into the air. Angeline and the other adventurers opened their mouths blankly. Someone flew over the ranks of falling soldiers, their sea-blue hair trailing behind.

“Ah! Yuri!”

“My, what exactly is going on here?” Yuri brushed her hair aside, frowning as she watched the soldiers lifting themselves up around her. “They’re soldiers... Did you do something bad, Ange?”

“Wrong. Someone’s controlling them... I’ll take care of the caster. Don’t kill them!”

One of the soldiers got up and lunged at Yuri. With just a small sway to the side, she dodged and struck his jaw with her fist. A white flash burst out at the

impact, and after convulsing, the man fell flat on the ground.

“I don’t really get it, but for now, we have to incapacitate them. Correct?” she asked, quickly tying her hair back. When she clenched her fists, the motion was accompanied with popping and sparking, as though her hands were electrically charged.

Angeline grinned. “You got it!” she shouted as she knocked a nearby soldier down with her sword. The other adventurers begrudgingly wrapped their weapons in cloth or sheathed them, trying their utmost not to kill the foes they intercepted.

Nevertheless, even as they refrained from lethal strikes, their enemies certainly came at them with killing intent. What’s more, they rose back up no matter how many times they were knocked down. It was as if they were dealing with the undead, and the adventurers were gradually losing their will to fight. It wasn’t as if they had any obligation to help Angeline.

Within all of that, Yuri nimbly leaped around the battlefield, her charged fists teaching soldiers the taste of dirt one after the next. As expected of a former AAA-Rank adventurer, there wasn’t a more reliable ally. With her abilities, it seemed she could return to the front lines whenever she wanted.

The area was covered in a faint glow. Sand-colored masses of geometric symbols flew about. Byaku had revealed his circles, hammering them into any foe within reach. He would press them down on the backs and arms of these attackers, increasing the weight until they could no longer move. Many adventurers cried out in amazement.

Angeline looked at him, clearly displeased. “I said you didn’t have to.”

“Hmph... Why do I have to be protected by you? It’s your fault for being so slow.” He directed his circles with a wave of his hands, containing soldier after soldier.

Angeline bit her lip. Despite everything she had said, she was ultimately unable to accomplish anything on her own. As she was now, it was like she was simply trying to imitate Belgrieve, and she had gotten in over her head because of it.

“Dammit...”

I need to find the practitioner, she thought as she kicked off. She slipped easily through the ranks of soldiers now that their movements were dulled and escaped the building. The sun had now set, and under the glow of the streetlamps, it was difficult to make out the expression of everyone passing by.

Where are they? She looked around, extending her senses to their limit. If her foe was using puppeteering magic, surely there were threads of mana she could follow. The chaotic mix of magics from all of the magicians in the guild made it hard to identify, but even so, she managed to detect a feeble hint.

“Over there...”

She launched off the ground, latching onto a pillar and climbing to the top of an awning. She raced all the way up to the roof in one burst.

“Found you.”

A group of several masked figures looked back at her. The one casting the spell had a slightly different symbol on his mask. His cohorts charged at Angeline with their swords.

“You get no mercy!”

She drew her sword, cutting each one as soon as they entered her range, never losing any speed. As she aimed her sword at the spell caster, one of the masked men used his own body to block it. The blade was wedged hard between flesh and bones. It would not budge.

As she scowled, the swords of others came for her. However, Angeline released her sword and swiftly stooped down to evade the attacks. She drew a knife from her belt, thrusting it into the throat of one while sweeping another’s leg, sending him tumbling from the building and causing a commotion on the streets below.

“Let’s hope he didn’t land on anyone...” she muttered as she kicked a masked attacker while yanking a sword from the figure’s grasp. Keeping up that momentum, she used that blade to once again clear away all around her in the span of one breath.

She lifted her face to glare at the practitioner. It was hard to tell their expression as they wore a mask, but they continued muttering something under their breath.

“Great One...Almighty One...protect us from the wicked...”

“Is this what you do to people, Lucrecia?!” Angeline yelled as she swung her sword. The spell caster’s head flew into the air as the threads of mana stretching out from the corpse fizzled out.

Angeline wiped the blood from her sword before sheathing it. She felt exhausted.

Hobbling over to the edge of the building, she looked at the street below. She could hear the soldiers groaning from their wounds, having returned to their senses. Though they had survived, they were thoroughly beaten up.

“I’m no good at all.”

A somber mood came over her, but as she recalled Rosetta and Charlotte, she realized she didn’t have the time for that.

○

A man in a white robe stood with folded arms. His hood was pulled over his eyes. He was somewhat distant from where Angeline had fought, but he had observed well.

“Hmm...” The man placed a hand on his chin. “She’s certainly strong... But that can’t be it.”

The man flew through the air to where the battle had taken place, where the bodies were still littered and the smell of death rose with the summer heat. He walked through the corpses, checking them one by one.

“I thought that would be a good test, but they were far too weak to measure her strength... I guess that goes to show that the Inquisition does not know how to deal with adventurers.” He glanced at the guild. “How about another one then?”

He produced a dark gemstone from his breast pocket. After chanting a spell of sorts, he channeled his strength into his hand. A pale light seeped from his

palm, his sleeves flapping wildly despite the lack of wind.

“Off you go.”

The man chucked the stone towards the guild.

Chapter 41: It Was a Huge Mess

It was a huge mess, treating all those that were injured. The guild staff was racing all over as the piercing scent of elixir began to fill the building.

The soldiers who had been attacking in a berserk frenzy had suddenly crumpled to the ground, groaning in pain. Naturally, the adventurers were startled, but they realized that Angeline had kept her word. Yuri immediately brought out the elixirs, instructing every available hand to help with treatment.

The sick bay was full, while the tables and chairs in the lobby were being used as emergency beds. While notice was sent to the downtown soldier station, quite a few of their men had fallen under the spell, sending the system into disarray.

Angeline walked through the rows of bedridden soldiers and sighed. *If only I'd dealt with the practitioner sooner...*

She entered the sick bay, where the beds were packed with soldiers as though it were a field hospital. The soldiers had no memory of what happened when they were manipulated and hadn't the slightest clue what they did to deserve this.

Rosetta was further in the back, while Charlotte sat in a chair by her bed. Once she noticed Angeline, tears welled up in Charlotte's eyes.

"Sis..."

"Are you okay, Char? How's Rosetta...?"

Angeline stroked Charlotte's hair as she gazed down at the sister on the bed. She was laid facedown to treat the wound on her back, which had been smeared with elixir. The bleeding had stopped. Her complexion wasn't too bad, and when Angeline put a finger to her mouth, she could feel a steady breath.

"Good..." They had managed to avoid the worst.

Charlotte grabbed Angeline, sobbing into her hip.

“B-B-B-Because of me...”

“Wrong. It’s not your fault. Don’t blame yourself.”

“But...”

“Urgh...” Rosetta stirred. She cracked open her eyes. “What happened? Where am...”

“Don’t push yourself, Ms. Rosetta. You’re badly injured.” Angeline rushed over and supported the woman as she tried to get up.

“Ow, ow... Oh, Ange. What happened to...” Rosetta’s eyes stopped on Charlotte, and her expression softened. “Good... You’re all right.”

Charlotte was at a loss for words. She bit her lip as tears spilled from her eyes. And then, suddenly, she flew into a rage. “Stupid! Stupid! After I said so many terrible things to you... Why?!”

“Ha ha... I guess you’re right. I’m stupid, so I don’t know why. But I’m really happy to see you’re all right...”

Her wounds still aching, Rosetta chuckled weakly as she stroked Charlotte’s head. Charlotte buried her teary face into the sister’s chest, sobbing heavily.

“I’m sorry! Thank you for saving me... Thank you...”

“Heh heh, you’re welcome.”

Angeline expelled a relieved sigh before turning to call out to one of the guild medics.

“How are Rosetta’s...that sister’s injuries?”

“Oh, her? The wound was pretty wide, and she lost a lot of blood, but it didn’t reach her bones or organs. We stopped the bleeding, so she should be fine with some rest.”

“I see...”

It seemed she would be fine for now. She took one last glance at Rosetta stroking Charlotte and talking about something before leaving the sick bay with heavy feet. *Looks like I’m not needed here.*

She needed to inform the orphanage about Rosetta. After some unsteady

walking, she spotted Yuri mopping up blood in the lobby.

“Ms. Yuri,” she called out.

“Oh, Ange. That sure was something.”

“Yeah... Thank you. You were a real help.”

“Hee hee, it’s fine. We need to help one another.” Yuri tapped Angeline’s shoulder with a gentle smile.

Angeline returned a half-hearted smile of her own. “I’m going to cool my head. Char and Rosetta are in the sick bay. Can I leave them to you?”

“Sure... Got it. Don’t push yourself, Ange.”

“Thank you.”

Yuri seemed to sense something from Angeline’s brooding face. Without another word, she left the cleaning to the others and entered the sick bay.

Angeline, meanwhile, walked out into the open air. There was no wind that night. It felt as though the lazy summer heat was pooling over itself.

She took a deep breath and absentmindedly glanced around. There were rubberneckers about, but that was common enough. Soon, she noticed Byaku leaning against the outside wall, staring at the sky. He furrowed his brow as she approached him, a cynical smile spread across his lips.

“Serves you right. Looks like big sis can’t solve everything.”

“Sorry.”

“What’s with you? You’re being creepy.”

“I got in over my head. I never put any thought into whether I could protect you or not.”

Whenever Charlotte trusted her a little more, whenever Byaku showed some emotion, she felt like she was growing closer to Belgrieve. She felt a little proud of herself. But perhaps that was just a facade. *Have I ever truly taken a good look at the pair? Was I just being conceited?* Never mind whether that was true or not; for her, this mess hammered home her own incompetence.

Angeline stood beside the boy and leaned against the same wall. She stole a

sidelong glance at him. He was younger, but about the same height as her.

“What do you think I should do?”

“How should I know?”

“Right...”

Seeing Angeline dejectedly hanging her head, Byaku clicked his tongue in frustration.

“You’re the same as that brat.”

“What?”

“Always going on like, ‘it’s all my fault, all my fault.’ You must have it easy, taking everything on your shoulders, then playing the tragic heroine.”

His unreserved tone got to her head. “What? That’s not what I was trying to do...”

“Hmph, from my perspective, you’re all the same. So indecisive. I liked you better when you were annoying.”

“I mean... If I get full of myself, it will happen again...”

“Silence.” Byaku held out his arm. His hair turned black, and his magic circles became visible, bathing the street in their golden glow.

Angeline felt something cold on her spine. She reflexively drew her sword. “That’s...”

There was something small in the midst of all the people who had gathered out of curiosity. It was hardly as tall as Angeline’s waist. Pitch-black, like a shadow, but vaguely maintaining human form. Its sleek, slippery skin glistened in the sand-colored light.

It was the same shadow she had fought in an abandoned dungeon near Orphen. However, it had none of the innocence she felt back then. Its entire being exuded hostility and murderous intent—so much so that it was sickening to look at.

The shadow stood stock-still, observing the situation. It reacted faintly to the clamor, eyes forming around what was presumably its face.

“Insects. Kill.”

Suddenly, its shadowy mass expanded. It grew to the size of an adult, gaining mass in its arms and legs. The crowd was astir, sensing the danger and frantically moving to distance themselves from the thing. It took in these people with malevolent eyes.

Then it jumped, with claws aimed at the nearest man. The man’s face froze in fear, but it never reached him. Angeline slid between the man and the shadow, catching those razor-sharp appendages with her blade.

The blow was terribly heavy. Her hand felt numb, and even with her legs braced for impact, she was forced back.

“Run!” Angeline barked. The crowd scattered in every direction.

Channeling her strength into her sword, Angeline forced the shadowy creature back. It spun through the air, landing without difficulty. Its eyes shifted around its face, locking onto Angeline.

“In the way.”

“Don’t look down on me!”

Two shadows intersected with a screeching of metal. When they parted once more, Angeline was scowling at the wounds on her arm, cheek, and leg. They were barely scratches, but the blood was rather unpleasant.

It’s not like the demon I fought in the dungeon, Angeline thought as she adjusted her grip on her sword. She had just fought several battles, and she felt as though her focus was shot. Moreover, cheap tricks wouldn’t work against this opponent—she would be killed if she didn’t go all out.

As Angeline readied her blade, a glistening insignia flew from behind her. It collided with the figure, leaving a dent in its skin. However, this was far from lethal. The shadow groaned, shook, and batted the symbols away.

Angeline glanced back. “You don’t have to do anything... I’ll protect you.”

“Hmph.” Byaku scoffed, clearly not buying it. He sent his circles at the beast. After flailing its arms to swat them down, the shadow kicked off and flew at Angeline.

“Come!”

She lowered her stance and intercepted it. Sparks flew as sword contended with claw; the metal quivered, and the vibrations passed through the hilt to her hand. Even so, she forced her arms to swing as if everything beyond her shoulders was as supple as a whip.

But her foe did likewise, and the fact that its body was its weapon allowed it to operate without any unnecessary motions. After dozens of exchanges, it was Angeline who was gradually pushed back.

That was when Byaku’s circles flew to take the shadow by surprise and send it reeling back.

“Oi, give it a rest already,” Byaku growled as Angeline caught her breath. “You think you can win by fighting so recklessly?”

“Shut up!” Angeline howled back. “I’m not going to fail again... I’m going to protect you!”

It was as if something had possessed her. She braced her legs and readied her sword again.

Byaku yelled, “That protection you’re talking about—you mean shouldering everything and self-destructing! How conceited can you be?!”

Angeline fell silent at that, but struck at the shadow all the same. Just as before, it matched each blow with hatred and ill intent. Her sword reached unimaginable speeds, yet the shadow took all of them, finding openings to counterattack as well. Though she had the speed, her bladework lacked its usual refinement; her agitation robbed her swings of everything but their dexterity.

“In the way,” the shadow muttered.

Suddenly, Angeline felt an immense jolt to her flank. A third arm had sprouted from the shadow’s torso to deliver a heavy blow.

She was knocked off her feet, bouncing twice, then three times, before rolling. The impact knocked the air from her lungs, and she coughed as she desperately tried to catch her breath.

“Agh...hack!”

Grimacing as her lungs wouldn't obey her whims, Angeline lifted her gaze to see the shadow's claws coming her way.

“Kill.”

“Enough!” Angeline roared bestially, before forcing herself to her feet with her sword.

I'm not going to lose here. She braced her aching joints with willpower, but she couldn't move sharply. Before she could stand and ready her blade, the shadowy beast was already before her.

Before its claws could fall upon her, a large sand-colored sigil crashed into it from the side, while several smaller ones peppered it like bullets. The shadow was knocked away, large craters in its skin.

Byaku ran up to her, fuming. “Are you trying to die? What's your problem?!”

“So what, are you saying I'm wrong?!” Angeline answered angrily. Her eyes were losing focus as she drowned in rage directed at no one but herself.

Finally at his wit's end, Byaku grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

“How are you still so careless?! Get that naivete of yours under control! How are you like this after giving me that high-and-mighty lecture?!”

“I mean...”

Before Angeline could open her mouth, Byaku swung his arm. His circles gathered to protect him. However, they were easily blasted away by jet-black claws, sending Byaku flying with them. He was gone from Angeline's field of view.

Her eyes shifted unsteadily. Byaku had taken quite a heavy blow. He was wounded and in tatters, but he had just managed to protect his vitals. His eyes blazed in anger as the number of circles around him multiplied. His hair became a mishmash of white and black before settling on black once more.

The arcane symbols orbiting around the boy shot at the shadow, but none were enough to deliver a fatal blow. The circles would be sent flying with a swing of the shadow's arms, and Byaku would answer by raining down even

more of them like a meteor shower. However, he was gradually running out of mana. His shots were growing visibly weaker, and blood dripped from his pale lips before dispersing in a black mist. Finally, he fell to his knees while many of his circles faded into nothingness.

Angeline wanted to scream. She wanted to spit up all her anger and sadness.

“I can’t,” she told herself. She held it in, but the swirl of emotions within her only grew more chaotic.

She was reaching her emotional peak. Just before it was about to explode, Belgrieve’s face crossed her mind.

Remember. What did dad say? “Always keep a level head no matter the situation. You mustn’t let yourself be led by momentary emotions past the point of no return. An adventurer lives and dies by split-second decisions, so you must always mind yourself before anyone else.”

It suddenly felt as if her field of vision had widened. The clouds of anger and helplessness cleared from her eyes.

“What am I even doing?”

She had gotten all worked up about protecting people and had nothing to show for it. She had grown prideful—so much so, she hadn’t been able to even look at herself objectively. *How pathetic.*

However, this was no time to fixate on it and wallow in self-loathing. She needed to first take care of the problem before her eyes—otherwise, Belgrieve would be ashamed of her.

Her body moved the moment this thought occurred to her. Her hand that had seemed so heavy before now moved as lithely as if she were swinging a small twig. She relinquished any needless strength, lightening her gait.

Angeline delivered a powerful kick into the shadow’s raised arm. Her surprise attack smacked it into the ground.

“Right, it’s nothing special compared to dad.”

It was fast, and each blow was heavy. But it did not predict her moves and feint accordingly; its movements were all straightforward. As long as she kept

her cool, she could react to any additional limbs it decided to grow. Belgrieve's attacks were precisely engineered to counter her—they were far more of a threat.

Putting a hand to his chest and panting, Byaku said, "Took you long enough."

"Sorry, Bucky. Leave the rest to me."

"Don't call me Bucky..."

"Heh heh... Rest for a bit."

Angeline launched off the ground with the tips of her toes. She turned the edge of her sword on the hate-filled shadow as it tried to stand.

"Come. I'll play with you."

"Kill."

The demon sprung at her—it must have polished its movements as it fought with Byaku, as it was even faster than before. However, Angeline nimbly twisted her body, parrying a strike from its arm. Her otherwise numb hands were in perfect form. Turning with the shadow's own force, she hammered at it with her blade.

"Gah?!" The shadow flew back with a pained groan. It had been struck by her blade but hadn't been severed. It was as though she had hit it with a blunt object.

"Right... It's not easy to cut this thing."

She recalled the battle in the abandoned dungeon. Dortos's spear couldn't pierce it, and her own sword only managed to slice at the very last moment. She needed to foster the same synergy as before.

Angeline channeled her strength into her sword. Now that she had shaken off her anxiety, it was like her blood was crying out for battle. She did not hate fighting strong opponents; in fact, her heart was filled with fighting spirit as a smile dawned on her face.

Her mana circulated through her body more strongly with each beat of her heart—from her arms to her hands, down to her fingertips—and on through the sword in her grasp, as though it were a part of her. The mana that couldn't

be contained within it overflowed from the blade as a radiant light.

The shadow puppet shifted its eyes scornfully and lunged at Angeline, growing more arms along the way.

“Kill.”

Several spiderlike arms came at her from all directions, each powerful enough to land a fatal blow.

Angeline faced the onslaught with silent intensity. She stooped down into a drawing stance, coiling, building up force—and then released it.



She felt no resistance as the blade passed through. Its body split in two at the chest. After spasming, the arms coming at her fell to pieces.

“Ah...gah...”

The shadow staggered and fell with a thud. Its body released a foul-smelling smoke as it crumbled and melted until only a dark puddle remained.

Angeline sheathed her sword before catching her breath. She relaxed, but she couldn't let herself collapse just yet. She looked around for Byaku, smiling when her gaze fell upon him.

“How about that? Big sis handled it, didn't she?” she said—before falling backward to the ground.

Byaku sighed and shook his head.

○

The wind began to pick up.

“Interesting,” the robed man muttered from the rooftop. “It might be beneficial to let her run free for a bit.”

He placed a hand to his chin, pacing a few steps on the very edge of the building. The hem of his robe flapped precariously, as just one gust could have sent him tumbling down.

Satisfied, the man readied his teleportation magic. However, space refused to fluctuate for him. He furrowed his brow suspiciously and looked behind him.

“Well, if it isn't...”

“Bastard... What are you doing here? *Hack.*” Maria watched him, her gray hair swaying in the breeze. A sphere of compressed mana glowed atop her spread palm. This was evidently preventing the man's escape.

The man cracked his knuckles with a fearless smile. “‘What am I doing?’ Don't ask the obvious. What about you? Are you looking for a place to die?”

“Hmph. Don't lump us together. To begin with, you should be dead already.”

“Heh heh, that's rich coming from the great Ashen Archmage. I didn't think you were such a fool.”

“Who’s the real fool here, trash? Prancing right out where I can see you.
Cough, hack.”

He chuckled as he saw Maria break into a coughing fit. “Looks like you aren’t doing too well. Can you really kill me like that?”

“Try me,” Maria said. Her finger twitched.

Suddenly, the space around the man pulsed like a mirage, closing in to crush him. He swiftly crossed his arms and chanted something. The wavering space was pushed back with a pale blue light; a heavy sound filled the air as the spells clashed, and at the end of it all, the man emerged with a sneer on his face.

“What’s wrong? Are the years getting to you, Maria?”

“Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself?”

Her fingers twitched again. All of a sudden, the ground beneath him softened like a quagmire, swallowing him up to the waist. Several balls of light immediately flew at his sour face—these were lumps of highly condensed mana with an output far greater than an ordinary magic bullet.

Clicking his tongue, the man thrust out his arms.

“Night is black—blood is silver—flames flicker—moon shines—dye all.”

His chant ended just as the orbs of light burst. Even Maria had to wince at the violent flash that resulted—it was visible from the streets, and already had the rumor mill going as gawkers pointed in its direction.

“He got away.” Maria sighed and lowered her hand. The man was nowhere to be seen. He had rapidly strung together and overlaid his chants, allowing his teleportation spell to slip through Maria’s interference.

“I’m growing old...*cough, hack-hack.*”

Frustrated, Maria stared at the people below, who were still awestruck by the flash. From her vantage, she could see the craters in the ground from Angeline’s fight with the shadow.

Her eyes stopped on the melted dark puddle.

“I can’t act oblivious if that guy’s involved... It’ll be a pain, but I should look

into it.” She paused, then grasped at her chest. “Grr, *hack! Cough hack!*”

Another bout of coughing came and went. “Dammit... The medicine this time is too short-lived... I need to think of a new one...” she spat in a voice filled with loathing.

She slowly made her way down from the building with a glowering expression on her face.

Chapter 42: She Collapsed Facedown onto the Bed

Ange collapsed facedown onto the bed. Charlotte looked on with evident concern, while Anessa and Byaku just looked at her tiredly—only Miriam was grinning. Angeline idly kicked her legs in the air like wings flapping.

“Why... Why does everyone turn me down...?”

“What were you expecting?”

“I mean... I mean, you won’t find a man as good as dad anywhere in Orphen... No, I’ll go a step further. You could search the entire empire and come up empty-handed!”

“You just don’t know when to give up... Stupid as ever.”

“Heh heh, I think Ange’s shamelessness is actually what draws people to her.”

Angeline rolled over at these merciless words.

They were in Angeline’s room; some time had passed since the battle with the inquisitors and the shadowy figure. Summer had passed its peak, and while it was still quite hot, the green in the trees was starting to fade.

Ever since they defeated the shadow, both the Inquisition and the folks aiming to revive the demons had gone to ground again. Angeline wondered if they were waiting for her to lower her guard again, but nothing had happened yet.

There was another upheaval in Lucrecia; the papal faction that boasted near-absolute authority lost a majority of its members, and evidently no longer had time to waste on a girl in some distant land. This further lessened the need for the anti-papal faction to drag in a figurehead from outside. Therefore, the danger was greatly reduced.

According to Lionel, the group that attacked had presumably been an advance force that took action once they lost contact with their motherland due to the rioting, and they didn’t represent the will of Lucrecia.

“A real bother it is; there was apparently an uprising in Lucrecia two days before the attack... Shouldn’t a secret organization secure their own secret communication channels or something? Aww, how am I going to explain this to the lord...”

There was also an ongoing dispute over who would bear the treatment fees for all the injured soldiers; Lionel’s stomachache would continue a while longer.

Now that one of their powerful demons had been defeated, the force Charlotte was once a part of likely wouldn’t make another move in the near future—at least, that’s how Byaku saw it. They didn’t have any significant information on their own organization and were mainly targeted to make an example for the other members. The organization wouldn’t risk incurring substantial damage just to eliminate them, and it would be more problematic if their own existence was made public.

In any case, Angeline could now kick back and relax. She felt like something had awakened within her, but had no way of testing this out now that the problem had suddenly gone away.

To vent her pent-up frustration, Angeline once again devoted her time to finding a bride for Belgrieve. She heeded the tavern master’s words and tried her best to keep marriage out of the conversation, but either she was too obvious, or no one wanted to go with her regardless. The results stood at not a single woman wanting to accompany her in the fall.

Lying on her back, Angeline lazily reached her arms and legs towards the ceiling.

“It’s their loss. Now that it’s come to this, I’ll take my time searching...”

“Now, now... Ange, you’re just gonna waste your time and effort again,” Anessa said.

Byaku nodded. “My thoughts exactly. How about you try thinking a little? What you’re doing, it’s all futile,” he said, then tiredly slouched against the wall. Anessa looked a little pleased that there was now one more person to retort at the girl’s antics.

“I ask that you please keep out of my domestic circumstances.” Angeline

pouted.

“Hey, big sis, why can’t you just get your dad to come to Orphen?”

Angeline sprung up. “That’s right... He turned me down once, but he should come if I say it’s for fun, rather than to live with me...” Her face sparkled as if she had received a divine revelation. She vigorously patted Charlotte’s head. “Splendid idea! Good girl, Char.”

“Hee hee...”

“All right, I’ll go at the beginning of fall and convince dad to come back with me. A grand tour of the capital...with a bit of matchmaking on the side!”

Miriam seemed enthusiastic about this proclamation. “Yay! There are all sorts of places I want to show Mr. Bell. I can’t wait!”

Even Anessa nodded, her expression softening a bit. “The matchmaking is utter nonsense, but it would be nice to see Mr. Bell around...”

“Hee hee... Sounds like fun.”

The eyes of the three girls who knew Belgrieve lit up. For some reason, even Charlotte looked excited.

Left completely out of the loop, Byaku heaved a fed-up sigh. “I don’t get it, but...do whatever you want.”

○

The shadow of the mountain gradually stretched out as the glistening evening sun took refuge over the horizon. But the sky was still bright; the western sky was a vivid red, as if a massive fire had broken out.

On a hill overlooking the village, four figures had assembled. Belgrieve, Duncan, and Marguerite sat wherever they fancied, their eyes tightly shut and their unsheathed weapons in hand. Only Graham was standing, rocking a child in his arms.

The seated three were meditating to raise their synergy with their weapons. By sharpening their mana and their senses, they concentrated to make their weapons like an extension of their own bodies. Although Belgrieve’s chest rose and fell with each breath, he otherwise did not move a single muscle. Duncan

and Marguerite weren't so focused, and occasionally, they would restlessly shift about. This sort of static training clearly wasn't up their alley.

Marguerite opened her eyes a crack and timidly opened her mouth.

"Are we done yet...?"

But there was no reply. As he rocked the child, Graham remained silent as a statue. Marguerite gave up and closed her eyes again.

Belgrieve could feel a strange sensation drifting about him. While his body wasn't moving, he was in tune to what was going on within to an astonishing degree. Like a mountain river blasting through narrow ravines, he could feel his blood flowing through his veins. Each drop contained potent mana, circulating around his body. It would flow past his fingers, to his sword—the hilt, the body, the tip—before returning to him.

Once it passed through the steel, the mana that came back was cold, as if the metal was stabbing into him. With each beat of his heart, it would collide with the warm mana produced by his own body, giving birth to a sense of unease. It was like a battle was being waged. He was working up a sweat despite not moving a muscle.

Gradually, the two resisting forces began to swirl and meld together. He could feel the mana that passed through the sword and the mana of his body fusing until finally, they became a single stream.

Belgrieve opened his eyes and stood. He sheathed his sword before stretching out his limbs.

"That's about it for today."

"Very well." Graham nodded.

"What's your problem?" Marguerite sulked. "You wouldn't reply to me... Why is it always Bell?"

"You must understand the difference, Marguerite. Bell stood once he had done all he could; you merely grew bored along the way."

"Urgh..." She groaned as she sullenly stood.

Duncan stretched his back and shoulders. "Well, I'll be... I'm terrible at this.

Looks like I'm better off single-mindedly swinging my axe."

"Don't put yourself into a box like that. You need to escape that mindset, or you'll never become a first-class warrior, Duncan."

"Hmm... I see." Duncan folded his arms in thought.

"Graham, could I take Mit off your hands?"

"Of course."

Graham handed the black-haired child to Belgrieve. The boy's blank expression barely changed—he had no shyness of strangers and would allow essentially anyone to hold him like this. Though he still wasn't so fond of Marguerite, who had once tried to kill him.

Mit settled into Belgrieve's arms.

"Dad..."

"Yeah, let's get going."

The four of them climbed down the hill, through the summer grass that had grown out a good deal. There were sheep and goats bleating here and there, and every house could be heard preparing for dinner. The sky turned a shade of purple, and the largest expanse began to shine under the crescent moon's grin.

Some time had passed since the battle. The forest had returned to normal, and fiends were once again few and far between. The lumberjacks were delighted that they could get back to work, while the village youths were a little disappointed that the excitement was over.

In a once-again peaceful Turnera, Belgrieve continued to work the fields and train with his sword. The only difference was that he had another mouth to feed. It was quite lively at home, but though he liked to live in peace and quiet, this wasn't so bad either.

He returned home, lit the fireplace, and was in the middle of preparing dinner when Kerry arrived. Barnes was there with his girlfriend, Rita, too. Belgrieve tilted his head curiously.

"What's everyone doing here?"

“Well, you know how much of a mess the last party was. We thought we’d throw one in secret.”

Kerry had a basket of food with him, while Barnes carried a crate of wine bottles. Marguerite’s face instantly lit up.

“Yay! Wine!”

“Drink in moderation, Marguerite.”

“I should be saying that to you, granduncle. That much ain’t enough to do a thing to me.”

Graham frowned, but she was lamentably correct, so he had no rebuttal except to sigh.

“Don’t drink it all, Maggie,” Barnes said with a wry smile. “This is for everyone.”

“I-I know, I get it.”

Barnes’s face softened as he saw Marguerite in a fluster, and Rita promptly prodded him.

“No cheating.”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong...”

Rita pinched Barnes’s cheek and turned to Marguerite in a pout. “You can’t have him.”

“I’m not taking him, no worries. Let’s all get along, eh?” Marguerite said with a laugh, amicably poking at Rita. Even so, Rita cautiously kept Barnes in her embrace.

The tables were put together and chairs were brought from the shed. This was shaping up to be a far calmer party than the last one. Graham knew to call it quits after just the first glass—however, the drink was still getting to him, and he spoke less than usual.

Mit waddled his way between the adults, sitting on their knees or scaling their backs. He made quite the curious face as he leaned against Kerry’s belly fat.

“Kerry’s all squishy... Not like dad.”

“Ha ha ha, hey now, Mit. That tickles!”

“Yeah, well... My old man and Mr. Bell are the same age, but they couldn’t look more different... Mr. Bell’s so cool, and then, well, look at him...”

“What are you talking about, Barnes? I... I mean, you shoulda seen me. Most handsome man in the village, they’d say! Right, Bell?”

Belgrieve chuckled and sipped from his cup. “Can’t recall. You were certainly thinner, that’s for sure.”

“You serious?! I can’t even imagine a slim Kerry.” Marguerite cackled while heartily downing her glass.

Kerry furrowed his brow and slapped a hand against his belly. “You just don’t get it. It’s a sign of success that a little old farmer got to be this well-rounded!”

“Yeah, I get that part. You worked hard.”

“Ha ha ha, at least Bell understands! Hey, Mit, don’t hit there. You don’t have to copy me.”

Perhaps entertained when Kerry hit his stomach, Mit had begun vigorously drumming against the man’s fat.

Duncan scooped the child up with a laugh. “My, what childish innocence!”

“Duncan, hairy.”

This time, Mit began tugging at Duncan’s beard. “Hey, Mit! My hair is not a toy!”

“So messy...”

“Ha ha ha! What a troublesome kid you are!” Though he said that, Duncan seemed quite delighted.

After fiddling with the beard a while longer, Mit reached a hand towards Graham. “Grandpa, hug...”

“Hmm...”

His eyes shut, Graham carefully took Mit and placed him on his lap. Mit leaned his back against him, then snatched a thin loaf of bread from the table and gnawed on it.

Mit had adapted so well to Turnera it was hard to believe he was originally a demon. Naturally, they hadn't told the villagers about that. All they said was that Belgrieve picked him up in the forest. It had happened before with Angeline, so the villagers did not question it.

According to Graham, while Mit's form was incredibly close, he still was not human. Once left unattended, he would crunch and swallow branches, rocks, and tableware—and scissors could not cut through his lengthy hair. It seemed he could also change the shape of his hands if he wanted to. It stood to reason that if his hands could change, his body could as well.

In short, he currently took on a human form by choice, but his actual shape was not fixed. He was closer in nature to those shadowy figures.

However, it was also true that he was quite stable in this form. When he was first adopted, he would suddenly begin shape-shifting while asleep, but that hardly ever happened anymore. Even Graham didn't know the logic behind it; intrigued, he continued to observe the child.

Having spent many long years fighting demons and fiends, Graham seemed to be quite deeply invested in that field of knowledge, and he tended to see Mit as a valuable sample—though that was only at the start. He had since been completely done in by the unaffected adorableness of a young child, and while he didn't say much, he was always delighted to look after the boy.

Rita looked at the child, who was being rocked to sleep after finishing the bread.

"Children. Sounds nice..."

Barnes hesitated to reply. Rita stared hard at him until he awkwardly muttered, "Y-Yeah." His glass was quickly topped off by Duncan.

"So when's the ceremony?" he asked with a laugh.

"Hey! Mr. Duncan!"

"Hee hee..." Rita grabbed Barnes's arm, her cheeks turning red.

Kerry chuckled. "Hurry and give me a grandchild to hold!"

"Oh shut it!" Barnes guzzled down his cup to play it off. The drink must have

taken the wrong path, as it sent him into a horrible coughing fit.

“Come to think of it...” Rita said as she rubbed his back. “Mr. Duncan.”

“Hmm?”

“How are things going with Hannah?”

“Grah?!”

Duncan banged a fist against his chest as he choked on roasted meat.

“You’ve been getting along pretty well these days!” Kerry smiled from ear to ear. “How about you give up on traveling and settle down here?”

Duncan was a warrior who wielded a battle-axe, and his mastery of this weapon meant he often helped the lumberjacks. The man’s good-hearted personality allowed him to get along with them immediately, and he began attending their get-togethers as well.

Now, it so happened that the one cooking for those get-togethers was a thirty-year-old woman named Hannah. She had lost her lumberjack father to an accident with a fallen tree and had lived alone since. Despite her situation, she was cheerful and lively, and Duncan presumably saw a kindred spirit in her. Lately, she had even gotten to teaching him woodworking.

Duncan cleared his airway with wine. His eyes were spinning. “Oh, no, I’m not ready to settle down yet!”

“What are you saying? You’re in your midthirties, for crying out loud. Keep saying that, and the years will slip away before you know it. Hannah’s pretty lonely, you know. I’m sure she’d happily accept you.”

“H-Hmm...” Duncan shut his mouth, his red face turning even redder. His feelings for the woman were quite clear.

After mixing a stew by the fire, Belgrieve stood with a wooden pail in hand. “I’m going to fetch some water,” he said and left.

Marguerite poured herself a glass. Then, it suddenly occurred to her. “Come to think of it, what about Bell?” All eyes gathered on her.

Kerry cocked his head. “What *about* Bell?”

“I was wondering if he ever wanted to marry or something.”

“Now that you mention it. The ladies couldn’t have left a man like Bell alone...”

“So how about it, Kerry? Bell must have been popular, right?”

Kerry grimaced and waved off the notion. “Right now, he can walk so naturally you can’t even tell he has a fake leg, but you know. He could hardly walk when he returned to the village. Was always shuffling around with a cane, it was painful to watch. It was like that when working too; you’d see him dragging his leg behind. I’d say the ladies weren’t so fond of him.”

When he had first returned, Belgrieve was not fully rehabilitated or trained. His movements were far from graceful—he couldn’t walk without a cane, and it took him more time than anyone else to do simple tasks.

Self-sufficiency was the standard in the village, and no woman would stick around with a man who couldn’t work. There was also the fact that he had once tried to leave the village behind, for which Belgrieve was the target of teasing and ridicule. Yet still, he continued working day after day, all while continuing his rehabilitation. He eventually grew deft at his work and reached a point where he could do even more than the others.

“See, by now everyone’s apologized, and they count on him. But the people from our generation? They feel guilty about making him the outcast for a while. Bell doesn’t care about it, but that just makes them feel worse. Marriage’s out of the question.” Kerry paused to take a sip, and then sighed. “And it doesn’t look like he’s interested either.”

“Hmm.” Marguerite disinterestedly pressed her cup to her lips. “Now that’s a waste. Right, granduncle?”

“Hmm?” Graham had been too engrossed in playing with Mit. He lifted his face quizzically. “Yes?”

“Nah... Don’t worry about it.”

That was when Belgrieve returned. He transferred the contents of his pail to a water jug, then noticed the look in everyone’s eyes and was taken aback. He stared at them blankly, wondering what could have happened while he was

gone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Bell, oh Bell. You really... You really had your troubles...”

“I think I respect you even more now...”

His confusion only grew as Duncan and Barnes burst into tears. Scratching his head, he asked, “Wh-What’s this, all of a sudden...?”

“Hey, Bell. You got anyone you like?”

“Hmm? Like... Well, I like everyone in Turnera... And Ange, of course. My daughter is precious to me.”

“That’s not what I meant! I mean, you ever think of getting married?”

Belgrieve’s face relaxed, and he took his seat with a light chuckle. “Me? I’m forty-three. I don’t think about it anymore.”

Marguerite, seeming agitated, filled her glass. She poured with such force that some of the concoction ended up on the table. “That’s such a waste! Whether you’re forty or fifty, doesn’t matter! It wouldn’t hurt to have a wife or two!”

“No, I’m not a noble—two would be bad news...”

“You’ve got a woman you’re smitten with, don’t you?” Graham muttered and instantly became the center of attention. He stopped patting Mit and looked at Belgrieve. “It was that elven lass called Satie, isn’t that so?”

“Err...” Belgrieve scratched his head.

After staring blankly for a moment, Kerry shot forward. “B-Bell! You fell in love with an elf?!”

“I’m not sure if I would call it love...”

“Bell! You met another elf before my granduncle and me?!” Marguerite excitedly grabbed him by the shoulders.

Belgrieve bitterly poured himself a glass of wine. “That was a long time ago... We were just members of the same party for a bit.”

“Hey hey hey hey! I’ve never heard anything about this!”

“No, I mean, that’s not something I’d go out of my way to bring up...”

“What are you talking about? Don’t be such a stranger, man! Fill me in on the details!” Kerry shifted his chair towards Belgrieve, leaning in, all ears. Marguerite, Duncan, Barnes, and even Rita watched him with great intrigue—though Graham seemed keener on entertaining Mit.

He gave a troubled laugh. A bit of bashfulness struck him as he realized he would be telling such a tale at his age. Memories could be bitter at times; he just hoped he could make it a funny old story to distract himself.

○

The tavern was always lively. Adventurers of all sorts drank and ate together, regardless of rank. There were belligerent roars exchanged over a rousing melody from the traveling folk. The smell of stew and alcohol, and body odor, and all other things mixed in, wafted over the whole scene.

“Hah, I’m beat,” the elven girl said as she reached across the table to pat the red-headed boy on the shoulder.

The boy scratched his cheek. “You don’t look like it.”

“Heh heh, I mean, it’s so exciting. I always look forward to every new dungeon.”

The brown-haired boy sitting beside him chuckled as he carefully distributed the food among them. “Being too energetic is also troublesome, you know.”

“Like hell it is,” said the boy with straw hair beside the elf girl. “The more spirit you’ve got, the further you’ll go. Ain’t that right? We’ve got a long path ahead of us.”

“Heh heh, you’re right. We’re still at the bottom, but we’ll reach the higher ranks someday!”

“Wrong, we’ll be S-Rank! Don’t settle for less!” the straw-haired boy said, prodding at the girl. The girl laughed in response.

The boy with red hair could feel a pang in his heart. He didn’t quite know why, but he would be overcome with a most peculiar sensation each time he saw the

straw-haired boy and elf girl laugh together. It was somehow painful whenever the girl's smile was turned to anyone beside him.

It's no good. She's in love with him, the boy thought, putting his hand to his chest. The brown-haired boy beside him narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"What's wrong? Chest hurting?"

"No... Got a fish bone stuck..."

"Wow, that's not like you. You have to be careful."

"Yeah..."

The red-haired boy chugged his drink.

Meanwhile, the girl grinned and stared at him. "Heh heh, it's all so new to me. The time I've spent until now, why, I never could have even dreamed of it back home."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Where do you want to go tomorrow?"

The straw-haired boy laughed. "We'll go to a different dungeon tomorrow. Just a little more, and we'll hunt our quota. Then it's another rank-up! We can accept even harder jobs after that!"

"Oh, wow. Finally time, huh."

"Yeah, I can't wait. There's nowhere the four of us can't go. I'll show you a whole new world."

As the elven girl marveled at all the new sights ahead of her, the straw-haired boy gently tapped her on the shoulder. The red-haired boy let out a sigh too soft for anyone to pick up on.

I'll never be able to drag her around like that. He laughed to himself, honing his ears to the throbbing of his own heart. *Is this lovesickness? Or something else entirely?* Whatever it was, his heart would hammer whenever he saw the elf girl smile at the straw-haired boy.

I would treasure her... He knew those emotions would never bear fruit, but they were still his own. He didn't intend to cause anyone any trouble, but surely

he was free to let his imagination run wild. For now, he let himself bask in a fantasy.

The girl glanced at him and smiled. The boy smiled back. He was always quite happy when her smile was for him.

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He sent Kerry off into the chilly dead of night; the breeze would be perfect for cooling his drunken ardor.

Belgrieve had barely started into the story when the others began gulping down drinks to curb their excitement. It soon got to the point where Kerry was so dead-drunk he could barely articulate anything, sobbing and ranting about this and that. It was beginning to get out of hand, so Belgrieve ended it there.

Borrowing Barnes's shoulder, Kerry shambled his way down the path. Then he turned and bellowed, "Beeellll... You go get 'em, champ! I'm always on your side."

"Get to bed already, or you'll be useless tomorrow!"

So they unsteadily went on their way, the light from their lantern growing distant.

Belgrieve let out a sigh and stared absentmindedly at the sky. The crescent moon floated beyond the mountains, leaving only a sea of stars in its wake. He tried to recall if he used to stare at the sky like this back in Orphen, when he had to camp out for long jobs. At least the sky hadn't changed at all since then. *If they're still alive, are they staring up at the same sky?*

They were all talented adventurers. Even now, Belgrieve couldn't understand why they allowed him to be in their party. Though he had long since broken off contact, they were surely still living life to the fullest somewhere out there.

Looks like I still haven't come to terms with it, he thought. It had been over twenty-five years, but he was surprised to find he still had a lot to say about the elven girl.

"Maybe that's why..."

He had never been so keen on marrying. *Perhaps...*

Is she still an adventurer? If she is, what rank is she now? Has she incurred any serious injuries? Or did she retire and marry someone?

“An adventurer, huh...”

His thoughts turned to Angeline. When it was night in Turnera, it was night in Orphen as well. He wasn't so lonely when he knew she was under the same sky he was. Belgrieve took a deep breath, then turned and walked into his house. Behind him, an owl hooted loudly under the twinkling stars.

Extra: Village Life, City Life

Angeline kicked off the ground, propelling herself backward just as the massive ogre charged with a roar. The next instant, several arrows flew from behind Angeline, accurately piercing through its eyes, brow, and heart. The moment it faltered, Angeline's blade took its head.

"Nicely done, Anne... Was that the last one?"

"Should be. Good grief, how are there so many of them?"

Anessa leaned her bow against her shoulder and sighed. Not far away, Miriam swung her staff to summon lightning and scorch the smaller goblins black. The job was to annihilate a flock of fiends that had showed up at a village near Orphen. The strongest fiend among them was AA-Rank at best, but unfortunately, their sheer force of numbers proved to be quite troublesome.

There were plenty of jobs like this, back when there had been a massive outbreak of fiends. However, Angeline's desire to meet her father had made a demon of her, and it hadn't felt so troublesome then. In that sense, perhaps she was a little unmotivated at the moment—though that didn't change the fact that she was strong.

Some time had gone by since crossing paths with the Inquisition and the shadow, and their peaceful days had returned. Angeline was still obstinately going on the attack against Belgrieve's bride candidates, to absolutely no avail. It had gotten to the point where she was practically ignored whenever she brought up the topic.

In any case, the return of their daily routine meant they were back to work once more. Although being an S-Rank adventurer meant she did not have to do too many jobs to sustain herself, she now had two more mouths to feed. *Working for someone else's sake isn't half bad*, she thought.

They returned to Orphen once work was over. While they had eaten lunch on the road, the sun was still rather high by the time they got back. Yuri welcomed

them at the desk with a smile.

“Welcome back, girls. You work fast.”

“Nothing but small fries...”

“Heh heh, looks like Calamity-Class fiends aren’t much more than pests if I put you on the job.”

“Ah, sis!” Charlotte appeared from behind the desk. She wore a kerchief over her tied-back hair and carried a broom in her hands.

“Oh, Char. Are you helping out again?”

“Yeah! I’ll be done soon, just give me a minute!”

While Angeline and her party were out for work, Charlotte and Byaku would be placed in the guild’s care. It was the safest place to be, and she had plenty of friends there. Byaku was still as sullen as ever, but Charlotte had already blended in. She had lately gotten around to helping out with the cleaning.

“What now...? We’re a bit sweaty, so wanna go to the bathhouse?”

“About that—the two of us, we’ve got some business at the orphanage. We’ll be done by evening, so how about dinner together?”

“Hmm, got it...”

“Then see you at the usual tavern. Aha, sure is hot today. I should take a bath later,” Miriam said, stretching her arms. Charlotte soon returned, dragging Byaku behind her.

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Large, fluffy clouds lazed here and there around the summer sky, their whiteness reflecting the sunlight near-blindingly. Marguerite pulled off her straw hat and wiped away sweat with the back of her wrist.

“Sooo hot. Why do I gotta deal with this?”

She had cast off the fur coat she usually wore and her pale, slender limbs took on the sunlight directly. And yet, she showed not the slightest hint of tanning.

Belgrieve set aside the weeds he had plucked, glancing at the length of the shadows and the position of the sun.

“It’s almost noon. Want to wrap up here?”

“Copy that. Ahh.” She heaved a deep breath, as though she had waited for this moment all day. She fanned her face with her hand. “How is it so hot?”

The height of summer was behind them, but the heat lingered fiercely, and the plants grew vigorously. Self-sufficiency was standard in Turnera, so daily watering was a crucial job. Luckily, the wells and rivers did not seem to be drying out at all; perhaps the vibrant forests surrounding them played a part in that.

Once Mit’s turmoil in the forest had finally settled down, Belgrieve returned to the busy countryside life. He never missed his morning or evening training, but his sword arm did not put food on the table. After training, he would work the fields, chop wood, and head out to the forest. The sheep were fully sheared, and the stalks of wheat from the spring planting stretched out their green leaves and swayed in the wind. It was almost time to start preparing for winter.

Graham was busy looking after the village children and Mit; perhaps they were at the village square. Duncan had left to help the lumberjacks.

Marguerite looked at Belgrieve, who had begun stuffing his basket with vegetables for lunch, and asked, “Hey, I sweated up a storm; could I go to the river real quick?”

“Go right ahead. I’ll make lunch, so try not to be long.”

Marguerite grinned before flying off towards the river.

There were no baths in Turnera; at most, the villagers would wipe themselves down with towels soaked in warm water, but on these hot summer days, this would only make them sweat more. When the heat was too harsh, the villagers would often make the trek all the way to the river to submerge themselves in the cool water flowing from the mountain. This river was born from the snow melting in the high mountains surrounding the village, so it was cool even in the summer. It was too cold to enter most other times, so this was one of summer’s big events. There were already quite a few people ahead of her washing away the sweat from the morning’s work, many of them young.

“Hmm, nothing but guys in that direction,” Marguerite noted, scanning the

riverbed from afar.

She could be a tad rough around the edges, but she was still a young girl, and she felt embarrassed to show her skin to the opposite sex. After looking around, she ultimately decided to walk farther upstream where there were fewer people.

The river gradually crawled into the forest, where the banks narrowed and the flow increased. However, there were occasionally places where the currents were calmer, and these places were perfect for a swim. She couldn't sense another soul about once she entered the forest, and there were bushes and thickets that could conceal her well enough.

While the villagers thrived from the forest's blessings, they were too afraid to enter it carelessly. Marguerite shared none of their fears; as an elf, she felt more at home among the trees than anywhere else.

Marguerite tossed her clothes aside and dipped her toes into the stream before slowly lowering the rest of herself in. The water was bone-chilling, but it was instantly refreshing on her sticky skin.

"Ahhh... I live for this."

Submerged up to her neck, she leaned back far enough that all her bundled hair was soon sopping wet. Then, she allowed the tension to drain from her body, gently floating to the surface. Beyond the overhead branches swaying in the breeze, she could see the blue summer sky, and fallen leaves tickled her sides as they floated by.

After enjoying the river a while longer, she rose with a great splash, with water bounding off of her pale skin. She found after standing that the water was only waist-deep. She crouched down, scooped up water with her hands, and splashed it on her face.

"Phew... That's the stuff."

Untying her damp hair, she collected it, then forcefully ran her hands down it from top to bottom, causing water to pour out from the ends. What had once been a tepid breeze was now cold against her damp body. Still, it was as if the heat had simply been sealed deep within her, and she was still burning inside.

Taking a seat on the riverbank with only her feet in the water, she let her gaze wander idly. Here and there, the sun's rays would filter through the trees and bounce off the river's surface. She used her hands to brush off a few stray droplets and sat a while longer as she dried.

"All right, let's get back. I'm starving."

Marguerite stood up, scanning the riverbank for her clothes.

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Orphen was situated in the northern reaches of the dukedom, so the region did not get exceptionally hot in the summer months. However, it was a large city where many people gathered. The buildings were tightly packed with poor ventilation, and there was little greenery to be found. Many streets and structures were constructed from stone, which would soak up the sun and radiate heat. A cloud of dust would be kicked up from the unpaved side paths every time people or wagons passed through, creating a peculiar haze around the crowds that made it a little difficult to breathe. It hadn't rained these past few days, so the ground was arid.

Weaving her way through the plumes of dust, Angeline arrived at the bathhouse. There weren't many commoners in Orphen who owned their own baths; the lower classes would usually wash at public bathhouses.

The interior was made of wood, stone, and plaster, with one large hole dug out of the center. This pit was furnished with large flamestones at the edge. Water would crackle and steam as a pipe deposited it upon the stones. As heat output could be changed based on how these stones were arranged, it was easy to control the temperature. A wooden grill was placed around them as a safety precaution.

Angeline scooped up some warm water to wash her face.

"It's a nice bath..."

"It is," Charlotte said from her seat beside her. The sun was still high, and thanks to the rising steam, the light streaming through the windows looked like solid staffs.

It was hot in the bath, but far better than broiling under the summer sun.

Indeed, for some peculiar reason, it felt far cooler outside after a nice hot bath. A chilled wine afterwards was also something to look forward to. Cooling magic was comfortable and convenient, but Angeline wasn't much of a fan—as far as she was concerned, it simply made it far more unpleasant when she had to leave for the blistering streets.

Angeline leaned against the rim of the bath and stared at the ceiling. “You could never even imagine this in Turnera...”

“Really? How do you take a bath in Turnera?”

“There are no baths... Usually, you wipe yourself down with a wet towel. But it's not enough during the summer, so you splash on some water from the well, or go for a swim in the river...”

She recalled how Belgrieve would often take her to the river when she was young. Unfortunately, Belgrieve was a terrible swimmer due to his peg leg, and he would always watch her swim from the shallows. She remembered fishing with him more than she remembered swimming together. The only ones who would swim with her were her friends and the older village girls. As a young girl, Angeline had been frustrated with the fact that Belgrieve would never join her no matter how many times she invited him to swim with the other girls. Thinking back on it now, she had been quite reckless.

During her last visit, she didn't have the chance to swim. But just recalling the bone-chilling cold of that water was enough to blow the summer heat away.

“You swim in the river? Naked?”

“Correct.”

“Doesn't anyone see you? That's a little embarrassing,” Charlotte said, fidgeting.

Angeline giggled. “Well, sometimes men did come to peep. I was a kid, so I didn't care, but...the older girls would throw rocks at them.”

“Turnera sounds like a lively place.” Charlotte stood up and let out a sigh. “I'm feeling dizzy. I'm going to take a dip in the cold tub.”

“Yeah, I should too...”

So Angeline stood too and accompanied the girl to the cold-water bath. The heat meant that the cold bath was far more packed. She somehow managed to squeeze in, but it wasn't nearly as cold as she had hoped for. Turnera's river was cold even through the summer. She recalled a time when she was swimming alone, and a mischievous faerie had hidden her clothes.

It was a trivial matter now, and it brought with it a sense of nostalgia. After summer came fall, and this time, she would pick wild cowberries for sure. She swore as much to herself as she soaked up to her shoulders.

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As he came through the door with Mit, Graham immediately glanced around the room.

"Where is Marguerite?"

"Well, she said she was going to the river and hasn't come back yet." Belgrieve folded his arms, his expression growing troubled. The stew of summer vegetables and dried meat he had been preparing was bubbling in the pot.

Marguerite had gone to the river in the late morning, but was still nowhere to be seen. Surely she must have known that noon had already passed, and it was hard to imagine she would take the wrong road.

"Could Maggie be lost?"

"Lost? Well, I think she knows the place well enough... Ah, hey now." Belgrieve lifted Mit up just as he was about to bite into a plate. Then, looking at Graham, he said, "For now, let's eat without her. Maybe she just took a detour."

"All right." Graham nodded, picking up a wooden ladle.

Around that same time, Marguerite was at her wit's end. The clothes she thought she had doffed by the riverside had seemingly vanished. Suspecting a pervert or a thief, she had searched high and low, but came up completely short. As a matter of fact, she was confident that she would have sensed anyone who had approached. Did her clothing perhaps fall into the river and drift away?

“Dammit, why’d this have to happen to me...” she grumbled.

She couldn’t return to the village like this. She considered swimming downstream to ask the folks bathing down there for help, but she found that rather embarrassing and uncool. That said, it wasn’t as if she had any better ideas. She was left naked under the summer sun, and the stupidity of the situation was irksome to her.

Suddenly, she noticed a shake in the nearby thicket. “Eek!” she cried, hiding her chest. “Who is it?!”

A wild rabbit burst from the greenery. It made her quite depressed to find out a mere rabbit had made her so jumpy. She pondered to herself how anxious it made her to have nothing to wear. In any case, she wasn’t getting anywhere like this. She was about to search for her clothes again when she sensed someone finally drawing near.

“Judging from your voice, is that you, Maggie?”

“Duncan... Ah, snap!” Marguerite hastily jumped into the water. Duncan was momentarily taken aback when he emerged from the thicket, but he quickly turned away. “P-Pardon me. I didn’t expect to catch you bathing...”

He was about to be on his way when Marguerite frantically called him back. “Wait—hold on, Duncan!”

“Huh?” Duncan stopped, though he took care not to turn to her. “What is it?”

“Well, uh... My clothes were...w-washed away, so... I’m sorry, but could you get me something to wear from the house?”

“Oh, what tough luck. Understood, I’ll take care of it.”

“Sorry, and thanks. Ah! Keep it a secret from granduncle and Bell!”

“I see... Are you sure? Why’s that?”

“I mean, it’s...embarrassing...”

Duncan jogged away with a wry smile. He was carrying his axe with him, so perhaps he had been out in the forest helping the lumberjacks.

Marguerite found a nice sunny place to sit. The heat was nice on her now-

frigid body. She dried in an instant, and she wasn't sweating either, so it was quite a liberating feeling. She wasn't even anxious anymore, now that she knew Duncan would fetch clothes for her. Once she had calmed down, being naked wasn't too bad either.

"But who the hell is this clothes thief... Ah, I'm starving."

Marguerite pursed her lips, then planted her palms on the ground behind her and leaned back. A comfortable breeze was blowing, and each time the trees rustled, the light below would shift. She had just decided to flop back and lie down when she felt something soft under her back where she reclined. Springing up, she discovered the clothing that she thought she had lost.

She swiftly scanned the area. Not a trace of anyone, and there had certainly been nothing when she first sat down. She shuddered at this mysterious phenomenon. For better or worse, her clothes were back. And she was dry too. Marguerite hastily put her clothes on and sprinted off. There was something wrong here, something off, and she wanted to get away as soon as she could. She had long since forgotten about Duncan.

o

It became much cooler when the sun began to set. Still, the stone buildings continued to emanate heat, and they would only cool completely around midnight. The city would continue to feel somewhat stuffy until then.

After waiting for night to fall, Angeline took Byaku and Charlotte to the usual bar where Anessa and Miriam were waiting for her.

"Huh... You're early," she remarked.

"Yeah, our business wrapped up early."

"We already started drinking without you." Miriam cackled with a drink already down the hatch.

Angeline happily took a seat. Wine was poured into the empty glass that had been reserved for her, and after raising it in cheers, she downed it in one gulp. It was quite delicious and refreshing. She looked around to see the place was as packed as ever. It wasn't upscale enough for cooling magic, so the heat of so many people made it a dizzying experience.

“Sautéed duck and omelet, stewed pork and eggplant, some sausage...and chilled wine, a whole jug of it. Also bread and wheat porridge, please.”

She ordered the first things that came to mind as she slouched back. Once she realized the day was over, she felt strangely exhausted; perhaps the alcohol played a part.

Charlotte timidly opened her mouth to say, “Umm, how is Rosetta doing?”

“She’s doing fine,” Anessa replied. “She can’t work yet, but she can stand and walk around.”

“More than fine, I’d say,” Miriam chimed in. “She’s got too much energy, and she’s mad she has nowhere to put it. She always was a hard worker.”

Angeline placed a hand on Charlotte’s head and stroked her. “Let’s go see her tomorrow...”

“Y-Yeah! Thank you, sis!” The girl bashfully smiled.

“So what’s it looking like? Are you returning to Turnera in the fall?”

“Yeah... That’s the plan.”

“Heh heh, leaving so soon? You sure Mr. Bell won’t be disappointed in you?”

“He won’t be... My dad will be happy. And I’d better leave quickly if I want to get Char there.”

“Hee hee, I can’t wait...” Charlotte smiled from ear to ear, propping her head up with one hand. She seemed to be looking forward to meeting Belgrieve.

It will be too late to swim in the river in the fall, Angeline thought. But they could still fish, and harvest mushrooms and berries along with fall’s other blessings. Just thinking about it set her heart racing. She enjoyed cowberries raw, but stewing the fresh ones into a sauce and pouring it over roast elaeenia was also a treat. The sweet and sour berries meshed well with the rich fat of the bird.

Miriam munched on boiled corn and said, “Turnera’s food was pretty nice. Mr. Bell’s a good cook.”

“Yes. The seasoning is simple, but it has a nice, rustic flavor.”

“I know, right...” Angeline nodded proudly. She enjoyed the food in Orphen, but there were times when she felt an overwhelming desire to eat Belgrieve’s home cooking. Actually, she felt that craving at nearly every meal. While Angeline often cooked for herself, she was never a fussy chef, and the food she made just to sustain herself would turn out rather bland. By comparison, food made for her by Belgrieve carried a sort of warmth aside from the flavor.

“Jarlberry, was it? It had an interesting smell. They don’t really use it in these parts.”

“Right, right. I was confused the first time, but I like it quite a bit.”

“What kind of smell?” Charlotte asked, blinking.

“Yeah, the flavor’s kinda prickly, but also soft like tree bark... It’s hard to explain.”

“Hey, Ange—since everyone grows their own food there, the dishes must change every season, right?”

“Correct. There are plenty of vegetables from summer to fall. Meat and fish too. The food at the fall festival right before winter is extravagant. The start of spring is when supplies are lowest.”

“Oh, really? There was quite a bit of food at the spring festival...”

“That sweet bread, the one with the dried fruits kneaded in—that was a hit.”

“Wow... Sounds tasty.”

“It is tasty. You’ll be able to try a lot of things if we make it in time for the fall festival...”

The homesickness struck her again, and Angeline let out a sigh. However, once the steaming plate of duck was set before her, her empty stomach immediately drove away the memory of the tastes of her homeland and, for the time being, urged her to dig in and take a mouthful. More flavor seeped out with every bite. Despite all her talk about Turnera’s cuisine, the food here was also delicious; that was precisely why they were such frequent customers.

“Come on, Bucky. You can eat too.”

“Don’t call me Bucky.”

Having kept quiet the entire time, Byaku was as sulky as ever. Miriam playfully reached out and pinched his cheek.

“Is the heat making you cranky? How about you smile sometimes, Bucky boy?”

“Blasted drunk...”

“Come to think of it, you haven’t had a drop. Do you not like wine?”

“Can’t stand the taste. Leave me alone.”

“Such a child...”

“Huh?” The crease in the boy’s brow deepened as he glared at Ange. “What’s that? Try saying it again.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry... Your big sis doesn’t mind if you can’t hold your liquor,” Angeline said as she savored each sip of her wine.

With a scowl, Byaku violently snatched up a glass and chugged it down.

“Wow,” Miriam marveled. “That’s the spirit. How manly.”

“Don’t egg him on, seriously... Oi, Byaku... Byaku?”

“Huh... Byaku? What’s wrong?”

When Charlotte tapped him on the shoulder, his body swayed. A tilt soon turned into a topple right out of his chair. Anessa rose with a start.

“Hey!”

“H-Huh... Bucky? You okay?”

Byaku quivered silently. He attempted to lift a shaking hand only for it to powerlessly slump down. His face was red, his eyes unfocused. He was dead-drunk from a single cup of wine.

“I didn’t think you would be that weak...”

“Byaku! Get a hold of yourself!”

“Ahh... If you’re weak, just say so. No need to be stubborn...”

For now, they lent him a shoulder to get him back in his seat. But his body hung limp, and dinner was the least of their worries. They hadn’t even finished

eating yet; Angeline folded her arms, wondering what to do now. All the while, Miriam cackled, having finally lost to her drink.

○

Water was added to the leftover lunch stew, then barley, and finally the salted fish they bought from a passing peddler. Thinly sliced eggplant was fried in oil and tossed in dried herbs and salt. With that, dinner was served.

The western mountains meant sunset came fast to Turnera. Unlike Orphen, there weren't many stone buildings to retain the heat. The abundant dirt and grass meant that the temperature immediately fell with the sun.

"That should do it. You had a late lunch, Maggie, can you still eat?"

"Don't worry your head off. I can eat just fine."

"Ha ha, how nice, to be young..."

"But this fish is way too salty! What were they thinking?!" Marguerite frowned as soon as a scrap of salted fish entered her mouth.

"We're quite far from the sea," Belgrieve explained. "It will rot if they don't salt it this much."

"Huh? This is sea fish?!"

"Yeah. It was a bit pricey, but it lasts long, and it doesn't take much to flavor a dish."

From time to time, such goods would come in through peddlers. Sometimes they were bartered for, while other peddlers would only accept money. Regardless, currency was far less useful here than in the capital.

Suddenly, Belgrieve recalled his time as an adventurer. Back at the capital, it was impossible to live without money. He could grow the food he needed here in Turnera, but over there, money was an absolute necessity to put meals on the table. Every day, he was busily running about, either hunting fiends or gathering materials. At this point, he felt that having to use money as a medium of exchange for goods at all was just a pain.

Not long ago, he had traveled to Bordeaux with Angeline's party and paid for an inn and meal for the first time in a very long while. It was a strangely fresh

experience to him, and he remembered having some troubles overcoming that conceptual gap when he first set off too. *Did Ange go through that?* he wondered.

“Maggie, is money used in elven territory?”

Marguerite cocked her head. “Money? Nah, I don’t really get it...”

“In the Western Forest, each household grows, hunts, or gathers their own food.” Graham fielded the question for her. “Some places near human nations have picked up trade, but...there weren’t many financial transactions in the settlement where Marguerite and I lived.”

“I see...”

In that case, perhaps Marguerite would have some troubles if she ever decided to leave for Orphen.

“But Duncan sure is taking his time today. You think his job is dragging on?”

“Duncan working?” Mit twisted in Graham’s arms.

Belgrieve smiled. “Yeah. It’s like he’s a part of Turnera now.”

And that was precisely the moment when Duncan barged through the door. He looked restless, then dazed as soon as he noticed Marguerite.

“Did you find your clothes, Maggie?”

“Huh? Me? I...” Marguerite awkwardly mumbled. She had scampered back swiftly, grown embarrassed along the way, and decided not to say a word about what happened in the forest.

“Clothes? Did something happen?” Belgrieve curiously asked.

“Truth be told, I ran into Maggie around noon in the forest.”

“In the forest? No, Maggie went to the river. I don’t think she went that far.”

“Y-Yeah...” Marguerite nodded, with an odd expression on her face.

“But I... Hmm, that means it must have been a faerie...”

“Hmm?”

“Well, I saw Maggie swimming in a river in the forest. She said her clothes had

been washed away so she wanted me to run home and get her something to wear... That's why I hurried back with some clothes, but she was nowhere to be seen... Do you reckon a faerie was teasing me? Ha ha ha!" Duncan laughed, having seemingly accepted this as fact.

"I see..." Belgrieve stroked his beard. "The faeries around these parts do love their mischief. They often teased me when I was a child."

"Oh? You too, Bell?"

"Yeah. They'd pretend to be fish and tug at my line, or call out with my friends' voices... That's right, they once hid my clothes when I was swimming. I was quite at a loss then, since I couldn't just go home naked. Well, I found them in the end—those faeries are far better than fiends."

Marguerite twitched.

"But it's rare for them to go after adults. They generally only play with children..."

"Hmph, does that mean I'm too childish?"

"That's not what I meant... Maybe they thought you'd play along?"

"Hmmm... But that transformation was so masterful. I'm sure even you would have fallen for it, Bell. It was perfectly Maggie from the voice to the face. It even told me to keep quiet to you and Graham because it was embarrassed."

"Hmm? What a strange faerie."

"Y-You must be tired, Duncan. Well, dinner's done. Take a seat!"

"Right. Well, thanks, I guess..."

"Now Bell! I'll take care of that! Don't worry, just sit! Okay?!"

Marguerite wiped down the table, set out silverware, and was suddenly quite keen on helping. Duncan scratched his cheek while Belgrieve curiously stroked his beard.



“You’re strangely helpful today, Maggie...”

“Hey, I’m just in the mood sometimes.”

The two men exchanged a look and a shrug. Only Graham stared at the busy girl as if he knew everything. The charcoal popped in the fireplace, sending a thread of smoke streaming from the chimney.

Afterword

I don't really know if an afterword is necessary, nor do I see any use in reading something like this. I mean, right after you read a novel that plays around with a fictional world, you have the author crawling out from the woodwork to drag you back to reality. This just doesn't feel right to me. In the first place, reading this is essentially like listening to someone else's ramblings with your eyes, and it's just really noisy. Though saying that is like invalidating my own profession, so I should drop it there.

In any case, I'm really bothered by the fact that I have nothing to put in the afterword. Unlike the story, there's no real through line; it's just the author arbitrarily talking about whatever he wants, and it's none of our business whether the reader even looks at it or not.

I'm getting far too heated on the matter, so I've decided to head north to cool off. My bum hurts after being rocked around in a carriage for several days, and by the time I get there, it's way too sunny and hot. But the wind is cool if you find some nice shade, and it is quite enjoyable once you get used to it.

The author lives in Oita prefecture in Kyushu. Through streets and wastelands, after many a twist and turn, he makes it—to where the fields stretch over the plains and the sheep munch on the grass. Given the season, he decides to bring kabosu fruit back with him as he sits in a chair at the end of the yard.

"Not too many faces around."

"You got that right."

"What happened to the elves and Duncan and whatnot?"

"They're all out."

"It's nice and cool here. I guess I was the one who was getting heated up."

"It's summer, so it still gets hot here, but it must be better than it is down south."

He has a point. More importantly, the author enjoys how the air is crisp and less stifling.

“We’re starting to run low on water. The fields are going to dry out before the rice can be tilled. They’re all looking so seedy, each and every one of them.”

“You sure you’re not just slacking off? Aren’t you supposed to be a farmer...?”

“Oh shut it.”

He stares long and hard at the kabosu I have with me.

“So what do you use that for?”

“You squeeze it over stuff. People from Oita put it over everything.”

“Everything?”

“You can just drink the juice too.”

“Hmm? I see... Well, whatever,” he says as he strokes his beard. He takes a sip of floral tea, staring at the light shining through the gaps in the trees. “Have you heard anything about Ange?”

“Not recently. And wait, it’s hardly been long since she left, right? You’re already worried about her?”

“Can’t help it.”

“First the daughter, then the father. I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Well, putting all that aside, please take this.”

The author produces a book from his bag; the man takes it with a suspicious look on his face.

“Forget about Ange? But here she is, right on the cover. Isn’t this art a bit too good?”

“I think so too. But please just think of it as a blessing from Master toi8 and take it.”

“Right... It makes me feel a bit itchy, though.”

“As humble as ever. How about you just be happy about it?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“All right, then look at this manga. I think Urushibara-sensei really outdid himself here.”

“Wow, you’re right... Yeah, did I ever move that well before?”

“He drew you ten percent better. Be grateful. So there, it came to me. The manga is, needless to say, wonderful—both the cover and the illustrations. The sole and greatest flaw of this book is the writing. In that regard, the manga is wonderful. There’s all sorts of unnecessary text at the end of the book, but that’s all well and good because you can just skip over it. So how about I just leave it to the manga to tell the story? I’ll get rid of all the prose and leave only Master toi8’s illustrations. In the first place, how am I supposed to be happy when such gorgeous drawings are squandered on hideous writing? It’s nothing but trouble if the cover is so good but the contents are like this. Don’t you think so?”

“But if that’s the case...what happens to you?”

“Right, that’s the problem. I can’t go around proudly calling myself a great author anymore. No, don’t say that I’m not great. I’m not asking for the truth right now.”

“I don’t get what you’re trying to say...”

“I’m trying to say that the original author is the worst part of it, but everyone supporting him is incredible. When you really get down to it, it’s downright cringey for the author to have a conversation with one of his characters in the afterword. ‘There you go again with your try-hard pseudo-poetry. This is why the readers are going to give up on you.’”

“Then, you can just...*not* do that, right?”

At the start, I wrote that I had nothing to write. The clouds flow by, casting a shadow over the brilliant sun. Now the air is much cooler. The man slouches in his chair as he flips through the pages of the book.

“So, are you done?”

“Yeah, just a few more lines. Making it pure dialogue is nice. I can get in so many lines while saying less.”

“But I’m surprised you got three volumes out of it...even if the cover and illustrations are great.”

“You’ve got that right. I’m thinking the readers are going to grow sick and tired of the slow pacing. Next time, I want to throw in something that will shock them. Maybe I’ll throw in a random slasher to stab you in the gut. What do you say?”

He never really replies when the author asks him about these things.



I make it a rule to only
read the book after the
manuscript is finished,
but I'm really looking
forward to the
next volume!

2018.

Toi8

The fine details
on Angeline's design
are cool too!!!



CONGRATS!
ON!
VOLUME 3!

This is Urushibara
Kyu, who's doing the
manga version for
Comic Earth Star.



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

Author MOJIKAKIYA Illustrator toi8





Bonus Short Story

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 streetside 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 nice. 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 good 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 anchovy and garlic-grilled mussel.”

Their food had arrived. On the first plate were small fish that had been sliced open and stuffed with citrus vinegar and salt, then marinated 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 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 oyster, coming up!”

Another dish came out while Anessa and Miriam were squabbling. Anessa 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.

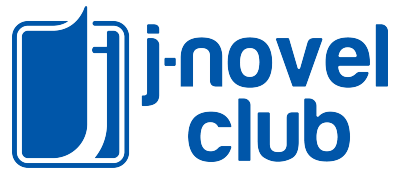
Miriam burst out laughing. “Seriously, you picked that timing to sneeze?”

“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.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 3

by MOJIKAKIYA

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