

I Surrendered

My Sword for a New Life as a Mage

7

Shin Kouduki
Art
necomi



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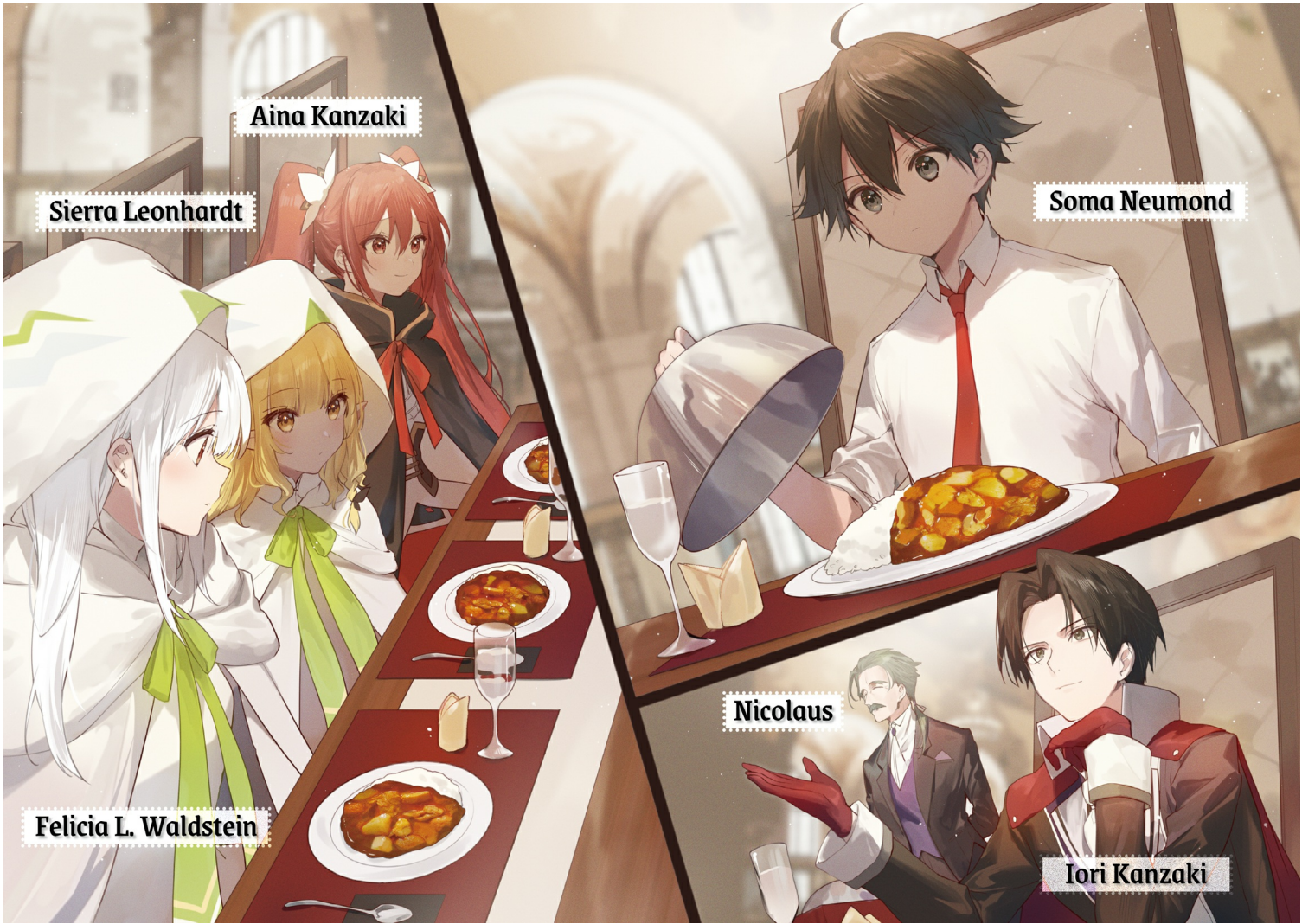
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<illust> necomi





Aina Kanzaki

Sierra Leonhardt

Felicia L. Waldstein

Soma Neumond

Nicolaus

Iori Kanzaki



Mana gathered in her outstretched palm.

“Flame, obey my will and reveal your power.
Let all that stands in my way be immolated.”

If Soma remembered correctly, that was the chant for the first spell that Aina had ever used. It was a beginner's spell, though; the one she'd just used had been more powerful.

He was wondering what she was trying to accomplish when he got his answer.

“Flame Arrow!”

Sorcery (Special-Grade) / Dark Lord's Guardianship / Persistent Buildup / Consecutive Spell: Magic / Flame Arrow.

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1

Felicia was looking around the room because she had nothing else to do. This room certainly wasn't intended to entertain anyone, however; all she saw were stone walls and ceilings, which weren't going to help her kill any time.

But that also reminded her that she wasn't in that forest she'd gotten so accustomed to living in, which put a smile on her face.

"What is it...?" asked her younger sister, Sierra, who must have been watching.

Felicia's smile widened. "Oh... I was just wondering what my past self would think if she knew where I was now. I'm sure she wouldn't believe it if I told her."

"True..."

She wouldn't have believed this ten years ago...or even one year ago. She'd thought her life would continue the way it always had, with no change and no need for change. Just like her mother had lived until the end of her days.

But that lifestyle had suddenly been destroyed one day—when a boy named Soma appeared in that forest where nobody but her should have been.

"Maybe 'destroyed' is a bit of a violent word for it..."

"Mm-hmm... But it suits Soma."

"Maybe so..."

Soma had treated her normally, as if the fact that she was a witch was irrelevant. Well, maybe his behavior couldn't be called "normal"...but it had been a long time since she'd been treated like a normal person—since back when her mother was alive. For the first time in a while, she'd enjoyed her daily life.

Felicia had thought that was temporary, however. Soma had in fact planned to leave as soon as he had the opportunity, and she had been all right with that.

It had been a chance meeting, after all. She'd thought it wouldn't affect the

rest of her days, that things would go back to normal.

But they hadn't. Another day had suddenly come, one that had nothing to do with Soma.

The forest god.

The elves.

A witch.

A sacrifice.

And...

"I would have died on that day if not for Soma...if not for having met him."

"Mm-hmm... So it's a good thing he destroyed it."

"Yes..."

She could agree with that now. However, she'd only come to think that way recently. In the time just after Soma had saved her, while she'd been relieved, she'd also genuinely wondered whether that was right. Could she, a witch, pursue happiness like any normal person?

And to be honest, she wasn't sure she'd completely resolved that doubt deep down. But she wasn't denying herself anymore.

"Well, I've been through a lot, so..."

"Mm-hmm... That's what happens with Soma."

Sierra's comment brought a crooked smile to Felicia's face. She wanted to argue the point, but it was true. She hadn't imagined she would get wrapped up in such a fuss in the first town she visited after leaving the forest.

"And he meets weird people."

"That's a rude way of putting it, and wouldn't that make *us* weird people too?"

"We kind of are..."

"You know that's not something you're supposed to agree with. Well...there *was* someone unusual. Stina, right?"

Felicia thought back to the girl they'd met in that town. She hadn't been a bad person, but she'd seemed oddly eager to pretend she was, like there was some sort of villain persona she felt she had to maintain. And what bothered Felicia was that she thought maybe she had some tendencies like that herself.

In any case, apparently Stina and Soma had been acquaintances, and they'd decided to cooperate. That had led to them working together to deal with the monster problem...

"And maybe this isn't proper to say, but to be honest, I enjoyed it a little."

"I get that..."

It hadn't been easy, and if anyone had asked whether she wanted to do it again, she would have said no. But it was also true that she'd had fun while doing it. Maybe it was the feeling of working together to overcome difficulty. That was something she never could have experienced in that forest—especially not if she'd died.

Regardless, the issue had been resolved, and they'd parted ways with Stina. To be honest, it upset Felicia a little, since she wasn't used to saying goodbye, but Stina must have had her own circumstances. There was nothing they could have done to stop her.

"And I wondered what was next...and now this."

"Mm-hmm... Happens a lot with Soma."

Felicia wasn't sure about leaving it at that, but it was true, so she couldn't argue with it. She thought about the girl they'd met just after parting ways with Stina and muttered her name.

"Aina, huh..."

She was another acquaintance of Soma's, and a friend of Sierra's too in this case. Apparently she'd been on her way to visit home, and the three of them had decided to come with her...

"I never thought I would find myself in the Dark Lord's castle."

"Mm-hmm... That's normal."

Felicia glanced around the room and sighed at Sierra's reply. It didn't look like

a Dark Lord's castle here, but it was certainly part of one.

"My past self never would have believed this."

This made her think you never know what might happen in life, although it sounded self-evident when put that way. She'd never imagined that she'd leave the forest and come to this castle, let alone be guided to it by the Dark Lord's daughter.

Well, Aina wasn't with them now that she'd left to go look for the lord of the castle...

"I just realized... Was it really a good idea to leave us alone here? It seems careless... Maybe they don't need to worry because of the kind of place this is?"

"Maybe... But I think Aina just trusts us."

"Is that so..."

Felicia found herself smiling as she realized that her sister, who struggled to express herself and hadn't been able to make any friends in the forest, really had made a friend. That, in turn, reminded her of the other person who wasn't with them right now.

"That reminds me—I wonder what Soma is doing now?"

She thought back on how he'd told them he was going to search the castle to kill time and left. This was Soma, so she didn't think she had to worry about him, but...

"Probably getting into something else..."

"I can't argue with that, but I certainly hope not..."

He would probably come back acting as if nothing had happened, but that didn't mean that was true. In fact, she was sure he was up to *something*.

But...

"To be completely honest, I'm a little excited."

"About what...?"

"To see what he's going to do next."

“Mm-hmm... I get that,” Sierra said with a smile.

Felicia smiled back as she looked the way Soma had gone, thinking about what was to come.

2

When he woke up, he saw a clear blue sky. Lifting himself away from the sensation at his back, he found that he was lying on a field of grass. He tilted his head in puzzlement.

“Hmm...”

He tried touching the ground. It felt neither especially hard nor soft; the grass only grew to about his ankles, so it didn't make for a very good cushion.

“I don't suppose I fell here... And if I had, then where would I have fallen from?”

He looked up at the sky. There was nothing but a clear blue expanse—nowhere to fall from. Maybe an airplane, but he wouldn't be alive in that case.

“And I don't recall being on an airplane.”

Jokes aside, he glanced around. All he saw was a grassy field—nothing else, not even a tree. That meant he didn't see anything dangerous, so there was no issue with what he saw, except for one big problem: he didn't remember coming here.

“In fact, I don't recall ever seeing this place...”

But thankfully, nothing seemed to be wrong with him physically. When he tried to move, he didn't feel any pain.

“That would be my one piece of good luck, I suppose.”

He had clothes on, but when he checked his pockets, he didn't even have his wallet on him. It wasn't on the ground near him either, so he literally had nothing but the clothes on his back.

“And I see nobody nearby...”

He was really in a fix here. He didn't think he'd done anything to deserve this, but maybe someone had a grudge against him. But even if this was an attempt at revenge, it seemed like a half-baked one.

“Oh, hmm... What is that?”

As he looked everywhere he could think to, his thoughts racing, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. It was quite far away and only appeared the size of a speck, but it was something other than grass. Maybe he would end up disappointed if he went to look...but that was the only nongrass thing he could find at the moment, so he had no choice but to go.

“It would be superior to remaining here, at least.”

So he didn’t hesitate to begin walking in that direction...and about five minutes later, he stopped in his tracks.

It wasn’t that he was disappointed. In fact, his expectations had been exceeded.

The thing he’d been walking toward was clearly man-made. It had become plainly visible before too long, so it must have been quite large—ten meters tall, if not more. Since he could make out its shape even from afar, it must have been rather imposing when seen up close.

But it wasn’t because of its size that he’d stopped, nor because he couldn’t tell what it was. It was because he *could* tell what it was, in fact.

“Hmm... This is a castle wall, yes?”

He’d never seen one except for in textbooks and video games, but that had to be it. There shouldn’t have been one, though; he hadn’t heard of such a huge castle wall anywhere near where he lived, at least.

But while that was a problem in itself...the bigger problem was what was around it. There were several *things* prancing around the wall—they looked like birds, but they were about half as tall as the wall, so they were too big to actually be birds. What in the world were those?

It wasn’t that he’d never seen anything like them before. He was pretty sure he had, although they were too far away to tell for sure.

That had been in a game, though. And like that castle wall, they shouldn’t have existed in real life...

“I see. It isn’t any wonder that this development seemed to come out of

nowhere... But when could I have fallen asleep?" muttered Yagiri Soma as he looked at the sky.

†

"...And that is how I remember the very beginning."

Once he was done telling the story of how it had all begun, Soma sighed as he leaned against the giant tree. It had been over three decades ago in terms of subjective time, but he couldn't have forgotten it if he'd tried; he hadn't even forgotten after death, so he doubted he ever would. That was only natural, though.

"So you just woke up in another world? No warning or anything?"

"There was none that I noticed, at least. I simply woke up lying on the ground."

"Huh... That does sound like something that'd happen to you."

"What do you mean by that?" Soma asked, but the only response he got was a shrug. That was all...but the familiar interaction put a smile on Soma's face.

"What's that look for?"

"Oh... I was simply thinking that this is how things were back then."

"It is? Huh... Maybe, yeah. You remember that, though?"

"Hmm... Yes, I do. It was a few decades ago when I last met you."

"Decades, huh... But you remember it really well. Including me, of course. Has your memory always been that good, Soma?"

Soma had been his name in his past life as well—Yagiri Soma. And this man, who knew that—Kanzaki Iori—had been his friend. That wasn't in the world where he'd mastered the sword, however; that was in the world he'd been in before that one.

"That goes to show how memorable those times were, even after multiple decades."

"Yeah, they were in a lot of ways..."

"I could say the same of you, however. While my name happens to be the

same, my physical appearance is completely different, unlike yours.”

“You’re not the type of guy who I wouldn’t recognize just because you look different. But yeah... I guess those times weren’t the kind of thing you forget after a couple decades, huh?”

“Precisely.”

Soma would recognize any of his friends from back then the instant he saw them, not only Iori. That was how memorable they had been.

He didn’t think he would meet any more of them, though. Meeting Iori alone was unthinkable enough.

“And considering that, this is truly an amazing coincidence.”

“You mean that we met up?”

“It is, isn’t it? You were summoned to this world as a hero, succeeded the Dark Lord after defeating him, and now here you are.”

“And you somehow got transported to another world, died, got reincarnated in this one, and now you’re here.”

They’d given each other basic but full summaries of the circumstances that had led up to this moment. When they heard it again from each other’s mouths, it sounded completely absurd...but it was true.

“But if we’d had a conversation like this in our past world, we would have either been disregarded or committed.”

“For sure. I wonder what they would’ve said.”

They smirked as they imagined it. The others wouldn’t have hesitated to pick on them about it. It *was* a fantastical, unrealistic notion, after all.

“But yeah, I guess maybe we wouldn’t have found each other again here if even one little thing had been different.”

“Hmm...?” Soma looked at Iori with puzzlement; something about that statement struck him as off. Maybe he was overthinking it, but...

“Oh!”

Just then, they heard an exclamation. They turned to look and saw two

familiar people standing near the door: Aina and the head butler.

“No wonder I didn’t recognize the way here... I didn’t know about this room.”

“I had a hunch that he would be in a hidden room, between knowing that one exists in this castle and being unable to find him anywhere else, but to think it would be in a place like this...”

The two let out sighs that sounded somewhere between weary and impressed as they looked around the room. Then their gazes converged on one point: the person they were looking for, Iori.

“Ugh, shit, now they actually caught—”

When caught in their sights, Iori panicked for a moment, but he stopped moving as soon as he realized who they were. His eyes opened wide, as if he were witnessing something impossible.

“Wait... Aina, is that you?”

Aina narrowed her eyes in displeasure. “You’re not going to tell me you forgot what your own daughter looks like, right?”

“No, of course I didn’t, but...”

Iori still looked baffled. Well, maybe that was a normal reaction upon seeing that his daughter, whom he hadn’t seen in over two years, had suddenly shown up.

“Well, whatever. Anyway! I won’t tell you to act like a Dark Lord, but haven’t I always told you to be more responsible?! Ugh, you haven’t changed at all since I’ve been away...”

“Uh, so, well... Wait, Aina...?”

“What?!” Aina glared at him as if to ask whether he had a problem with that, but he didn’t appear to. He was still baffled, but less at seeing Aina herself than at how she was behaving.

But understanding flashed through his eyes just after that, and he slowly turned to look toward Soma.

“Right, I was wondering how you got here...”

“I would think that should be of more concern to you.”

“Well, you’re *you*, so I figured you had a way.” He looked over at Aina, showing he understood the reason. Then he turned a displeased look back on Soma as if to ask why he hadn’t mentioned Aina.

Soma hadn’t deliberately left her out of the story, though. It simply hadn’t been the right time to talk about that part. But he hadn’t necessarily intended to bring her up if given the time either; he’d thought it would spoil the surprise.

“Well, that doesn’t really matter. I take it this is thanks to you?” Iori turned to look toward Aina again.

Soma shrugged, understanding what Iori was implying. “I wouldn’t say I did anything of importance. This is thanks to her own efforts.”

“If that were enough, we would’ve worked something out a long time ago... I can’t believe you sometimes.”

“Come on, father, listen—wait, huh? What’s Soma doing here...?”

“Isn’t it a little late to notice that?”

Well, she must have been too focused on Iori, given that she was meeting him for the first time in a while and probably nervous about that.

“Just waiting left me with no way to occupy my time, so I decided to look around. Then I found this place and found *this* along with it.”

“I never said you could just...”

“But you found it thanks to me, yes? It seems you didn’t know about it.”

“This is true; we weren’t aware of this place,” the head butler said. “May I ask how you discovered it, for future reference?”

“I don’t mind, but I didn’t do anything special. I simply noticed a disturbance as I was walking, checked it out, and found this.”

“I see... As I should have expected of a friend of Her Highness.”

“So that’s how you found it... I was wondering. Sounds like you, though. But do you really have to call me ‘this’?”

“I believe it’s fitting. Wouldn’t you agree, Aina?”

“Wha, uh, well... Sure...?”

“Hmm...?”

Aina seemed to suddenly falter despite her lack of hesitation before. It couldn't be because Soma was there...so he tilted his head in puzzlement and looked at her.

Bewildered, she furrowed her brow and asked, “Um, Soma... You seem kind of...weirdly friendly with my father?”

“Hmm...” Soma understood her bewilderment. It was certainly natural that one would have questions upon seeing a man the age of one's father acting friendly toward a boy one's own age, and too little time had passed for them to have just made friends.

But...

“Well, I won't deny that, but I have my reasons.”

“I feel like I remember you saying something similar before...”

“How odd.”

He didn't have any reason in particular to hide it, but it was a very complex thing to explain. Since there was no reason he needed to, he preferred not to if he could get away with it.

“I don't really care either way, but it'd be a pain to explain, so just take what Soma said at face value.”

“Well, I guess it's not like I really need to know... But it really is weird. Fine, though.”

Aina seemed dissatisfied, but she accepted their answer. That didn't make her happy, judging by the glare she was giving him, but Soma simply shrugged. He could tell her later if the time ever came to.

“I apologize for interrupting your conversation, but shall we return now that we have found Sir Iori? Your friends are waiting for us.” The head butler brought up Felicia and Sierra and smoothly transitioned to the next topic when he noticed the break in the conversation. He seemed quite capable, befitting the title he identified himself by.

“Oh... That’s true. Let’s head back, then.”

But before they could go...

“By the way, you can feel free to attempt to escape, but I intend to help catch you if you do.”

“Tch, what kind of friend are you?”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m also Aina’s friend.”

Iori seemed to give up on the thought of escape when Soma stopped him before he could try. It was probably just that he didn’t want to work, not that he didn’t want to talk to them... He really hadn’t changed a bit. Being summoned to another world had done nothing to the core of his character.

But Soma rethought that as he began to follow Aina. He saw Iori, who was following them as well, looking at Aina, and he saw the look on his face.

The current Aina must have been the true Aina Iori knew, the one from long before she’d run away from the castle. And if he could make that face upon seeing that, then it wasn’t true that nothing had changed about him. He was at least able to make the face of a proper father.

As Soma reflected on that, a slight smile stole across his face.

3

Naturally, Felicia and Sierra were bored. When the others came back, Felicia was doing nothing but staring at the wall.

“Oh, you’re back... And is that...?” Felicia asked after taking a few moments to notice.

Soma nodded, then elaborated because he thought it would be better for her to speak with someone she knew than a complete stranger. “Yes, this is the man currently known as the Dark Lord.”

“Weirdly vague...?” Sierra said. Unlike Felicia, Sierra had turned to look at them the second they’d entered the room, and she must have simply been doubtful. It was true that usually a Dark Lord would declare himself one outright, but...

“Oh, yeah, don’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure he said that himself, but it doesn’t really mean anything,” Aina said wearily.

She was half right. Iori had in fact said that when Soma had asked about his position. But it was another story whether or not it meant anything. Actually, Soma thought it definitely meant something; Iori had said it with an air of meaningfulness. He probably hadn’t explained because he hadn’t felt like it. It would have taken time, and he wasn’t a fan of putting in effort in the first place. And Aina probably saw it like that because Iori had wanted to avoid trouble—to avoid getting Aina involved in his issues.

“Like he said, I’m Iori. I’m acting as the Dark Lord right now. You can call me Dark Lord, Iori, or whatever you want. No need for formalities if you’re Aina’s friends.”

And he seemed to treat Felicia and Sierra the same. Soma was an exception, probably not because Iori trusted him but because he thought of him as someone it was all right to involve in his issues. Soma sighed, thinking that was another thing that hadn’t changed about him.

“Well, it’s a good thing that we’ve reconvened, but what shall we do now?”

He was asking both Aina and Iori. The three of them were here to accompany Aina, after all; whatever they did next was up to her.

“Yeah... Well, my mother and the rest won’t be back for a while, right?”

“Yes, as I informed you before, they left on urgent business and will not return for several days. Only Sir Iori and I are here,” the head butler said.

“Hmm, okay... That’s a long time to wait. And if the emergency takes a few days, it could easily be longer than they think. I have a bit of time, but I’d prefer to go back before we’re cutting it too close... Especially with this one here.”

“Why are you looking at me?” Soma looked back at Aina with confusion, not knowing what she was referring to...but then it occurred to him.

It was common sense that on a journey, two were better than one, and three were better than two; it meant they were safer on the way and could look out for each other overnight, and having more people made things easier overall.

But there were exceptions to that rule: for example, if one of your companions was a stranger, it meant you had to be wary of them, and it risked putting you in worse situations—not being attacked by them necessarily, but perhaps being held back by them.

And there were cases in which one person was enough—if they were used to traveling, capable of fighting, and didn’t need to keep a close lookout. In that case, having more people come along would only slow them down, whether those other people were on the same level as them or higher. Having to accommodate others never sped up the process.

Well, maybe if one of your companions was a mage, they could use magic to increase your efficiency. But Aina was a mage herself, so if anything, that was her role...

“But in that case, it would apply to Sierra and Felicia as well, not just me... So what makes you say that about me in particular?”

“I can tell you really mean that... You never change, huh? You don’t seem to realize,” Aina said with a sigh.

Soma simply looked at her with even more puzzlement. What was she talking about?

“Well, this is Soma,” Felicia said.

“Mm-hmm... No helping it.”

“You too, Felicia, Sierra? Incomprehensible...”

“I see you’re one to talk about people not changing,” lori commented. “Well, that aside... Why didn’t you ask me earlier, Aina?”

“About mother? I mean, you wouldn’t know much anyway, right?”

“N-No... I might...” lori averted his eyes, confirming her statement. The exchange seemed to reveal part of the power balance in this family.

“Family, though, huh...”

“Huh? What’s up?”

“No... It’s nothing.”

Soma wasn’t *not* surprised that lori had one now, to be honest, but this wasn’t the place to talk about that. More importantly...

“So what are we going to do? You must have come here with an objective in mind, right, Aina?”

“Huh? Yeah, I did... Mostly to let everyone know I’m okay and talk about what’s been going on since I left.”

“Oh, and I can see why you would want everyone here in that case.”

Apart from the fact that Aina was an only child, Soma hadn’t heard much about her family members, but it sounded like she had ones other than her mother and father. But regardless, it didn’t sound like it would be easy to get all of them together within the next few days.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do... I wanted to see everyone while I’m here, but it can wait until next time. I guess mother and the rest will hear about it if I tell father...won’t they?”

“Rest assured that I will inform them,” the head butler said.

“Okay... I’m glad.”

“Your dignity both as a Dark Lord and as a father is in shambles,” Soma said.

“Lay off. This is how things always are, and things like that are just a pain anyway.”

He didn’t seem to be claiming that to protect his ego; those were just his genuine thoughts. Aina seemed annoyed but not especially bothered by that, which showed it probably was how things always were.

“Then I’ll talk about what’s been going on lately... And I don’t suppose I could go back to the village after that...”

“Yes... Perhaps if you traveled overnight, but there’s no need to push yourself like that,” Felicia replied.

“Mm-hmm... Didn’t seem like there were monsters to worry about... But it’d still be pushing yourself. And there’s no rush.”

“It’s another story if you’re really opposed to staying here for the night, however.”

“I-I didn’t say that...!”

Judging by how she rushed to deny that, Aina was definitely sympathetic toward Iori. Although Soma knew it was none of his business, he let out a sigh of relief and shrugged in response to Aina’s glare before continuing the conversation.

“In that case, we would be staying here as well. Is that all right with you?”

“I’d be surprised if anyone said no to that. We have more rooms than we know what to do with anyway. The problem is actually what we’ll do in the meantime. It’s too early to start preparing dinner, even if more people means it’ll take more time to make.”

It was certainly too late for lunch but too early for dinner. It would be around two hours before the sun completely set.

Regardless...

“Aina can talk about recent events in that time, right? I’m sure you will have

questions once you hear, and Aina must be curious about what's happened to you as well."

"Nah, I don't really have much to say, even if it has been two years... But if you've been around, I guess a lot must have happened."

"Yeah... I'm actually not sure I'll have enough time."

"You really think so?" Felicia asked. "No... I can imagine it, actually."

"Mm-hmm... I don't know about everything... But even just what I know would be enough."

"Has there really been that much...?" Soma wouldn't say it hadn't been very much, but he thought it was within the bounds of normalcy. It would be another story if they went into all of the details, of course, but a general summary wouldn't take long.

"You're the only one who'd be okay with leaving it at that... Well, I guess the plan is to go over what's happened, eat when we're done, go to bed, and go home tomorrow, then."

"Hmm... Well, so Aina says, but is that all right with you?" Soma asked Iori and the butler. "She'll be going home very soon."

"Well, there's no reason to keep her here. Maybe it'd be different if the others were here, but if that's what Aina wants, then more power to her."

"I am but a butler, so I have no right to object to whatever she decides...and as long as it makes her happy, there should be no issue."

"Is that so..."

Aina seemed embarrassed by their responses. Soma simply shrugged and said nothing more. He hadn't been especially concerned after seeing that the Dark Lord was Iori and how Aina spoke to him, but he was glad to see that the two had a positive relationship.

"Should we move somewhere else first, then? This isn't the best place to talk."

"Good point. But where... Actually, I know the perfect place." Iori smirked. Soma sighed, realizing that he was having some weird idea, but kept his

thoughts to himself. This was Iori's house; he could do whatever he wanted in it as long as it didn't bother the others.

"The perfect place...? What would that be?"

"You'll get it once you see it."

"I must excuse myself, then. There is dinner to prepare."

"Oh, you're going to make it? I was wondering about that." Soma had imagined the head butler was capable of many things, but cooking was unexpected. He'd thought that would be the chef's duty, not the butler's.

"We are looking for a chef as well, but willing candidates are difficult to come by, so I've taken it upon myself."

"Don't let him fool you. He's really good. It's not that we can't find any chefs at all—we just can't find any better than this guy."

"You flatter me. Shall I decide the menu as usual?"

"Sure. Up to you... No, wait. Why don't you make *you-know-what* for them? There's enough time, right?"

"You mean...? But..."

"Aina's home, so this is the perfect time. And they won't get mad."

"Understood." The butler dipped his head and left.

Well, Soma had noticed a clearly suspicious term in that exchange...

"What is *you-know-what*?"

"You'll see. You're gonna be surprised."

"I think I have an idea... Are you sure about this?" Aina asked.

"Like I said, I don't think they'll be mad once I explain."

"But you expect people to be mad at first."

"Don't worry about it. Come on, let's go. Everyone, stand close together."

"What? I thought we were going somewhere else..."

"Are you going to...?"

“I think you have the right idea, Sierra. It will be faster to simply show you, so come over.”

Felicia still seemed confused, but they walked over and gathered closely around lori.

And then...

“Okay, here goes,” lori said with a snap of his fingers. Then the scene before them changed completely in the blink of an eye.

4

They were now somewhere that was incomparable to where they had been just a moment before. That went for both width and height. It could have fit not only tens but perhaps hundreds of people.

But Aina's first reaction upon seeing this majestic room was to feel weary, because she knew what it was. While she'd had a feeling her father had been plotting something, she'd never expected that this would be their destination. Maybe it really was the "perfect place" in a certain sense...but *this*? Really?

She glanced around. Her father, Iori, had a smug look on his face. Suppressing the urge to shoot a magic attack at him, she looked away and saw that Soma was also regarding him with an exasperated look. And it was hard to tell with Sierra...but she was tilting her head, probably because she was impressed.

"Was that...teleportation?" Aina heard Felicia ask just as she was about to check her reaction. Felicia's voice was full of disbelief, and her body language communicated the same.

And it was no wonder. It was even notable to Aina, who was used to it, and Soma had seemed impressed too when he'd experienced this for the first time. That was most likely why Sierra was impressed. It was only natural to feel something like that after an experience like this.

"This," of course, meant how they'd gotten to this new area—teleportation, just as Felicia had said. Ultimately, that was all there was to it, but what her father had just done was too unusual to leave it at that. It required a particular talent to teleport, after all, as well as quite high-level techniques and knowledge. One had to clearly picture both one's current location and one's destination as well as move through space. That required an extraordinary level of concentration and an equally extraordinary amount of time. While one could use a magical item to support most of the process, it couldn't do anything to reduce the time; it was impossible to teleport in an instant like that without significant skill. Also, moving through space caused a certain degree of

teleportation sickness. That was inevitable as well...but it hadn't happened this time.

Aina had been shocked when she'd found out what teleportation was normally like. But naturally, Iori wasn't teleporting the normal way. This was one of the special abilities he had as the owner of this castle. It was like a giant magical item, apparently, so teleporting in that way was possible within its bounds. It was also possible for him to bestow that ability upon others; Aina had it too. Her capability was limited, however; she could only teleport to a few places. One of those was the room her father had been hiding in, which explained why nobody else had been able to find him until she'd visited. And it was likely that there were other rooms like that; she would have to tell the head butler to let her mother and everyone know.

With that in mind, she looked around and sighed at her still-smirking father.



“Sorry to interrupt you while you’re feeling smug...but are you sure about using this place?”

“It’s the perfect place to hear a report, right?”

“I suppose it is in a certain sense,” Soma said. “I knew you were up to no good...but to think you would bring us to the throne room of all places.”

Yes, Aina’s father had brought them to the throne room. Maybe it *was* the perfect place for reports in a sense, but not for personal reports about what had been going on recently. Her mother would have gotten angry if she’d been here, and Aina would have joined in. And yet strangely, all she felt right now was a bit of exasperation. She was used to her father doing things on a whim like this, yes, but...

“The throne room, huh... What a, um, creative decision...” Felicia said. “Very original.”

“You don’t have to be polite. You can just say he’s weird.”

“Mm-hmm... But he’s kind of like Soma. So I’m not too surprised.”

“Oh... I get it.”

Now it made sense. In fact, Soma was even worse than this. And she’d gotten used to him, so now things like this didn’t bother her much anymore.

“Would you care to explain why you’re copying me...?” Soma asked.

“Huh? Nah, *you’re* copying *me*.”

“Yeah, yeah, now let’s start catching up with each other,” Aina interjected to stop the pointless argument brewing between her father and Soma, as well as to urge them to fulfill the purpose of their visit here. What good would it do to decide which of them was dumber, anyway? As she’d been thinking a second ago, Soma was worse when it came to things like this, so they didn’t need a debate to know that Soma was dumber.

“Heh, it seems victory is mine.”

“Ugh, if my daughter says so...”

“I take that back. You’re both equally dumb. Anyway, can you just sit on the

throne, father? You can't give a report like that."

"Come onnn, I have to sit? It's so high up and cramped, it's actually exhausting sitting up there. That's why I don't use this room much."

"Then why'd you bring us here...?"

"Hmm... May I sit in it, then?" Soma asked. "I've always wanted to try it."

"There's no point in *you* sitting in it...!" Aina sighed and glared at the two, which seemed to convince her father to be serious. Well, maybe "serious" wasn't the right word for it given that they were here, but he was at least going to the throne. He took a seat and let out a sigh.

"So... I don't mind if you want to give your reports to each other here, but what should we do while you're at it?" asked Felicia.

"Good question... Are you going to kneel?" Sierra asked. "Should we too?"

"I'd really rather not kneel."

"Hmm, but it wouldn't feel quite right for you to stand..." Iori said. "All right, how about this?" He snapped his fingers. Four chairs appeared in front of them—and they were even small chairs, the perfect size for them to sit in.

"Ooh, you can do that too. Very convenient."

"Yeah, kind of. How's that? Shouldn't be any problem, right?"

No, there was no problem with this...but Aina felt like there was a problem with something else here. Thinking about it more wouldn't be productive, though, so she gave up and sat down.

And then...

"Well, no need to be formal, so I guess I'll just get started... But where should I start?"

If she was going to tell him everything, she would have to start from the beginning of her journey, when she'd left here. But she honestly barely remembered that part, and it would almost come off as a dig at him if she talked about that right now. She hadn't come here just to vent a grudge against him. She'd just wanted to see everyone for once and let them know she was

safe and doing well.

In that case...

“I guess when I met this dummy, then... That was when everything really began.”

She said it jokingly, but she really meant that. Having met Soma—having had the opportunity to meet him at all—had been the first signpost on the journey toward where she was now.

That had been how Soma and Aina had started talking. At the time, she'd struggled to trust people, but she'd been able to talk to him anyway because she'd found him interesting in multiple ways. Then, over the course of a year of that, Aina had started to open up...and finally, she'd learned how to use magic thanks to him.

The time just after that was especially eventful. She met Lina, then reunited with Albert, only for him to kidnap her. And Soma saved her.

Then she found herself beginning a journey with Soma and Lina. They dragged her all around the Duchy of Neumond, took her to the ruins there, and got her into weird situations that they had treated as perfectly normal. And just when she thought it was over, they met Sierra and began exploring ruins again. It proved to be even more trouble that time, with something called an Archdragon getting revived...but Soma took it out before she knew it.

However, because of that, Soma wasn't able to continue on the journey. Although he'd said from the beginning that he didn't plan to continue, and that was probably true, she knew he wanted to. But after lengthy consideration, he ended his journey...and that wasn't unrelated to Aina. She knew she'd been allowed to stay in that fort thanks to Soma putting in a good word for her...although he hadn't seemed to understand how much that had affected the outcome.

When she thought back on it now, maybe he'd asked permission for her to stay so that she would remember the family she'd been trying to forget. His family was awkward with each other, sure, but they were family nonetheless. Maybe he'd hoped that would make her think about her own in comparison. She could have just been overthinking that, though.

Anyway, she spent some relatively calm yet still busy days in the fort until the time came for her to go to the academy. She'd never thought she would be able to go, so she was really grateful for that...and grateful to be able to attend the same school as Soma. While she passed the exam on her own merits, she wouldn't have had the chance to even take the exam if not for Sophia; she couldn't thank her enough.

Her school life was fun and fulfilling but also brought a lot of unexpected events. It was needless to say who was involved in most of those. She couldn't believe he didn't even take classes seriously... Well, no, maybe she should have expected that. Nevertheless, she made friends and enjoyed her time there.

But then that one incident happened. Aina was kept in the dark about it the whole time. While there was one point when she felt involved, she probably wasn't really. And before she even knew what was going on or how it had begun, it was over—and Soma was missing.

Break came soon after that, Sierra went to visit home...and that triggered Aina's decision to come home as well. Then, when she had almost reached her destination, she reunited with Soma. If she thought about it that way, her journey had begun with Soma and ended with Soma. It was no exaggeration to call this dummy the entirety of her journey, even. Well...maybe it *was* an exaggeration.

Regardless, that was the end of what she had to say. She'd digressed in the middle there, and it had taken a while, but she was done in time for dinner.

"You. Soma," her father addressed the boy with a glare when he was done listening. Soma returned a puzzled look, and Aina felt the same. She would have been surprised enough if her father had had something to say to her, but *Soma?*

"What is it?"

"Lemme see your face. It's looking really punchable right now. And I also get the feeling I should do that as a parent."

Aina was at a loss as to what her dad was talking about. Apparently she was the only one, though.

Soma was narrowing his eyes as if he accepted the challenge. “Do you understand how irrational you sound right now?”

“Shut up! They say might makes right, you know!”

“I see... Then I reject your might and substitute it with my own!”

“I’d like to see you try...!”

Her father jumped down from the throne, and Soma confronted him. The scene was beginning to take on a chaotic aspect. Aina shot a look toward Felicia but received only a weary shrug in response. Sierra looked the same way, which was unusual for her...and for some reason, Aina felt like their expressions were directed at her too.

She was probably imagining that, though. After all, she hadn’t said anything much—all she’d done was be honest about what had happened.

She looked back to her father as if evading the other two girls. In what was supposed to be like a squabble between kids, they were displaying oddly high-level movements, making for a bizarre scene.

At a loss for words, Aina sighed and thought to herself that she didn’t understand their relationship. They had clearly known each other before meeting here—that much was obvious from how they acted around each other. She’d thought the same thing about Soma and Hildegard.

But she was far more confused in this case. As far as she knew, her father hadn’t left this castle since becoming the Dark Lord. She recalled him saying that he’d had no choice but to stay here.

So how, and where, had he met Soma? She couldn’t come up with an explanation however she tried.

But as she pondered the question, she let out a sigh. For some reason, she didn’t really feel like figuring it out.

If anything...

“Well... This *is* Soma.”

Somehow, that was almost a good enough explanation for her. Why was that?

Letting out yet *another* sigh, Aina smiled wryly both at the situation and at herself.

5

Her honest opinion would be that she hadn't expected this. But it would have been hard for her to pinpoint the cause of that feeling, because it was several things at once.

Number one, the fact that she'd looked for a shady spot at random and found one in the first place she looked; number two, the fact that she'd considered giving up out of concern that people would be suspicious of her but been left alone to do as she pleased; and number three, that D-day was the very next day. None of it had gone the way she'd expected.

And the scene before her was much the same.

A crowd, she thought to herself with a sigh. Maybe it would be better described as a disorderly mob... Either way, it was more than expected—that was to say, the situation was more hopeless than she'd expected.

The sheer number of people had exceeded her expectations as well, though. At a glance, she saw over a hundred. She was impressed that so many had gathered here...but she also couldn't hide her dismay. The absolute conviction each one of them displayed was a large factor in that.

“———!”

The crowd erupted in cheers. Someone had probably said something rousing. She hadn't been listening, but she could make a guess as to what had been said, judging by how all of their eyes were instantly on her. She didn't even have the spirit to smile back anymore, so she simply shrugged in response, but that got them going again. Apparently it didn't really matter what she did anymore. They would just interpret it as they pleased.

Well, she probably bore some responsibility for that. She'd been completely honest about her own status because she couldn't be bothered to hide it, and she'd shown a bit of her power to save her the trouble of being looked down on, but that had only worsened the situation.

They'd thought it would be all right, but now they were *sure* it would be—so said their eyes, which were still on her. And inside them, she sensed something dark and murky. She let out a small sigh. It was hard on her to be treated as one of them, even if, from an outside perspective, she was no different from them.

“Good grief,” Stina murmured underneath the wild enthusiasm. But maybe this was fitting in a sense, she thought with a sigh.

†

After the row with Iori, Soma's group headed for the dining hall. Now that they were done talking, it was the perfect time to eat.

The dining hall had been created by modifying part of the castle; it hadn't been there originally. It was physically inaccessible from anywhere around it, which meant that only Iori and family could enter. It must have been part of the living quarters that Aina had mentioned.

Regardless, when Soma arrived, he was honestly surprised to see the room. He'd been picturing something larger, but it wasn't actually all that big. It was hardly bigger than the dining room at Glass Stop North, the inn they'd stayed at in the last town. The only difference was that this one had a single long table; the size was about the same. It wasn't proportionate to the size of the castle, especially considering that this was a Dark Lord's home.

“Hmm... Wouldn't this be insufficient in multiple ways?”

“Nah, not at all. Like I said, only we can get in here, and I don't let anyone through who I don't know well. That isn't many people.”

“I see... Wait, I was about to accept that explanation, but didn't you say you created this room? What did the former Dark Lord do?”

“Dunno. You'd have to ask whoever was around back then, and I honestly don't care. But I'm sure they figured out *somewhere* to eat, and they didn't necessarily live here anyway. They also could have made a place of their own to have dinner brought to. The people in the nearest village did seem weirdly scared of us at first.”

“Oh, that reminds me, I went to say hi to the village chief, but he was acting distant,” Aina said. “He seemed oddly wary.”

“Everyone else has softened up a bit, but that one old man’s incorrigible. It seemed less like he’s stubborn and more like he needed something sufficient to change his mind, so it would only have backfired if I’d said anything to him. Well, I’m sure it’ll work out in the end. Anyway, everyone, sit. Food’ll be out soon.”

“What are you talking about...?” Soma asked, but Iori actually went to sit down, so he did as well. Regardless of whether the seating arrangement necessitated concern, it was easy to decide now that Iori had taken the head of the table. Aina was the only other family member here, though, so there wasn’t much to decide.

And as soon as they sat down, the meal was brought out. The head butler set food down in front of each of them...but Soma couldn’t tell what it was. There was a lid over it, and he couldn’t even smell anything.

“Oh, just so you know, it’s made so you can’t smell it until it’s open. You’d know what it was right away if you smelled it.”

“Yet another unnecessary step...”

But Soma would have been lying if he’d said he wasn’t eagerly anticipating it. Iori had said he would be surprised; he couldn’t help being excited to see what it was.

Each of them had been brought one plate. There was no sign that the butler was planning to bring anything else, so either there would be another course when they were done eating this one or this was the entire meal. He could at least tell that it wasn’t meant to be a buffet-style meal where they all shared several dishes, but that was all.

The plates were elliptical; he couldn’t tell how deep they were due to the lids. They were rather large, but that didn’t tell him anything. It was entirely possible that they had used large plates for a small amount of food.

In conclusion...

“Well, I can’t tell by looking at it.”

“Of course not. Just open it. You’re gonna be shocked.”

Soma reached for the lid as instructed. It was clear that no amount of thinking would bring him any closer to knowing what it was.

But as Soma lifted the lid, there was something that stimulated his senses before its appearance became clear—the smell. When the scent reached his nose, it immediately caused his eyes to widen. It was one he was awfully familiar with, and it brought back memories.

He remembered the name of the dish at the same moment that its appearance was revealed. There were dark and white sections with a clear boundary in the center, and on the brown side were other colors...no, other ingredients.

This was unmistakable. Soma found himself gasping the name.

“Curry...?!”

“Heh, surprised, right?”

Of course he was. He turned to look at Iori, who had a smug look on his face. It ticked Soma off a little, frankly, but he couldn’t say anything after being presented with this.

“You...recreated it?”

“Yep. It was pretty tough.”

Of course it had been. The concept of curry didn’t exist in this world. Sometimes Soma found himself craving foods from his past life, so he had researched them in his spare time. While he’d found several dishes that were similar to others he remembered, there was nothing like curry. In fact, this world didn’t even have the raw ingredients for it...and Soma had come to understand why upon further research.

“Why do you look so pleased with yourself?” Aina asked. “I heard you barely helped.”

“Of course I helped. I came up with the idea, and it was my job to taste-test and give feedback.”

“So that means it wasn’t you... I take it that he is responsible for this.” Soma looked around for the butler but didn’t see him anywhere. He’d left as soon as

Soma had seen the food. Maybe he'd thought it wasn't right to eat alongside his masters, or maybe he'd had something else to do.

Soma was looking in the direction the butler had gone. That must have been where the kitchen was, the place where he'd labored to make this. It was a hard feat to make this at all, let alone based solely on someone else's memory of it. Soma was impressed he'd pulled such a thing off.

And not only that...

"So I had a feeling we'd have this... But are you sure it's all right? I really think mother will be mad..."

"I'm telling you, it'll be fine. I'll tell her it's to celebrate you coming home. I'm sure...uh, well, at least *mostly* sure it'll work... I hope."

"Your confidence is decreasing by the second. And the fact that she'll be mad means... This must be as expensive as I imagined."

"Kinda, yeah."

The reason he'd never had anything even similar to curry was because spices of any kind were highly valuable in this world. But as the smell made obvious, it was heavily spiced. Of course it wouldn't be a commonly known dish. Maybe nobility or wealthy merchants could have it if they splurged, but they wouldn't go around spreading information about it.

And it wasn't just an issue of curry itself but of rice. Rice did circulate in this world, but only in specific areas, and even there, no one ate it as a staple food. It wasn't the right variety for that. Soma couldn't imagine that Iori would skimp on the rice if he'd gone so far as to recreate curry, so this must have cost a lot.

"It costs a lot to make too... And it isn't the best-looking, to be honest. I'm fine with it because I grew up with it, but mother still doesn't like it, and neither does anyone else. It does taste good, so they can eat it if they close their eyes, but they say they'd only be okay with having it once every few years."

"So they generally don't want it..."

This was curry, though. It was tantamount to torture to have it right in front of you, giving off such a smell, and not be able to eat it.

Soma turned to look at Iori, who returned a crooked smile and a shrug. He was already holding his spoon, so he was probably thinking the same thing.

Soma put his hands together to give thanks for the meal, then picked up his spoon. He stuck it in the border at the center and picked up equal portions of each side. When he brought it to his mouth, it was the smell that he sensed most strongly, as well as nostalgia and another harder-to-describe feeling.

“Hmm... It’s curry.”

“Right?”

“Yes... But that is about all I can think of to describe it.”

It tasted good, yes. And it was a one-of-a-kind taste, a taste that brought back memories for him.

However...

“Frankly, isn’t this a waste of money?”

“Yeah, that’s why mother gets mad when we have it... It does taste good, but it costs a lot, and there are better, more extravagant meals we could have for the same price...”

“A valid argument.”

That was exactly why Soma hadn’t tried to make it despite wishing he could have some. While he was the son of a duke, making something like this would have taken endless amounts of money. He would have used up the family’s entire savings just testing out different recipes and ended up in loads of debt. Maybe it would have been another story if he could have sold the recipe...but nobody would have bought the recipe for something that cost so much to make. A quality recipe was worth a fortune, but not if nobody bought it.

“Hey, you can’t put a price on happy memories, right?”

“I can’t deny that. I suppose that’s exactly why they haven’t banned you from making it despite being angry.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Aina said. “I didn’t really get it before...but I think I’m starting to today.”

“Hmm...”

When Aina said that, she'd looked at Soma as if she had something more to say to him, but there had also been resignation in her eyes. She'd probably wanted to ask...how did he know a dish from Iori's past?

Knowing that, Soma responded with a shrug as he brought the familiar flavor to his mouth.

6

Soma let out a long, contented exhale after thanking them for the meal. Both his stomach and his heart were full. When all was said and done, it had been good to relive memories like that. When Iori had later proudly brought out pickled vegetables with soy sauce and daikon radishes, though, Soma had thought he must be dumb after all.

Nevertheless, it was true that that wouldn't have been possible for Soma. No amount of skill with a sword would solve matters of money. It was only because Iori was the Dark Lord that he'd been able to do this.

In any case...

"You two don't have to force yourselves."

"No, I'd hate not to finish after you went to the trouble of making this..."

"Mm-hmm... Can't waste food."

Felicia and Sierra had gone unusually quiet since dinner had started. Soma had wondered if something was wrong with them, but apparently they were just struggling with the curry. That was probably for the reason Aina had noted—curry didn't look very appetizing to someone who wasn't familiar with it, and the generous amount of spices made the smell far stronger than any common dishes. Aina was used to it, and Soma even found it nostalgic, but it was no wonder that it would be hard to eat after seeing it for the first time.

"Well, this is Iori's fault for serving curry to people he just met, so he should take the blame."

"Oh... True. My bad. I didn't really think about those two."

"I can't believe you..." Aina sighed. "What now? You aren't going to make them go to bed hungry, right?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't be doing my job as a host... But what do we do?"

They were doing their best to eat it, but their progress was abnormally slow.

Soma was already done, but they'd only taken maybe two or three bites each. Apparently the spice was too much for them. They kept lifting spoonfuls up, hesitating, putting them back down, then trying again.

"From an outsider's point of view, this would look like we're torturing them."

"Yeah... This is more like what people expect from a Dark Lord."

"I mean, I'm serving them food, so I don't really think so... But I guess I can't really argue now that I'm seeing this."

"I'm so sorry..."

"Sorry."

"Like I said, you don't have to apologize."

But just when Soma was wondering what the solution to this predicament would be, the head butler made a reappearance carrying two plates.

"I apologize for the delay."

There were lids on the plates as there had been on the curry; wariness flashed across the sisters' faces at first. But this time, the butler gave them a crooked smile and removed the lids as soon as he set the plates down.

What was underneath could only be described as white. It resembled curry...in fact, it was basically the same thing, if the brown part of curry were white. But they seemed happy to see it, less because of the appearance than because of the lack of a strong smell.

Soma knew the name of this dish too, naturally.

"Cream stew."

"So you are familiar... Yes, in the past, whenever we had leftover ingredients, Iori told me that I could prepare this using many of the same ones, so I made some just in case, as I understand that curry is intimidating for the uninitiated."

"Hmm... I'm impressed that you're even prepared to bring out replacement meals for people who don't like dinner."

"You flatter me. This is simply the bare minimum for a head butler." He dipped his head in a flawless display of propriety.

“What a capable servant... I envy you, lori. Would you mind if I poached him from you?”

“Sure, if you don’t care about me starving to death without him!”

“What kind of threat is that...”

Felicia and Sierra had apparently started eating while lori was busy clowning around with Soma. Seeing that they were bringing the stew to their mouths with no issue now, Soma exhaled with relief and met eyes with lori, who returned a relieved and apologetic smile.

Soma shrugged. While lori was lazy and tended to create work for others, he wasn’t incapable of being considerate. The lori Soma knew would have been quicker to think of the two girls.

But the same went for Soma... He hadn’t noticed them not eating, which meant he hadn’t been mindful of their needs. That would have been unthinkable normally. It must have been because he’d reunited with lori, as well as because of the curry. He’d been distracted by his nostalgia and let other considerations fall to the wayside.

Unlike Hildegard, lori was someone he could definitely have called a friend in their past lives, and he’d known lori for much longer. Soma’s heart wasn’t so cold that he’d felt nothing upon seeing him. The thing at the throne had been part of that, and then this curry... Honestly, Soma had been soaking in the nostalgic feeling, remembering the time he’d spent goofing off with lori and their other friends and how that had felt. It had been decades, but that was all the more reason.

And lori probably felt the same. While Soma had only heard a brief summary, it had sounded like he’d been through a lot too...and he was still going through it, judging by what Soma had heard from Stina and the current state of this castle. That was probably why lori had gotten a bit lax. Soma had no right to blame him for that; if anything, he had to apologize alongside him.

So he shrugged again, this time toward Felicia and Sierra. He would have to apologize later.

“Curry and now cream stew... Have you recreated anything else?”

“Well, I wanted to, but, y’know...”

“The others said they couldn’t tolerate any more and banned him from the kitchen,” Aina said. “As they should.”

“I told them the others shouldn’t cost so much, though...”

“Understandable of them.”

Who would trust a man willing to spend all that money to recreate curry when he said something wouldn’t cost much? Soma agreed with their judgment, to be honest. When he’d tasted the curry, his first thought had been that it was just like he remembered. That meant Iori hadn’t made a *good* curry but a *familiar* curry. The difference was like night and day.

Iori probably would have turned down a curry any better than this—he’d wanted a flavor he knew from back then more than he’d wanted curry itself. Of course, that meant that just making it taste good wasn’t enough, which complicated the task. It must have been a rough road to reach this result... It was evident how much work the head butler had put in. Probably Iori realized that too, which might have been why he’d told the butler how to make cream stew. It wasn’t as expensive as curry, and it was another way to apply the knowledge of how to make curry.

“Right, you eat your stew over rice, don’t you?”

“Huh? Yeah... That’s how I always ate it, and I was taught it as a way to use up leftovers from curry anyway. You did too, right?”

“Yes...”

That brought Soma back. He didn’t remember why, but he recalled having a conversation about whether one should eat cream stew over rice or not, and whether rice was even the superior option to bread. It had ultimately been settled that it didn’t matter as long as it tasted good. That was just one of the pointless discussions they’d had back then.

Once again looking back fondly on those good old times but resolving to pay more attention, Soma glanced over at Felicia and Sierra. They genuinely seemed to be fine with the cream stew; they were eating it like normal.

Soma smiled. This was probably their first time eating rice, and he was glad to see they liked it. It mattered to him whether they accepted his home culture, after all. Maybe his home culture was technically that of this world now...but that was one thing and this was another.

As Soma watched Felicia and Sierra, who didn't seem to want to talk while they ate, out of the corner of his eye, he continued to chat with lori.

7

Moonlight poured in through the window. It was a nice, quiet night, Soma thought as he approached the windowsill, letting out a breath toward the full moon.

He'd just wrapped up their after-dinner chat and been led to the room he was to use tonight. When he glanced around, what he saw was, naturally, the interior of that room. That elicited another sigh from him, as it was clearly too big.

"He apologized that it might be too small...which makes me think his perspective may have been warped."

It was several times the size of even his bedroom at home. It was proportionate to the size of the castle, yes, but it was far from "small." It was possible that Iori was being modest, but...

"He clearly meant that when he said it..."

Well, according to him, he'd already spent nearly half his life inside this castle. It would be no wonder if that had distorted one or two of his senses. Soma had been taken aback to hear that, of course...but Iori had said not to pay it any mind. There was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

"Well... He said he thinks things will work out soon."

And Soma had no choice but to take his word for it.

"All right then..."

He wondered about what to do for the time being. The obvious choice was to go to sleep, but unfortunately, he wasn't tired. He didn't see anything in here to occupy his time, however, and Felicia and Sierra had said they were going to bed, so he couldn't go talk to them. However, he also couldn't exactly snoop around in here...

"Oh?"

Just then, there was a knock at his door. It left Soma perplexed because he couldn't think of who would be dropping by. As previously mentioned, Felicia and Sierra had gone to bed, and he saw no reason for the head butler to stop by. The most likely to come over was lori, of course, but he wouldn't come at this time.

But...

"Soma? You up?"

"lori...?"

The voice was definitely lori's. Despite his puzzlement, Soma went to the door, opened it...and saw exactly who he'd expected to. It was lori, standing there casually.

"Why have you come here?"

"Hey, who wouldn't want to talk more with an old friend? Had enough already? I'd be kinda shocked if that was enough for you..."

"Feel free to be shocked if you like, but I thought you went to see Aina."

That was why he'd thought lori wouldn't come at this time. It had been a while since they'd seen each other, yes, but the same went for lori and Aina, and it would be natural to prioritize a daughter over a friend.

And each now knew that the other was in this world. They'd talked about their general situations, so there wasn't anything they had to rush to go over. That could wait for another time.

"Oh, I did... But she kicked me out."

"What have you done this time? You may not be able to get away with it scot-free depending on what it was."

"You got the wrong idea, moron. I went to see her and she said she'd told me everything she wanted to, so I should go see you. She was like, 'Well, it seems like you two have a lot going on, and you already know I'm doing fine.'"

"Hmm... Couldn't it simply be that she doesn't care to speak with you?"

"Whoa, whoa, choose your words wisely. I was just thinking the same thing,

so if you're not careful, I'll have to cut off your head."

Iori's face was so serious when he said that, Soma couldn't help but snicker. What would their other friends have said if they'd seen that?

"You appear no different, but you've actually changed. Well...I suppose you're the same in some ways and different in others."

"Eh? You think so?"

"You never would have said that before, even as a joke."

"Huh... I guess not. Well, I've been through a lot. Also, looks to me like you've changed quite a bit yourself."

"Is that so? Well...I suppose I have also been through a lot."

They hadn't told each other about those things yet. With that understanding, Soma met Iori's gaze and shrugged with a crooked smile. Iori returned a similar gesture.

"Well, in that case, you may come in. I was just wondering what to do with my time."

"Don't mind if I do. I mean, I own this place anyway."

The night was still young. In order to use the rest of it to speak with his long-lost friend, Soma invited Iori into the room.

†

To be completely honest, Stina thought this was creepy. The people around her were kicking up a fuss, saying that this was destined, that it had to be done, but she was sure it was nothing so grand. It was something harsher and more vicious.

With that in mind, she looked toward the thing she had just been offered. It was pitch black and had a warped shape; it was just barely identifiable as a sphere. If she'd seen it on the ground, she would have thought it was nothing more than a rock.

No...scratch that. If she'd seen this on the ground, she would have immediately started planning how to get out. It was so eerie and ominous that

it was clear at a glance that one would have to run away from it.

And that was only natural. After all, a fragment of the Archdevil's power was sealed inside it. She could tell just by looking at it that they weren't making that up.

Its material and size were nothing out of the ordinary, however. It looked eerie and ominous, yes, but that was the extent of it. The difference between this and the piece sealed in the dungeon at the Royal Academy in Ladius was like night and day.

But this was enough. More than enough. She even wondered why they had something like this.

It had all started when she'd brought up this—their greatest asset, their hidden gem—as a topic of conversation. She'd said it in rebuke toward the churning crowd—that it couldn't be used at this point in time.

The reason was simple. The final piece to set the sealed power free hadn't been found, nor had it been determined where it was sealed. This was just a paperweight that they called their greatest asset...and yet she'd been offered it, asked if she could make it work.

The last piece wasn't a particular material but a vessel with which to transfer what was sealed—something that should serve as the source of its power. Basically, they hadn't been able to find something sufficient for that...and if this didn't work, then probably nothing would.

In other words, at the very end, all of the necessary components had been assembled—yes, everything. They hadn't found the place where the final piece was sealed...until they'd come here. Stina had been sure the second she'd arrived: this was the place. On the eve of the fateful day, everything had fallen together.

“Is something the matter?”

As she thought it over, somebody spoke to her. She turned to look toward the man. She didn't remember his name, to be honest, but she knew who he was because he'd been the one to settle things. He'd also been the one who'd given her the thing she now had in her hands.

“You seem to be staring intently at what I gave you. Did I behave improperly in some way?”

“Nah... I’m just surprised you had this.”

“Ah, I understand. Yes, it was a coincidence that it came into my hands... I brought it with the thought that it might prove useful at some point in the future. And it in fact seems like it can be useful to you, so you never know what will turn out for the best.”

“True...”

What was for the best, and what wasn’t? You could never know until things were over...even if an action appeared utterly foolish in the moment.

With that in mind, Stina looked back at the thing in her hands. As she listened to the shouting voices around her, she clutched it tightly.

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The moon was shedding enough light into the room to illuminate it, and it created a rather romantic atmosphere. Having a romantic atmosphere meant nothing, however, with only another man present. Soma had considered turning on the lights, but the need for that had been quickly eliminated—Iori had done it himself with magic. He'd said it was to reduce the wear and tear on the disposable magic tools they used to turn on the lights, but...

"Is this some kind of harassment toward me? If you want to fight, then I'm fully willing to take you up on that even at this hour."

"Huh? Why would it be... Oh, right, you always said you'd like to use magic. So you actually can't now?"

"'Actually'? Why can *you* use magic?"

"I think it makes less sense that you can't... I mean, I heard that whoever comes to this world from our old one is supposed to be able to use it."

This was news to Soma. Not even Hildegard had told him that. Maybe she'd known and not told him, or maybe she hadn't known... It was even possible that she'd just forgotten to mention it. She didn't seem to realize, but she could be absent-minded at times. While it was definitely valuable information, it was entirely possible that she'd meant to tell him and forgotten.

But...

"Hmm... Really, now?"

"Yeah, apparently our old world is on a higher plane than this one or something. That also means our souls are relatively higher in status; each one actually contains a majority of the inborn talents in this world. Of course, there are still individual differences."

"I understand. But...how do you know this?"

Yes, that was the issue. Hildegard was a former god and had apparently

encountered the gods of this world, so it would be no wonder if she knew things like that. But was this really something that a mere former hero should be able to know, even if he was a Dark Lord?

Soma narrowed his eyes at Iori's nonchalant face. Iori, however, simply shrugged. "Well, I've been through a lot, I guess. Enough to end up as a Dark Lord."

"Hmm..." Soma mumbled with a shrug. That checked out for him; this fundamentally lazy man wouldn't have taken the role of Dark Lord without a very good reason to. And if that was the case, then it was no wonder that he'd gained some information that Soma wouldn't know.

"Makes sense to you?"

"I see no reason that it wouldn't. But I also see no reason to forgive you for being able to use magic."

"How come? C'mon, forgive me."

"I refuse."

They glared at each other for a split second, then burst into laughter. This had happened from time to time since he'd reunited with Iori, and it was a very nostalgic feeling.

"Oh yeah, before I forget... Thanks."

"What's this all of a sudden... It feels uncomfortable, to be frank."

"I'm thanking you. Just accept it."

"How should I, when I don't even understand what you're thanking me for?"

"Yeah, that's fair... But you should have some idea, right? I mean for Aina's magic."

That certainly was what Soma had been thinking. Considering Iori's personality, he'd imagined he would thank him for that.

"She herself seemed to let it go without much thought."

"Which is all the more reason to thank you. It got settled well enough that she can act like it's no big deal. Oh yeah, and she said you 'fixed the problem...'

What did you actually do?”

“Hmm? I just saw something strange, so I cut it.”

“Cut it...?” A dumbfounded look came to lori’s face.

Soma returned a look of puzzlement; he didn’t see any reason for lori to react like that. “I get that look often... Why might that be?”

“I don’t get why you’re asking that, personally. I guess that’s just how you are, though. And only someone like you could have fixed Aina’s issue, I bet.”

“You overestimate me. I happened to help her by coincidence, but that was all it was. And you...actually, none of you really cared about that issue, right?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Even a fool could see you didn’t care based on how you act about it.”

Maybe “didn’t care” were the wrong words for it, though. It was more like it didn’t bother them. Whether Aina could use magic or not didn’t change how lori and the rest of their family saw her.

“Well, that’s true. But Aina was suffering anyway, and there was nothing we could do about it. She didn’t want to accept it no matter what we said. One reason for that was everything going on at the time...but that’s no excuse. Anyway, you were a big help.” lori dipped his head.

Soma shrugged, feeling faintly surprised. He could see that lori was really acting like a proper parent now, and that reminded him of all the time that had gone by. He hardly felt that way while looking at him.

“I just remembered a question I’ve been meaning to ask... Why do you have the same appearance that I remember? You may be able to delay aging somewhat using magic, but you don’t seem to have changed in the slightest.”

“Oh, I guess I never mentioned it. That’s also because I’m from a higher plane, apparently. I guess my soul holds up really well over time and that affects my body or something? Plus some secondary effects from being a hero.”

“Hmm... It isn’t because you’re a Dark Lord?”

“Well, it’s just that I call myself the Dark Lord. Like, as a way to take

responsibility for defeating the old Dark Lord.”

“The way you put that makes it sound like ‘Dark Lord’ isn’t usually a title one takes for oneself.”

“It’s supposed to be a role bestowed by the world, like ‘hero.’ He only came to be known as ‘Dark Lord’ because we called him that, though. But that stuff doesn’t have anything to do with you, so I’ll stop rambling.”

It was actually rather interesting to Soma, but while there was a long night ahead of them, it was also finite. There were many things he wanted to ask and talk about, so he indicated his agreement. “Indeed. Well, whatever the reason may be, it was helpful that you look no different. I might not have recognized you if you’d grown too much.”

“I get the feeling you of all people would’ve recognized me anyway.”

“That is what they call an overestimation.”

That kicked off a long conversation. They discussed things they hadn’t been able to talk about before, things they could only talk about alone. They talked about a lot of things, some corny, some stupid...just like they had in the old days.

While they leaned toward talking about the past, the present also came up from time to time. Soma was least certain of how to approach the topic of Felicia and Sierra. He hadn’t found the right time to bring them up, so he hadn’t explained about them to Iori; as a result, they had continued to wear their hoods the whole time they were together.

He ended up telling Iori, since he’d gotten permission to. “Sierra is an elf, and Felicia is a witch.”

While Iori showed slight surprise, he said casually, “Oh, that explains why they can’t show their faces.”

That response was a relief to Soma.

“Walking around with an elf and a witch, though... That’s just like you.”

“Is it...?”

They also discussed a lot of personal matters, and naturally, Soma had to ask

if Iori knew of any way to gain the power of magic. But...

"If I knew a way, I would've tried it with Aina."

"Hmm... That makes sense. But nevertheless, you're no help. Despite calling yourself a Dark Lord, you fall short at the most crucial moments..."

"Hey, just because I'm a Dark Lord doesn't mean you can ask me to do the impossible when it comes to any random thing. Well... No, I guess that isn't really random."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Did I mention there's a storage room in this castle?"

"I recall hearing that... What about it?"

"Basically, there's a bunch of stuff the Dark Lord collected. Documents and things."

"Oh...?" Soma narrowed his eyes. *Documents* wasn't a word he could overlook—he was extremely interested to see those. "But what does that have to do with what you said before?"

"There's a ton in there, like you'd expect from a Dark Lord's collection. Honestly, I only know what roughly ten percent of it is."

"I see... So you're saying that the information I desire may be there."

"Yep."

This state of affairs wasn't unrelated to Iori being the Dark Lord; even though he lived in this castle, he only knew about ten percent of what was in it. That begged the question of why he knew so little, however.

"Well, like I said, there's a ton of stuff. And a lot of it's a pain to deal with."

"Do you mean forbidden books, for instance?"

"Things like that, yeah... Hey, do you know ancient hieroglyphics?"

"Naturally. They're just Japanese, right?"

"Yeah, from our point of view, that's what they are."

Of course—writing like that would limit the number of people who could read

it.

“But I was under the impression that there are very few documents written in ancient hieroglyphics.”

“Well, for some reason, there are a ton here. A tenth or so of everything.”

“That’s quite a lot. I imagine people would be overjoyed if I gave them to the right places.”

Research on ancient hieroglyphics made little progress because of the lack of material. Soma didn’t know how much there was here, exactly, but if there was enough, it could result in significant progress. Even if not, though, there were two people here who understood them perfectly.

“Maybe they would. The Dark Lord collected them, though, and I don’t know what they all say, so I can’t just give them to you.”

“You could simply check what each one says and only give me the ones that are all right.”

“You want me to *check* all of them? Ew, no thanks.”

“I had a feeling you would say that.”

But he was being lazy about this because providing the documents to researchers would be doing a favor for some random strangers; it would have been different if it were for Aina. He wasn’t the kind of man to slack on things like that. If Iori had only looked at ten percent or so, there really must have been a lot of documents.

“Hmm... Do you think it would be worth a look?”

“Maybe. But I’m telling you, there’s a *ton*. It’d take you years on your own.”

“You wouldn’t like to have someone else look so that you know what’s there? I imagine that given they’re in the Dark Lord’s castle, there are some useful writings.”

“I have other priorities. And as far as I know, we’re the only two people who can read ancient hieroglyphics.”

“It would be another story if you taught someone...but that would take time

in itself.”

Iori would probably be too lazy; honestly, even Soma didn’t want to. It wouldn’t be very easy in practice.

“Hmm... Ancient hieroglyphics, though...”

“What about ’em?”

“I was just thinking that it’s an amazing coincidence.”

The script they called ancient hieroglyphics just happened to be Japanese, there was a sizable number of documents here written in that language, and two people were here who had the very rare capability of reading them. It was coincidence after coincidence. Well, it was also an amazing coincidence that Soma and Iori had reunited here, so...

“A coincidence, huh... I don’t know about that.”

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“Am I only imagining that you mean to imply it isn’t, in fact, a coincidence?”

“Well...I think it’s definitely a coincidence that we met up again. And as for ancient hieroglyphics being Japanese and there being a ton of them here... I can’t really say.”

“Hmm...”

That meant he thought the other parts were different, though. That reminded Soma, there was something he’d had in the back of his mind from their discussion upon reuniting...

“Do you mean to say that it isn’t a coincidence that you were summoned to this world and I was reincarnated into it?”

Iori didn’t immediately respond to the question, which was a response in itself.

“It’s not like I have any proof.”

“But there must be some way to prove it.”

It made sense to Soma—his friend was in the world he’d been reincarnated into. How big of a coincidence would that have to be?

“Well, maybe if you wanted to say we’re connected by a red string of fate, it’d be different.”

“I’d like to refrain from that.”

“Me too, don’t worry.”

“I’m glad to hear that. So what do you mean exactly?”

When Soma asked that question, Iori looked up. Soma followed his gaze, but all he saw was an unfamiliar ceiling. However, Iori’s eyes crinkled as if he saw something else there, and he opened his mouth slowly.

“Did I tell you about how I got summoned here as a hero?”

“Well, we just went over that. I don’t believe you’ve told me the details, however. Do you mean to say that this is related to that?”

“Yeah. So, actually... Apparently I wasn’t supposed to be summoned in the first place.”

“What do you mean...?”

Soma hadn’t heard the details from Iori, but he knew the general story of how the heroes had been summoned. Veritas had summoned them in order to eliminate the threat of the Dark Lord. They’d done so because they hadn’t had enough forces to resist him on their own. So what did Iori mean, he wasn’t supposed to be summoned?

“Oh... Well, this is just what I’ve heard, and some of it’s from Veritas, so I don’t know how trustworthy it is... But apparently they summoned me on their second try.”

“Second try...?” Did that mean that someone had already been summoned before Iori?

Iori shook his head. “No, apparently their first try failed.”

“Failed... Do you mean that nobody was summoned?”

“Yeah. They did the ceremony and nothing happened. They cracked down on anyone who knew that information, though.”

“Hmm...”

That made sense. If they’d failed out of incompetence, it would have led to criticism of Veritas. They must have laid groundwork all over if they were going to summon a hero, but Soma had heard that Veritas’s power had been unparalleled at the time—so much so that they’d become the center of the fight against the Dark Lord. It must not have been especially difficult for them to suppress a minor failure.

“Yet they tried to do the same thing that had already failed once? Were they really out of other options?”

“No... What I heard is that they meant to fail again.”

“What would be the point of that...?”

“It’d be a pain to explain the whole thing... Basically, the point was to increase Veritas’s influence.”

According to Iori, Veritas had thought even the first summoning was unnecessary. They’d just conducted the ceremony to bring a powerful individual into their country in the name of opposing the Dark Lord. So it hadn’t been much of a problem for Veritas that it had failed, and yet they’d tried the ceremony again—this time with the help of another country.

“For what purpose?”

“If they were working together, then neither could be completely at fault in the event of another failure. And Veritas planned to make an announcement afterward: *This is no cause for concern. Even if we cannot enlist the help of a stranger, our country already has someone with strength worthy of being called heroic.*”

“Hmm... That reminds me, I heard that there were two heroes.”

One was Iori, and the other was named Beatrice, if he recalled correctly. So they’d intended to present Beatrice at that time.

“But wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of having a ceremony at all?”

“Yeah, if you think about it rationally. But Veritas was able to make it happen anyway, and by doing so they were going to strengthen their influence...or so the plan went.”

“But that wasn’t what happened.”

“Yeah. They summoned me instead.”

And not only had they summoned a hero, it had been with the help of another country. Since Veritas had led the effort, they had gained stronger influence, but...

“It was nothing compared to what they’d originally planned. Actually, in the end, it even weakened their influence.”

“Hmm...”

Veritas had originally been the center of the fight against the Dark Lord, but once a hero had been summoned, that hero would naturally become the

center. And since another country had helped in summoning him, he was essentially a shared asset between the two nations. Apparently he'd been affiliated with Veritas, but the other country wasn't going to allow Veritas to take all the credit.

"And Veritas couldn't have been soft enough to back down then."

"I guess not. So they put me under house arrest. Their explanation was that I was in bad shape mentally after getting summoned to another world all of a sudden."

"House arrest, huh..."

That struck Soma as lenient, to be honest. He hadn't had much involvement with the country, but based on what he'd heard, he wouldn't have been surprised if Iori had been imprisoned or even killed under the guise of an accident.

Iori shook his head when Soma voiced that thought. "You have the right idea, actually. They were considering that. I only got away with house arrest 'cause I did what they said and because they didn't actually know how powerful I was."

"Hmm... I understand."

The reason they'd summoned him in the first place was to serve as a soldier in the fight against the Dark Lord, after all; they couldn't have predicted what would happen if they treated him badly and he opposed them. That made house arrest a questionable decision in its own right, however...

"How was it actually?"

"Huh? Well... It was actually pretty nice. I wasn't allowed out of the castle, but there weren't many restrictions other than that. They gave me a live-in maid so I could have anything I wanted whenever I wanted, so it was cool that I got away without doing anything."

"I suppose it would be to you..."

Kanzaki Iori, at his core, was a lazy person. He'd gone so far as to say his dream job was NEET. Of course a man like that would be happy to be put in a situation where he didn't have to do anything.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you told me that was your suggestion, in fact.”

“Nah, it wasn’t me. I was definitely on board right away, though.”

“So I imagine. What happened after that? If they had you under house arrest, I can’t imagine they then made you fight against the Dark Lord.”

“Yeah, the plan was for me not to participate in that. They said they had to defeat the Dark Lord on their own without relying on a hero who was in bad shape mentally.”

“According to their original plan, then. But things didn’t go so well for them, did they?”

“Yeah... A whole lot happened. I was reluctant too, but I ended up going to the Dark Lord... Decided to, actually.”

“Hmm...”

Soma could tell from lori’s face that it really was contrary to what he had wanted to do. What could have happened?

But lori shrugged and moved on with the story, apparently not intending to elaborate. “So this is the important part. One of those things that happened was that I met a certain someone, and she told me something.”

“What was that?”

“That this wasn’t supposed to be my role, and she was going to help me in apology for that.”

“Hmm... Apology, huh...”

The first and second statements almost seemed completely disconnected, but there was no need to overthink it. Basically, that person had probably done something that resulted in lori being given that role, which he shouldn’t have been given.

“And you agreed?”

“Yeah... I agreed. In both the ‘concur’ way and the ‘consent’ way. Especially when it became clear to me that I was kind of a standin.”

“Do you mean for the first failed summoning?”

“Yeah. You’re quick on the uptake, huh? The Veritas people thought they’d done something wrong... But I could somehow tell, as the person who got summoned, that someone else was supposed to be summoned the first time.”

Even so, it wouldn’t have been surprising if he’d objected when told he was a standin. But Iori had said he’d both concurred and consented, which meant...

“You agreed to serve as a standin, then? Well, I don’t see you being the type of person to be angry about hearing that... I do imagine you would groan that you wished the original person would fill the role instead.”

“Yeah... If I’d heard that earlier than I did, I might have. No, probably would have. But I was resolved by that point.”

“Resolved?”

“Yeah. To be a hero and defeat the Dark Lord.”

“Hmm...”

Iori may have been lazy, but that didn’t make him a layabout. He got things done when he needed to. Even then, though, he habitually complained about it...so it must have been an extraordinary circumstance for him to declare that.

“By the way, who was it that said that to you?”

“Who was she... I don’t really know. It’s not like I’m trying to keep it from you, though; I really don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me. She might’ve called herself a fount of wisdom to us, though.”

“A fount of wisdom...”

“She told us all sorts of things we didn’t know. She called it her way of atoning, but I don’t think we could have reached the future we wanted without her.”

Iori seemed genuinely thankful to this person. Soma didn’t see any resentment in his eyes, only something similar to reverence.

“Hmm... Her name?”

“Hildegard Lindwurm.”

Soma wasn’t surprised to hear that name. He’d had a feeling.

“Judging by your reaction, you know more than nothing about her.”

“Indeed. I’m acquainted with her... In fact, she was the one who reincarnated me into this world.”

“I see...”

“You don’t seem very surprised to hear that... Why is that?”

“Well... It makes a lot of things make sense.” lori shrugged.

Judging by lori’s reaction, Soma suspected he might be thinking that the original hero was supposed to be Soma...but he was doubtful about that himself.

Based on the little lori had described, there had been signs before he’d been summoned. A magic circle had appeared at his feet before he’d reappeared here.

But as he’d described before, nothing like that had happened for Soma. He’d just woken up in another world, and he hadn’t heard anything like that from Hildegard. It wasn’t that he thought Hildegard had lied to lori, but judging by what lori said, Soma doubted that Hildegard knew who had originally been meant to fill lori’s role. It was entirely possible that lori was misunderstanding things.

“Well... It doesn’t really matter.”

“Huh? What doesn’t?”

“Whether or not we were meant to come to this world has no bearing on what we do.”

Even if Soma really had been meant to come to this world before lori, lori had already defeated the Dark Lord, so that role had been fulfilled. And just as lori didn’t seem to have any issue with being summoned to this world, neither did Soma. He’d had some worries at the very beginning, after he’d first been transported to another world, but he’d long since come to terms with them. Most importantly, Soma himself had wished to be reincarnated in this world, so there was no need to be bothered by it.

“No need to be bothered, huh... I wonder.”

“Hmm? Is there something worrying you?”

“Well, I might just be overthinking it... But honestly, I don’t think I fully defeated the Dark Lord.”

“Do you mean that something felt off about the final blow? Or perhaps that you never saw his body after defeating him?”

“No, not like that... What to say... It’s just a sense I get. I felt it when I beat him—that I *had* beaten him, but not completely.”

“Hmm...”

Heroic intuition, maybe. It would have been easy to conclude he was imagining it, but idiots were actually pretty unlikely to make things like that up.

“Do you mean to say that the Dark Lord will be revived?”

“I can’t rule it out. There are people trying to make it happen, even.”

“I’ve heard such stories as well... But would there be reason to worry if it did happen? You defeated him once, after all, and you can’t be much weaker even after more than ten years.”

“Well... I wish I could agree with you on that.”

“Do you mean that you’ve grown weaker since then?”

Ten years wasn’t a short time, but it also wasn’t long enough to grow weak. And considering the lack of change in his appearance, his strength should have remained...

“Wait, knowing you... Don’t tell me that you’ve gotten out of shape as a result of not practicing for ten years.”

“Well, that too... But there’s a more serious answer. I told you I took over as Dark Lord, right?”

“You did, yes... But what does that have to do with this?”

“That means I’m not a hero anymore. I may only be a Dark Lord in terms of status, but regardless, I’m not a hero. I lost my heroic power a long time ago.”

Soma looked intently into lori’s eyes. He saw no indication that he was lying. If nothing else, lori was convinced of that.

“And it couldn’t be that you simply lost your motivation after defeating him and thought that meant your power was gone?”

“Unfortunately not. It happened the second I landed the finishing blow—I sensed that my role was over and I wasn’t a hero anymore. I guess you could argue it was in my head...but it felt the same as when I got summoned into this world and could just tell I was a hero before anyone told me.”

“Hmm... Is that so?”

If Iori said so, then Soma had to believe it was true. However...

“What do you expect me to do with this information?”

“Nothing in particular. I mean, you’re the one who started going on about coincidences.”

“Perhaps, but you wouldn’t have said so much about it if that were all.”

“You’re right... But it’s not that I want you to do anything, really. Just said what I wanted to. Told you how I’m feeling, you know?”

“I see... You just do as you please, don’t you?”

“Isn’t it a bit late to notice that?”

“Hmm... Yes, indeed.”

Now that Soma thought about it, Iori had always been that way. But Soma understood he was the same, so it went for both of them.

“Well... We’ve gone over a lot, so how about we call it a night?”

“All right. There are still many things I’d like to know...but we will have more opportunities to talk.”

“Yeah.”

On the one hand, a man who’d been summoned to another world; on the other, a boy who’d been transported to one and then reincarnated in a second. Nothing guaranteed that they would have been able to see each other even the next day...but they’d managed to reunite despite all of that. Soma had no way of knowing whether this was fate, but it was enough to make him believe that even if they parted ways now, they could meet again.

Thus concluded Soma and Iori's first talk as friends in ages.

"Speaking of which, what're you doing tomorrow?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing?"

"I mean, are you heading out right away?"

"Hmm... We haven't discussed that yet. It will depend on how that conversation goes."

"Okay... Well, it can be up to all of you, then. But if you have some time...can you do me a favor?"

10

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Who knows? Maybe I’ve gone crazy from being poisoned,” Stina said with a shrug. She thrust her spear forth as blood dripped from it. The point touched the man’s neck and broke the skin, but she paid that no particular attention. Whether or not she worried about it, that spear would pierce his throat in the end.

“But it doesn’t matter. You just have to tell me where the others are. That is, if you don’t want to end up like *them*.”

She glanced over and saw twenty or so human figures. They were all dead; they’d had their throats slit, been violently slammed, or been struck by lightning. She could say that for sure in part because she’d checked but mostly because she was the one responsible for doing all of that.

“How regrettable... You were meant to be our leader. Why should you of all people have such a change in heart?”

“Like I said, maybe it’s ‘cause I’ve been poisoned. Personally, though, I don’t think I’ve changed.”

No, she hadn’t changed one bit. It was *because* she hadn’t changed that she’d planned to do this from the very beginning. And even if it meant her demise, there was no reason she had to feel a strange sense of responsibility for it.

And if she *did* feel responsible, she’d chosen the wrong course of action. She shouldn’t have led them just because she was the Dark Lord’s daughter. She should have handed leadership over to someone else.

That was why she was doing this—because she’d become aware that they were making another stupid plan. She’d come with the resolve to take responsibility this time and stop them in their tracks once and for all. To be honest, it had been a gamble whether she could uncover their plot, but she’d managed to succeed...and she’d waited until now because of the sheer number

of people who had gathered, which had exceeded her expectations. Not that it would have posed a problem for her if they'd all attacked her at once, but it would have been impossible to make sure that not even one of them had gotten away.

So she'd waited until they'd begun to split up just before commencing their plan. However, as a result, she didn't know where the others were gathered. She'd heard that there were several different meeting places depending on people's roles in the plan, but the only one she knew was this, the designated place for her own group. That was why she had come here with them and was now cornering this man, who was supposed to know all of the locations.

"So when are you going to start talking? Or would you rather I torture you? I honestly don't feel like it, and I've never done it before, so it might get kinda rough... But there's not much time, so if that's what you want..."

"Now, no need to panic. Take your time. Being hasty never leads to good results...and it should kick in any moment now."

"Huh? What're you—?!"

Her head instantly started spinning. Her vision went fuzzy, and she got the sudden urge to vomit.

"Agh?!"



She coughed up a dark red fluid like the stuff spreading across the floor. *Why?* she wondered for a moment, but she couldn't wonder for long. The strength left her body and she collapsed where she stood.

"Gh, hah... Wh... What's...?!"

"Phew... That certainly had me nervous. I never thought it would take so long to work... Perhaps I should say I'm impressed."

"Is this...poison...? So that stuff...you brought out..."

"Exactly; it would have made me nervous if you hadn't taken a bite, although there are other ways to make you ingest it... I didn't inform all of the others because I couldn't afford for you to realize. Those who were unfortunately affected served to keep you unaware."

"*You...!*"

"Why so angry? Isn't it the same in the end regardless? I did give them an antidote so that they could withstand it to some extent...but to think it was even slower to affect you... I'm truly impressed." He dipped his head in a sarcastic display of courtesy.

Stina desperately tried to move, but she couldn't lift a finger. She just kept coughing against her will, dyeing the ground a deep red with each cough. It didn't seem like she would die immediately...but that didn't make much difference at this point.

"Oh, rest assured, I won't kill you. No... I could never be so wasteful. Not when I've created such a perfect opportunity."

"Oppor...tunity...?"

"Yes. They were here to deceive you, but also to serve as sacrifices. Oh, and would you look at that... You happen to have it on your person right now—the item necessary to break the seal. Yes, what an opportunity."

"You're...going to...?!"

Stina hadn't wanted to awaken the thing slumbering here, of course. She'd taken the item anyway out of an abundance of caution—so that no one else would use it. There hadn't been time to dispose of it, so she'd thought keeping

it on her would be safest. But now...

“Wait just one moment. I need to draw the magic circle. And don’t worry... We have plenty of time before the plan commences.”

He smirked, a dark flame smoldering in his eyes. Oblivious that he was walking the path to ruin...or perhaps letting her know that he was fully aware and didn’t care.

“Now, let us begin. The ceremony that even the Dark Lord himself is said to have ultimately avoided...to resurrect the Evil Spirit.”

His mouth warped uncannily as he spoke.

†

“And what would be the meaning of this?”

Underneath the clear blue sky, Soma looked around and sighed. He saw nothing of interest nearby, only a vast plain. It was late morning, and this was a part of the Dark Lord’s castle—more specifically, the yard. But as far as he could see, there was nothing in it.

Iori had asked him the night before to come here after breakfast if he had time. He hadn’t said why, only that Soma would understand once he got there.

“I don’t know... I’d like to ask the same thing.” Aina, who was standing next to him, shrugged.

They hadn’t come here together; she’d told him she had something to do, but then she’d come here for some reason. Considering that, Iori had probably summoned her here too, but she didn’t seem to know why either. And the one who had invited them was nowhere to be seen.

Just then...

“Hey. Been here long?”

Soma found himself sighing as Iori walked toward them with an unapologetic demeanor. As Soma had thought so many times since they’d reunited, his friend really hadn’t changed.

Aina seemed to feel the same, judging by the sigh he heard from next to him.

“What do you mean, ‘Been here long?’ Why’d you take so much time to get here after you invited us?”

“I mean, we didn’t set a specific time, right? And I get a cramp in my side if I get up too soon after breakfast. It’s important to rest after meals.”

“What are you going on about? Why did you call us here?” Soma asked. When he’d seen Aina, he’d assumed Iori had invited everyone, but there was no sign that Sierra and Felicia were coming. They hadn’t said they had any plans either, so it must have just been Soma and Aina. But he couldn’t imagine what Iori would want with just the two of them. He didn’t recall anything like that coming up in their conversation the night before.

“Nothing much. I just wanted you here as insurance, Soma.”

“Insurance?”

“Yeah. It’s Aina who I actually have business with.”

“Me...?” Aina tensed slightly at that.

Whether or not he noticed, Iori continued with a casual tone. “Well, I’m meeting my daughter for the first time in a while, after all. I wanted to see how much you’ve grown.”

“You’re checking her progress?”

“Yep.”

After seeing Iori nod, Soma looked to Aina, the sky, and the empty yard. Then he muttered to himself before speaking up. “For your information, if you plan to do anything indecent to Aina, I’ll have you in pieces before you can start.”

“Of course not, stupid. Obviously I mean magic.”

Soma had been kidding, of course. But he was nonetheless taken aback to hear the word “magic.”

“Magic... This would certainly be the perfect place to use it, I suppose.”

There was nothing here, after all. That meant they didn’t have to worry about damaging things when using magic. That, however, begged the question of why Iori had invited Soma. What kind of “insurance” would he need if Aina was

going to use magic here?

Before Soma could ask, lori began to walk toward the plains...and stood in front of Aina.

“What is the meaning of this...?”

“Huh? To check her magic, obviously. This is the easiest way.”

“So...you’re going to check at point-blank range?”

“Point-blank, huh... Yeah, I guess you’re not wrong. It’s more like absolutely no range, though.”

In other words, lori was going to check her magic by directly taking an attack.

Soma narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing lori’s face as if trying to discern his true intentions. “Are you out of your mind?”

“This is enough to make you doubt my sanity? It isn’t really unusual. I’m sure they do the same kind of thing at the academy you go to.”

“Hmm...”

Soma thought that sounded like nonsense at first, but the sparring they did at the academy was similar if you thought about it a certain way. It wasn’t uncommon for instructors to take attacks as a way to judge a student’s skill or rate of improvement. Soma had never attacked an instructor himself, though; he’d only seen other people do it.

“And do you plan to attack her?”

“Of course not. I mean, that would make it easier to test how much she’s grown, but I’d never lay a hand on my daughter. Wouldn’t want her to really get hurt.”

“So when you say Soma is insurance, you mean he’s here in case I accidentally —”

“Nope,” lori interrupted Aina before she could finish. “Sometimes, when you’re not accustomed to using magic, it can get out of control. When I said I don’t want you to get hurt, I mean by yourself either. Hence insurance.” He smiled.

Seeing that, Soma thought for the first time that Iori really seemed like a Dark Lord. His words would have come off as a provocation to Aina, however.

“Okay... So you’re saying I don’t have to worry about hurting you,” she responded.

“Yeah, you got it. I’m called a Dark Lord, after all. I may not be as powerful as I was in my prime...but I’m strong enough to see how far my daughter’s come.”

Soma sighed when Iori added even more provocative words. Judging by how Aina looked out of the corner of his eye, she was raring to go. Her nervousness and hesitation from before had disappeared. This situation must have given Aina pause, even if she’d tried to hide it on the outside, but she seemed to have forgotten all about that—just as Iori had intended.

Iori wasn’t the type of man who would put himself in the position of taking a magical attack, even to see his daughter’s progress. Wondering why he would do such a thing, Soma sighed once again.

“You’re as awkward as ever when it comes to these things... I suppose not even becoming a father has changed that about you.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing that you were meant to hear. I take it that my duty is to simply watch Aina?”

“Yep, if you don’t mind.”

Soma knew he wasn’t really being given the option to refuse. He sighed for the third time. This did give him pause...but it was for his friends. He responded with a shrug.

Seeming to understand what Soma meant, Iori ever so subtly smirked so that only Soma would notice.

“All right, then, whenever you’re ready. Oh, and make sure you don’t hold back, of course, or I won’t be able to see how far you’ve come.”

Soma gave Iori a look of exasperation as he continued to provoke Aina, but it seemed super effective on her. He could sense her fury and her mana building in intensity.

“Okay... I got it, then. I’ll use all my power like you told me to...so try not to get hurt!”

Instantly, as if signaling the start, the spot where lori had been standing burst violently into flames.

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Soma narrowed his eyes at the blaze. The scale of the explosion had been average, but it was still a bit larger than a person, and there had been enough force behind it to fatally wound someone. If they'd been at the academy, that could have potentially happened, depending on the target.

But...

"I see... Yeah, you can definitely use magic now. And without a chant." Iori emerged unharmed from the smoke that the blaze had created. He didn't seem strained, so he must have completely protected himself somehow. Not only that, he shrugged as if disappointed. "But that hardly even counts as a preliminary test. Didn't I tell you not to hold back? Go ahead, give me all you got."

"I guess I better... All right, here I go...!"

After succumbing to Iori's provocations again, Aina thrust her right arm out in front of her. Mana gathered in her outstretched palm.

"Flame, obey my will and reveal your power. Let all that stands in my way be immolated."

If Soma remembered correctly, that was the chant for the first spell that Aina had ever used. It was a beginner's spell, though; the one she'd just used had been more powerful. He wondered what she was trying to accomplish but got his answer immediately.

"Flame Arrow!"

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup *Consecutive Spell: Magic* Flame Arrow.

It made sense when he saw that she hadn't just manifested a single arrow. Tens of arrows appeared before her outstretched arm and flew toward Iori all

at once.

But that sight didn't appear to faze Iori. "I see. That's a basic spell, but it's definitely threatening with so many at once. And you've raised its power by using extra mana. The fact that it's basic makes it even easier to add your own touch, and you have it completely under control too. Not bad...but not especially good either."

He shrugged, not doing anything but watching the approaching arrows. He made no move to deflect them nor to use a defensive spell. It was as if he planned to simply let them hit him. But although that was a basic spell, it wasn't lacking in power. Being hit by so many arrows at once would be life-threatening.

But if anything, Aina was the one who looked shaken. Her gaze wavered with a hint of uncertainty; she was probably wondering if she could keep going like this.

Soma, however, wasn't concerned at all. He figured Iori wouldn't do something that actually put him at risk of death.

And he was right. Just when the arrows got close, Iori casually lifted his hand and knocked them all out of the air.

Unarmed Combat (Special-Grade) *Heroic Blessing*
(*Imitation*) Draconic Blessing (Imitation) / Steadfast
Resolve: Tiger Crush.

Aina's reaction was delayed by a second—she hadn't expected that countermove—but she immediately made another move of her own.

"Firestorm!"

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Firestorm.

A fiery tempest instantly appeared directly below Iori and swallowed him. It

was large enough to consume two or three adults, and it reached high enough into the air that Soma had to crane his neck to take it all in. That couldn't possibly be low in heat energy; taking it directly would do more than burn someone. If they were lucky, it might just char them.

That was only if they took it directly, however. Once the storm subsided, Iori was standing unharmed where its center had been.

"That wasn't bad...but still not particularly good. I can tell you have decent control over your magic from the fact that nothing's burned outside of it, but that's—"

"Flame Burst!"

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Flame Burst.

Iori was interrupted by a burst of flames—then a second and a third one, each larger than the last. They enveloped him with a roar.

Being hit with those through a weak defensive spell, let alone directly, could easily have been fatal. But once the smoke cleared, Iori wasn't so much as singed.

"Hey, you're getting the hang of it. Keep going. You seem to be the type who needs a bit to warm up."

"You...!"

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup / Nullify Chant: Magic / Flame Burst.

Iori, as cool and collected as ever, was hit by another fiery blast. This time, it continued burning without interruption, affecting its surroundings. The ground began to come apart and disintegrate, forming a crater.

It would have looked like a massacre to some. She was continually hitting an

opponent who wasn't resisting with a spell strong enough to affect the surrounding terrain. If an uninvolved third party such as Felicia had been there, she would have tried to stop Aina.

But Soma wasn't going to. He knew that wasn't actually what was going on...and it looked like something completely different to him. Like a little kid throwing a temper tantrum.

If he'd voiced that thought, Aina might have denied it, and maybe she herself didn't realize, but that was what it was in essence. More precisely, it had been engineered to turn into a tantrum—by the one standing there cool and collected: Iori. His words of provocation had all been for that purpose.

He hadn't said as much to Soma, but there was nothing else it could be. That was just the kind of man Iori was.

“You've never been able to communicate properly...”

The reason he'd done this was simple. He'd wanted to be attacked—wanted his daughter to attack his inability to do anything for her.

And deep down, Aina had most likely wanted to attack him too. To criticize him for not doing anything, even while knowing that it wasn't a fair criticism, that she would just be venting. And precisely because she'd known that, she hadn't been able to say anything. This precocious and bright girl, whether consciously or unconsciously, had kept her feelings buried in her heart.

But however precocious and bright she was, she was still a girl, not yet a grown woman. She had the right to act childish sometimes.

“I don't know about using me for this purpose...but I suppose if it's for a friend...”

Ultimately, Iori was just indulging himself. Aina hadn't asked for this; it wasn't clear she even understood what it was. But it would still lighten her conscience, and Iori's as well. Soma thought that was worth being used for.

“Consume and incinerate my foe...”

The end seemed to be approaching. Judging by her heightening mana, Aina intended to make this her final attack. The ground was already in shambles, and

it didn't look like she planned to use any less power this time.

But it would be all right. Iori got things done when he had to. He was the one who'd continually provoked Aina, so he must have had some way to handle this. After all, if he didn't, Aina would end up traumatized, so he had to—as a life-and-death matter.

“Infinite Gehenna!”

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup / Steadfast Resolve: Magic / Infinite Gehenna.

The second her chant ended, a gigantic magic circle appeared on the ground. Watching the immense blue blaze that erupted from it, Soma thought to himself how badly this father and daughter lacked communication ability. He shrugged.

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Once silence returned to the yard, it was in the state it would have been in after a meteor impact. It was as if the ground had been scooped out by a giant spoon. The earth surrounding it had been rendered bare by the final spell. Soma had heard that it was possible to specify a target with that spell, but she must have chosen to simply add more power rather than waste any energy on that.

And the one who had created that scene was currently collapsed on the ground next to Soma. He'd been taught physical stamina and mana were fundamentally similar; using too much of either one would result in a collapse. Therefore, Aina had ended up that way because she'd used too much mana. But her face showed no sense of accomplishment.

"You seem rather frustrated."

"Of course I am... I was proud of how well I can use magic now. But it didn't work on him at all."

"Well, I *am* your father. I wouldn't be worth my salt if I couldn't withstand that," Iori said as he walked up to them. Taking that ferocious attack hadn't hurt him at all; apparently he really was all that.

"And...I'm also frustrated this went the way he wanted it to," Aina said.

Soma observed her face. In fact, he saw not only frustration but a hint of relief. Maybe that in itself was adding to her frustration.

"Hmm... Isn't that good, Iori? Your daughter seems to understand exactly how you feel."

"Well... Yeah, I guess that's a good thing."

Iori seemed reluctant to state that outright; he must have been wishing his feelings hadn't come across. Not out of ill intent—just because he was embarrassed. He was so awkward with people in so many ways.

"So does that conclude my role in this?"

“Guess so. Sorry you had to be involved.”

“I don’t particularly mind. But if you want to make it up to me, there is one thing I’d like to ask of you.”

“There is? Well, I do owe you, so I’ll do what I can, though I can’t promise anything...”

“It isn’t anything difficult. I’d simply like to stay one more night.”

“Another night...?”

Iori and Aina gave him confused looks. That was only natural, because he’d planned to leave today. But...

“Why? Did you think of something else to do?”

“I suppose I did. Not for me to do, however, but for Aina.”

“Me...?” Aina stared at him in confusion, seeming not to pick up on what he meant.

Soma sighed. “Do you really intend to leave in this state?”

“Oh... W-Well...” She averted her gaze, realizing only now that she’d had it pointed out to her.

Since she’d collapsed due to mana overuse, all she had to do was wait for it to recover, but that wouldn’t happen instantaneously. It wouldn’t be long before she could move again, but leaving here would mean resuming their journey, and you never knew what might happen on a journey. Considering that, she naturally couldn’t embark in this condition.

“Well, I suppose that isn’t my real underlying reason.”

“Then what is it...?”

“I’ll answer that with a question. Are you sure you’ve had enough time to talk, even after doing that?” Soma pointed toward the crater Aina had made.

Sure, maybe she’d released some of what had been weighing on her this way. But if that were enough to completely clear her mind, she wouldn’t have done something like that in the first place. And anyway, father and daughter were seeing each other for the first time in two years; they must have had a lot to

talk about, more than they could have in one night.

“My point is, you should talk to him while you recover your mana.”

“But... I’m sure he’s busy...”

“He certainly may have a lot to do, but even if you didn’t talk to him, would he really do those things?”

“Good point,” Iori chimed in.

“Don’t give me that...” Aina sighed. “I get it. I do need some time for my mana to recover...and I won’t have anything else to do in that time. I can spend it talking to my father.”

“For sure. When it comes down to my work or Aina, it’s no contest which comes first.”

Soma shrugged at the two, who still weren’t being forthright about their feelings. He had no reason to stay here any longer, so he addressed Aina.

“Aina, have you recovered enough to move?”

“Oh... I’ll be a bit longer, so you can go without me. It’s not like I’ll hurt myself lying here.”

“Hmm...”

There was no way the literal meaning of those words was the same as what she really wanted to say. But as Soma confirmed after exchanging a glance with Iori, this place really was safe, so it wouldn’t be an issue to leave her.

“We’ll go ahead, then.”

“Mm-hmm.” Aina nodded with a wordless vocalization reminiscent of Sierra as Soma and Iori made to leave.

They continued walking without a glance behind them...and once they were out of Aina’s earshot, Soma opened his mouth.

“So, are you all right?”

“Do I look like I’m not?”

“You look like you’re running out of capacity to grin and bear it.”

“Aren’t you insightful?”

Just as Iori said that, his confident posture crumbled. He looked almost as if he might collapse on the spot.

“I’m not going to carry you if you collapse.”

“Some friend you are.”

“You may not be able to see her, but your daughter is behind you. It’s only a little longer to the castle. You can hold out until we reach it.”

“Ugh... I guess if you put it like that, I’ll keep it up a bit longer.”

Iori straightened his posture, but his unsteady steps betrayed the fact that he was nearing his limit. If Aina saw that, she would realize the truth. But knowing Iori, if Aina had been watching, he would have feigned being perfectly fine.

“It must be hard being a father.”

“Sure is. You’ll understand soon enough.”

“I honestly struggle to picture that happening.”

“I couldn’t either, but now look at me. Don’t worry.”

“Hmm... That makes sense.”

That was more convincing than anything Soma had heard before. But he hadn’t had a relationship like that in his past life, so he thought it likely that things would turn out the same in this one.

“On that note, would you mind if I asked you something?”

“I have a feeling I know what it is...but go ahead. Not like I have any reason to keep it from you.”

“I’d like to know...how did you endure Aina’s attack without being harmed? Or to be more precise...without the appearance of being harmed?”

As was evident from how Iori looked right now, his cool and collected demeanor had been an act. It had only been easy for him at the very beginning. Aina hadn’t noticed once the blood had gone to her head, but Iori had only been feigning ease. On the inside, he must have been putting in desperate effort.

“Well, I’ve lost my power but not my experience. I can still trick my inexperienced daughter. But I thought I had you fooled too...”

“Unfortunately for you, I was watching from an outsider’s perspective. And you were acting so unlike yourself, it was plain to see that something was going on. But in addition to being inexperienced, Aina was also quite worked up despite her calm appearance, so it’s no wonder that you were able to deceive her.”

“Don’t put it like that. You make it sound bad.”

“It’s the truth.”

Iori shrugged, unable to deny that. “So you wanted to know how I did it?”

“Yes; what with the fire, I was unable to tell what was happening. All I could tell was that you did something.”

“I didn’t even mean for that to be detectable. I guess that shows how much weaker I’ve gotten.”

“I believe it shows the awesomeness of my perception.”

“Man, I’d like to say ‘if you say so,’ but you’re *you*.”

As they joked, Iori’s eyes were darting around subtly. He probably wasn’t debating whether to tell Soma at all so much as *how* to explain it. Once he appeared to get his thoughts in order, he looked straight at Soma.

“The specific method is a trade secret, but although I may not look like it, I’m actually better at fighting with cheap tricks than head-on.”

“No, you absolutely look like it.”

“Shut up. Well, long story short, I used little tricks to ensure most of the spells didn’t even reach me. The only one I got hit with was that Flame Arrow.”

“Hmm... They didn’t even reach you, huh?”

That was about what Soma had expected. Iori hadn’t appeared to be blocking them, but he hadn’t seemed to be withstanding any damage either. That meant the likeliest explanation was that they hadn’t even been getting to him.

“Even with her perception clouded by anger, I would think Aina would notice

due to the lack of resistance, to say nothing of a bystander...”

“Exactly why I didn’t let her notice it. But I wasn’t that far away, so that last attack really had me nervous. I thought for a second that I might actually die.”

“Quite pitiful for one who calls himself a Dark Lord.”

“Shut up.”

As they had that exchange, Soma sensed someone nearby and turned to look. The head butler was standing in the entrance to the castle. When he noticed the two, he dipped his head.

“That reminds me, who is he?” Soma asked Iori.

“What do you mean, who is he? He’s the head butler. Didn’t he tell you that?”

“Well, he did, but there are no other butlers here, right?”

“No maids either. He’s the only servant we have.”

“Hmm...”

Iori’s words made Soma reexamine the structure before them. Even if most of it was unused, it didn’t look like it could be maintained by a single servant.

“So the Dark Lord’s army is a tough employer... I suppose that if it were lenient, that would pose a problem in itself.”

“Can it. And it’s not like we chose to only hire him. We got a lot of applicants when we recruited, but he rejected all of them. Said they weren’t good enough to serve us.”

“Hmm... I recall you saying something similar about cooking.”

“That’s different...but yeah, I guess it’s similar. He’s too capable for his own good, so he’s strict with his assessments.”

“I would think even the most outstanding servant would have limits...”

Just because part of the castle was unused didn’t mean it could be neglected. It would take a lot of effort just to keep track of where everything was...

“Oh, knowing where things are isn’t a problem for him. He already knew before we came here.”

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. He was head butler for the Dark Lord before me.”

Immediately grasping what that meant, Soma sighed. In that case, it was no wonder the man knew the castle inside and out.

“Are you sure that’s all right?”

“It is for now, at least. And if anything happens, I’ll handle it next time,” lori said casually with a shrug, although there was resolve deep in his eyes.

If lori said so, then Soma had nothing to add.

When they reached the entrance, lori addressed the butler, whose head was still bowed. “You don’t usually greet me at the door. Is something the matter?”

“No, nothing is amiss. I simply wished to inquire about your plans.”

“Oh, right, we said we’d think about when they’d leave once we were done with this.”

Soma and Aina hadn’t known what lori’s request even was, let alone when he’d be done with them, so they’d left their plans for afterward flexible. Their departure had ended up being delayed anyway...and if the head butler took care of everything around here, then it would be best to let him know that they were staying another night as soon as possible.

“Well, we decided to put off leaving and stay another night.”

“Ah, is that so? I’m glad to hear that. I don’t see Her Highness, however... Is this related to her?”

“I suppose so,” Soma replied. “She’s unable to move at the moment due to lori overdoing it.”

“Oh...?” The butler turned a sharp look toward lori, who subtly shrank back in fear, then glared at Soma.

“Hey. Soma.”

“Did I say anything inaccurate? That was clearly because you got ahead of yourself.”

“Well, you’re not wrong, but... Just so you know, I didn’t do anything to her,

okay? If anything, it was a one-sided fight in her favor. Almost killed me.”

“Ah... That intense? It sounds as if she’s developed well.”

“Yep. They do say kids grow with or without their parents around...but still, I’m surprised she grew so much.” Iori glanced behind him with evident emotion. Aina was out of sight, but maybe he could still see her like that in his mind’s eye.

“How wonderful... In that case, I would like to leave the castle. Would that be acceptable?”

“Huh? Do we need something?”

“No, our stock is sufficient. I simply wish to make today a grand event, as I was unable to provide a warm enough welcome on short notice yesterday.”

“We aren’t especially concerned with things like that...”

“Just accept it,” Iori said to Soma. “As Dark Lord, if I treated my guests poorly, I’d lose my good name. Right?”

“Indeed, sir. And the same is true for Her Highness.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Well, if the butler wanted to celebrate their visit, Soma had no reason not to accept it. He didn’t want anything overly formal, but Iori would also have objected to that, so he didn’t think he needed to worry.

“All right, in that case, go for it.”

“Yes. I hope to present the most flawless welcome I have thus far.” The butler bowed one last time and left.

Soma narrowed his eyes at the man as he walked away. “Hmm... As I thought yesterday, he’s no ordinary man when it comes to deportment.”

“He must have needed that to be head butler at the Dark Lord’s castle.”

That was probably true. With that in mind, Soma turned to look at Iori, who seemed seconds from collapse.

“You seem to be quickly losing steam.”

“Sure am. Man, it’s hard work seeing how much my daughter’s grown.”

“You brought this upon yourself...in multiple senses.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well, I’m gonna go take a break in my room. Do whatever you want in the meantime.”

“I will, then. Oh...but you *will* speak with Aina, right?”

“Yeah, I gotcha... See ya.” With those parting words, lori left on unsteady legs.

Well, after that reminder, lori probably wouldn’t pretend to forget about it. To say anything more would be overstepping.

“They should resolve their family issues between the two of them. Now...what should I do?”

He could look for Sierra and Felicia, who were probably occupying themselves somewhere, or he could find something else to do. He walked away, deciding to think about it as he went.

13

Soma, who had been wandering the castle, unable to put his thoughts in order, paused at a corner. He felt a familiar presence from the other side of the door before him—actually, two of them. That must have been Sierra and Felicia. Apparently they had been killing time indoors.

“Hmm... I have no way of knowing what’s here, but this is a good time to look.”

He hadn’t decided what he was going to do, after all, so he took it as a fateful opportunity and reached for the door. As soon as he opened it, he understood the purpose of the room.

“I see... So that’s what this room is for.”

His vision was immediately filled with countless books. He’d heard that there was a storage room somewhere in the castle that housed a private collection, and this must be it.

“But judging by the scale of it, this could easily be called a library.”

Books, books, and more books, as far as the eye could see. Some on the shelves and some stacked in the corners. There seemed to be more beyond where he could see; he even saw more when he looked up. This was no match for the academy library, but it was unusually large for a personal collection.

“Well, perhaps the Dark Lord’s collection shouldn’t be called ‘personal...’ But this is certainly too much to grasp on one’s own.”

As he looked around, simultaneously impressed and weary, he saw someone walking toward him from the back of the room. He couldn’t see her face because she was wearing a hood, but he didn’t need to in order to know who she was. It was Sierra.

“Soma... I thought so. You need something here...?”

“No. I came here because I sensed that you were here and was interested in

what you were doing. I was also curious as to what this room is.”

“It’s a personal library...as you can see.”

“So it seems. But it appears far larger than any normal personal library.”

“Mm-hmm... Agreed.”

As they talked, one more person emerged from the back. She was also wearing a hood, but again, Soma didn’t need to see her face. It was Felicia.

“It really is you, Soma.”

“Hmm? What do you mean, ‘really’?”

“Well, I was reading a book over there when Sierra suddenly stood up and said, ‘Soma’s here.’”

“Hmm... I see.”

That kind of thing was normal to people like Soma and Sierra, but Felicia wasn’t accustomed to it. It was no wonder that it would give her pause.

“So what are the two of you doing here? As far as I can see, you should have everything you need to kill time.”

“Well, I can’t deny that we’re partly here to kill some time, but I would say it’s mainly to gain insight. It’s also a gesture of thanks.”

“What do you mean, thanks?”

“Apparently lori doesn’t know what most of these are.”

“I certainly recall him saying that, yes...”

So the two were specifically trying to find the books that lori wasn’t familiar with. Given the sheer number, however, Soma thought it would be hard to tell which had already been checked.

“No, he has the ones he’s familiar with stacked in the corners so that we can tell.”

“Mm-hmm. And he said the useful ones are stored separately.”

“Hmm... He’s taken that into consideration, then.”

In that case, though, there were even more unread books than Soma had

imagined. And Iori hadn't seemed very motivated, so most of these books would probably never see the light of day.

"Well, I suppose that's none of my concern. May I ask what sort of books you've been reading? If you do have a specific objective, it must be difficult to find what you're looking for."

"That's part of the reason that I've been reading books at random. My original goal was to gain general information in a variety of fields, though, and reading at random also aligns with that."

"I'm looking for ones about magic. I thought maybe there would be books here with info I'd never seen before."

"I expected as much from you, Sierra. Have you found anything?"

Sierra shook her head. It made sense that she hadn't, seeing as Iori had probably primarily searched for magic-related books as well. "But I'm not giving up yet."

"Hmm... Well, not everything has been checked, so there must be some that he missed. It's possible that there's something useful in those."

"I hate to say it, but it seems unlikely that we'll find anything. There are a lot more books here than I expected," Felicia said.

"This is true. I didn't expect there to be this many."

"And I don't think you fully understand just how many there are yet."

"Oh?" Soma returned a curious look. Felicia's response was to point toward the back of the room. She must have meant that the answer lay there.

"To see is to believe, I suppose."

He'd intended from the beginning to kill some time here, so he had no reason to refuse. He headed toward the back with Felicia, and what he saw there made him nod in understanding.

"So the area we were in before was only the atrium."

That area had been more than large enough, he'd thought, but this one was even bigger. It was twice...no, three times as large, and the density of volumes

was even higher. There wasn't a noticeable difference in the number of books on each shelf, but there was an instantly apparent difference in the numbers stacked on the floor. That meant lori had looked at all of those.

"He could afford to be prouder of this."

Soma's tone wasn't serious, but it certainly would have taken a lot of effort to look through all of these books. He'd known lori would spare no effort for his daughter, but it looked like he'd gone above and beyond.

"Hmm... This is more than I expected in multiple ways. This also makes it even less likely that we'll find something related to magic."

"Mm-hmm... I know."

"Well, that hasn't stopped us yet, I suppose."

Both Soma and Sierra were searching for any way they could possibly use magic despite knowing it was like grasping at clouds. Looking for a book that may or may not have been there within a huge quantity of them was trivial in comparison.

"On that note, what do you plan to do, Soma?" Felicia asked him.

"I planned to decide that after finding out what you and Sierra were doing. Now I've found you here, however, and I've been interested in this place since learning about it."

"Same as me...?" Sierra asked.

"It would seem so."

Soma, like Sierra, was interested in this place because of the possibility of finding books related to magic. Since this was the Dark Lord's castle, it probably contained information that didn't circulate in the outside world, so he couldn't help being curious.

"Mm-hmm... Then help me."

"Hmm? Well, given that we have the same objective, I suppose I would ultimately end up helping you regardless...but it seems as if you mean something different."

“Oh, I understand... I think Sierra means she wants you to take care of the ones over there. We can’t read them, after all.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“You can’t...? Oh... I see. They’re ancient hieroglyphics.” Soma had been perplexed for a moment until he’d remembered lori mentioning that many of the books were in ancient hieroglyphics. Sierra and Felicia certainly wouldn’t be able to read those. “Understood. It may be time-consuming to seek out the books written in ancient hieroglyphics, however... Well, perhaps not, since I could simply look at the title page.”

“No, I don’t think you’ll even have to do that.”

“Hmm?”

“Here.” Sierra began to walk. Wondering what she meant, Soma followed her to a section even deeper within the room. Once she reached the very end, she pointed at a bookshelf there. “All of these.”

“Do you mean to tell me that every single one of these books is written in ancient hieroglyphics?”

“It’s shocking, isn’t it?” Felicia agreed. “But while we haven’t checked all of them, every one we’ve looked through is. The rest of the room doesn’t seem to be organized in any particular way, so apparently these are kept separately.”

“Hmm...”

Well, sorting them by subject would require reading some of each book, but in order to tell whether a book was written in ancient hieroglyphics or not, one only had to open it. They must have been collected here because they were easier to sort out.

“If that’s the case, however, then this is once again far more than I imagined.” Even the academy had only had a few volumes, but at a glance, he wouldn’t be surprised if this shelf contained over half of all the hieroglyphic books in this world. “Well, having a larger number is good for us in a way.”

“Mm-hmm... More likely we’ll find the info we want.”

“However, it also means you have to check all of these books...”

“That’s inevitable. I didn’t go into this expecting that the information I want would be easy to obtain.”

“Mm-hmm... So can you do this part?”

“I certainly can. Will you take care of those books, then?”

“Mm-hmm... Okay.”

“I’m beginning to feel left out...but that’s fair, seeing as I wouldn’t know what you’re looking for if I saw it.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

In fact, Soma thought the three had very clear-cut roles. He would look for ancient hieroglyphics, Sierra for magic-related books, and Felicia for everything else.

“And this isn’t a formal investigation but simply something we’re doing to fill time.”

“Mm-hmm... Don’t worry about it.”

“I know...but it’s a matter of my feelings.”

“Hmm... It’s like that, is it?”

Well, maybe it was, but Felicia didn’t seem serious, so she was probably kidding. With that in mind, Soma reached for one of the books in front of him. The cover had made it stand out; it had an intricate design that didn’t match the plain appearance of the rest of the book.

The cover seemed to have been added after the book was created, however. Soma thought so because it wasn’t written in ancient hieroglyphics. He’d heard that such books weren’t uncommon; some people added elaborate covers like this to old books to make them more attractive to collectors. However, if they added an extra cover page with the actual title, it would be obvious that it wasn’t the original cover, so people tended to make up hieroglyphics at random to put on the cover.

“These seem more like the hieroglyphics I knew...”

Either the designer hadn’t been able to imitate the writing inside, or they

hadn't tried because nobody would be able to read it anyway. Either way, the characters looked vaguely similar to ancient hieroglyphics—Japanese—but not really. Soma hadn't seen Earth hieroglyphics outside of textbooks, though.

“Well, the contents are what matter.”

The inside couldn't have been tampered with, so it didn't matter what the outside looked like. He flipped open the cover to see those crucial contents and began to turn the pages. Then he nodded to himself in understanding.

“I can see why they went out of their way to create this cover.”

As Soma skimmed the pages, he saw various words and elaborate pictures—but the people of this world wouldn't have seen it that way. Photographs didn't exist in this world. So although this was just a book containing pictures of meals—a cookbook—they must have found it mind-blowing. And since most of these dishes didn't exist in this world, it probably really would be mind-blowing to a cook.

“Hmm... Perhaps Iori succeeded in recreating curry because he found a book with a recipe for it somewhere.”

Recreating a dish completely from memory would be a world apart from taking an existing recipe and making it closer to a dish one remembered. Both would be difficult, but the latter was far more realistic.

“But what should I do with this...?”

Soma had no use for it, but it could potentially be useful. He didn't want to unceremoniously toss it in the corner.

“I suppose I'll leave it someplace and let Iori know about it, then.”

Thankfully, there were open spaces on the shelves. He could place potentially useful books in those.

“A cookbook, though...”

The book he'd seen at the academy had been a journal. Two completely ordinary items with nothing in common. The issue, though, was that these had probably been created in Japan. He hadn't seen enough of these to say that for sure about all of them; maybe some had been written in this world. It was even

possible that most of them were from this world. But it was definitely highly probable that more books from Japan existed in this world.

“Hmm... It’s no coincidence that we came to this world, huh?”

Soma was reminded of what Iori had said. Maybe these meant something, then.

“Well, thinking about it won’t bring me to an answer.”

Even if these did mean something, what would he do with that information?

Soma glanced over the book again, confirming that it really was nothing but a cookbook, and placed it on the edge of a shelf. Then he turned around and looked at Sierra, who was sitting in one of the chairs intently reading a book. Apparently the other two had continued to read while he’d been looking at that book.

“Hmm... It wouldn’t be right to think about unrelated subjects while they’re hard at work. I should start reading as well.”

Soma turned back to the bookshelf, picked up a book at random, and began to read it.

14

Nicolaus nodded with satisfaction at the scene before him. The magic circle had been drawn perfectly; all that was left was to chant the spell. Then the Evil Spirit would be revived. He couldn't help but smile.

"And this is all thanks to you... Oh? Might you have died? We can't have that just yet..."

The thing at his feet wasn't reacting anymore, he noticed. He had enough sacrifices already, but this was the core of the ritual. He kicked it to motivate it to hold on a little longer, and it groaned faintly.

"You...can't just...decide I'm dead..."

"Ah, still capable of speech? How stubborn you are. Well, that may make them happier, so this is perfectly fine."

After a satisfied nod, he muttered to himself in preparation. It was all ready.

"Thank you for your patience. The ritual is complete at long last. I don't expect it to fail... There should be no need to worry about that, seeing as you were created for this purpose."

The thing at his feet gave a wordless exclamation.

Nicolaus's mouth warped at the reaction. He thought the thing's reaction would have been more interesting if it had had more energy...but there was no helping that. Nicolaus was just barely Low-Grade level in terms of Skills. He had to accept that; even this thing could have killed him if it hadn't been so weak. Musing that once the Evil Spirit was revived, he could act however he wished, he continued.

"My one concern is that you're defective...but I suppose that concern is unnecessary as well. As a vessel for the Dark Lord, you were defective, but he himself determined you adequate as a priestess of the Evil Spirit."

"Shut up...and get this damn...ceremony or whatever...over with."

“Ah, and perhaps you aren’t aware... Being a priestess, in this case, is the same as being the Dark Lord...in the sense that it makes you a vessel. No, you must have been aware... After all, it was for that reason that Albert and the others installed you as leader. Of course you of all people would know.”

The thing cried out again.

He was half lying. It was true that the Dark Lord had made Stina priestess of the Evil Spirit to serve as a vessel, but he didn’t know what Albert and the others had intended to do. Maybe she’d simply been made leader and nothing more. Nicolaus, having only been an underling, had no way of knowing their intentions...but the truth didn’t matter, not as long as there was that despair on her face along with surprise. How audacious of her, when she intended to betray and overthrow them, he thought audaciously, smirking to himself.

The preparations were truly complete now. Hope invited resistance, but despair drove it away. He couldn’t afford to take any chances. It was a given that he would use every means available to ensure success. Yes, that was all it was; he had no other reasons.

Nicolaus straightened his face against the smile that came to it and opened his mouth to chant the ritual words. As he pronounced the sounds, he wondered whether *he* might be the most suited to be the next Dark Lord, being able to summon and join forces with the Evil Spirit.

†

There was a sound in the room. It wasn’t a very loud one, but it stood out in the space where before there had been only the sound of pages turning.

Soma reflexively turned to look; he could tell that someone had made the sound deliberately. Indicating that that was the case, the person responsible—Felicia—rose from her seat and looked at Soma.

“Shall we call it a day?”

“Hmm... I suppose it’s already that time.”

“Too bad...”

Soma and Sierra stood up in response to Felicia’s suggestion; they knew she

was pointing out that it was about time for dinner. But while she might have been considering the position of the sun in the sky, there were no windows in the library, so they couldn't see outside. Apparently Felicia could tell because she'd spent so long living in that forest. She had a good sense of time without needing to look outside.

He'd already confirmed that her sense of time was accurate too, so he had no reason to doubt her. It had been a few hours earlier; when lunchtime had arrived, she'd pointed it out just before the butler arrived. Soma had asked her how she'd known, and she'd replied that she'd just had a feeling.

"To think night is here already, though... Time has flown."

"It really has. But we haven't done anything today but read books... It feels like a bit of a waste."

"Mm-hmm... But a good change of pace."

"Indeed. I imagine Aina feels the same."

"She must, after spending the entire day speaking with her father."

As previously mentioned, they'd already eaten lunch, but Aina and Iori hadn't shown up. According to the butler, they'd been unable to stop talking once they'd started. Apparently they'd seemed quite apologetic about it, but Soma and the others weren't so tactless as to make them stop. It was father and daughter's first time alone together in ages; it was only natural that things would turn out that way.

"Well, let's make our way to the dining hall. I imagine Iori and Aina are done talking by now."

"Yes, let's. He may be treating us hospitably, but it would be a shame to make the head butler—Nicolaus, right?—wait for long."

"Mm-hmm... He has a lot to do."

"He did indeed leave shortly after lunch to finish some other preparations."

The three left the library room as they spoke. They hadn't found anything that looked useful in the course of the day, but they hadn't expected to. It wasn't a problem since they'd started with the intent to kill time.

But there had been a wider variety of books than they'd imagined, so it had been fascinating in multiple ways. Soma thought he might stop by again if he had the chance.

Just as the three began to walk toward the dining hall, they bumped into Iori, who was walking in the opposite direction.

"Hey. Funny seeing you here."

"We already planned to go to the dining hall together, so I wouldn't call it funny... Actually, why are you coming this way? Isn't the dining hall over there?"

"Yeah, that's why it's funny. Apparently dinner is gonna take a bit longer. He left a note saying he needs more time to really go all out with it."

"Hmm, is that so..."

"If he went as far as leaving a note, I imagine it'll take more than a little time. We could wait for him, but..."

"We could stay in the library," Sierra suggested.

"That is certainly an option."

"Yeah. Do you have a minute, Soma?"

"Hmm?"

He did have time, but what could Iori want with him now? He didn't recall Iori mentioning any further business they needed to discuss. Maybe Iori had remembered something in the course of his discussion with Aina.

"I don't mind...but what is it that you want this time?"

"Just to have a talk."

"Didn't we talk more than enough yesterday?"

"I thought of something else to talk about. It won't take long. And I don't know if we'll have time after dinner."

"I don't plan to do anything after dinner." It would be too early to go to bed, even if dinner ran somewhat late.

“Don’t you plan to leave early in the morning?”

Soma turned to look directly at Iori. He hadn’t talked to Iori about their plans for the next day yet, but there was one person who could have. “Did Aina tell you that?”

“Yeah. She said since it’s her fault you’re staying late, she wants to make up some of that time.”

“Not her fault...”

“I agree...but she wouldn’t listen if we told her so.”

It was just like Aina to worry about things even if told she didn’t have to. It was both a strength and weakness of hers, but the fact that he accepted that about her was what made them friends.

“I don’t mind, in that case.”

“Thanks. Sorry, you two. I’m borrowing Soma for a bit again.”

“No problem...”

“I understand. We’ll find something to do in the meantime.”

“Yep, go ahead.”

After parting with Sierra and Felicia, Soma followed Iori. They couldn’t sit down and talk right there, so Soma figured Iori was leading him to a room somewhere. And his guess turned out to be correct, but he hadn’t expected the particular room.

“I assumed you were taking us to your room. Why are we in mine?”

“Mine’s too far.”

“Couldn’t you teleport us?”

“I can’t teleport anywhere I want. My room’s not in range.”

“Hmm...” That sounded like an excuse, but Soma wasn’t so eager to go to Iori’s room that he felt the need to argue. If Iori wanted to talk here, he was fine with that. “Understood, I suppose.”

“Sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“Well...lots of stuff.”

“I see...”

If that was what lori said, it was probably best not to push the matter. Soma didn't think there was really a need to apologize...but lori was like Aina in that respect.

“Did you have a proper conversation with Aina?”

“Yeah. Thanks to you.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

lori seemed like a load had been lifted from his shoulders; they really must have talked about a lot. It had been worth spurring him on.

“So what did you want to talk about?”

“Not much, really. Just wanted to thank you again.”

“Why is that?”

“It sounded like you played a big role, based on what I heard from Aina.”

“That is what they call an exaggeration, or perhaps an overestimation.”

“You're probably the only one who thinks that.”

“Hmm...”

Soma disagreed, but he couldn't begrudge a man for thanking him. He would accept it as it was.

“What exactly did you talk about, though?”

“Hard to explain... We kind of went over everything. Actually, it's making me mad to remember... Mind if I punch you?”

“Why? I don't recall doing anything that warrants you punching me.”

“If you're being serious right now, that makes you even worse.”

“In what way?” Soma gave lori a puzzled look, genuinely not understanding the implication. lori only shrugged as if to say there was nothing more he could

say. Really, what did he mean by that?

“I guess this is how you should be. It’d be annoying if you were self-aware about it.”

“Would you mind filling me in on your thought process here?”

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, right, I was going to say, Aina...”

What started then was something between a complaining session and a father bragging about his daughter. Well, while the contents of what he was saying sounded like complaints, he was smiling, so it was probably just bragging.

“To think this is the lori I once knew... People really do change.”

“What’d you say?”

“I was talking to myself. But what you were saying did remind me of something.”

“It did?”

“Yes. I’ve been meaning to ask you about it since I met you, but it slipped my mind.”

It wasn’t really something he should have forgotten, but he’d been carefree after finding his old friend. It would only make the atmosphere weird if he told lori that, however, so he kept it to himself.

“Huh? I thought we went over everything. There’s something else you wanted to bring up?”

“Yes, it’s about Stina...”

As soon as the name left Soma’s mouth, lori’s eyes narrowed. That confirmed Soma’s suspicions. He’d thought they probably had a complicated past together, and he’d been right.

“How do you know that name?”

“Because I met her personally. Didn’t I tell you about meeting a strange girl shortly before coming here and getting involved in a fiasco?”

“Oh... I get it. No wonder it seemed like you already knew about her somehow when she came up.”

Iori seemed calmer about this than Soma had expected, though. He'd thought that at worst, Iori might feel threatened if Stina's true identity was exposed, but it didn't seem like that would be a concern.

"So who is she, exactly? She claimed that she was the Dark Lord's daughter and Aina's older sister."

"Ahh, yeah... I guess if you've met her, you're no longer uninvolved, so I can tell you. Long story short, she wasn't making that up. She's not technically Aina's sister, but she was like a sister to Aina."

"Hmm... I recall Aina saying something similar."

"Did you bring her up to Aina...?"

"No, I only asked her if she had any sisters to make sure. And I didn't ask in a conspicuous way, so I don't think she realized what was going on. It isn't my place to make that call, after all. Do you think I should have told her?"

"Nah, it's no problem that you didn't. It's pretty complicated, I guess."

"So I imagine."

Soma had picked up on that much, which was why he hadn't explicitly mentioned Stina to Aina.

"Hmm... I doubt this, but might she be your child with a mistress? Stina seemed to be older than Aina, so that would certainly complicate things... Or perhaps a child with a former wife? That would certainly make it hard to have her around... The pieces are coming together."

"No, they're not. I'm not blood related to Stina at all."

"So your wife's child from a former marriage...?"

"I'm gonna kick your ass if you don't cut it out."

Soma hadn't made that suggestion seriously, so he shrugged in response. It was true that he had been considering that possibility, however. Judging by the fact that they'd described her as "like" a sister, Stina must have lived with Iori and Aina's family, if only temporarily. There must have been a good reason for that...but they didn't live together now, and there must have been an equally good reason for that. Soma also suspected Stina might be involved in something

shady, and considering that, there weren't many possibilities he could think of...

"Well, you're not on the right track, but you're close. Aina and Stina are blood related, at least."

"Oh? They are? Hmm... Well, you're supposed to be all alone in the world in this life... And she wasn't making up the part about being the Dark Lord's daughter...? Don't tell me... Did you and the former Dark Lord..."

"I just told you I'm not related to her. But that's not too far off... Just like you to hit on that."

"It isn't far off? What do—"

Soma wasn't able to finish asking what Iori meant, because he was interrupted by a loud boom. It sounded as if something had exploded. The two immediately turned to look at each other.

"I don't suppose any construction is being done nearby at this hour."

"Not that I know of. And it's way too disruptive if that's what it is. I'll go complain."

"Hmm... Then I'll come with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Whatever that was, it was far too loud. And while I haven't had the opportunity to demonstrate, I'm rather confident in my skills, so I could be of use if things were to get out of hand."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Iori wasn't just saying that to be agreeable. As was evident from him asking Soma to accompany him this morning, he had some grasp of what Soma was capable of.

Soma smiled wryly and shrugged, because this made it evident that Iori really had come a long way—he was able to do things with ease now that he never could have in the past.

"To think you never even got into a fistfight in the old days."

"Well, I had some experience. I just couldn't be bothered to start anything."

“Oh, is that so? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Not the kind of thing I’d go out of my way to mention.”

“I suppose not. I’d like to hear more about those days the next time we have a chance to talk.”

“You’re gonna jinx it. But...yeah, when we have the chance.”

They were having that kind of exchange because they both had a gut feeling. They could both sense something approaching—something they’d rather not deal with, as lori might describe it. And they could also sense that if they didn’t deal with it now, it would become even more trouble.

“All right... I don’t feel like it, but I guess I’ll get down to business.”

“I concur with you on this. I would have preferred to watch and wait. But so be it.”

The same sound had been repeating, and it even seemed to be getting closer. Soma could only imagine what would happen if they didn’t do something.

There was no time to go get Sierra and Felicia. They had probably noticed these sounds too...and he didn’t need to tell them what to do. They’d built plenty of experience themselves; they would do as they saw best. Soma was just slightly worried about Felicia...but Sierra could back her up.

Soma glanced at lori. While he thought things would be okay based on what he’d heard from lori, his friend still couldn’t hide the concern on his face, and he was probably aware it was showing.

Soma kept his mouth shut about it and shrugged. Worrying even though they knew things would be fine was just what fathers did.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Yeah.”

lori snapped his fingers, and the two were headed to where they thought the source of the sounds was.

15

The range within which Iori could teleport using his own power—or the castle’s—was limited to the interior of the castle, so the two of them headed outdoors on foot.

Soma turned toward where the sounds were coming from and narrowed his eyes. “Judging by the sound, I would say those are coming from beyond the mountains...most likely the northwest.”

“Probably around there, yeah. There’s a forest right there.”

“I see... Then that would be a fitting location.”

It would be difficult to notice anything going on inside the forest and, if one noticed, hard to make out exactly what was going on. The issue with that, however, was that the choice of location was rendered meaningless by these sounds. They were giving away where they were. Only a fool would throw away such an advantage.

“So this must be a diversion, yes?”

“Yeah, that’d make the most sense, but...”

“But there would be no need to carry out a diversion in a place so suited for ambushes. Considering that, it could be that this is their true objective and they simply want us to assume it’s a diversion.”

“Or maybe they’re both diversions and their real goal... Like, it doesn’t matter.”

Soma understood exactly what Iori meant by that. He turned to look toward the direction that was the reason he understood—the northeast. He had a distinct sense that something was amiss that way.

“Their *real* real objective is that way. If they can accomplish something with what they’re doing right now, then that works out in their favor, but even if not, they can slow us down... I would expect them to be in the southeast and

southwest as well, then.”

“Probably, at this rate.”

In fact, there was no way that wasn’t the case. They wouldn’t leave any side uncovered during such an obvious attempt to do something.

“On that note, do you have any idea who may be doing this?”

This was clearly an attack—that had been self-evident for some time now. That was no wonder, given that Iori was a Dark Lord (albeit in name only, according to him), but the reason for and perpetrator of the attack would determine Soma’s next steps.

“If this is your mistress come to elope with you, then I’m sorry to say that not even I know how to resolve this.”

“What, you’re still dragging that joke out?”

“Well, then, jokes aside... What do you think?”

Iori shrugged in response to Soma’s question. That probably wasn’t to say he didn’t know, however. He sighed with an expression of weary acceptance, then opened his mouth. “I guess I do have some idea. The former Dark Lord’s guys are probably the only ones who’d do something like this.”

“Hmm... Are those the people who previously revolted?”

“Yeah...but how do you know about that? There’s a gag law about it.”

“There is? I suppose that makes sense...”

A revolt would be nothing short of a scandal. And on top of that, several of the rebels had gotten away and even stolen treasures. It was only natural that the current Dark Lord would try to hide it.

“Well, the reason I know is simple. Stina told me about it.”

Iori furrowed his brow as soon as that name came up, which seemed to be for a separate reason. His next reaction indicated that he thought it just as strange that Stina knew about it.

“Stina...? Why would she...”

“Hmm? Is it strange that Stina knows about it?”

“Well, yeah. It was about two years ago, after Aina had already left. Stina wasn’t at the castle by then, so she couldn’t have known about it.”

“Oh? She seemed rather knowledgeable, though.”

“I can think of a few possibilities, I guess... Her too...? But then why would she have told you? Or maybe...”

“Thinking about it is all fine and good, but the proper time for that may be later.”

That seemed to remind Iori of the current situation. He paused and let out a breath as if to recenter himself. “True. Well, anyway, I’m pretty sure this is them. Maybe I should say this is *also* them, actually. They did something similar before.”

“Hmm... Attempting the same thing that failed before... Well, I suppose part of it succeeded in a way, so perhaps because of that...”

“Who knows? Some of them did get away, but we got all the major players, so maybe they just don’t have anyone with a brain left. Either way, I figured they’d be back eventually, so this doesn’t really surprise me.”

“On that note... Is *that* one of the ones that got away?” Soma turned his head toward the northeast. That was the area where he’d indicated their true plan was unfolding, and he sensed an ominous presence there. If he was unlucky...actually, even if he wasn’t unlucky, it might prove to be more trouble than the forest god. That wasn’t to say Soma thought he would lose in a fight against it...*if* it was a fair fight. But considering the current situation...

“No, I don’t remember anything like that. Either they joined up since, or maybe they brought that from somewhere else... Doesn’t matter, I guess. I’ll just go over there, so can you take care of the rest?”

“Hmm, I don’t mind...but are you sure?”

“I’m a former hero and current Dark Lord, you know. I’ll figure it out. Can’t make a guest do the hardest work, after all. Not to mention...the reason I stayed here was in case of something like this.”

“Ah, as I surmised.”

Soma had had a feeling that was the case. Iori hadn't seemed surprised that he was being attacked, and it couldn't be a coincidence that they were attacking while his family was away. They must have deliberately waited until Iori's forces were split up, and Iori's family had knowingly gone along with it.

"I suppose there should be no reason to worry about the area behind us."

"Yeah, pretty much. We definitely don't have to worry about the castle, at least. I made the barrier stronger after the last attack. But even then, I couldn't have guaranteed we'd be okay for sure, so it's a good thing you're here."

"Hmm... I certainly can't spare any effort after hearing that. I'll help to my utmost capacity."

Not that Soma hadn't intended to do that from the beginning. But given this chance to put another in his debt, even a friend, he was going to take it. By doing that, he could potentially obtain something he wanted later—something like an ingredient derived from a rare monster.

"I suppose I'll go and shut them up shortly, then. Do you have any requests, such as taking them alive if possible, for example?"

"Not particularly. Not like there's much I'd ask them if you took them alive..." Iori stopped in the middle of speaking and smiled wryly, probably thinking the things he said now were much more unsettling than in the past. Soma knew that for a simple reason: he'd thought the exact same thing at the same time.

But Soma said nothing about that, instead simply shrugging. "Understood. I'll be back soon. Take care."

"Yeah. You too."

After that exchange, Soma dashed off toward the northwest.

†

Going northwest meant going over the mountains. As for how he was going to get there, he was going to go directly across the mountain, of course.

"Hmm... It would be faster to bring them down as I go, but that wouldn't do," he muttered as he rushed over the mountain. He heard something hit a tree behind him, but ignored it as well as the presences nearby and the enmity he

felt emanating toward him.

Those were the monsters that lived on this mountain, of course—its protectors. Soma was definitely an anomaly to them...and apparently not even Iori could tell them what to do. However, killing them would weaken the protection around this area, so Iori had told him to hold off, hence why he was ignoring them as he went.

He could have avoided them by taking a detour, but that would have required going back the way they came and going around. He didn't know what might happen in the time that would take, and it seemed likely that there would be enemies that way as well. Fighting them would take time in itself. That was why he'd decided to take the shortest path.

And that wasn't causing him any issues at the moment. He did have to keep the monsters' locations in mind as he went so that he didn't end up surrounded, but that was it. And while that took a certain amount of effort...

"I can simply add that to the debt I'm owed."

He could just ask for an even better ingredient. No problem at all.

Before much time had passed, he had reached the peak of the mountain. He looked down; the descent appeared to be about the same as the path he'd just come up. After that, there was a forest...and he saw tiny but distinct fires burning within it.

"Yet another mess... And I recall seeing something like this before."

The forest continued up the mountainside. If he let the fires burn, they would reach where he was right now. On top of that, they were quite scattered...and they were increasing in number. With every boom, another one appeared, seemingly too small relative to the sound.

"Good grief... Well, I suppose I already knew this was a diversion."

Soma scanned the presences nearby. There seemed to be about forty to fifty here. They weren't especially strong, but they were scattered every which way, which would certainly make this more work. They seemed to have gone into this expecting to be defeated.

“And I don’t expect that they’ll disperse once I defeat a certain number of them.”

If anything, he felt like they would continue to put up a fight until the very end. That was a good thing in a way, since letting them get away was what led to things like this in the first place, but...

“They seem more determined than expected. That makes me wonder what’s going on where he went...but first, I should take care of this,” Soma muttered, lowering his gaze from the distance to the slope at his feet before beginning to dash down it.

16

The man sighed as he listened to the booming sounds in the distance. When he reflected that it had finally begun, he couldn't help but smile.

Yes, at long last. It had been two years...no, it had been over ten if he counted from before that. Considering that his long-held wish was coming true, it was only natural that he would be in high spirits.

With that in mind, he looked toward the sky, where an even darker black was spreading. That brought a contented smile to his face as he remembered a story his father had passed down to him.

Over a century ago, when the devils and the Dark Lord had been most feared, that had been their color, for it had been the color of the Dark Lord's hair and eyes. It was around that time that people had begun calling them devils; those with black hair or eyes had been ostracized out of fear and banished to the devils, who had used their talents to menace mankind, making black even more dreaded.

But that age had ended in the blink of an eye. A hero summoned from another world had vanquished the Dark Lord. And that hero's hair and eyes had been black, so the color's association with the devils gradually weakened. In place of that fear, the knowledge spread that it represented outstanding talent. Although the Dark Lord, who was thought to have perished, had made a comeback after fifty years, black was no longer synonymous with terror by then. The fact that his power had been nowhere near what it was in his prime only compounded that. The Dark Lord was judged a relic of a bygone past.

Of course, the Dark Lord had gradually regained power since...but black hadn't returned to being their color. When he had completely recovered his power and attempted to strike fear into the hearts of the people, he had been defeated by a hero once more—and this time, the hero had inexplicably announced he was taking over as the Dark Lord, much unlike the previous hero, who had vanished without a trace.

If that had been all, perhaps the man would have obeyed this new self-proclaimed Dark Lord. Power ruled among the devils, and the Dark Lord was no exception; it was logical in a way that the one who defeated the Dark Lord would call himself Dark Lord—if that was the only factor one considered, that is.

But the series of events beginning with the revolt two years ago had made it clear: power was not the only thing a Dark Lord needed. There had been many devils who thought there was something more important than that, and there still were. Like him.

As he thought back on what his father had told him and his own experiences, he sighed again. The deep, thick darkness seemed to threaten to engulf him as he gazed into it. It was at its deepest right now...so he thought that this was the time that suited him best.

“Don’t you agree?”

“Dunno. I don’t really care, so whatever.”

The response came along with the sound of footsteps just after he voiced the question. He looked down, and as he’d suspected, jet black was the color he saw. Iori Kanzaki—the former hero who professed himself the Dark Lord...perhaps better called their nemesis. The man had thought he would show up, so he wasn’t surprised to see him. If anything, he had been anticipating this, including the fact that Iori seemed to have come alone.

The man let out a sigh as if to conceal the smile he felt coming on. “Oh dear, how inhospitable of you. You must know I’ve come a long way just to meet you.”

“At least say that to my face. And I’m not happy to hear that from a random old dude, anyway.”

“Random? How rude. I’m quite sure the two of us have met. Am I not worth remembering in your eyes?”

He saw the other man’s eyes narrow. It was as if he was searching his memory. But he eventually shook his head. “Sorry. Can’t remember you.”

“Is that so... Quite unfortunate. Allow me to remind you, then. My name is Nicholas. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Ooh, a proper introduction, huh? I’ll remember this time. But I doubt we’ll meet again anyway.”

“How harsh. But that is certainly true. You are known as the ‘Dark Lord,’ after all, and I am but a minor character whose name is unknown. If anything, I should say it would be an honor for the Dark Lord to remember my name.” The man—Nicholas—bowed in a superficial display of politeness, but there was a smirk on his face as he lowered it out of view of the other man.

This was a complete farce. Iori couldn’t be so naive as to think he had an ally in this place, in this situation. He’d prolonged this exchange for the purpose of observing Nicholas; the actual content of the conversation didn’t matter to him.

“You just lie with a straight face, huh?”

“What makes you say that? I can attest that I was completely honest in what I said.”

That was true; what he had said had come from the heart. However...

“It would truly be an honor for the Dark Lord himself to remember my name. However...that would only be true of you if you were really the Dark Lord.”

Immediately, several things shot toward Iori from the bushes behind Nicholas and exploded. There were about thirty of them in all—the same as the number of people hiding in those bushes. As each one made an impact, it exploded with a bang. The sounds were different from the ones echoing in the distance, and they had a good amount of force behind them. Despite the small scale...no, because of the small scale, their power was highly concentrated. These disposable magical items could kill a monster in one hit, to say nothing of a human; no normal human could hold their own against so many of them one after the other. If there was any issue...it was where one drew the line of “normal.”

“We... We did it...?! Ha, ha ha... Take that! That’s what you get for claiming to be the Dark Lord! That oughta teach you and all our enemies a lesson...!”

One of the men hiding in the bushes emerged as he shouted those words. It seemed he was rejoicing in their successful ambush. However...

“Our ambush may have succeeded...but success is not the same thing as

being effective.”

“Huh...? What do you...”

“I advise you to be careful. You should hide if you don’t want to be—”

Nicholas stopped in the middle of his sentence when he realized it was too late. At approximately the same moment, he heard a quiet but clear voice.

“Heavenly thunderbolts, I command you to fall.”

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Heroic Blessing (Imitation)*
Draconic Blessing (Imitation) *Dark Lord’s Blessing*
(Imitation): *Magic Thunder Rain.*

The sound came at a delay. Their surroundings were recolored a bright white that shone through his reflexively shut eyelids, and the sound that rumbled through the area a few seconds later was far beyond the ones they had made.

Nicholas covered his ears and waited, then, once it had subsided, opened his eyes, looked around, and sighed. The bushes had all been burnt to a crisp, leaving only black clumps and thirty...somethings. People? They were certainly shaped that way, but a mere breeze would have blown them away without a trace. It was a massacre.

“No holds barred, I see... How utterly cruel.”

“I already gave you mercy, remember? I told you last time, if you show up again, I won’t be so forgiving.”

“I didn’t personally hear you say that,” Nicholas responded with a shrug, narrowing his eyes. He’d expected things to turn out more or less this way, but he hadn’t imagined it would be this dire; eliminating thirty people, each of whom had at least a Low-Grade Skill, was beyond what even Nicholas could do. *Nobody* left on their side would be capable of that. You had to admit, he lived up to the “former hero” title. It was believable that he’d vanquished the Dark Lord on his own.

“Why have you left me unharmed despite that? Is this a display of pity?”

“Of course not. What reason do I have to pity someone I don’t even know? So...what’d you do?”

“Who’s to say? The fault may lie not with me but with you. Perhaps you accidentally left me out of it...but I suppose that isn’t going to fool you, is it?”

It would have made things easier if he’d shown so much as a split second of weakness, but it didn’t look like that was happening. The other man’s eyes were fixed intently on him, not moving even momentarily.

“Not like I’m cocky enough to take my eyes off you when I can sense what you have with you.”

“Ah, yes, I suppose not...”

Nicholas had been letting the energy leak out in order to lure him. Not many people would let that escape their notice, especially not a former hero.

“Well, I suppose if you’ve caught on, there is no more reason to hide it. We’ve already accomplished our goal, after all. So...come out.”

Immediately after Nicholas finished speaking, a pillar of flame shot up next to him. It didn’t feel hot, strangely enough, but even Nicholas could feel that the presence had grown stronger. Despite knowing that it wouldn’t attack him, he couldn’t stop cold sweat from dripping down his skin as the flame compressed, the pillar growing smaller and taking on a distinct shape.

But the other man wasn’t going to simply wait for that to finish.

“Thunderstrike.”

Lightning instantly struck as he had commanded. It was far narrower than the previous strike, but it must have been far higher in power. He’d simply intended for the previous blow to defeat an enemy, but this was a serious blow with no thought of the aftermath. If it had hit Nicholas, he certainly wouldn’t be alive... He wouldn’t even have retained his original shape.

“Tch! What the hell did you just set free...?!”



The former hero clicked his tongue and shot a glare at Nicholas, which was only natural—the lightning he'd brought down had dissipated before touching the thing. It was beyond the level of simple defense—it was as if he had stopped his own attack halfway. And now that he'd clearly sensed that, he'd asked that question.

"I have no obligation to answer that question...and I think you already know the answer regardless."

Nicholas wasn't trying to bluff; he thought the other man must understand without being told. That was clear from him using the words "set free." He must have been aware, at the very least, that this had been sealed away somewhere. That was only natural; things like this weren't just lying around all over the place.

"Do you not want to accept it?"

"...!"

The former hero glared at Nicholas, who returned a sneer. He was truly pleased. And this was the time to press him further.

"I suppose I'll give you the answer. I'm well-known as a generous man, after all. Yes, as you have deduced... This is what is known as the Evil Spirit."

"I knew it... So this is...!"

"Yes. In short, this is your archnemesis."

That was a fact and nothing more. A hero, whether former or current, could never prevail over the Evil Spirit, and he himself must have known that better than anyone. The most he could do would be to run away...but that would be bad news for Nicholas, because then he wouldn't be able to capture the former hero, even using this. That was why he'd lured him out here in the first place.

But Nicholas wasn't worried. He was sure, given the former hero understood the situation, that he wouldn't run away. If he was going to, he already would have...and Nicholas knew exactly why he hadn't. Actually, that was exactly why he'd gone out of his way to use this.

The Evil Spirit was a powerful force, but it couldn't exist in this world on its

own. It was nothing but a spirit; it had no physical form. In order to exert its power on this world, it needed a body as well as a substance that would serve as its core. That body needed to be alive, and it was better if its consciousness was fading; it was said to be ideal if it was in despair.

In other words...

“Dammit... I knew it was possible... I should’ve known from that gut feeling...!” the former hero spat when faced with the entity in human form. He shot the smiling Nicholas a look that could kill, but Nicholas wasn’t afraid in the slightest. As long as he had this, no former hero could pose a problem.

“What did you do to Stina...?!”

“Now, I’m sure she would have wanted this... You *are* her father’s nemesis, after all. And if you have any sympathy for her, the best thing to do, in my opinion, would be to allow her to avenge him.”

As the other man continued to glare yet did nothing more, Nicholas returned a deep, deep smile. Along with the thing at his side, he slowly began to walk toward the former hero, who was moving neither to fight nor to flee.

Stina watched the scene through hazy awareness. Flames writhed around her; they leapt and jumped with her every move. She was looking toward the black-haired, black-eyed man; it was as if she were toying with him. Once the flames enveloped him, though, he would be burned to a crisp, flesh, skin, and bone all alike.

For now, he was dodging and defending against all of them, but the question was how long that would last. Knowing that, however, didn't mean there was anything she could do.

Stina had a general idea of what was going on. She'd been fully conscious right up until the point when she'd been made into the Evil Spirit's vessel. Then, during the process, she'd lost consciousness, but based on that very fact, it wasn't hard to deduce what was happening right now.

It was another story, however, whether deducing that would be of any use. No...she could state definitively that it would be completely useless. That was the plain truth of the matter.

The Evil Spirit had taken over Stina almost completely. She was still capable of thought, but nothing else. She could see, and she could hear, but she had no control over what she sensed; she couldn't voluntarily move her eyes or plug her ears. Was there any meaning to her being in this state? Probably not really. It was simply that she was still alive, so she could think, and she could perceive what reached her awareness.

The Evil Spirit seemed to have a consciousness of its own, but it seemed not to want to share it with her, because she couldn't tell what it was thinking. It also seemed to be following Nicholas's orders...but there was no point thinking about that. It wasn't like she could do anything anyway.

She was in a resigned frame of mind, yes, but how could she not be? There was genuinely nothing she could do; she didn't see any point in continuing to think. Even her stepfather could do nothing more than run back and forth like

that. He didn't seem to have given up yet, based on the looks he shot in her direction from time to time...but if there was anything he could do, he would have done it already. He was just drawing the struggle out. The conclusion was foregone...and Stina wasn't strong enough to put up a fight while knowing that.

Maybe if she'd thought the way Nicholas did, it would have been different. It was true that her stepfather, Iori, the former hero, was someone she should have called a nemesis. If she'd held a one-sided grudge against him, maybe she would have had some feeling other than resignation. Not that that would have helped at all in resolving this.

And in reality, she didn't hold a grudge or anything of the sort, so that meant nothing. Even though he was the man who had killed her father. She'd never thought of him as a nemesis in the first place, really. Not as a devil, not as a daughter.

To make a long story short, Stina was the daughter of the bona fide Dark Lord. Not Iori, but the Dark Lord who Iori had defeated. And because nobody had truly inherited the title of Dark Lord since then, it was accurate to call Stina the daughter of the Dark Lord, not Aina. That was why she'd introduced herself to Soma as such.

All Iori had done was announce he'd taken the position, after all; he was insufficient in multiple ways to truly identify as the Dark Lord. The title of Dark Lord was one that the world itself was meant to bestow. It was a signifier for one who inflicted harm on the world; that was the true meaning of the name.

And that was why those identified as the former Dark Lord's faction didn't recognize Iori as the new Dark Lord. They knew that, and they worshipped the Dark Lord not in spite of it but because of it. Some saw hope in his resistance; some felt envy toward him as they sank into despair; some sensed a certain power in him. Though their reasons differed, the point was that he was a figure who stood in opposition to the world.

In that sense, Iori was the complete opposite. A hero was one who fought alongside the world. Maybe technically alongside mankind, not the world, but if the world perished, then mankind would along with it, so there was little difference. A decisive figure who emerged from within, or perhaps from outside

of, mankind when it was at risk of extinction—a protector of mankind. That was another term for a hero, and that was what a hero's role was meant to be.

And that was why the Evil Spirit was a hero's archnemesis. A hero was a person who exhibited great power against that which opposed the world or humanity, but he or she was restricted from using that power against anyone on the world's side. A hero was powerless against gods, spirits, and any beings of that nature. And the Evil Spirit, being a spirit, was part of the world—was designated as such, technically. Either way, a hero was incapable of resisting the Evil Spirit, whether they were a current or former hero. Even if they had already carried out their duty to defeat the Dark Lord, they had once been a hero nonetheless; the title of “hero” was too weighty to escape as easily as that.

In terms of his fundamental essence, Iori hadn't changed one bit from when he'd been a hero. That was why he could do nothing but dodge the attacks. However, if this was simply the Evil Spirit and nothing more, he should have several ways out of this situation...

“Hmm... You've done nothing but run about. Is something the matter? I would think you of all people would have some strategy against your archnemesis. Are you keeping it hidden? Or perhaps...is it that you can't bring yourself to lift a hand against your daughter, unrelated by blood though she may be?”

“Tch, you cheeky bastard... I would've already if I could. And actually, I thought it was because of Stina too, but I'm getting a feeling there's another reason... That's not *just* the Evil Spirit, is it?”

“Oh my... Impressive of you to notice that. Yes, well, hiding it would accomplish nothing, so I'll tell you. For the core substance in reviving the Evil Spirit, we used a fragment of the Archdevil's power.”

“A power fragment...? Those aren't easy to come by...”

“Yes, I thought the same thing. But I happened to stumble upon a fragment one day... Yes, I just came upon it by the wayside. What a lucky coincidence.”

“Huh...?” Iori's tone sounded less skeptical and more like he wanted to ask what kind of joke that was.

And that was only natural; Stina had had the same thought, listening from the sidelines. She couldn't think of anything that claim could be other than a joke. But he actually seemed to be serious.

"Yes, it's no wonder that you find that hard to believe... I did as well. But all I've told you is true and real. It must be a gift from our god to us, indeed."

"Your god, huh... I had a feeling based on how you talked about it... So an Archdevil worshipper's gotten in there too."

"Gotten in? Oh, no. Most of our brethren are believers."

Stina didn't like acknowledging that, but it was true. The majority of the people in the former Dark Lord's faction worshipped the Archdevil. She'd only discovered that after becoming their boss, and she'd honestly wanted nothing to do with it. That was despite the fact that she'd gathered her father was probably one of them too.

"Well, given that, we were happy to use what we had been so fortunate to receive. But to be frank, it wasn't especially high in quality. So it wasn't useful in raising the spirit's power level...but it seems to have been effective enough on you."

"Yeah, unluckily...!" lori jumped backward to dodge the flames that continued to fly toward him...but his momentum abruptly dissipated at a certain point. He stopped in midair as if he had hit a wall.

That was the barrier around this area. It physically separated the inside and outside, and it was used to prevent any effect from being exerted on the outside area as well as to prevent escape. Nicholas had used it for the latter; more specifically, he was using it to restrict lori's range of movement. It would only remain in working condition for a few seconds if lori tried to break it, but that was enough right now; doing that would create a definite opening, which would be fatal in a battle against the Evil Spirit. Not enough to defeat him right away, of course, but enough to pin him down. And there were plenty of ways to proceed from there.

lori's attacks against the Evil Spirit were completely nullified, after all; they couldn't so much as hurt it. The Archdevil, too, was one of the proper gods of this world; combined with the Evil Spirit, its matchup against a hero was the

very worst against the very best.

While the Evil Spirit was a hero's nemesis, it normally wouldn't completely nullify their attacks. It would have been possible to break through its defenses. That was rendered impossible, however, when the hero's attacks were negated.

And yet Nicholas wasn't letting his guard down. Stina could tell better than anyone, since he was using her; he was projecting ease, but inside, he was constantly wary. He knew exactly what would happen if he gave lori an opening, even now. And that constant attention was what completely eliminated any chance of lori winning. Unless...

"How courageous of you, former hero. Why don't you let her have her revenge already?"

"I'd consider it if that was what Stina wanted...but it doesn't seem like it."

"You say such brave things...but how long can you maintain that bluff?"

At those words, the Evil Spirit possessing Stina's body moved in accordance with Nicholas's will, ignoring Stina's. With a wave of its arm, it conjured a blaze of tremendous heat and drove it toward lori. As he continued to dodge it, unaffected by having to defend against it, he glanced into the distance momentarily.

Nicholas grimaced then; he must have understood what that meant. Stina knew too. That was where the diversions were taking place, and the sounds coming from that direction had decreased in frequency significantly. There was no reason they would deliberately slow down...so that must have meant it was getting increasingly difficult to continue. Someone had gone over there.

They'd thought only lori was left here...but it was possible that there was somebody else. Considering that, it made sense that they'd split into multiple groups and gone to the trouble of creating a diversion, even though it shouldn't have been necessary. They'd explained that the idea was to gain whatever slight advantage they could by distracting lori, but if they'd known someone other than lori was here, it would have been plenty effective as a way to split up his forces. Maybe they hadn't told Stina because they'd suspected her from the beginning. Or maybe what they'd told her really had been their original plan, and they'd changed it at the last minute after discovering someone else was

here.

Either way, that meant one thing. They couldn't know for sure what would happen if this took much longer. The more time they took, the more likely it became that whoever had gone toward the diversion would show up. That was exactly what Stina hoped would happen, of course...but Nicholas wasn't foolish enough to simply allow that.

"I would have preferred not to do this...but I have no choice. I apologize, Stina. But if you begrudge anyone, let it be your stepfather. If only he had resigned himself to his fate, I wouldn't have had to do this."

"Hey, what're you—"

"Astraea. Go."

That was the signal. A clear emotion arose from the Evil Spirit, whose thoughts Stina had been unable to decipher until now. It was joy...and if Stina wasn't mistaken, it was something like a mocking smile.

And then...

Stina screamed wordlessly as pain instantly shot through her entire body.

18

The sheer pain prevented her from immediately comprehending what had happened. Her thoughts were overwhelmed by the sudden rush of it. That was compounded by her being in a state where all she could do was take in information; the second the pain hit, she reflexively attended to that alone, becoming more aware of it than she had to be.

It felt like a sharp blade stabbing her repeatedly in every inch of her body. The shock it gave her was immense, far overshadowing the nevertheless intense fatigue that hit her at the same time. If she'd had physical freedom, she would have writhed and screamed in agony. Or maybe she wouldn't even have had the capacity to remain conscious.

But right now, Stina didn't have the liberty of losing consciousness. To escape from the pain, all she could do was focus on something else and try to block it out, if just a little. And in this state, the only things she could use for that were her eyes and ears.

It was then that Stina finally noticed the change in the environment, and that she understood for the first time what had happened to her.

"Tch... I didn't think the Evil Spirit would lend its power for free...but looks like all the worst conclusions I can jump to are coming true. You're using Stina's life force to fuel it, aren't you...?!"

"Yes, precisely. You've done well to realize that so quickly."

Yes, this pain was the feeling of the Evil Spirit tearing Stina's life force from her. The result of that was the change in the surrounding environment: namely, the inferno blazing to life around them. Before, the Evil Spirit's attacks had been powerful but nowhere near the full potential of a superhuman being; it must have gained the capacity to channel more of that power by taking Stina's life force.

And if she wasn't imagining it, the Evil Spirit's presence was growing

more...present. It was as if it was filling in the parts of Stina it had stolen.

And apparently, she wasn't the only one who perceived that.

"Its presence is getting clearer too... Wait, is it...starting to materialize? Considering what's going on, it must be..."

"Hmm... You can tell. Truly impressive. Yes, it is as you've surmised. By consuming Stina, the Evil Spirit will incarnate in this world. That is the nature of the contract we made."

Stina readily accepted that as the truth, because it made sense of the fatigue assaulting her along with the pain. It was no wonder that having your very existence chipped away would feel like this, she thought almost as if thinking of someone else.

She probably felt that way both because this didn't feel quite real...and because she wanted to escape reality. Based on their conversation, it was easy to imagine what her fate would be, but there was nothing she could do about it, so she couldn't help thinking that way.

"I knew it... And who are you to use my stepdaughter in a contract like that without permission...?!"

"Without permission? Oh, no, you're sorely mistaken. This is exactly what Stina wanted."

"What...? Don't give me that bullshit...!"

"I could never lie to you, sir. That is simply the truth. It was Stina who was collecting the materials to revive the Evil Spirit in the first place, after all. She must have been fully aware this was coming."

Stina couldn't say he was lying about that. She had been collecting the materials like he said, and she'd known about the resurrection ritual to some extent. She'd even surmised that something like this would be necessary.

Moreover...she couldn't truthfully claim that she hadn't had the slightest intention of doing this. If they'd told her past self, before she'd betrayed Nicholas, that she needed to give up her life for them to use the Evil Spirit's power...she couldn't deny the possibility that she would have agreed.

“Tch, damn it... I can’t even deny that, ’cause that’s something that dumb girl would do.”

“It’s only natural that you can’t deny it, as it is indeed true.”

“You should’ve known you didn’t have any obligation to sacrifice yourself, you idiot...!”

While she did think she might have consented to being sacrificed at one point, she had actually long since given up on the idea of going through with this, so she thought Iori’s words a bit harsh. However...she might also argue that she *did* have an obligation.

“No obligation, you claim? But as the daughter of the Dark Lord, should Stina not be the one to sacrifice herself for the sake of vengeance—for our sake?”

“Sure... If that Dark Lord hadn’t decided he didn’t need her and abandoned her.”

That was true. The Dark Lord had abandoned Stina, saying she was unnecessary, that he didn’t need a disappointment like her. Aina had also been called a disappointment for not being able to use magic...but the real disappointment had been Stina. She hadn’t been able to inherit what she needed to as the Dark Lord’s daughter...no, as the Dark Lord.

Iori and her older sister had taken her in after the Dark Lord abandoned her, so she’d managed to live on despite that, but nonetheless...no matter what anyone said, when it came down to it, Stina was the Dark Lord’s daughter. That hadn’t changed. And that was why she thought she had an obligation, a duty. That was also the reason she’d agreed to become leader when the former Dark Lord’s faction had asked her.

No...that was just what she said. Deep down, the truth was she didn’t care. Not if those on her side lost their lives; not if other people’s lives got tangled up in the mess. She didn’t care about anything at all.

It wasn’t that she thought she was an exception. She’d known her turn would come, and she’d had no problem with that. In fact, for a time, she’d even desired it.

But she didn’t now. Not anymore. Just getting involved with *him* had been

enough to make her think about things she didn't need to.

It was too late, though. There was no backing out of this now, no saying she didn't want to die after all. She had to take responsibility for her actions. But giving her body up to the Evil Spirit now probably wasn't the way to do that. If anything, dying here would be getting off too easy. She needed to take proper responsibility for what she'd done.

But it didn't look like that would be possible. She was fully aware that she was heading toward death.

"Well, we have no way of knowing what Stina was thinking, unfortunately."

"You'd only have to ask. Why not try it right now? It'd be simple to just break that contract or whatever."

"That won't be possible. We would have to redo the ceremony from the beginning. I would indeed like to redo it if that were possible, as the Evil Spirit will not be able to manifest itself for long after materializing at this rate... The length of time it can manifest is proportionate to the time it takes to materialize, so although we could immediately use its power if it materialized right away, the length of its manifestation would be shortened. If only you had let yourself go down easily, we wouldn't have had to go through this... Stina must be in terrible pain. How awful."

"Don't try to blame this on me...!"

The fight had continued throughout their conversation. The flames kept leaping forth, and Iori kept dodging them. Their power was several times more than it had been shortly before, but they still didn't seem to be causing Iori much trouble.

After hearing their exchange just now, however, Stina was feeling nervous about that. If what Nicholas said was true, the Evil Spirit's power would grow with time, and when it reached its peak, it would be fully materialized. That meant that it would be fully capable of activity with a physical body, and it also meant Stina's death. Both of those were issues, of course, and natural to be nervous about.

But she was still thinking of it like someone else's problem. Grieving over it

would accomplish nothing, and nobody would hear her. The reason she was continuing to think was to escape the pain, after all. It was still there; she was just thinking of anything else she could to distract herself from it. Thinking about something that made the pain worse would defeat the purpose. Not even her stepfather was able to do anything about this anyway. What good would it do to think about something she couldn't do anything about?

Stina knew that, but she still couldn't let it go, both because letting go wouldn't make the pain go away...and because her stepfather still hadn't given up.

She didn't know how much longer that would last, however. At that very moment, the flames were approaching him, about to cut off the path he was attempting to escape by.

"Tch...! Heavenly thunderbolts, I command you to fall!"

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Heroic Blessing (Imitation)*
Draconic Blessing (Imitation) *Dark Lord's Blessing (Imitation)*: Magic Thunder Rain.

But instantly, Iori stretched an arm to the heavens, and bolts of lightning poured down in response to his words. They pierced the approaching flames and not only eliminated those but reached through them, raining down equally on the possessed Stina and Nicholas.

But that was in vain. Before they reached either one, they dissipated.

"Tch, so the Evil Spirit's affecting you too... And in exactly the same way."

"Oh, might your true intent have been to check whether that was the case? If you had been mistaken, though, I would be a pile of ashes at the moment."

"That's what I was going for, obviously. But I had a feeling it wouldn't work."

Stina had also known Iori was trying to make sure of that. He'd appeared to be aiming at Nicholas periodically. It was probably in part to keep him in check, but mainly to test whether he was really under the Evil Spirit's protection. The Spirit had deflected the attacks each time, but that hadn't been possible with

such a wide-ranged attack, and lori must have detected that, hence why he'd used it.

"After all the effort I've put into hiding it... Well, I suppose that's no longer necessary. I did so in case you realized you had no chance of winning and attempted escape...but I don't imagine you're capable of that any longer."

While lori had appeared to be dodging with ease at the beginning, that impression was almost completely gone. Nicholas seemed to think that if lori tried to make a break for it now, the Evil Spirit would have the upper hand. And its power was steadily increasing.

"If I put even more of Stina's life force into it, I'm sure it could handle you easily...but that would mean putting Stina through further suffering, and you mustn't want that. Frankly, I wish you would stop this futile resistance."

Nicholas wasn't seriously asking lori to stop, of course; he was just trying to buy a little time, and he didn't need much. The Evil Spirit's power was steadily growing, and it would soon be done. There was no need to be concerned about one undetermined variable.

Even Stina thought so...which was why it came completely out of the blue for both of them when lori actually stopped resisting and alighted on the ground.

"Excuse me...? What is the meaning of this?"

"What do you mean? You told me to stop resisting, right? Well, it's true that I can't hold out much longer." lori shrugged, appearing to have completely given up.

Despite that, Nicholas looked at him warily, unable to hide his bewilderment. That was only natural; Stina felt the same way. And she noticed that despite herself, she was actually shocked at this. That surprised her at first, but she quickly hit on the reason, and it wasn't because her stepfather had given up so easily.

In fact, Stina's consciousness was still hazy, so her field of vision was blurred. There were only a few things she could see clearly...and one of those things was the deep black color lit by the flames. That was her stepfather's color...but just now, she'd realized it was also associated with someone else. And when she

searched her mind, she realized she'd been seeing it that way ever since she'd spotted her stepfather.

In other words, Stina had been seeing a certain someone else in her stepfather this whole time...and that realization shocked her. In combination with the current situation, it reminded her of when she'd been saved, and she felt like he'd given up on her now.

Although she was still only thinking to distract herself from the pain, she laughed at her own audacity. This was beyond helping in multiple senses. It was rude to her stepfather...and to *him* too. Anyway, she was the one who'd distanced herself from him. She'd given him that route so that he wouldn't get involved in this.

So he wasn't going to show up. He wasn't going to come save her. She knew that perfectly well. And yet she'd seen him in her stepfather, gotten her hopes up, and disappointed herself. How incompetent of her. In that sense, her stepfather's judgment had been correct.

Her stepfather wasn't the kind of person who should die in a place like this. He could and should have escaped if he really wanted to right now. There was no reason to play along with this charade any longer.

She didn't want to die, of course, and at this rate, she wouldn't be able to take responsibility...but that wouldn't change either way. She knew that better than anyone. Her body couldn't hold out much longer. No matter what she did, she would die, and the Evil Spirit would manifest. It was inevitable. The correct choice, then, was to give up on what she couldn't even struggle against.

And Nicholas seemed to have noticed what was going on too. Although still perplexed, he smiled with an air of ease.

"Hmm... I don't understand the meaning of this, but no matter. Thanks to this, the preparation is complete. Now we can—"

"Man... I thought I might be able to do it, but I'm not up to it. Pretty lame, considering I said I stayed behind in case something like this happened... But I guess I'm not cut out for this kind of thing."

But lori didn't seem to be listening to Nicholas. He didn't even seem to be

paying attention. It was almost as if he was saying his role in this was over.

“So take care of the rest, will you?”

“Excuse me? What are you talking about... No, wait a minute. Who are you talking to...?!”

By the time Nicholas realized those words weren’t meant for him, it was too late. He went to mobilize the Evil Spirit right away, but even that was too late. The raging flames around them had already been slashed apart along with the barrier.

A small silhouette appeared immediately after that. A familiar one. One that shouldn’t have shown up in a place like this.

“Well, I have several things I’d like to say to you...but I suppose I’ll take care of this first.” With his usual fearless air, the figure—Soma—shrugged.

Even if she had been able to move, Stina would still not have been able to do anything more than watch speechlessly.

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After landing next to lori, Soma surveyed the area and sighed quietly. It was in quite an awful state. He could hardly tell what had been here before; all around them was barren ground. He could only tell something had been there because of the lingering burnt smell, which was the sole trace of whatever it was. Then he turned to look at the person who had created this scene and sighed, more loudly this time.

“Doesn’t this mean you’ve done a poor job of parenting, father figure?” Soma addressed the man next to him.

“No argument there. But Aina seems to have grown up pretty well, at least.”

“I feel as if Aina grew up using you as an example of what *not* to do.”

“Yeah... She could’ve for sure.”

“You’re agreeing with that?”

Only once they had gotten that far in their tongue-in-cheek exchange was there a reaction from the other side. It wasn’t from the person Soma had wanted a reaction from, however, but from the strange man standing to the side.

“I see... So this is your friend. I don’t see how you were able to call for rescue...but it’s too late nonetheless. If anything, this gives me one more person to use the Evil Spirit’s power against, which is fortunate—”

“Hmm... May I ask you one question, lori?”

“Wha...”

“What? Something on your mind?”

The man seemed shocked when Soma ignored what he was saying and instead turned to lori, who responded with amusement.

Soma tilted his head in confusion. Their reactions were unexpected. Soma didn’t have any business with this man, so he saw no reason for him to be

surprised or amused that Soma was ignoring him. That didn't really matter, however, so he decided to simply answer lori's question.

"Yes... I came here because I heard that the Evil Spirit was here. Is *that* the Evil Spirit in question?" Soma indicated the thing next to the man. He'd seen the figure before, but its presence felt distinctly different. However... "If it is...I'm honestly disappointed."

"Oh...? Why do you say that?"

"Isn't it simply too weak? And it's called a god? I find that laughable, frankly."

Soma wasn't trying to rile the man up; that was his honest opinion. He genuinely didn't see how something at such a low level could be called a god.

"I thought the same when I encountered that other thing recently... Is it that this world uses the term 'god' lightly? I imagined this thing would have immense power, but it seems not. I thought perhaps I could learn something by observing it, but it doesn't appear to be worth watching at the moment."

"There you go again. I do think the term 'god' gets thrown around a lot...but that thing's nothing to scoff at. I mean, I got screwed by it, so I'll lose face if we don't agree on that."

"Hmm... I'm rather skeptical of that. Were you really trying your best? I won't accuse you of messing around, but..."

"Well, sure, I stopped trying partway through because I didn't think I could win. But I did actually try."

lori must have been telling the truth. There would have been no point in lying about this. That didn't necessarily mean he was telling the whole story, though.

"And I told you, didn't I? I can't use my heroic powers anymore. That was the best I could do right now."

"It seems as if you held up rather well considering that."

It was true that the power Soma sensed from lori was less than that of the Evil Spirit. But if that were truly the case, then lori shouldn't have been able to hold out this long, especially when his attacks were ineffective. It didn't check out.

"Well, I think it's a matter of experience or past skills or whatever. It would've

been an issue if it'd gone straight for me for sure, but its attacks were actually pretty simple. I can handle stuff like that."

"Hmm..."

Soma still wasn't satisfied with that explanation, but he had to take Iori's word for it.

Just as Soma was nodding, another voice rose in agreement from the man who he had been ignoring. Soma had been watching the man and was aware that he had been shivering slightly, but now there was suddenly a smile on his face as he began to speak to them.

"Ah, I see... So that is how it is."

"We weren't talking to him, but he seems to be agreeing... What is going on here?"

"I'd like to ask that myself."

"Oh, no need to continue buying yourselves time. I understand exactly what this is."

"Buying time, you say? I don't understand what you're referring to."

Naturally, Soma was being honest about that, but it seemed to compound the man's misunderstanding. His smile widened and he nodded several more times.

"Yes, yes, I knew you would say so. But I understand. What you did was an empty attempt at intimidation, and you're currently waiting for reinforcements to arrive. Your show of ignoring me, your curious conversation, it's all to buy time. My goodness, you almost had me fooled."

"Hmm... Iori, can you explain what this man is talking about?"

"Well, I think basically he's the kind of guy who twists the facts to make sense to him when he doesn't understand something. No harm done, but no need to humor him either."

"You're continuing to stall, aren't you? You can't fool me anymore. And it doesn't matter to me if one or two others join you, or even more... The Evil Spirit can prevail even then. But...are you sure this is what you want to do?"

“Hmm? What do you mean by that?”

“It’s quite simple. Stina has little time left. Are you sure you want to stall despite that?”

By now, Soma had figured out that this man had a baseless sense of confidence and had come to a mistaken understanding of what Soma was doing, when in reality he wasn’t bluffing in the slightest. Those words seemed strangely credible, however...and they seemed to be true.

“Ah, but I suppose you wouldn’t understand. You must not comprehend what is happening here as of yet. And still you stall... Did you decide on that ahead of time? How cunning...”

“No, I largely understand what’s happening. I was listening, after all.”

“Excuse me...? What do you mean, you were listening? You were the one who went to stop the others, yes? I can’t imagine there were more... So how could you have heard...? No, you must be stalling again... So you haven’t given up yet...”

As the man came to his own understanding, Soma shrugged and sighed. He really had meant exactly what he’d said.

That was because Iori knew a spell to transmit voices to someone else from afar, and he’d been letting Soma listen in on their conversation as he took care of the others. Iori had started using the spell as soon as they’d split up; he must have predicted that this would happen even then. The reason he’d been having an unnecessary conversation with the man, too, was to draw out information for Soma to hear. Maybe it had just been a precaution, but in many ways, he was as shrewd as ever.

If the other man was satisfied with his own explanation, though, then there was no need to tell him that. And also...

“Well, it doesn’t matter to me, and you have no obligation to believe me...but you may regret this. If you don’t act now, then Stina—”

“This is true. I’ll do something about that first of all, then.”

“Huh...? What are you—”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic*
Blessing Absolute Severance *Sword of Pandemonium* Mental
Stillness *Eye of the Void: Demon Slayer III* Neo.



Since he'd been listening, he'd mostly surmised what was going on, so it was simple to handle now that he could see it for himself. In short, Stina was in trouble because this Evil Spirit was stealing her life force. However, that was only possible because of some kind of connection between the two—so if he cut that, then it couldn't do anything more. That was all.

"I-Impossible... Part of the link between Stina and the Evil Spirit is... What did you do?!"

"Hmm... You can tell. Interesting."

To a bystander, it would have looked like Soma had merely swung his sword. He'd thought the man would either misunderstand again or not even notice. Apparently he'd underestimated him. But he had no duty to explain, so he just shrugged.

"Well, I have one...no, two things to say to you. First, a correction. You said 'stalling' before, but I have no intention of that. I am more than capable of taking that thing on alone."

"Th... Then feel free to try. I don't know what you did, but this is the Evil Spirit, which subdued even a hero. No man could possibly defeat it!"

"I haven't gotten to my second point yet, so please don't get ahead of yourself. But I suppose I didn't originally intend to tell you, so it's all right."

Ignoring the fired-up man, Soma looked at the Evil Spirit next to him, which was intently eyeing him. No...he was looking at Stina, who must have been in there deep down.

"Right... Do you remember that I still owe you? Well, even if you don't, I do. This seems to be the perfect time to repay my debts by saving you. And this is my own decision, so I won't be taking complaints about it."

"You dare ignore me again...?! Get him, Astraea...!"

"Well, I've said what I needed to. So let's begin this, and let's get it over with," he muttered, stepping toward the thing advancing on him.

20

Aina looked around and sighed. She saw lushly growing trees, spots on the ground where the earth had been gouged out, and several collapsed figures—not just one or two but twenty of them. It made her wonder what had happened here.

Well, as for the earth and the figures, Aina was responsible for those. She'd heard the sudden booming sound while she'd been in her room thinking about the day to come. She'd been wondering how she would make up for the delay she'd caused when a sound so loud it could have shaken the castle reached her ears.

To be honest, it had crossed her mind that she could just stay put. In addition to Iori, Soma was here. She didn't know what was going on, but she was sure it would be all right with both of them around.

But even with that in mind, she had found herself springing into action. She didn't think she was needed, but still, she wasn't so meek that she'd stay put when she didn't know what was going on.

It would have been mere carelessness to dash out without knowing anything, however. She'd headed outside the castle to seek out whatever information she could find, which was where she'd run into Sierra and Felicia. Apparently they'd also heard the sounds and rushed outside.

Sierra, though, seemed to understand what was going on somewhat. There were people on all sides of the castle, and they were responsible for the sounds. And Iori and Soma had already covered two of the four sides.

That was enough information for them. They decided to split up to take care of the remaining two sides; Aina was put in charge of one of them. Then, as soon as she'd reached the place Sierra had indicated, she'd been attacked and repelled her assailants, resulting in this.

"But I still don't know who these people are...although I have some ideas,"

she muttered.

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup *Nullify Chant: Magic Flame Burst*.

"Wha?!"

When she sent a burst of magic behind her, she heard a boom and a shout. She turned around to see the earth gouged out and a figure lying beside the spot. They'd been trying to attack her from behind. She was able to detect them at such a short distance, especially when they kept trying the same thing over and over.

"Won't they attack me all at once and get this over with?"

She wasn't lazy like her father, but she was getting sick of this. Ever since she'd arrived, they'd been coming at her one by one. It was like they had a set order or something, and she was beginning to tire of it.

And the annoying part was that they weren't strong at all. It wasn't uncommon for them to go down in one hit like that, which was a good thing, but she felt more bored than fortunate.

"Well, that's probably on purpose..."

They were most likely trying to hold Aina back. As she'd discussed with Sierra and Felicia, this was probably a diversion. It wasn't an attempt to defeat them but to wear them down and prevent them from reaching the place where the real action was happening.

"And I'm not worried about that, so it isn't a big problem, but that doesn't make this any less tedious..."

Maybe it would have been better if she could have burned down the forest, but that wasn't an option. She was holding back right now; if she hadn't been, the forest would have been ablaze at the moment. The ground was in bad condition as it was.

"But that's better than burning down the forest... Father would be angry with

me if I did that.”

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup *Nullify Chant: Magic Flame Burst*.

As she thought about that, she sighed and blasted away another one coming at her from behind. That was the twenty-fourth. According to Sierra, there were about forty of them, so at worst, Aina would have to do what she'd already done all over again. That wouldn't exhaust her, but it would take time.

“At worst, this diversion could take longer than their real plan.”

She was sure Soma would do something about that, and she wasn't worried about her father. And she wasn't sure about Felicia, but Sierra was even better at sensing presences than Aina, so she would be able to detect hidden foes if they tried the same thing on her. That meant Aina would probably take the longest out of any of them.

“Well, it's not that I have a problem with being the last one...”

It just didn't put her in a good mood.

Aina was bad at detection magic, though. Even if she'd tried to look for hidden foes, she wouldn't have had any way to find them.

“So it's all up to them...”

She hoped they would start panicking and making mistakes in their haste soon. She doubted that would happen, though...

Just then, she quickly looked around. Something had distinctly shifted in her immediate vicinity. Maybe they'd actually gotten worried and changed course. Assuming each one was no stronger than they'd been so far, she thought she could handle them even if they all attacked at once, but she still tensed out of nervousness.

Focusing so that she could be ready for anything they tried, she prepared to launch a spell at any second...and then, in the next moment, three men tied together with tree branches were unceremoniously tossed in front of her.

“Huh...?”

Oddly enough, Aina and the men vocalized their surprise at the same time. Apparently the men hadn't expected this either; their faces said they had no clue what was going on. And Aina felt the same, but her reaction was different because she'd been prepared to act.

“Flame Burst.”

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Flame Burst.

The instant she reflexively used the spell, the men were engulfed in flames before they could even scream. Their bodies were blown away and rolled across the ground, showing no signs of rising again.

She let out a sigh of relief, furrowing her brow at the same time. “What in the world...?”

“I'm sorry... I seem to have startled you.”

Aina flinched and extended her right hand toward the voice, but when she saw who was emerging from the forest, she slowly lowered it with another sigh.

“And you did it again just now...”

“I-I'm sorry...”

“Well, it's all right. So you're the one who did that, Felicia?”

Felicia nodded. She had a hood over her face as always, but she seemed apologetic.

Aina sighed for a third time. “You don't have to act so guilty. You helped me defeat three of them at once. I'm curious how you did that, though.”

If she remembered correctly, Felicia didn't really have any way of attacking. She'd wanted to come along anyway in case there was some way she could help, and she'd been sent with Sierra, who would be able to protect her while doing other things.

“Yes... Well, I may not have attacking abilities, but I have a trump card.”
Felicia touched a pendant at her neck.

“Oh... Okay, I get it.” Aina had heard about this too, so it made sense now.
“That’s the forest god, right? Didn’t you say you have it sealed in there so you can use some of its power? Was that what that was?”

“Yes... It was, but...”

“You sound kind of unsure...”

“Um, well... I actually meant to capture more people with that... But I restrained the power too much, and that was all I was able to do.”

“You restrained it...? Why?”

“Well, I’m not used to controlling it, so I overdid it...”

In other words, she’d tried to keep the power from going out of control and accidentally stifled it too much. Aina wasn’t the best at keeping her power reined in either, so she understood. And that also made sense of something else.

“So that must have been the loud sound I heard earlier from over there.”

Felicia shrank at Aina’s words, indicating she was right.

Actually, Aina had been hearing all kinds of loud banging and shaking from the direction Felicia and Sierra had gone. She’d assumed the foes were going all out on them...but apparently Felicia had been responsible for that.

“Well, you finished early and managed to get here thanks to that, right? That’s a good thing.”

Part of Aina wished she could have handled this on her own, but she’d just been getting irritated with it, so this was perfect timing.

“Also, I’ve been wondering... How’s Sierra doing?”

Only Felicia was here; there was no sign of Sierra. Aina couldn’t imagine Felicia had come on her own, so she’d thought Sierra would be with her, but...

“Sierra? Um... She said there are a lot left hidden, so she’s going to thin them out...”

“Oh, okay. And you don’t have to look so sorry about it. It helps me out if you finish early.”

Sierra must have understood that. Felicia didn’t seem to, which was only natural, since they hadn’t known each other for very long. Or maybe it was just a matter of her personality.

In any case, it looked like they would be done before too much longer. But in that case, what would they do afterward? Would they head to where Soma and Iori were, or would they return to the castle? It was possible that something was happening there, so going back to check was an option. The head butler hadn’t returned by the time they’d heard the sound, but he probably had by now, and while Aina had heard he was capable of self-defense, she didn’t know how capable. Maybe it would be a good idea to go back and check on him.

“And I doubt I’ll have anything to do if I go to Soma anyway,” Aina concluded as she glanced around, ready to get this over with.

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As the castle came into view, lori narrowed his eyes at it. From here, it really did look worthy to be called a Dark Lord's castle.

"Seeing it like this reminds me of back then...although I was looking from a different direction at that time," he muttered as he continued to walk.

He wasn't here to reminisce about old times. He just couldn't slack off considering that everyone else was doing what they had to do. Even lori had the good judgment to arrive at that conclusion. Especially given that he'd left the other area to Soma.

Yes, lori had left Soma to battle the Evil Spirit and gone back to the castle. There was nothing he would have been able to do there, and there was something he wanted to check on here.

"Sir lori!" Just as lori arrived at the castle, the head butler—Nicolaus—was exiting it. lori wasn't surprised; he'd sensed his presence.

It was immediately apparent that Nicolaus was panicking. He ran up to lori and raised his voice. "What is that sinister presence...?! And where are all the others?!"

"Oh... Supposedly that's the Evil Spirit. And I have no reason to doubt that's what it really is, since my powers didn't work on it."

"The Evil Spirit...?! The very one that even the Dark Lord himself ultimately avoided?!"

"Yep. Soma's fighting it right now. I don't think we have to worry about it. It didn't seem to pose any problem for Soma."

"Is that so..." Nicolaus seemed skeptical of that.

lori, however, genuinely wasn't concerned. While Soma brushed a lot of things off, he wouldn't claim he could do something he wasn't capable of, so given his confidence, lori figured it would be no problem to leave the Evil Spirit

to him.

“And as for the girls, I’m pretty sure they went to take care of the rest.”

“The rest...? Do you mean those in the former Dark Lord’s faction?”

“Yeah. They were causing trouble in all four directions, probably as a diversion. Soma and I took care of two sides, and the girls got the other two.”

“Hmm... Understood. And what brings you here?”

“Well, even with the barrier, I couldn’t be sure they weren’t doing anything here. Have you noticed anything?”

“There seems to be nothing afoot here—at least, nothing within my capability to notice. However, I can’t be entirely confident, as I only returned a couple minutes ago.”

“Got it... I’ll check just to be safe, then. Wouldn’t want anything to happen when they get back.”

“Understood. Allow me to assist.”

“Thanks.”

After reentering the castle along with Nicolaus, Iori headed for the treasure room. That was the place most at risk of something being done to it. He’d strengthened the protection around it, adding a barrier among other things, but he couldn’t be completely certain.

“And after this... Well, let’s check all of the rooms one by one. Gotta be sure there aren’t any traps anywhere.”

“Indeed. On that note, Sir Iori, I have one question for you.”

“What, something on your mind?”

“Yes.”

Iori was still facing forward when he responded to Nicolaus behind him. However, he remained vigilant, conscious of the risk of being attacked even here.

“You seem quite alert to your surroundings. However, are you sure you don’t need to be wary of me?”

Nicolaus's words were punctuated with a boom. The spell he'd unleashed had exploded before his eyes, hitting its target directly. Half of the target scattered upward, and the remaining half slowly fell to the floor.

Nicolaus laughed maniacally as he watched. "Heh, ha ha ha ha...! To think the former hero would go down so easily! I suppose even a former hero is but a human... And this is what happens when he lets his guard down!"

With a warped smirk on his face, Nicolaus kicked the thing, which had been reduced to only its lower half. It flew straight into the wall, splattering against it like a tomato.

"Hmph... Well, this was so easy as to be disappointing, but so be it. Although he had lost his heroic powers, he had immense power nonetheless...but this is all he can do unless he activates it."

Nicolaus huffed and narrowed his eyes at the wall. He stared into space as if remembering something, then huffed again.

"I suppose this makes it worth having pretended to serve him despite the tedium of it all. It must be because I withstood such tedium that our god gave us this opportunity. I never imagined we would have guests at such a time...but that was ultimately optimal. To think he wasted his strength against his own daughter... If not for that, this would never have gone so well," Nicolaus muttered as he began to walk in the opposite of the direction they'd been going.

"This isn't the time for reflection, however. I must move on to the next thing. Not everything has been resolved yet, after all. Despite what the former hero said, I can't imagine the Evil Spirit needs my help...but no, no such hubris. That is exactly what resulted in the Dark Lord being defeated. I'll go to him out of an abundance of caution."

Nicolaus had paused for a moment, but with his direction determined now, he resumed walking.

It was just then that Iori spoke to him. "You're right. Hubris is dangerous. But it looks to me like you have plenty of it right now."

Nicolaus immediately whipped around, shock on his face as he saw Iori

standing there unharmed. “Wha... No... Impossible! Didn’t I just...”



“Kill me? Sorry, the thing you thought you destroyed was just an illusion. Well, I made some adjustments to trick you, so I guess not ‘just’ an illusion.”

Iori had taken the time to do that in the hopes that Nicolaus would start talking once he believed that he’d won. It would have saved Iori the trouble of asking him, but the other man apparently wasn’t *that* stupid.

“An...illusion? But it felt so substantial... Wait, to trick me? Did you...”

“Yeah, I knew you betrayed me... No, I guess it wasn’t exactly betrayal. I noticed you were only pretending to serve me. Well, I didn’t have proof until today, so I mostly kept it in mind as a possibility.”

It had seemed highly likely because the attackers had split their forces into four sides even though they had the Evil Spirit. There would have been no need to do such a thing; it should have been a foregone conclusion that they could subdue Iori if they had the Evil Spirit. Dividing their forces would only be necessary if they were considering the possibility that Iori would join forces with someone else and defeat the Evil Spirit. And if they knew someone else was present, that made Nicolaus a likely suspect. That hadn’t been definitive proof, however, as it was also possible that someone else had been surveilling the castle and had seen Soma’s group arrive.

But Iori had been fully convinced when Nicolaus had referred to the former Dark Lord as simply “the Dark Lord.” Maybe Iori would have assumed it was merely a habit of speech from Nicolaus’s days serving the former Dark Lord if not for the diversions. But it seemed more like Nicolaus was letting his true feelings slip out due to hubris despite claiming he didn’t have any. As Iori had told Soma, he’d had suspicions of Nicolaus from the very beginning that would never have been cleared up no matter what, so perhaps that ultimately meant he’d been going about this the wrong way.

“Well, you’re all like that, including the former Dark Lord. You have this baseless confidence that makes you think you’re better than everyone.”

“We *are*, so why should we not? Shall I prove it to you here and now? Now that you’ve been weakened, if you’ll face me in a fair fight—”

The instant Nicolaus began to do something mid-shout, Iori slammed him to

the ground. There was a dull sound, and a groan rose from Nicolaus's throat.

"Gah...! Impossible... How could you...?!"

"Still full of hubris, huh? I wouldn't underestimate me if I were you. I might be weakened, but I'm still a former hero—and the current Dark Lord."

"Keep his name out of your dirty—"

Nicolaus was interrupted by another impact. He slammed into the wall and coughed up dark red fluid.

"Agh...! Ugh... How did I... How did we...!"

"Give it up. There are some things I want to ask you. If you cooperate, I'll let you off easy."

"You fool... I would never—"

"Hey! What's all this noise?! Is something going on?!"

The voice came with no warning. Iori had been too focused on Nicolaus, apparently; he turned and saw Aina, Sierra, and Felicia wearing looks of shock. He hadn't noticed them approaching at all.

Iori clicked his tongue. He hadn't wanted Aina to see this. To her, Nicolaus was someone who'd taken care of her since she was little. Iori hadn't intended to hide the fact that the butler was on the former Dark Lord's side, but letting her see this would be far more shocking than just telling her the truth. As he wondered momentarily how to fix this, Nicolaus seemed to take it as an opportunity.

"Lady Aina... Please help me! Sir Iori has gone mad and attacked me...!"

"Father? Why are you..." Aina turned a dubious look toward Iori.

Iori clicked his tongue. It would be easy to tell her the truth right now. But how much would that hurt her? And...would she even believe him?

Nicolaus, noticing Iori's hesitation, continued. "Yes... Sir Iori is under the delusion that I am on the former Dark Lord's side... He refuses to accept the truth however I try to convince him, and it has come to this...!"

"Father... Is that true?" Aina eyed Iori intently.

He averted his eyes. It was out of guilt—guilt for hurting Aina all this time. He felt like she'd forgiven him somewhat after they'd talked all day, but that didn't erase the past. As a result, he didn't know what to say. "No... Nicolaus really is on the former Dark Lord's side. That's why I'm doing this."

"Did you hear that, miss...?! Sir Iori won't listen to reason! Please, do whatever you must to stop him...!"

"All right... I get it." Aina nodded.

Iori braced himself. He wasn't going to retaliate against Aina no matter what she did, but Nicolaus would probably take the opportunity to try something, and Iori wasn't going to allow that even if he had to put himself in harm's way. His only concern was that that would ultimately hurt Aina too... He really wasn't good at being a father, he thought to himself.

"Flame Burst."

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Flame Burst.

"Wha?!"

Aina's spell hit Nicolaus with a boom, swallowing him in flames, shocked face and all. When the blaze cleared, all that was left was an unconscious Nicolaus.

Aina snorted at him. "You've done a lot for me, but I'm his daughter, you know. I wouldn't misunderstand the things he does like that."

"That certainly gave me a shock...but yes, of course you would know who was telling the truth, even though he's taken care of you."

"Mm-hmm... Of course."

As Felicia and Sierra commented on the sight, Iori recovered from his speechlessness. Struggling to maintain composure, he spoke up proudly. "That's my daughter."

"Hmph... It was the least I could do." Aina turned away in an attempt to hide her bashfulness.

Iori's mouth curled into a smile at that sight, but he straightened his face right away. He was done here, but not everything was over. Although he still thought he was inadequate as a father, he couldn't afford to lose focus right now.

"All right... Only that way left, then."

"You don't need to worry about it," Aina replied. "Soma's there. You know he's going to wrap things up with sickening neatness."

"That's certainly true."

"Mm-hmm... Can't argue."

Iori agreed with Felicia and Sierra. However...

"I feel like I'll have to punch him after all."

Thinking that that was one thing and this was another, Iori turned toward the direction Soma had gone and narrowed his eyes.

Stina had a strange, indescribable feeling as she watched the scene. The best way to describe it would have been to say that it was like a dream. The dancing flames, the sword leaping about as it cut through them—none of it felt real. While she knew it was her body controlling the flames, it all felt like it was happening to someone else.

And in a way, that was accurate. Although she was still conscious, she couldn't even open or close her eyes. No amount of proximity to the scene, not even being in the body of one of the participants, could make this feel real.

Maybe it would have been better if she could still feel the pain she'd been feeling until shortly before. Not better, exactly, but it would at least have felt more real. But the pain had completely gone away. Even the constant fatigue had faded. There was no longer evidence that this was anything more than a dream.

More problematic than anything was the person she was facing—this familiar boy swinging the sword in his hand and slicing through the flames she unleashed. His jet-black hair fluttered with every swing of his sword, and his jet-black eyes were fixed directly on her. Exactly the scene she'd been imagining until a few minutes ago.

And that was why Stina was sure this was a dream. She must have lost consciousness for some reason...or maybe she was already dead. This wouldn't make sense otherwise, after all. Reality was cruel and pitiless. The world wasn't kind; miracles weren't real. There was only the vast, nonsensical world they called reality.

In that sense, Stina had actually been quite fortunate. Created as a homunculus to serve as a physical vessel for the Dark Lord, she had quickly been determined incapable of that and abandoned after a series of failed tests, then ultimately taken in by her stepfather and allowed to live a normal life. She'd lived more than enough.

And yet things had turned out this way, which was her own fault. She owed Iori a debt for the life he'd given her, but she'd disregarded it out of a mistaken sense of responsibility and ended up messing everything up. That was all. Considering that she'd brought this upon herself, this conclusion was entirely fitting. That was really all there was to it.

So of course help wouldn't come. Someone who shouldn't even be here certainly wouldn't show up, not outside of her wildest fantasies.

"Ha, ha ha ha...! So all that talk was just bluster..."

Just then, she heard the voice. She didn't have to see Nicholas to know it was his, but he wasn't nearby. He'd stepped back, perhaps fearful of Soma. Then he hadn't spoken another word until now, but he seemed to have refocused on the current situation.

He went on with an air of superiority. "You can hold off the Evil Spirit's attacks, but that seems to be all you can do. So, what do you think of our god's sheer power? Do you understand now that it isn't to be looked down on?"

Stina mentally gritted her teeth and let out a sigh, thinking that this really had to be a dream. The Evil Spirit's power was, in fact, amazing. Flames greater than the ones that had been directed at her stepfather were blazing out of control, flying toward Soma all at once. Not even a Special-Grade user could have lived through them, let alone Stina. Despite what Soma and Iori had said, Stina thought the Evil Spirit was worthy of being called a god, and it was impressive that he was cutting all of the flames away.

However, that was all he was doing. He was only slicing the flames that came his way, unable to counter with an attack of his own. That meant the two were evenly matched, hence Nicholas's lack of concern.

But Soma should have been capable of more than that. Stina had never seen Soma going all out, but based on that very fact, she was able to surmise that his true power was unimaginable. He shouldn't have been on equal footing with a foe like this. So if he was, that meant this was a dream.

And even then, Soma couldn't be allowed to win. If he won, he would help Stina. She would be saved. That was the one thing that couldn't happen.

This was already too good to be true, so her reason told her that this was as far as it went. She didn't know if this was a dream or what, but it was probably meant as a message to her not to get her hopes up that she'd be saved, to follow through with her responsibility and die a brutal death...

"Hmm... Yes, I suppose I must admit my assessment was mistaken."

"Yes, yes, of course. To begin with, as you can see, most of Stina's body has been replaced by that of the Evil Spirit. Even an attack that connected could not harm it, and even if it did, that would be tantamount to harming Stina. I don't know if you know Stina, but as a friend of the former hero's, you wouldn't want that, would you? If you understand, then give up—"

"I never imagined that it would be so wildly underwhelming."

"Excuse me...?"

It happened right when he said it. Stina couldn't tell what was going on. She just sensed something flash, and she felt as if it had passed through her right shoulder. Then she felt something strange about her right arm...and something familiar flew through her field of view. If she wasn't seeing things, it was her own arm.

"Wha...?!"

Stina found it slightly amusing that Nicholas was the first to raise his voice at the sight. Not that she was able to voluntarily open her own mouth to shout right now, but it was questionable whether she would have said something first even if she had been able to. After all, while she recognized her arm, she didn't have any particular thoughts about it.

"I-Impossible... What did you just... No, are you out of your mind?! Not only are you fully willing to harm her, you go out of your way to cripple her...! Could it be that you've lost hope of saving her and given up?!"

The words continued to flow from his mouth, quick and panicked. It really was amusing. He was talking as if he were actually being considerate of her wishes—he had been talking that way this whole time, in spite of the fact that he was the one who'd made her do this. It was plainly obvious that he was saying that for the purpose of self-preservation. Of course Soma wouldn't pay it any mind.

Also, Stina was able to think about it like it wasn't happening to her because this still didn't feel real. Even though her arm had been cut off, she couldn't see most of it...and she didn't feel any pain. That only strengthened her conviction that this was a dream. Maybe it wasn't that the Evil Spirit was going to take her over but that Soma was going to kill her, and that could be a kind of salvation in itself, she thought, when...

"Gieeee!"

For a moment, Stina didn't understand who that scream had come from. And just when she came to an understanding, the sight she saw and the sensation she felt made her lose it again.

The voice had come from her own mouth. It was the Evil Spirit's scream. And nothing was amiss about that; even the Evil Spirit must have felt pain when its arm was cut off.

The issue, then, was that it was clutching her right arm with its left hand. Which meant that her right arm—which should have been cut off—was somehow there. And even though Stina should have had no sensation at all, she could feel her right arm being grasped.

"Wha... H-Her arm...?! It was just over there, so how...?!"

Nicholas noticed at a delay and began to make a fuss, but Stina couldn't focus on that at a time like this.

She'd been able to remain detached until now because this hadn't felt real. But now that she had sensation, that wasn't possible anymore. The shock and confusion she should have been feeling this whole time hit her all at once. This was supposed to be a dream. What was going on? Did this mean... No, it couldn't be...

"Yes, there seems to be a good deal of confusion going on...but that doesn't matter. This seems to have gone as intended, and it was worth the wait and see."

"As intended...?! What the hell did you do?!"

"I see you're dropping the polite act. And I did nothing especially difficult. It's apparent that Stina is being possessed by this Evil Spirit, which inherently

means that she's nearly become one with it. However, as long as she hasn't become entirely one with it, something can be done, so all I did was cut the Evil Spirit's arm off. If anything, it was easier to aim for now that they've nearly fused."

"H-How can that be...?!"

"Ah, and the reason the arm I cut off looked nearly identical to Stina's is likely because they were nearly fused. For a moment, I thought I might have made a mistake, but there seems to be no problem."

Soma was saying that as if it were completely normal and nothing to pay any mind to, but of course it wasn't. Nicholas's reaction was the proper one...which made this all the more like Soma.

And based on that, Stina came to a conclusion, though she hadn't yet recovered from her confusion. She couldn't possibly imagine something so nonsensical herself. Which meant...while this was unbelievable, it apparently wasn't a dream but something happening in real life.

Just then, there was a loud bellow from the Evil Spirit, as if to say it wasn't giving up. As her right arm hung there loosely, the spirit aimed a sharp glare at Soma. Its will to fight hadn't weakened but grown even stronger. Its look even contained resentment, and the flames around them grew more vigorous in response.

Strangely, Stina was able to perceive those things clearly. Before, she hadn't been able to sense the Evil Spirit's will...but maybe she could now because it had a definite understanding of this too—an understanding that the boy before them was easily capable of ending even the Evil Spirit's life.

"Hmm... I'm glad to see you're spirited, but I don't intend to play along with you any longer. I'm also curious about what's going on back at the castle. So I'll take this opportunity to end this."

As he said that, Soma didn't assume a fighting stance; he only stared at them. And that alone sent a chill through them—through the Evil Spirit. Now that they were nearly fused, Stina could sense its immense power in her skin, but it was frightened from just a look. What kind of nonsense was this?

But it didn't withdraw, perhaps out of pride. It roared, summoning flames far greater and hotter than any it had before, and flung them all toward him at once...

"Flash."

That was the end. Stina couldn't tell what had happened, just that there had been a flash of light and something had passed through her neck.

And in the next moment, just as all of the flames flickered out, the Evil Spirit's head was flying through the air.

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Iori sighed as he took in the scene. The earth was gouged out and scattered everywhere as if there had been an explosion; the trees were snapped as if something had crushed them, and several had chilling slash marks in them. He'd heard the gist of what had happened here, but...

"She went overboard again. I mean, from what I heard, she didn't have to do this much. I know she said she's not good at holding back, but still... Who'd she get that from?" he said with a shrug as he looked around.

This was preferable to having corpses laying about, though. The fact that that was the first thing that crossed his mind told him either he'd gotten pretty jaded or he'd gotten accustomed to this world...but it was a bit late to notice that, especially considering that he called himself the Dark Lord.

"The Dark Lord, huh..."

When he thought of that, he couldn't help but think back to what had happened the day before, since he'd only just heard about it. What had happened right after Soma had defeated the Evil Spirit.

A day had already gone by since the former Dark Lord's faction attacked. Iori had come here—taken a detour away from the castle entrance to this area off to the side—because he'd heard that the girls had engaged in battle here the day before.

"This, too, will work out in the Dark Lord's favor, huh?" he muttered, looking past the castle toward where Soma had fought the Evil Spirit the day before.

Those had been the last words of the man called Nicholas. Soma hadn't killed him; it had been closer to suicide. They couldn't determine that it was for sure because he had simply dropped dead the instant Soma had defeated the Evil Spirit. According to Soma, it wasn't suicide...but Iori had an idea of what was going on.

"Nicholas must have had a contract with the Evil Spirit too."

But unlike Stina, he'd personally desired that. He'd voluntarily offered his life to the Evil Spirit. That was why he himself had died when it had been defeated.

"Those people aren't afraid to do things like that, after all."

They behaved as if they didn't believe in the value of life. Not even the value of their own lives. That was how most of the Archdevil's worshippers were...and that was why Iori had a deep distaste for them.

"Tch..." He clicked his tongue when another scene crossed his mind. He turned to look toward the castle, narrowing his eyes. "Do they practice using the same lines or something?"

He'd actually heard the phrase "This will work out in the Dark Lord's favor" the night before, when he'd been trying to get information out of Nicolaus. Just then, the Evil Spirit's presence had vanished. Iori had realized that Soma had successfully defeated it, and Nicolaus must have known the same thing. With those final words, he had taken his own life. There hadn't been time to stop him; he must have manifested magic inside his own body, tearing it apart from within. By the time Iori had gotten close, it was already over. His only good fortune was that the girls had been at a distance. He didn't know how much consolation that was, however.

"Well, that aside, the Dark Lord's favor, huh... I wouldn't be surprised if people like that chose death over giving out more information than they had to, but..."

The timing bothered him. Nicolaus hadn't chosen death upon waking but upon realizing that the Evil Spirit had been defeated. True, there certainly hadn't been any moving ahead for him after that, but if he'd wanted to avoid talking, he should have done it immediately after he'd woken up. At that point, he couldn't have known when he would be interrogated, so if he was really trying to avoid that, he should have been the type not to hesitate to end his life.

"And it wasn't just Nicolaus either..."

He was thinking of the ones the girls had defeated. They'd apparently captured them alive and kept them in one place, but when Iori had gone to check on them later, they had all been dead. According to the girls, some of them had still been awake when they'd been captured...so it was highly likely

that they'd also died when they realized the Evil Spirit had been defeated. Nobody had been there when it had happened, so nobody had heard them talk about it being in the Dark Lord's favor...but he was sure they'd said it.

"And in that case, that opens up another possibility... Actually, it's possible it's just as they say."

In other words, it was possible that the deaths of Nicolaus and the others benefited the Dark Lord in some way. Not Iori, of course; the former Dark Lord. He'd already been defeated by Iori...but as Iori had told Soma, he didn't think he'd truly been subdued. He'd already come back once, so it would be no wonder if he did so again.

"I can't imagine how, but maybe he's using their deaths to achieve that. Maybe the Evil Spirit's too."

That probably hadn't been their original objective, however. Things had ended this way thanks to Soma being there, but if he hadn't been, Iori would most likely have been killed. He did have a trump card of sorts, but it was fifty-fifty whether it would have worked against the Evil Spirit, and even if it had worked, it wouldn't have been enough to defeat the spirit. He'd gotten really lucky this time.

"Well, that means using the Evil Spirit or whatever was only their second-best plan. They made it so whether I'm killed or the Evil Spirit gets defeated, it benefits the Dark Lord. That's just like them. What a nasty plan."

In any case, he was certain they had utilized the Evil Spirit's death for something or other. That was why he'd come here—to search for clues about that. If the Dark Lord was involved, then Iori couldn't ignore it. Even if it didn't involve him...no, especially if it didn't. It would be carelessness on Iori's part. Or maybe there was nothing he could do about it, but that didn't mean he could be so shrewd as to feign ignorance.

"But it's not looking like I'm going to find any clues, even if there are some. Well, I guess I couldn't have expected anyone to predict this... Nobody was hurt, and that alone's too good to be true," he muttered with a sigh, turning back toward the castle. He narrowed his eyes as he thought of who was inside. "Maybe I could've learned something if I'd asked Stina...but no helping that."

There was no point talking about things he couldn't do. He knew that perfectly well.

The Evil Spirit possessing Stina had been destroyed by Soma. However, destroying it hadn't brought back the parts of Stina that it had stolen—about eighty percent of her being. That had been more than enough of a loss to be fatal. She hadn't lost anything physically, so she hadn't appeared any different, but her mana had significantly decreased—as had her presence itself, seemingly. She was definitely still there, but very faintly; it felt as if she might fade away any second. In any case, she wasn't her normal self, and it would have been natural for her to die. And she definitely would have if she'd been a normal human.

“Stina ended up a vessel for the Evil Spirit because she *isn't* normal...but she also survived thanks to it. Ironical. But...all that means is that she didn't die.”

She still wasn't capable of speech, let alone walking. There was no way of knowing how long it would take for her to talk again...or if she ever would. Could he really say it was a good thing that she was alive at all?

“I'll have to hold her accountable too... Ugh.”

While he hadn't heard it from her personally, he was pretty sure she was involved with the former Dark Lord's faction. He didn't know how deeply, but since she'd ultimately ended up in that position, he had to make sure she took responsibility.

But there was nothing he could do if she couldn't talk. If she could speak, he could have struck some kind of plea bargain in exchange for information about her allies...

Just then, he remembered... “Right, Soma said something weird as he was leaving, didn't he?”

Soma's group was no longer at the castle. After a brief dispute, they'd left this morning for Soma's hometown. Iori had gone straight from seeing them off to this place. And as they'd left...

“Didn't he say... ‘Stina said she has something to talk to you about’?”

Iori had let that slide in the midst of his surprise at finding out Soma was Klaus

and Sophia's son...but what had Soma meant by that? He'd said it as if he'd spoken with Stina.

Well, lori could just go see Stina later. He'd been planning to regardless.

"Actually, maybe I should go now. Doesn't look like I'll find anything here."

He glanced around and sighed. Continuing here would only be a waste of time. Although it wouldn't be right to leave this place like this, there was nothing he could do about it, so it would be more meaningful to wrap things up quickly.

"All right... Time to go back," he said as he began to move away...then glanced behind him.

In the direction he looked was the Duchy of Neumond in the Kingdom of Ladius... What a lucky coincidence, he thought. Or maybe that wasn't a coincidence either...but it didn't matter to lori either way.

"You must have it rough yourself, huh? Well, good luck," he muttered, turning forward once again and heading back toward the castle.

†

"Oh?" Soma stopped walking momentarily when he thought he heard someone call out to him. But when he turned around, nobody was there.

Aina turned around to look at him. "What? Is something wrong?"

"No... It seems to be my mind playing tricks on me," he said with a shrug. He looked around again, but nothing was amiss. There was no sign of any monsters—just the vast, tranquil scenery.

"I see the aftermath of yesterday's events didn't reach this area," he muttered as he resumed walking. Of course, that was because he'd seen what the mountains had looked like when he'd left the castle. He could no longer see the mountains from here, but if he could have, the marks on them would have been clearly visible; that was how major the damage was.

"Of course not, since we didn't see anything on the way here! And I couldn't do that if I tried 'cause I'm not you! But I did go a little overboard..."

"You call that a little... Soma's influence?" Sierra asked.

“True, that wouldn’t usually be called a little,” Felicia agreed. “That was clearly overdoing it. But...I’m not one to talk.”

“Huh? Um... But it is a little, isn’t it? I mean, it’s not *that* bad...”

“She doesn’t realize it herself... Whatever will we do with her?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you!”

As they chatted, Aina led the way ahead. Their trip was smooth sailing at the moment. But that was to be expected, as not much time had passed since they’d departed from the castle. They couldn’t have run into *that* many problems.

If their travels went well, they would reach the academy much earlier than planned thanks to Aina’s presence. They had plenty of time left, even taking into account the events in the previous town and their stop at the castle. There wouldn’t have been a problem if they’d stayed at the castle for a few more days, but...

“Are you sure you want to leave today?” Soma asked Aina. “You could have stayed on your own. You must not have had nearly enough time to talk to Stina.”

“I can’t argue with that, but didn’t I tell you this morning? I can always find another chance to talk to her. It can wait till next time. And without me, you would be cutting it close on time. I could get there before you even if I stopped for a few days.”

“Hmm... This is true, but it also sparks a certain competitiveness in me.”

“Same... Wanna try?” Sierra said.

“Try if you want, but I’m going with Aina,” Felicia replied. “I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you anyway.”

“No, having such a handicap would be... Actually, in that case, doesn’t Aina need the handicap more than us?”

“You’re just being rude now,” Aina chastised Soma.

“But...it’s true too.”

“Yes, it’s true. I shouldn’t use this too much, after all.” Felicia held her hand against her neck. It wasn’t visible externally, but there was a plain necklace there.

Soma narrowed his eyes as if looking at it, but he couldn’t sense anything. “Hmm... On that note, you used it successfully, right?”

“Yes, thanks to you. I didn’t have any issues with it.”

“Mm-hmm... Looked fine to me too.”

“Is that so... It should be all right, then.”

Aina seemed to realize just then what they were discussing. Her head tilted slightly as if she was questioning something, then she nodded to herself. “Oh, that thing? Yeah, it seemed to work fine. But it startled me.”

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s nothing for you to apologize for, Felicia. You may have done that, but if you go back far enough, it’s all Soma’s fault.”

“Mm-hmm... Accurate.”

“Well, it may be accurate...but I can’t comprehend why you would say that as if it’s common sense.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying that after all this time.”

That made it even less comprehensible, but he kept his mouth shut and simply shrugged. He didn’t need to be told who was more at fault. But it was another story whether he could accept what she said. Everyone here seemed to be having fun, however. In that case, there was no problem.

When they’d left the elves’ forest, Soma had never imagined they would go to the Dark Lord’s castle. A lot had happened before and after that, and he hadn’t been sure how it would turn out, but in the end, he thought they’d settled on a not-so-bad ending. Although they hadn’t reached the academy yet, to say nothing of his hometown, he was certain that if anything happened, it would work out. No matter what.

Suddenly, something Stina had told him came to mind. He hoped it was just her mind playing tricks on her...but if not, what should he do?

“Well... It changes nothing in the end.”

Yes, it would all work out. So even with an uneasiness in his heart, Soma stepped forward as he always did. As he thought of what was to come, he moved forward with his friends nonetheless.



The Legacy of the Greats

When she knocked on the door, a dull sound reverberated through the space. It wasn't very loud, as she'd knocked lightly, but it was enough to alert the person inside that she'd arrived. However, even after she'd waited a few moments, there was no response. She tried three more times before giving up. With a sigh, she reached for the handle.

"What is it you need? As you can see, I am occupied—oh? So it is you, Sylvia. Is something the matter?"

Sylvia sighed again when she saw the headmaster. Not that she hadn't expected her to be there—rather, because this was exactly what she'd expected. When she saw the questioning look on her face, she sighed for a third time.

"What do you mean, is something the matter? And you don't look very busy to me..."

"What could you possibly mean? I am extremely busy—busy resting," the headmaster said as she lay sprawled out on her desk.

Sylvia couldn't even sigh at that. If anything, she sort of respected that the headmaster could be so shameless. And, well, Sylvia knew she wasn't exactly slacking off.

Just as she was reflecting on that, she heard two more voices from behind her.

"Ah, this brings back memories. I haven't seen you like this since back then."

"It certainly does. And honestly, I'd prefer not to remember those times."

"Hmm...? You must be..."

"Oh...!" Sylvia turned toward the man and woman behind her, the two she had guided to this place.

"Sophia, Klaus. What brings you here?" the headmaster asked.

“Sylvia invited us, of course,” Sophia replied. “Well, technically, we were only invited as far as the area before this one, and we entered this room without permission.”

“I-I’m sorry...! I meant to call right away!”

“No, no need to apologize,” Klaus said. “I can tell you’re not at fault with one look at her.”

“Hmm...? I have the distinct sense that the blame is being laid on me...”

“Because I’m laying it on you.”

“Well, yes, there is only one person we could blame.”

Sylvia let out a sigh of relief as she listened to the three talk. They didn’t seem to actually be mad. Although she realized they already knew each other through her father and none of them was the type to be angry over having to wait a few minutes, that was one thing. She couldn’t help but worry. Yes, she was royalty, but they were the greats who had saved the kingdom. Their status was equal to...no, even higher than hers. And above all, Sylvia, as someone who’d been born in this kingdom, looked up to them. With that in mind, she couldn’t help but overthink this.

“I have no idea why you would blame me...but such strange things are bound to occur. Nevertheless, what brings the two of you here?”

“Like I just said, the fact that Sylvia invited us.”

“That’s not what she’s asking. But you probably know that.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“You suppose...?”

“Well, you should have been informed beforehand, right...?”

They wouldn’t just have shown up unannounced. They’d sent someone ahead of them to let the headmaster know they were coming.

“That person should have told you what we were here for... But if you’re surprised to see us at all, then that must mean...”

“The message never reached you.”

“I would call that a failure of communication...but seeing you like this, I can’t imagine it was a problem with the messenger.”

“Oh? That sounds almost as if you are saying I am at fault.”

“Because I am.”

“What else would he be saying, really?”

The headmaster tilted her head as if to say she had no earthly idea what they were talking about, but there was actually no way it wasn’t her fault. She’d probably been told and just let the information go in one ear and out the other.

“Hmm... Yes, I recall someone saying something to me earlier, now that you mention it. I deemed it unimportant information at the time and disregarded it.”

“Don’t do that... What if it had been a matter that needed your attention? And I think it’s important enough that these two are visiting...” As Sylvia wondered what the headmaster would have done if this had been an emergency, she heard a laugh from behind her. She turned and saw Sophia faintly smiling. Wondering whether she’d said something funny, she tilted her head in puzzlement.

Sophia noticed and shook her head as if to say no. “Oh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you, Sylvia. I was just thinking this really brings back memories.”

“It does?”

“Yes... This definitely reminds me of back then,” Klaus agreed.

“Although it was you who complained back then.”

“Didn’t you too?”

“Yes... You and I complained, Camilla laughed like she was fed up with us, and Alexis laughed as if to say we just had to put up with it... I miss those times.”

“I certainly remember that...but it was not long enough ago to remember fondly,” the headmaster said.

“Maybe not for you. It is for us, though.”

“Yep... Very eventful times.”

“Hmm... This is a difficult feeling for me to relate to.”

Hearing that reminded Sylvia that the headmaster wasn't human.



She didn't know what race the headmaster belonged to, but that was probably why she didn't look any older than Sylvia. It must have been because she belonged to a long-lived race that she didn't feel the nostalgia Sophia and Klaus did. Maybe another member of a long-lived race, like Sierra, would have understood.

That wasn't what Sylvia was really curious about, though. It was the names Sophia had mentioned. If she was looking back on a time involving those people, then...

"Um... When you say 'back then,' do you mean when you took part in the campaign against the Dark Lord?"

Sophia. Klaus. Camilla. And Alexis, Sylvia's father and the first king of this nation. That would have been the only time the four of them had all been together that was long enough ago to look back on fondly. It was also well-known that the headmaster had helped them; apparently she had the position of headmaster here because of her achievements then. Considering what she'd achieved, she ordinarily would have been given an even higher position, but supposedly she'd insisted on this one. In any case...

"Yes, that would be it... She was just like this back then."

"She was," Klaus agreed. "She said she was busy whenever we invited her to important meetings, and whenever we asked her for anything, she just shot back that it didn't concern her. It was hard to know how to handle her."

"Well, I was only assisting," the headmaster argued. "It would not have been right for me to act in the foreground more than necessary. And nevertheless, I take issue with being compared to the person I was at that time. In the present, I am responsible in carrying out my duties as headmaster."

"While looking like that?" Klaus asked dubiously.

"That's hard to believe," Sophia said with amusement.

"Oh, well, that's actually true," Sylvia said.

In spite of how the headmaster looked at the moment, she was actually doing her work. But while people had initially thought she was so focused she

couldn't spare any time to hear others out, the instructors had been complaining that even when she was taking a break, she refused any requests, claiming to be busy. However, she did a perfect job as headmaster and took time to listen to anything that was truly necessary, so complaining was as far as they could go.

"I see... I can believe that," said Sophia. "That was how she was back then."

"Yeah," said Klaus. "She never participated in meetings, but sometimes she would pop in on a whim, give us a crucial plan or piece of information, and leave."

"As you were the ones who stepped forth and stood in the center," the headmaster said.

"That was what she said then too. We didn't know how to treat her after the war because of that."

"I never wanted to be honored. It was not for that purpose that I assisted."

"But how else would we represent it?"

"Your achievements were clear, after all. I'd go as far as to say nobody would have objected to crowning you queen."

"I would have been the first to object to that. This station is enough for me; it is what I wish."

"Wow... I never knew," Sylvia said, nodding in awe.

The headmaster looked at her quizzically. "You appear quite fascinated by this exchange."

"Of course I'm interested to hear from the greats themselves about what happened."

Anyone in this kingdom would have been interested, not only Sylvia. There would have been crowds of adults wanting to hear, to say nothing of children.

"One of those greats is a member of your immediate family. Couldn't you ask him as much as you want?" Klaus asked.

"Oh, well... My father doesn't tell me much when I ask. He just looks off into

the distance with a bitter smile and says things were tough back then.”

“I guess it makes sense he’d react like that.”

“Well, he must have been pushed around more than any of us,” said the headmaster. “Perhaps it could be said that he is still in the midst of being pushed around.”

“Yes... Things must be tough for him even now.”

“Yeah. And that probably isn’t the only reason he doesn’t want to talk about those times.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Sylvia looked at the three with confusion.

They all exchanged glances. Sylvia couldn’t tell what they’d communicated in that instant, but there must have been some mutual understanding. She felt all three sets of eyes turn to her at once, and she instinctively straightened her posture, sensing that they were about to tell her something important.

“Yes... You are, after all, a member of the royal family, so perhaps it’s time for you to learn.”

“It might be a bit early.”

“There should be no problem with it. None that I can see, at the very least.”

“All right... If you say so, I suppose.”

“Um... What are you talking about?”

“Where should we start... Well, we should probably start at the beginning. Do you know the reason we went on that journey?”

“The reason? Of course...” Sylvia had mentioned it previously. It had been a campaign to subdue the Dark Lord.

“Yes, that certainly is what they call it nowadays.”

“Nowadays...?”

“Yeah. It was called a campaign to subdue the Dark Lord when we set off for Veritas, but that wasn’t our objective...or maybe that isn’t the best way to put it.”

“It was one of our objectives, although more like something they wanted us to do if we had the chance.”

“Their goal was to send a team off under that pretext,” the headmaster explained. “And that was only natural considering the circumstances; otherwise, neighboring powers would have ganged up on Veritas.”

“What do you mean...?” Sylvia had heard that Veritas had been a very powerful kingdom at the time. It had had many enemies to match, of course, but even so, it had been strong enough to act as the driving force behind the campaign against the Dark Lord. What kind of situation would put a kingdom like that at risk of being ganged up on?

“To make a long story short, our mission was to capture the Otherworld Hero...either that, or kill him.”

“Huh...?!”

“I can understand why you’d have that reaction.”

“In the stories they tell these days, the heroes set off on their journey along with the campaign, after all. And as there was minimal time between the two, it may not be entirely inaccurate to say as much.”

“But technically, we went after them.”

What had actually happened, then? This was so different from what Sylvia had heard that she could only listen speechlessly.

“Well, it was an entirely natural decision considering that Veritas felt it necessary to save face. In fact, it would have presented problems if they had not.”

“Yes, given that the main members of the campaign were injured in the attack on the castle. That and Veritas’s hero being abducted.”

“What...? What in the world happened?”

“Of course, that’s only what happened in terms of the bare facts. Not the truth of what led up to it.”

“And even those bare facts were only given to a few people, including those involved in the campaign. However, there were others who obtained that

information independently, such as myself,” said the headmaster.

“Independently? I thought you helped with the campaign...”

“I began assisting in the middle.”

“You did...?”

That was another point that contradicted what Sylvia had learned. She’d been told the headmaster had helped since the very beginning of the campaign.

“It simply suited them better to claim as much. I was unwilling to assist in the beginning.”

“And the same probably would’ve gone for me,” Klaus said. “I didn’t even doubt what they told me at the time... I hardly even thought about it, really. All I thought about was swinging my sword around. I suppose that hasn’t changed.”

“I can’t talk either,” Sophia added. “I doubted their word somewhat, but to be honest, I didn’t think it would be a big surprise for that hero to do that.”

“Huh... Were you on bad terms?” Sylvia asked.

“Oh, no. We hadn’t even talked to him. We’d only seen him. But that gave us all the more reason to dislike him.”

“Yeah... In Veritas, the more people knew about him, the more they tended to hate him.”

“Well, that is his own fault. I may have disliked him if I had not known.”

If the headmaster would go so far as to say that, the hero must have done something outrageous. Something bad enough that people wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d attacked the castle.

“What happened...or what did he do?”

“Nothing, actually.”

“People hated him that much even though he didn’t do anything...?”

“He did literally *nothing*, you see. He didn’t do anything from the second he was summoned into our world. He didn’t even train.”

“After he was assigned servants and provided a room, he simply shut himself away. It is said that he only emerged for meals.”

“Wow...”

Sylvia supposed it was natural that people would hate him in that case. There had probably been good reasons that it had turned out that way, but she had heard the Dark Lord had been making life hard at the time. With the hero, their lifeline in that situation, behaving like that, she didn't think she would have taken it calmly either.

“Well, it also suited Veritas that he behaved in that way. They were the ones who instructed him not to do anything.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Basically that he was in their way. They couldn't eliminate him, however, so they told him to stay out of things.”

“After they went to the trouble of summoning him...?”

“They didn't mean for it to succeed. But it did.”

“Oh, I see... But wait, Headmaster, didn't you just say it was his own fault?”

“Although Veritas told him that, I did not think he would agree. They went to the trouble of summoning him from another world, after all; they did not choose their target at random. The ritual to summon a hero necessarily summons one with power and spirit worthy of being called heroic.”

“So that's why you called it his fault... But he had power worthy of being called heroic, right? So I'd think he must have had some reason for doing that...”

“I wonder...”

“This is him we're talking about, after all.”

“It is entirely possible that after being told he had no responsibilities, he decided he preferred to do nothing at all out of sheer laziness.”

They didn't seem to be joking. Sylvia only knew as much about the hero's character as she'd heard in stories... What kind of person had he really been?

“Well, whatever his motive, Veritas certainly took it as a positive for them. Making light of him like that ultimately came back to bite them, however.”

“You mean the attack on the castle? Was there some reason that happened?”

“I don’t know. There must have been some reason, but he never told me the details.”

“What we know is that the attack happened the night before the campaign was set to leave during an important discussion about what they were going to do the next day. The main members of the campaign were badly injured as a result, and Veritas’s hero was abducted. In other words, all we know is what Veritas explained to us. But we also asked him and he confirmed it, so we know it’s true.”

“Well, he would never have done something that took so much effort without a reason, so he must have had a good one.”

“I see... Oh, and I’ve been wondering, what do you mean when you say the main members of the campaign were injured? My understanding was that you went after them right away.” Sylvia had considered that maybe they had been instantly healed with magic, but there would have been no need to mention it in that case, even if it was true.

“Oh, that’s simple. We weren’t originally the main members.”

“We were chosen, but we weren’t in the main roles,” Klaus clarified. “We were support...actually, more like lackeys, at least in terms of how they treated us.”

“Both of you...?”

This had been over a decade ago, so they couldn’t have been stronger than they were now, but Sylvia found it hard to believe that Sophia and Klaus had been treated that way. But it didn’t seem to be that simple; the three of them narrowed their eyes as if thinking back on it, then smiled wryly.

“Well, they were certainly less experienced than they are now, but it would be more accurate to say that it was because they were in Veritas,” the headmaster said.

“Yeah... Honestly, we were at a level where we couldn’t say for sure we would win against them in a fight, but we also couldn’t say we’d lose. We were in that position regardless because we were in Veritas.”

“You needed something more than power to move up in the ranks there,” Sophia explained. “And it was largely because we were in such a position that we ended up going after them. After all, this was an opponent who all of the main members together couldn’t defeat, and we’d been instructed to assassinate him.”

“While capture was included as a possibility, the reality was that we could not capture such a man. Our only real choice was assassination...and that was on paper, really. Our true purpose must have been to ascertain where he was and perhaps buy some time if possible.”

“How could they...” Sylvia wondered how a kingdom that would do such a thing could become a superpower...but maybe doing such things was exactly how. If that was what it took to become a superpower, then she would prefer that this kingdom not become one.

“Do not worry; Veritas was the only one that brazenly did such things. They may be beneficial in the short term, but they only result in long-term losses.”

“I don’t know if it’s directly related to that, but Veritas is having trouble right now,” Klaus agreed.

“They certainly are. Well, that would be how we ended up going after him. We half understood that we were being used...but we were young.”

“Yeah... We weren’t able to think about anything else at the time. The only one with doubts was probably Alexis.”

“My father?”

“Yes, Alexis was the only one who seemed suspicious from the beginning. When we left the capital, he couldn’t stop thinking about why he would suddenly have done such a thing.”

“Yeah. We might not have made up with him if not for Alexis.”

“Didn’t you say my father went through a lot of struggles?”

“He certainly had a difficult time, but more than half of it was due to his conscientious nature. In other words, he often took on unnecessary burdens because he overthought things.”

“But that helped us a lot.”

“Yes, as you said, we might not have been able to make up with the hero if Alexis hadn’t been with us.”

“Really?” To be honest, in the stories Sylvia had heard about the campaign, the members had been a team from the very beginning, so it didn’t make sense to her that they’d been opposed at one point. There was no reason to make such a thing up, so it was probably true, but...

“You wouldn’t normally think to be friendly toward someone showing abject malice toward you, right? Although it may be that we just *thought* it was malice.”

“Yeah, he didn’t really have it out for us...or maybe I should say it’s questionable how much he actually concerned himself with us.”

“Such was the sheer difference in their power levels.”

“And my father did something about that...?”

“Is that hard to believe?” Klaus asked.

“Honestly, yes... I know my father is amazing, but when I think of him, I think of someone who’s always smiling.”

“Ah... Well, that is no wonder. That is a habit of his—perhaps the secret of his success,” said the headmaster.

“In what way?”

“Not many are capable of being cruel toward someone who comes to them with a smile. At least, it almost never leaves a bad impression. That was his way of attempting to reduce the struggles he took on.”

“Hearing it put that way makes me feel bad for Alexis.”

“Maybe we should apologize... We’re seeing him soon anyway.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Sophia and Klaus spoke of him so casually that it was hard to imagine they were talking about a king, but that was the nature of their relationship with him. Just as Sylvia was feeling slightly envious, the headmaster spoke up as if she'd remembered something.

"We have digressed, but what brought you here in the first place? You must not have come simply for fun."

"Oh, that's right, we didn't mention yet. Or I guess you weren't listening when we sent the message."

"Yes, right. Well, it isn't entirely mistaken to say we came for fun. We have business in the capital, and we decided to come visit in our free time around that."

"I remember you saying that."

That was what Sylvia had told the headmaster, in fact. And that was why she'd brushed it off as unimportant.

"Hmm... It is quite rare to see both of you here. What brings you to the capital? I cannot imagine that you would be talking at such length if it were an emergency, so it must not be that. Oh, and you do not have to tell me if you cannot, of course."

"Oh, I can leave if you can't talk with me here..." While she wanted to hear what they had to say next, Sylvia was supposed to just be a messenger. She should leave if she was hindering them.

However, Sophia shook her head. "Oh, no need. It wouldn't be a problem if anyone heard our reason for coming here."

"Well, it's basically to ask for advice, after all. And also just to take a break."

"Advice... I see. This must also be why you are going to see Alexis."

"Yes. As I'm sure you're aware, there's chaos in Veritas at the moment. We wanted to take this opportunity to discuss our future plans."

"We aren't thinking of trying to seize the opportunity to destroy Veritas; we don't want to go that far," Klaus clarified. "But we might be able to make it harder for them to interfere with us going forward."

"It would also be an option to watch and wait, but it is certainly rational to discuss the possibility. What do you mean by a 'break,' however?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

"We don't get enough rest, so we were told to take this chance. Also to get some rare alone time."

Klaus said that with a sour face; it didn't look to Sylvia like he was unhappy so much as embarrassed. Sophia also had her face turned away. When Sylvia saw this, it made sense to her that her father had said these two could be awkward in some ways.

The headmaster was also smirking as if she'd come to an understanding. "Yes... I understand. You could have simply gone sightseeing instead of coming to a place like this... However, this is just like you."

"Oh, hush... It's none of your business."

"And we also came to spend some time with family, but..."

"Oh..." The headmaster averted her eyes now, seeming to grasp what Klaus meant by that. Sylvia found herself looking down too.

"Well, on the topic of Soma, I must inform you..."

"It's all right. He's gone on another adventure of some sort, hasn't he? I can guess that based on the lack of communication and his not being here."

"That's just like Soma. Maybe he's a lot like *him* in that way."

"Yes, maybe so, now that you mention it. In fact, they have a lot of similarities, don't they?"

"Ah, perhaps they do."

The three of them were nodding in agreement, but Sylvia, who wasn't in on this, could only cock her head in puzzlement. She had an idea of who they were referring to, however. "Do you mean..."

"Ah, indeed, I believe it is as you suspect. We are referring to the same man we were discussing previously—Iori Kanzaki."

"I thought so... But are they really that alike?"

A great hero she'd been hearing about since she was little and her friend Soma from school—it was hard for Sylvia to imagine that they were similar. It wasn't that she didn't think Soma was good enough to be a great, of course; he'd saved her time and time again, so he already was a kind of hero to her. But maybe because she was so familiar with Soma, she found it hard to juxtapose him with a hero who had saved the kingdom...no, the entire world.

“Yes, well... To be honest, their personalities are complete opposites.”

“Yeah. Iori was lazier...actually, the laziest person ever.”

“Huh? He was?”

Although that was the exact opposite of what Sylvia had expected to hear, Sophia and Klaus didn't seem to be kidding.

The headmaster also nodded. “Indeed. His motto was ‘I can't be bothered.’ He spent the majority of his time lounging about.”

“Yes... I'll never forget the sight of him when we first caught up to him.”

“Well, all of us thought he was an impostor sent to trap us, after all.”

“What did you see...?” Sylvia asked, but Sophia and Klaus met eyes, then shook their heads. Apparently they couldn't talk about it...or maybe preferred not to.

“I have heard about it...and it would be best not to press for details,” the headmaster said.

“Let's just say that it wouldn't be good for your education. We all hated him after that, in fact.”

“Wait, you didn't make up right away?”

“No, not at all. We watched and waited the first time, then immediately started fighting the second time. It was only the third time that we spoke at all, and that ultimately turned into a fight too.”

“Although it's questionable whether we can call it a fight. He never attacked us once.”

“True... And after that, we got stubborn and started underestimating him. It

was the next time that we were reminded that he really is a hero.”

“What happened...?”

“It was simple. There was a monster that we thought all of us might finally be able to beat if we worked together, and he took it down in one hit. I wasn’t able to accept that fact at first, though.”

“It couldn’t be helped. I wasn’t able to accept it right away either.”

So basically, someone they’d begun to think wasn’t worthy to be called a hero had displayed power that really was heroic before their very eyes. It certainly made sense that they wouldn’t have been able to accept that right away.

“Only Alexis accepted it immediately. And Camilla was quick too.”

“Camilla did say all that matters to her is what she sees with her own eyes, didn’t she? That’s just like her. And I don’t think Alexis ever really had doubts about that.”

“It was also because he served as a shield, unlike you two. He saw it from a different perspective.”

“And it was thanks to Alexis that we were able to make amends little by little... Anyway, his personality was completely unlike Soma’s. It’s just that they both seem so...how do I put it...collected.”

“Yeah. It’s hard to describe, but I think anyone who knew both of them would understand.”

“Indeed... And while their facial features are dissimilar, it could be said that their distinguishing traits are alike.”

“What traits...? Oh, you mean their hair and eye colors? Yes, that’s true.”

They must have meant their black hair and black eyes. Those were certainly rare, so maybe they gave a similar impression.

As Sylvia thought about that, Klaus muttered with his eyes narrowing as if in reminiscence, “Black hair and eyes, huh...”

“What about them?”

“I was just thinking how his daughter didn’t get those from him.”

“Oh, that’s true... Well, Soma didn’t inherit ours either.”

“Hair and eye colors are determined by various factors, after all. It is precisely because he inherited those from you that he has them.”

As Sylvia listened to the three talk, she was suddenly reminded of something. Something they’d casually mentioned, something that she’d been wondering about for a while...

“Um... I’ve always wondered, is Aina...?”

Aina’s full name was Aina Kanzaki. Ever since Sylvia had heard that, she’d wondered whether she was related to Iori Kanzaki. Probably everyone who heard her name had wondered the same thing, really. Sylvia had never asked because she hadn’t known if it was okay to ask; she didn’t want to be nosy when Aina had never brought it up herself. But she was still curious.

“Ah, of course you would be curious,” Sophia said.

“Yes, especially as someone who lives in this kingdom.”

“Why are all three of you looking at me?” the headmaster asked.

“Um... I thought maybe you might tell me.”

“Sound judgment,” Sophia said. “There are many things we simply can’t talk about even if we know, not even to you.”

“And she would be subject to the least restrictions in that regard.”

“How very presumptuous of you to say, when there cannot be many things you are unable to tell the princess.”

Sophia and Klaus shrugged in response to the headmaster, indicating that was probably true. But apparently that wasn’t the whole story.

“True, maybe it wouldn’t actually be a problem. But given even the slightest possibility it could be, we can’t speak of it lightly, especially given the person we’re dealing with.”

“And there’s no guarantee that we even know.”

“Listen to yourselves. In the past, the two of you would have simply answered her question.”

“You were the one who taught us why that’s a bad thing. We’re not stupid enough to make the same mistake over and over.”

“So this is thanks to you.”

“My goodness,” the headmaster said with a sigh. “Well, it is not a secret, so it should be fine. As you must have surmised from our exchange, it is as you think.”

“You mean...”

“Indeed. Aina is Iori’s daughter. Specifically, Iori’s daughter with *her*.”

“Her...?”

Naturally, she would have to have a mother as well as a father, so of course there would be a “her” too. However, Sylvia didn’t see why it was necessary to emphasize that point.

But then, unexpectedly, Sophia and Klaus both reacted to that statement.

“I wondered if that might be the case... So it’s true.”

“She’s the two of theirs.”

“Although I have not confirmed with them personally, there can be no doubt it is true.”

The three of them seemed to have reached a mutual understanding, but Sylvia could only cock her head in confusion. That seemed to tip them off that they hadn’t explained enough. Sophia and Klaus shrugged, and the headmaster, seeing that, spoke up out of necessity.

“There is one more person in this story whom we have yet to mention. Like Iori, she does not currently live in Ladius. And she is one of the central figures, though she hardly comes up in conversation.”

“That’s to be expected, seeing as we had little to no contact with her before we joined forces.”

“Right... We were just underlings, so to speak, so we didn’t interact with her even when we were at the castle.”

“Do you mean the hero of Veritas?”

“Yes, that would be her.”

So Aina was the daughter of the two heroes. Sylvia was a daughter of one of the greats herself, and Soma was also the son of two of them. This nonetheless surprised Sylvia, both because these were the *heroes* themselves and because both of them were said to have gone missing. Yet she went to school with the daughter of these supposedly missing heroes. Anybody would have been surprised to hear that; anybody in this country, at least.

She immediately accepted it, however, because she knew just how much talent Aina had. She knew Aina worked very hard in addition to her natural talent, of course, but that was one thing and this was another.

This also brought up questions, however. As she’d remembered previously, the two heroes were currently considered missing, and Ladius was supposed to still be searching for them, given that they were two of the greats who had saved the kingdom. But if Aina was their daughter, they should have been able to ask her where they were.

“Well, it is complicated,” the headmaster said with a shrug as if she’d read Sylvia’s mind.

They must have known about Aina for a while, so there must have been a good reason they hadn’t taken that action. Or maybe they actually had and Sylvia just didn’t know about it...but in that case, there must have been an equally good reason she hadn’t been told. Even then, though, she couldn’t help but want to know, given that this was about her friend’s parents.

“Speaking of which, about Veritas’s hero—Beatrice, right? She hasn’t come up in conversation much so far. What was she like? I’ve heard her name but not what she did or what kind of person she was...”

“That would make sense. And it’s because of what you just said.”

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t that she was inferior in any way; she did more than well enough in her role. She was a true member of our team and worthy of being called a great,” Sophia said. “However...”

“Ultimately, she occupies the role of the hero of Veritas,” the headmaster

said. "That is why no one permitted her achievements to be in the forefront, least of all us."

"She played a large role, but that was likely to be seen as an achievement on Veritas's part, and that would have been bad for Ladius's formation as a country."

"The main reason we founded this country is that the people there had been suffering. We couldn't let it seem like Veritas had resolved that themselves."

"In fact, Beatrice is quite well-known in Veritas. But there is no longer any need for concern now that Ladius has been officially recognized as a nation."

"Okay... I get it."

Reality couldn't match up to ideals. Sometimes you had to forsake the few for the sake of the many, and Beatrice must have been one of those few. Sylvia was in no place to speak on that. It had probably been necessary, and Klaus and Sophia must have felt worse about it than anyone. They weren't allowed to express how proud they were of one of their companions. That must have hurt more than Sylvia could know.

However, bringing that up wouldn't accomplish anything, so she spoke of something else.

"So what kind of person was Beatrice? It shouldn't be a problem to talk about it here, right?"

"Yes...but where should we start?" Sophia mused.

"Right... She was complicated in her own ways."

"Hmm... Well, perhaps it would be easiest to begin with the role she was given, though that may not be the most interesting part."

"No, I'd love to hear about that. I've been wanting to know."

Sylvia wasn't just saying that to be polite; she was genuinely interested. This was a chance for her to hear from the greats themselves about the other hero that she hadn't been told about before.

"Really? Then I'll start there...but her given role wasn't especially large. It consisted of a few things, but the main part was that if not for her, we probably

wouldn't have been able to team up."

"Do you mean Beatrice was a mediator for you...?"

"Maybe in a sense, but probably not in the way you're thinking."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"If anyone was the mediator, it would have been Alexis," the headmaster said.

"Yes. What Beatrice did was give us the opportunity to see that maybe we could work together...or actually, to see that maybe we were mistaken."

"Right. All I thought about was swinging my sword, but even I started to feel like something was amiss the third time we crossed paths."

"The time we exchanged some words?"

"That's right. Good memory."

That conversation must have made him feel like something was amiss, then. As Sylvia wondered what kind of conversation it had been, Klaus continued as if he'd read her mind.

"Well, it wasn't much of a conversation. It was more of a suggestion. We just told her that if she was being forced to come along with him, she could come with us."

"But she shot us down. I remember exactly what she said: 'I'm with him of my own volition.'"

"It could not have been that you did not expect to be rejected," the headmaster said.

"No, but we didn't think she would turn us down so frankly. Or maybe it was the strength of her conviction that surprised us."

"Yes... The Beatrice we knew seemed quite passive, like she just went with the flow."

"Even though she was chosen as a hero by Veritas?"

"If anything, especially because of that. The environment she was placed in could not have been called good even for politeness's sake."

Sylvia had no clue what the headmaster meant by that, but she didn't seem to be kidding or making it up. She could tell by the pained looks on Sophia and Klaus's faces.

"Yes. It's hard to imagine what it was like for her, but...she was chosen as a hero, yet not treated well despite being called one. Perhaps I should frankly say she was treated poorly. I think even we received better treatment."

"People hated her, after all. No... Maybe 'hate' doesn't sum it up."

"Indeed. She was the object of a complex blend of emotions—hatred, awe, and fear."

"Was that because she was powerful enough to be chosen as a hero...?"
Sylvia asked.

"No... I won't say that wasn't part of it, but it would have been the case regardless."

"Yes. Since before she was chosen as a hero...since her birth, even, people had held negative feelings toward her."

"There was many a rumor circulating about her. People said that cursed blood ran in her veins, or that she was actually the daughter of the Dark Lord."

"I remember hearing people say that she was meant to be killed at birth. No, that may have been a fact, not simply a rumor."

"Really...?"

Sylvia knew very little about this figure called Beatrice. She only knew that she had been around the same age as the Otherworld Hero, that she'd had very strong magic, and that she had always been with the Otherworld Hero. She didn't even know what Beatrice had done in Veritas. She'd never imagined her environment would have been so harsh.

"Well, that must be hard to understand without knowing what things were like at the time," Klaus said.

"I don't imagine they teach about it nowadays."

"It is currently treated as a sort of taboo."

“What do you mean...?”

“It may sound like silly superstition now, but it was taken as common sense at the time.”

“It was because of her hair and eyes.”

“You mean...they were both black?”

“Indeed. The belief has been eradicated now, but until approximately ten years ago, the people of Veritas saw black as an inauspicious color.”

“You know that the being known as the Dark Lord has resurfaced several times in the past and tormented people, don’t you?” Sophia asked.

“Yes... I learned that in history.”

The first appearance of the Dark Lord had been over a century ago, and a hero from another world had defeated him that time. However, he had reappeared fifty years later. Some said that the Dark Lord had been resurrected, others that the second one was the first one’s son; the details were unclear. What they knew for sure was that that Dark Lord had been defeated as well. But then a third one had appeared and once again been defeated by a hero summoned from another world...

“And all of the Dark Lords had black hair and eyes.”

“The first Dark Lord in particular did a lot of harm, so it was around that time that the bias against the color black originated.”

“Although it gradually declined in other areas, it remained deeply rooted in Veritas’s culture. However, it was ultimately a hero with black hair and eyes who set forth to defeat the Dark Lord, which resulted in the belief being dismissed as superstition and disappearing over the past ten years or so.”

“But like she said, it was common sense at the time, so people were cruel to Beatrice.”

“If they hadn’t known about her powerful magic, she would’ve been killed... That was just how much people feared black.”

“Wow, really...? But wait, didn’t the hero from another world have black hair and eyes too? Was he all right?”

“If I had to say, he was not,” the headmaster said. “However, he was called a hero from the very beginning...”

“He was given the cold shoulder, but people never did anything more than look from afar.”

“I’m sure that was related to why people hated him. The fact that he did nothing only compounded it.”

“I see...”

Sylvia hadn’t known about this. It was obvious in this day and age that black being an unlucky color was just a superstition. Maybe there was no point in teaching about that anymore because nobody would ever believe it.

“So if things were still that way now, then Soma would have had a hard time too.”

“Indeed. However, knowing him, I am sure the obstacle would not have proved too great.”

“True...”

“Well, Beatrice was chosen as a hero despite the circumstances, so people often said things. I never saw her talk back, though. Whenever people treated her unfairly, she just submitted. That was why I was so surprised then.”

“Yeah. And that’s what made us rethink things.”

“However, it is not as if they reconciled immediately.”

“That couldn’t have been helped... We had our doubts, of course, but we, too, were born and raised in Veritas. We couldn’t accept it right away.”

“That’s also because of how we are. Looking back, I bet Alexis was already thinking about making amends by that point.”

“Well, people like Alexis are rare. I believe the two of you are open-minded enough, seeing as you were persuaded to change your minds,” the headmaster said to Sophia and Klaus.

“I wonder... I think it was entirely possible that things wouldn’t have gone that way. It took seeing the devastation here to open our eyes.”

Sylvia had heard about this. The campaign to defeat the Dark Lord had gone through the land that was now Ladius on their way to the Devils' Woods, learned of the devastation happening to the people there, and done as much as they could to solve the problem.

"But exactly what kind of devastation do you mean...?"

"I think that's one thing you're better off not knowing," Klaus said.

"Yes... Let's just say that it was enough to open our eyes despite our remaining faith in Veritas at the time."

"Well, all of Veritas's worst deeds were concentrated there," the headmaster said. "Although it is important that you, as a member of the royal family, know the full truth and not only a whitewashed version, I believe that this is one of those things that are unnecessary to know."

That only made Sylvia more curious, but it sounded like something that wouldn't benefit her to hear. Maybe she should be grateful that she didn't have to hear about it.

"And I think it was Alexis who said that we couldn't stand by when we saw that."

"Yeah. It was just after that that we started working together with them."

"Was it Alexis who created the opportunity for you to talk?" the headmaster asked.

"Yes, and we apologized for what we'd done in the past."

"They forgave us immediately. They said it wasn't a big deal, and I could tell right away they meant that. We didn't constitute anything to be concerned about in their eyes."

"I believe it had to do with their personalities in addition to the power differential."

So that was how the group Sylvia knew as the campaign to defeat the Dark Lord had formed. She found her heart pounding in anticipation of learning more. But while she hadn't meant to let it show on her face, apparently Sophia and Klaus could tell. There were wry smiles on their faces.

“I hate to disappoint you, but there isn’t much interesting to talk about after that.”

“Or maybe it’s better to say we don’t remember it well enough. We were too focused on the task at hand.”

“Well, it was not as simple as fighting and defeating a monster, after all.”

“We thought that would be enough at first.”

“I guess it was once again Alexis who said that wouldn’t get to the root of the problem.”

“Indeed; the underlying cause was Veritas itself.”

The headmaster must have meant that while defeating the enemy would have been a temporary solution, the problem wouldn’t really have been solved until they did something about Veritas. But taking down Veritas as a country would have been...

“Well, maybe if you put your mind to it...?”

“To be frank, simply destroying Veritas was entirely possible. However, that was *all* that was possible.”

“We discussed that at one point, in fact. The issue was what to do after destroying Veritas.”

“Only fairy tales end happily ever after once you defeat the bad guy. If we’d destroyed Veritas, it would just have left a bunch of people in anarchy with no country to live in. That would have made the problem worse.”

“And that’s why you decided to found Ladius, right?”

Sylvia could see how they might not remember the details about a time like that.

“Well, it was half out of defiance,” the headmaster said. “It was I who made the suggestion, but I never dared to imagine that they would act on it.”

“I don’t think we would have if you’d suggested it now.”

“Right. That was how young and shortsighted we were. It’s only in hindsight that we can call it a good idea.”

But they'd helped a lot of people doing that. Sylvia might not even have been born if not for that. She couldn't fault their shortsightedness.

"Given that, I think you may be more knowledgeable about what came afterward than we are," Sophia said to Sylvia.

"Indeed," the headmaster agreed. "Although what they say about you before you joined forces has been altered for the sake of optics, the events after that are mostly untouched, so it is entirely possible that Sylvia has learned more than you remember."

"Right... It's been a long time, after all. The records are probably more reliable than our memories."

Sylvia wanted to hear more from them anyway, but it didn't seem like they intended to continue. Maybe that was all they could tell her right now.

"I see... Oh, I'm curious after hearing all of that... What was Iori like as a person?"

Since she'd mainly heard about what had happened before they'd joined forces, she still didn't have a good idea of what the Otherworld Hero, Iori, was like. She'd thought maybe they wouldn't want to answer, but it seemed like there was no problem. Klaus pondered it for a moment, then began to speak.

"Right... It might be hard to explain what he was like in words."

"Yes... Well, the first word that comes to mind is 'lazy.' But that isn't to say he was unconscientious."

"He simply declined to do anything unnecessary. When something came up, he took action, although he complained about it."

"But it's not that it was just a front either. There were times when he complained but didn't actually do anything."

"Well, those must have been times when it was unnecessary for him to act," the headmaster said. "Things were ultimately all right without his intervention, after all."

"It certainly would have been easier if he'd helped. But he was using his name as a hero, so it's true that he didn't need to act for things to work out."

“Was he a difficult person, then?”

“Not exactly. Maybe I should say he was a hard person to get a grasp of. Though it could just be that we couldn’t understand him.”

“Yes... That may have been the case. While we could certainly have called him a friend, I honestly couldn’t say I understood him as a person.”

“Really...?”

It was true that friends couldn’t understand each other completely, but these were the greats who had saved the kingdom. She’d thought they would have a deeper relationship than that considering what they’d been capable of.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not that we weren’t close.”

“Yes; we fully trusted him, at least.”

“Hmm... I would think this would be easy for you to understand. Even if you fully trust Soma, understanding him would be another story, yes?” the headmaster asked Sylvia.

“Oh... I get it. So that’s how it was.”

She understood when it was put like that. And they *had* said Iori was similar to Soma, so maybe they were alike in that respect too.

“Well, we also don’t know how he felt about us.”

“Right... I’d like to think he trusted us too, but I don’t know for sure.”

“You trusted him and thought of him as a friend, right? I think he must have trusted you too, then...”

“I want to believe that, of course. But if I could say so for sure, I wouldn’t say I understood him.”

“Yes... Even in the end, we never really knew what we were to him.”

“If anything, is it not because of the way things ended that you cannot know?”

“The way things ended...?”

Sylvia knew they hadn’t been together until the end, given that he was still

missing to this day. But she'd thought they'd ultimately parted ways amicably. Sophia, Klaus, and Camilla had stayed to look after the new kingdom, and the two heroes had left to see about the Dark Lord. At least, that was what Sylvia had heard.

"Well, the ending has been dramatized to an extent. However, that is not to say that they parted ways on bad terms."

"It'd be more accurate to say we didn't have the chance to be on bad terms," Klaus said. "They just disappeared one day."

"It was just as things were wrapping up and we had a chance to catch our breath. And thanks to that, things were fine with Ladius, but..."

"You were rather panicked," the headmaster said. "As was natural after the sudden disappearance of the two heroes."

"They really didn't say goodbye at all...?"

"They didn't act any differently the day before, and they didn't even leave a note. Because of that, we thought they'd gone out on an errand or something."

"So it actually took a while for us to panic, like Hildegard said. It was only when lunchtime came around and they hadn't come back that we really started to worry."

"Although you were unable to act on those concerns."

"Because you were too busy?"

Their work hadn't ended once they'd founded the kingdom; that was just the beginning. What Sophia had called a chance to catch their breath was nothing more than a brief respite. They wouldn't have had time to go out looking for someone, not even a hero.

"Well, that was one reason, but the fundamental reason was that we didn't know what to do. The most obvious conclusion was that they'd gone where the Dark Lord was, but it was also possible that that wasn't true."

"There was the possibility that they'd been abducted, but who could possibly abduct those two?"

"And there was also the question of what you should do if they had indeed

gone where the Dark Lord was.”

“If they had, then they must have gone because they wanted to, so we couldn’t exactly bring them back with us.”

“And which one of us would have gone with them, if any? We couldn’t afford to leave Ladius; neither the political nor the military situation would have permitted it.”

“And there was not necessarily a need to. If there had been, the two would have informed you.”

“Maybe that’s true...but what if it’s not?” Sylvia asked.

It was entirely possible that the heroes hadn’t said anything out of consideration for the other two, knowing that they were busy. It was conceivable that they’d left without saying anything so that the others wouldn’t feel guilty for not going along.

“Who knows... They didn’t say anything, so we have no idea what they were thinking when they left without us. It’s possible that they were thinking of us, but...”

“In that case, the question is why they didn’t say so. But if they’d told us that, it’s doubtful whether we could have sent them off as pleasantly as in the stories...”

“I believe what they mean to say is that if the heroes had truly believed in them, perhaps they would not have left without a word,” the headmaster said.

“We thought exactly that... No, we still think so. That’s one reason I say we were never able to understand them.”

“Then, after some time had gone by without us being able to do anything, we heard a rumor that the Dark Lord had been defeated,” Sophia murmured with an indescribable look on her face.

Sylvia had no response. She was trying to imagine how it would have felt to be in their shoes. She could give them words of condolence, but they would just be words; they would be no real consolation. So instead, she voiced a question.

“Um, why are you telling me this...? I mean, I know I asked in the first place,

but...”

“Maybe I’ve gone on too long... I meant to be more concise.”

“But that doesn’t make this unnecessary. Everything we’ve said is good for you to know,” Klaus told Sylvia.

“While it would not pose any problem for you to remain ignorant, it is indeed best that you know,” the headmaster agreed.

“You mean...about how what actually happened is different from what people say?”

Sylvia had already known there were things like that. She’d been surprised at most of the discrepancies because the tale of the greats saving their kingdom was near and dear to her, but now that she thought about it, it was only natural. She was royalty, after all; she knew that sometimes politicians spun stories to make themselves sound better to the public.

But apparently that wasn’t it. Klaus shook his head and looked directly at Sylvia as he spoke to her.

“No, that’s not what I mean. Well, you could take it that way in a broad sense, but we’re talking about something more specific.”

“What do you mean...?”

“That we’re not the real greats that you hear about in stories,” Sophia said. “It was only thanks to the heroes that we were able to help the people who live here.”

“Yeah. Ultimately, we couldn’t do anything. And we know that better than anyone, as the ones who keep up the facade for the people’s sake.”

It would have been easy for her to protest that that wasn’t true. They were absolutely greats; otherwise the people of Ladius wouldn’t call them that. People weren’t that dumb. They were called greats because everyone felt they had done enough for the kingdom to deserve that.

But it would have been pointless for Sylvia to tell them so. She could tell by the look in their eyes. They already knew that the people of Ladius felt that way, and they still didn’t believe they were greats.

So Sylvia said something else. “So... What do you mean that it’s good for me to know?”

What they were saying was just their personal opinion. No matter what they thought of themselves, the world considered them greats, so knowing this was frankly meaningless to Sylvia. But they surely knew that and had a good reason to tell her this.

“We owe them. Us being called greats, this kingdom’s very existence... It’s all thanks to them. But no need for flowery words at this point.”

“Yes. In short, we’ve decided that if they ever need our help as we needed theirs, we will do what we can. We’ll make up for what we couldn’t do then.”

“Um... I don’t feel like that’s something I really need to know...”

“Actually, you need to know as a member of the royal family, because when the time comes, we’re going to prioritize helping them above all else.”

“Not if it harms Ladius, of course. But otherwise, we’re going to give it everything we have, even if it causes turmoil here.”

“To sum up what they mean, it is that you should be prepared for them to leave this country when the time comes,” the headmaster said.

If Klaus and Sophia left, the kingdom would lose its two most powerful fighters. That would leave a gigantic, albeit temporary, hole in their defenses that Veritas could potentially exploit. But they were saying they understood that and planned to leave anyway, which was why Sylvia needed to know as a member of the royal family.

Really, considering her position, she shouldn’t have accepted that. But...

“My father knows about this, right?”

“He plans to accompany them in the worst case, in fact,” the headmaster said. “He cannot leave as readily, of course, but he intends to if he sees any opportunity.”

“I see...”

“Is that all you have to say? You have every right to criticize us.”

“We’re basically saying that we plan to do what we want regardless of our station, after all. It would be natural to take issue with that.”

“No... I can’t. I would be lying if I said I have no problem with it, but...”

She thought anyone born and raised in this kingdom would have the same reaction to being told this. It was only natural. If the ones who had saved them were in trouble and seeking help, people would complain about them *not* responding to that request.

“It’s normal that you’d lend a hand. I think so, at least.”

“Is that so...”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Klaus and Sophia breathed sighs of relief. It seemed like they’d thought Sylvia would actually scold them. But she could never.

“Well, we cannot say for sure whether such a time shall ever come,” the headmaster said. “It is likely that it shall not.”

“Right... We think so too, actually.”

“And it’s questionable whether we could really help in such a case. But either way, it isn’t an option not to lend a hand.”

“So you’re telling me to be prepared for that scenario, then.”

Sylvia didn’t want to think about that...but something occurred to her. What kind of situation would require their help?

That train of thought quickly stopped, however, because she couldn’t think of anything...and also because an idea came to mind. The idea that no matter what happened, Soma could probably take care of it.

Smiling wryly at herself, Sylvia refocused on the situation at hand. She had people in front of her who she rarely had the opportunity to speak with; she should take this chance to ask whatever questions she wanted.

With that in mind, Sylvia began to brainstorm what she should ask next.

Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Kouduki. Thank you so much for picking up this book.

I added a lot of original content to this volume, so I expect that even people who've read the web novel were able to have a fresh experience reading. I hope you got some enjoyment out of it, no matter how little.

And I can't forget to evangelize the manga adaptation. It's as well-done as ever, so I'd appreciate it if you picked it up as well. It's currently on sale with great reviews.

Lastly, my gratitude.

Thanks as always to my editors, K and W, for your hard work.

Thank you, necömi, for taking the time out of your busy schedule to create more wonderful illustrations.

To everyone involved in the publication of this work, including proofreaders, salespeople, and designers, thank you again for your help and support.

And most of all, thank you to everyone who's supported me and picked up this book. You have my deepest gratitude.

With that said, I'll pray that we can meet again somewhere. I'd appreciate your continued support.









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I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 7

by Shin Kouduki

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