

I Surrendered

# My Sword for a New Life as a Mage

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Felicia L. Waldstein

Soma Neumond



*Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) /  
Blessing of the Forest Spirits / Mental Concentration /  
Quick Draw / Mind's Eye: One Stroke, One Slice.*

She closed the distance in less than a second, stepping forward and swinging her arm simultaneously.

She was going all-out from her first move, not sparing any force. Her sword swung out in an intentionally lethal gray arc.

But when it made contact, it was with a hard surface.





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# 1

It was an ordinary day—as days tended to be more often than not. Felicia L. Waldstein had no reason to expect today would be any different.

But that was precisely the reason for the look of shock and confusion on her face.

The scenery around her was the same as it ever was—overgrown trees, soundless tranquility—except for one addition that didn't belong.

That would be the boy sprawled out on his back at her feet.

Felicia didn't recall seeing this black-haired boy of about ten years old before.

But the problem wasn't that there was a stranger in the woods. The problem was that anyone other than herself was here, which was unthinkable.

"But I can't exactly call it unthinkable given that someone else actually *is* here right now," she muttered with a sigh once her shock began to subside.

However unthinkable it might be, it was a fact that this boy was here, so she had to accept that fact in order to determine what to do next.

However...

"The biggest problem is what to do now that I know."

As far as she knew, nobody but her had ever stepped foot into this area before. She had no way of knowing how to handle it.

"Well, I suppose it comes down to one of two options."

To help this boy, or to abandon him.

Frankly, Felicia had no reason to help him. This place literally belonged to her, and he'd entered without permission. That was reason to chase him out, if anything, not to help. She would even have been within her rights to kill him.

"Although I would never do such a thing..."

If anyone were killed, it would be her, she thought with a crooked smile as



she glanced at the strands of white hair at the edges of her vision.

Felicia was well aware that she was what they called a witch, and witches were taboo beings that disrupted the world. It was a sin for a witch to even be alive, and they were to be killed on sight.

So, considering that, she only had one choice. If she helped him, he might not only not be grateful but try to kill her... In fact, that was more likely. And Felicia didn't want to die.

"I wouldn't have to worry about him being attacked by monsters here..."

He was unlikely to die if she just left him here. He didn't appear to be hurt at a glance. It was likely that he would wake up eventually.

"Well, that in itself would be a problem..."

Felicia frequented this spot on the way to other places, and it was close to where she lived. That meant that she might meet him again when he regained consciousness.

That was highly likely, in fact. While this forest was large, there were a limited number of safe places inside it. Whatever he was doing, he would certainly make this area his base, which meant she was bound to run across him again.

It was hardly a possibility that he would be gone before then given the kind of place this was.

"I don't know what brought him here, so it would depend on that..."

Judging by his appearance, she thought it might have been some kind of accident. This wasn't the kind of place people came intentionally, and even if they did, a certain someone would have been sure to notice.

Nevertheless, the result would be the same whether she helped him or not...

"Who am I making excuses to?"

She smiled wryly, realizing that her train of thought had turned to excuses for what she was about to do.

Well, she knew what that meant. Although she'd given it some thought, she'd already known what she intended to do from the beginning.

Whether it was convenient for her or not, she couldn't just leave an unconscious boy there.

Even if it meant she would die as a result.

No, for that matter, she'd never had a problem with that to begin with.

She didn't want to die, but...

"It isn't like I have anything I really want to stay alive for," Felicia asserted with a sigh as she began to walk toward the boy.



## 2

When Soma woke up, he saw an unfamiliar ceiling. It was a plain one, like most ceilings were, but he didn't recall seeing this one before.

After blinking several times, he murmured to himself, "It seems some kind stranger has taken me in."

His memories were intact; he clearly remembered what had happened before he'd woken up. That made it easy to deduce his current situation.

He could almost still feel the sensation of cutting through something. That wasn't just because of his success but because it was familiar to him: it had felt the same way when he'd cut through space.

That must have been why he'd ended up somewhere unfamiliar; in other words, he'd "leapt" from the academy to somewhere else.

"That means that I overdid it...but all's well that ends well, I suppose."

Although he'd been teleported away, he'd fulfilled his objective and remained in one piece. It would have been greedy to ask for more.

"That isn't to say I have no problems with this, naturally...but they're within allowable limits," he muttered as he tried to move his arm, grimacing at the ache that shot through it.

This was one of those problems. It wasn't as bad as he'd expected, but...

"This isn't very good in the sense that it gives me even more to do... Oh?"

Just when he had that thought, he heard two tentative knocks. Turning toward the sound, he finally took in the place where he was lying.

As he'd expected based on the ceiling, he was in a plain room. It had no decorations—or anything else, really. Apart from the bed he was lying in, there was nothing but a table and two chairs. It didn't feel lived in; if he'd been told this was a storage room, he would've believed it.

But there was something more important to attend to than the room. He

turned his attention to the door located across the room from him; from it, he heard another two knocks. Someone was probably trying to check on him.

He wondered for a moment how to reply, but he didn't have to think for long, because the door cautiously opened.

And then...

"Pardon me—ah..."

The girl on the other side of the door opened her eyes wide; apparently she hadn't expected him to be awake.





Soma picked up on a variety of emotions in her eyes at that moment. Relief, joy, wariness, fear. There was also something mixed in that he couldn't put into words, but he quickly dropped that train of thought once he put together what she was.

Bloodred eyes, snow-white hair—Soma only knew one kind of being that had those traits.

But he only froze in surprise for an instant. He was extremely curious about her, but there was something he had to do first and foremost.

“Hmm... So I take it you...?”

“Oh, um... Yes, I found you on the ground outside...”

“Is that so? Thank you.”

“N-No, it's... Um, you're welcome.”

It was clear she'd helped him, so he had to thank her before anything else. Now that he'd acted on that principle, he looked at her with puzzlement.

Her reaction was strange. It was as if she hadn't expected him to be grateful. He thought it would have been entirely natural to expect gratitude after helping someone, but upon further thought, he could accept that sometimes things didn't work out that way.

“I apologize for remaining in this position. I would have preferred to give you a proper bow in thanks.”

“Oh, no, I don't mind at all... More importantly, are you hurt? I didn't see any injuries, but...”

“Hmm... No, I'm not wounded. It is hard to move, however. Mere muscle soreness, I suppose.”

“Huh? You're...sore?”

Her face went blank in surprise at his answer. He nodded, thinking that she seemed to be surprised at every little thing.

Yes, the pain that had shot through his arm when he'd tried to move it was due to soreness, not injury. This was one more piece of evidence that he'd



overdone it.

Well, the move he'd used was the same one with which he'd defeated Hildegard in his past life. In his current condition, he'd only been able to use a weaker version, but even so, it made sense that the exertion had taken such a toll on his body. He was lucky that it wasn't worse; it wasn't even as bad as the soreness he'd experienced several years ago.

"I'm not entirely unable to move, if I must."

"No, as I said, I don't mind..."

"I'm glad that's the case. I believe I should feel somewhat better by tomorrow."

"Is that so...? Shall we save the conversation for tomorrow, then? I imagine there's a lot you want to know..."

"Hmm, yes... I do have some questions, but it may be best that I save them for tomorrow."

Although she said she didn't mind, it wouldn't have been good manners to ask so many questions without standing up. Even Soma had enough discretion to realize that. It would have been bad enough if they were acquainted, but he didn't even know her name.

That thought made him realize what he had to say next.

"So, we can talk more tomorrow, but why don't we introduce ourselves first?"

"Yes, it would make things easier if we knew each other's names..."

"Indeed. So, my name is Soma."

"Soma... All right. Mine is Felicia Le...um, just Felicia. Glad to make your acquaintance."

"I think I should be gladder in this case. Not only did you help me, I've indirectly confirmed that you intend to let me stay over at least until tomorrow."

"Oh, that's true... Well, I thought it would turn out this way, so please don't worry about it."

Soma looked back at her with puzzlement. Something was off with what she'd just said. She'd seemed to think he wasn't hurt, so why would she have assumed that he would be staying the night?

He glanced out of the window. The sun was still high in the sky. He would have understood if it were night, but...

It hit him just then. He let out a small sigh. Considering what she was, it made perfect sense that there might be some reason he shouldn't leave. He didn't know for sure whether it was because of what she was, but he could ask tomorrow if he wanted to know. It wasn't something he had to think about right now.

He arrived at that conclusion because of how she was behaving. She still hadn't come any closer to him than the doorway, which was to be expected; she had to be wary of strangers, even ones she'd helped. And now he'd fallen silent, which must have made her even warier.

Not to mention, he predicted that he would be in her care for longer than just a couple days. In that case, he had even more reason not to put her ill at ease.

Moreover, he was certain of what she was. That meant he shouldn't give her any more reasons to be wary.

With that in mind, Soma looked through narrowed eyes at her distinctive hair and eyes.

*A witch.*

As he wondered what to do knowing that she was considered an enemy of the world itself, Soma let out another small sigh.

### 3

All that currently ailed Soma was muscle soreness. He could move if he forced himself, so he wasn't an invalid at the very least.

However, he'd remained lying down regardless, so it was only natural that the girl he'd just spoken to briefly—Felicia—had left the room. They'd just decided to wait until the next day to talk, after all, so there wouldn't have been any meaning in her staying longer to chat. And since they'd only just met, they probably wouldn't have gotten into a rousing conversation, anyway.

And it was convenient for Soma that he was alone now. There was a lot he didn't know but also some things he did, and he wanted to get his thoughts in order before speaking with her.

"This all came too suddenly..."

After he'd woken up in a strange place, he'd known that someone had most likely helped him, but he couldn't have predicted that that someone was a witch. He'd hidden his surprise so as not to worry her, but he'd been shocked when he saw her, to be honest. It might even have been the biggest shock he'd faced since being reborn.

"Well, I have a lot to think about...but I should start with what's directly in front of me," Soma muttered, looking at the small table next to the bed he was lying in. Felicia had brought it in for him, since he would need it; she'd also left something on top of it. If anything, she'd probably brought the table just to leave that something there.

And the item in question was...

"Hmm... If my eyes aren't deceiving me, that appears to be fruit."

According to Felicia, it had taken him over half a day to wake up, so she'd brought that, assuming he was hungry.

He was indeed hungry, so he was grateful for that. The only problem was that moving his arm resulted in extreme pain, so it was difficult to eat on his own,



but he couldn't exactly ask a girl he'd just met to feed him by hand. He might have asked someone like Aina just to see her reaction, but she wasn't here right now, so that was irrelevant.

Also, it was worth withstanding pain in order to eat...or so he wished he could say, but to be honest, he was thinking that maybe he should have asked her to feed him after all.

It wasn't that he was in more pain than he'd expected. It was within allowable limits.

"The issue is why she left them as is..."

Yes, Felicia had unceremoniously left the fruitlike things on the table without cutting them up first. There were three of them, round and as red as her eyes, but nothing else.

"It isn't a problem that I've never seen a fruit like this before, and if I must eat them whole with my hands, I suppose I will, but..."

He hadn't been able to hide that he was taken aback after being handed that and told it was his meal. To be more specific, he was disappointed and confused. He wondered if this was her way of telling him to hurry up and get out of her house.

"She didn't seem to be that type of person based on our short conversation, however..."

If she were, she wouldn't have helped him in the first place. In that case...

"Perhaps I should think of this as the result of her consideration...like a sick person's meal."

To repeat, Soma wasn't an invalid, but he was still lying down. He wasn't entirely unable to eat as normal, but it was certainly difficult, so maybe this was the best option Felicia could come up with considering his condition.

"Well, I suppose I can't complain."

He'd been taken aback at being given whole fruit, but he wasn't upset. Figuring that was just how it was, he reached out to pick one up.

"Ouch... I'd rather not move after all...but I'm too hungry to sleep. I can't say

whether this will be enough, but I'll have to see when the time comes."

Grimacing in pain, he brought one toward his mouth. The faint smell wafting from it told him that he was right about it being fruit.

It would have been hard to eat lying down, so he sat up despite the pain and took a bite. There was a pleasant crunch, a sweetness, and then a subtle acidity spreading through his mouth.

"Hmm... This has a texture and flavor similar to an apple. I suppose she gave them to me whole as a sick person's meal...or perhaps this is simply how she eats them."

People's ways of eating food differed between race, country, and even family. This wasn't how Soma was used to eating, but he could understand if he thought of it that way.

"This seems to be a more complicated situation than I thought."

As he looked at the fruit with a fresh bite mark in it, his mind drifted toward what was outside of the room. While it was bad manners to suspect someone who'd helped him, he had no choice in this scenario. Not even Soma was easygoing enough to trust someone entirely just because they'd helped him, especially not if that someone happened to be a witch.

With his awareness expanded, Soma continued to sense what was around him. He couldn't tell much about it, but he could sense basic things, such as the size of the building. It would be good information to reference for an understanding of the situation.

"Hmm... It seems moderately large, about the right size for four or five people...but Felicia seems to be the only one here. It's possible that the others are out at the moment..."

But that was highly unlikely. If Felicia lived with other people, she would have waited for someone else to get home before going into Soma's room. It was careless of her to speak one-on-one with a stranger, even being a witch...no, especially being a witch.

And judging by the wariness in her eyes when he'd seen her, it wasn't that she trusted him that much. The logical conclusion, then, was that she lived

alone.

“In fact, that would be an understatement...”

He widened his awareness even farther but sensed no other living beings, let alone people. This was clearly unusual. He got the sense that there would be some a bit farther away, but it seemed that nobody went anywhere near this area. He didn't know if that was because of the area or because of her, but there must have been some reason for it.

“But I already knew this place was unusual,” he muttered, looking out the window. He narrowed his eyes as he looked toward the sun, which was still in the same place in the sky.

“That means that she and I are the only ones here.”

In other words, nobody would interfere, no matter what he did. That was highly convenient for him.

Although he did feel ever so slightly guilty.

“Well, whatever I do, it will have to be after we talk tomorrow.”

It wouldn't be easy to do anything in his current physical state. First, he had to at least be able to move with no issue.

And in order to recover, he had to eat, so he brought the fruit in his hand to his mouth again. Its sweetness flooded his mouth the moment he bit into it, and the accompanying tart flavor seemed to him more sour than before.



## 4

“Phew...”

Felicia involuntarily sighed once she was back in her own room. She looked at her palm; it was damp with sweat. She’d apparently been more nervous than she realized.

And that was to be expected. Although he was far younger than her, that didn’t necessarily mean she was safe—in fact, he was likely to be dangerous, since he had been holding a sword when she’d found him. It was a cheap-looking sword, but that only made it seem more practical to her—if he had that, he must have been able to fight.

She’d put it in storage just to be safe, but she wasn’t certain that a sword was his only means of fighting; he may even have been able to use magic as well. If he’d felt like fighting, she may not have been able to make it back to her room.

So it was natural that she would be nervous, she thought...then smiled wryly as she realized how late in the game she’d had that thought.

“I already understood that when I decided to help him.”

But she still hadn’t been able to remain calm when it came to actually facing the risk of death. She didn’t know what to do with herself.

“And it’s too early to let my guard down...”

While he hadn’t had a blatant reaction, the boy—Soma—had been shocked for a moment upon seeing her. She should assume he knew about witches; it would have been too optimistic to expect that nothing would happen going forward.

“He looked at me quite intently...”

And if she wasn’t imagining it or being too self conscious, she’d sensed desire in his eyes. She didn’t know what for, but she could think of a few possibilities.

For example, she’d heard that anyone who succeeded in capturing a witch

could earn quite a lot of prestige—as well as enough money that they would never have to work again. That was how much people feared witches.

It was also possible that he wanted to kill Felicia out of sheer righteousness. On top of that, she'd heard that a witch's flesh and blood could be valuable prizes in themselves—that if someone with very little magical power used them, they could gain the ability to use high-level spells.

That last part was nothing more than a rumor, but the point was that there were good reasons for someone to want to kill Felicia.

“And to be honest, what he said made me suspicious...”

Especially when he'd said he was so sore that it hurt to move. She'd been sore before, and she certainly hadn't wanted to move much, but it hadn't been so bad that she would lay down motionless all day. If he was telling the truth, what had he done to end up in that state?

She didn't think he was lying about being unable to move, though. That was most likely true. The question, then, was why he'd said it was muscle soreness.

Maybe he'd been wary of her as well. Witches were considered enemies of the world. She had no counterargument; she felt like an enemy of the world herself.

Witches didn't make human sacrifices or seek out the blood of living creatures, however. And they didn't make creepy potions... Well, maybe they did, but not using human liver as an ingredient.

But she knew people said those things about witches, so maybe Soma had claimed he was sore in order to protect himself. While it would be very difficult to move if he was physically injured, it would be possible if he was just sore. He had said something to that effect himself, in fact. Maybe he'd wanted her to know not to try anything since he was capable of fighting back.

“Well, I might be overthinking it...”

But she could worry about that later. It couldn't hurt to be wary of him.

“But if I'm thinking that, I suppose I don't want to die after all.”

Well, she knew she didn't want to die. She didn't like pain or fear.

However...

“Is that acceptable, though?”

Was it acceptable for her to go on living without a reason to live?

That would have been fine for the average person.

But Felicia was a witch—a poison that rotted the world through her very existence.

Was she allowed to live just because she didn’t want to die?

“Well, even if I’m not, I don’t plan to die anytime soon... I don’t want to, after all. And now I have a role to fill.”

So Felicia would go on living another day, just as she had until now.

“Maybe I’m having these thoughts because it’s been so long since I’ve spoken to another person...”

She met and spoke to a certain someone once a month, but it was closer to business communication than anything. She didn’t come away feeling as if she’d had a conversation.

Well, regardless, today was a day like any other, so she picked up the food she’d brought and prepared to do as she always did. It was one of the same fruits she’d given Soma.

“I wonder if I gave him enough, now that I think about it...”

One was enough for her, but Soma had been sleeping for half a day, so she’d given him three...but looking back, he’d seemed as if he had something to say. She had to go back and check on him.

“But no, he told me he would go right back to sleep after he ate so he could recover.”

It may have been because he couldn’t do anything else, but the fact that he’d said that meant that he expected the food would be enough to sate his appetite.

“Well, I can check with him tomorrow. I chose to help him, so it wouldn’t be fair to neglect him,” she muttered, a strange feeling coming over her.



Tomorrow...

A tomorrow with someone else.

It felt strange and unusual. She must have experienced it before, but that time was just a distant memory now. She struggled to recall it even when she tried hard.

But...

"It might not be so bad," she said with a wry smile. It was quite carefree of her to be thinking this way despite the possibility that he might kill her, she reflected.

And she had another thought at the same time.

"I think, after all..."

*I don't want to die, but I wouldn't mind if I did.*

With that in mind, Felicia brought the fruit to her mouth as she always did. The flavor that flooded her mouth should have been the same as it always was, but it seemed to her ever so slightly more sour.

## 5

When Soma woke up the next day, he stretched to check his physical condition. Then he sat upright, opened and closed his hands several times, and tried clenching them into fists.

He hadn't completely recovered, but most of the pain had subsided. Apparently sleeping right after eating had been meaningful.

"Considering how much I've recovered, I think a day must have gone by...but has it actually?" he muttered, looking out the window.

The sun was in the middle of the sky, just as it had been when he'd gone to sleep. He felt like he'd been asleep for half a day, so he'd expected that it would be dark outside. It seemed like being here might throw off his sense of time.

"Well, I'll see how it goes, I suppose."

Just then, there were two knocks on the door. He sensed someone on the other side. The presence was familiar, and he didn't have to guess who it was.

So he replied, "You may come in."

There was a momentary hesitation, but his visitor quickly mustered her resolve and opened the door. There he saw Felicia, looking the same as she had the day before.

"Good morning, Soma. How are you feeling?"

"Well, as you can see, I'm better than I was yesterday. I believe I should be able to carry out daily life activities now."

"Is...that so? That's wonderful to hear."

Wariness and anxiety flashed through Felicia's eyes despite what she said.

That was only natural, however. If Soma had recovered, that meant he potentially posed a threat to her. He would have been concerned if she hadn't been wary of him, in fact.

So Soma continued to speak without touching on Felicia's discomposure.

"I owe it to you. Thank you for your help."

"Oh, no, it was nothing..."

"Not only did you help me, you gave me a safe place to sleep and a meal. I would call it overly modest to say that that was nothing."

"Do you really think so...?"

"Hmm?"

"I might have only done that because it suited my own needs... You know, since I'm a witch."

Soma's eyes widened when he heard her say that. While he'd known it already, he hadn't thought she would bring it up herself. He'd been meaning to bring it up at some point, though, and he hadn't known quite how. This in itself was convenient for him—in more than one way.

"Hmm... Splendid. I suppose there's no need for me to beat around the bush either, then."

"Huh?"

Felicia blinked at the unexpected response and drew back slightly. Paying it no mind, Soma continued.

"It happens to be convenient for me as well that I came upon you."

"You mean...you wanted to find a witch for something?"

"Yes. It was only by coincidence that I ended up here, but I was looking for a witch."

"Is that so..."

Felicia let out a sigh, seeming to come to a conclusion in her mind. Soma was puzzled at that, but he had more to say. He hadn't gotten to the important part yet. Setting her reaction aside momentarily, he wondered what words to use as he opened his mouth.

"Why don't you sit down for the time being? You came to speak as we agreed to yesterday, yes? I imagine this will be an involved conversation...although



perhaps I shouldn't say so myself. Would you prefer I go over there, actually?"

He looked over at the chairs sitting in the room. Right now, unlike yesterday, he would have no trouble getting up to sit in a chair, and it would be questionable to make the master of the house sit in a chair while he stayed in bed.

Or so he thought, but Felicia shook her head, indicating there was no need.

"No, you can stay as you are, Soma. I did come to talk to you, so it may be better if we both sit down for that, but if you aren't fully healed, it must hurt to move, so there's no need. Don't worry about offending me."

"Hmm... If you say so, I suppose I'll take you up on that."

He agreed in part because it did in fact hurt to move, but also because he thought Felicia had another intent in saying that. The table was small, so if they both sat in the chairs, it would necessitate getting close to each other, and she probably wanted to avoid that.

Soma looked at Felicia, thinking she must be wary of him. After a brief hesitation, she decisively stepped into the room and sat in one of the chairs.

"All right... Where shall we begin?"

"How about we start from the beginning? I need to ask where this place is regardless."

"Right... I'll tell you about that first, then."

Felicia nodded, but then glanced back and forth as if unsure where to start. Once she put her thoughts in order, though, she began to speak with another nod.

"As you may have gathered based on the fact that I'm a witch, this area is known as the Witch's Woods."

"Hmm, the Witch's Woods... I suspected as much, but wasn't confident they really existed."

They were one of the most detested places in the world, because as the name implied, a witch lived there. That made it only natural that people would hate and fear these woods. The only other place like that was probably the devils'

territory.

The Witch's Woods were different in one regard, though, because nobody knew where they were. As a result, some said they must not be real; if they existed, someone would have found them. The majority of people thought that way, so they were mostly brought up by parents who warned their children that they'd be taken to the Witch's Woods if they misbehaved.

Soma had heard of them as well, and he hadn't been sure whether to believe in them or not.

"It makes sense to me now that nobody's found them."

"Wait... Do you mean you understand what kind of place this is?"

"To some extent, yes. It seems to me that this area is on another plane of existence and therefore impossible to detect from outside."

He was speaking from intuition; he'd sensed something off about this place. Since he had only his intuition, he would have accepted it if she'd said he was imagining things...but apparently he was correct. Felicia nodded in confirmation, a look of shock on her face.

"That's exactly right. It's on a separate plane of existence, so it should be impossible to enter from the outside."

"Hmm..."

Felicia looked at him as if to ask how he'd gotten in despite that, an even stronger hue of wariness in her eyes. That made sense, since he'd entered a place he should never have been able to enter and understood what it was.

Despite her suspicion, though, it really was just a coincidence.

"In fact, it would be more accurate to call it an accident."

"An...accident?"

"Yes. I was trying to stop something, but I suppose I used too much force, since I apparently tore a hole in space and ended up here. That's also why I was so sore."

He couldn't exactly tell her that the Royal Academy had sealed away a

fragment of the Archdevil's power which had then gone berserk and threatened to blow up the entire surrounding area. He'd said all he could, but now he wondered how she would receive it...and surprisingly, she didn't verbally counter him. If anything, she seemed even more suspicious than before. She may have thought he was just lying to her.

But he couldn't tell her anything more, and continuing to talk would only make him look less trustworthy. He thought maybe he should try to say something anyway, but Felicia was first to open her mouth.

"Is that so... That's a pity."

"What do you mean?"

"As I said, this area is on a separate plane of existence...so it's impossible to enter from outside, and it's impossible to leave."

"And you don't mean that in the sense that I'd need your permission, I take it."

"Yes... While I'm a witch, and this place is named after witches, I don't control it. I couldn't send you out of these woods even if I wanted to. Well, it wouldn't be completely impossible...but it certainly isn't possible right away."

"Hmm..."

He'd heard that a witch had created the Witch's Woods to hide from human eyes, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Just then, Soma remembered what Felicia had said to him the day before.

"That reminds me, you said that you'd expected me to stay at least until today."

"Yes, because you wouldn't have been able to leave these woods."

"But this area seems rather large. Although I can't leave, I could have chosen not to remain in your care if not for my pain."

"Well, they are woods, after all... There are certain areas that aren't as dangerous, but this house is the only decent place to stay."

"Is that so..."

There was certainly a dense thicket of trees outside the window. It didn't look like they would pose much of a problem to him, but he would be able to test that for himself sooner or later.

In any case...

"Well, that's no problem to me. I've thought of plans for even the worst-case scenario...but now that I've met you, all of that is irrelevant."

"You mean...now that you've met a witch."

"Yes."

Felicia stiffened as soon as he confirmed.

He didn't know why she seemed so nervous. It could have been because she'd already figured out what he wanted; she was a witch, after all, so it wouldn't have surprised him if she was capable of that.

"You told me before that you wanted something from me, right?"

"I certainly do."

"May I ask what that is...?"

"Of course."

He had no reason not to tell her. Nodding again, he looked Felicia directly in the eye. Even if she already understood what he wanted, it would demonstrate his sincerity to tell her himself.

"I'd like you to teach me witchcraft."

"Huh...?"

But in response to his sincere statement, he received only a mystified murmur.

## 6

Felicia blinked a few times, not comprehending what she'd just heard. She'd expected him to say he wanted to kill her or something of that nature, but...

"You want me...to teach you witchcraft?"

"Yes, you heard me correctly."

She asked again to make sure she wasn't hearing things, and he nodded again, which only deepened her confusion. Soma looked at her with puzzlement.

"Hmm... You're a witch, so you can use witchcraft, can't you?"

"Y-Yes, of course..."

Witches and witchcraft were inseparable. In fact, witchcraft was the reason they were called witches. While the color of their hair and eyes were said to be proof that they were witches, the essence of witchhood was witchcraft—it was what made them enemies of the world.

But that would mean...

"Soma, do you...want to be a witch?"

When he asked her to teach him witchcraft, he clearly didn't mean he just wanted to hear how it worked. He wanted to use it.

She wouldn't ask why. It made sense that someone who knew what witchcraft could do would want to use it.

But using witchcraft would mean becoming a witch. Felicia swallowed at this completely unexpected development, but Soma continued to look at her with puzzlement.

"No, I don't particularly want to become a witch... Ah, I see your point. You mean that I would have to in order to use witchcraft."

"Yes. Using witchcraft entails becoming a witch. It may be possible to use



magic without being a mage, but it isn't possible to use witchcraft without being a witch."

"Hmm... Is that so?"

"Yes."

Felicia nodded, and Soma looked down as if lost in thought. She let out a sigh of relief, thinking that he'd given up on the idea. Being a witch herself, she knew that nothing good came of it. She wasn't sure what she would have done if he'd agreed anyway, but if he was giving up now...

"Well, I suppose I don't have a problem with that."

"Huh? Um, what do you mean?"

"I have to become a witch in order to use witchcraft, right? Then I accept that I have no choice but to become a witch."

He didn't seem to be joking. He was seriously saying that he didn't care if he became a witch—an adversary to the world itself.

"Do you understand what that means? You would literally become an enemy of the *world*, not just the people in it."

"Hmm... Well, I don't know what that entails in practice, but I don't expect to regret it."

"Do you mean...there's something you're willing to go that far for?"

Despite bearing the name "witchcraft," it had a power closer to miracles. That meant that there were some things that only witchcraft could accomplish, so it made sense that someone who knew that would want to use it.

But miracles were events that shouldn't have been possible; otherwise they wouldn't have been called miracles. That was the reason they went against the laws of the world, hence why the power was called witchcraft and its users were called witches.

However, Soma only nodded again. "I still have no issue with that. It wouldn't inconvenience anyone, only make me an enemy of the world, right?"

Felicia looked back at him speechlessly.

He might have been saying that out of ignorance. He was only a kid. He might not have known what it meant to be an enemy of the world...but his gaze was so direct that she couldn't believe that. It looked like he was saying those words with a full understanding of their true meaning.

Felicia involuntarily averted her eyes. That gaze was too bright for her to look directly into.

Then she opened her mouth as if to mask her discomfort.

"What do you want so badly? And...why wouldn't you simply ask me for it?"

Felicia could already use witchcraft whether Soma learned it or not. That meant she could grant his wish and he wouldn't have to become a witch. It was another question whether she would do so, naturally, but he hadn't even asked, which she thought would have been the obvious first thing to try.

But contrary to her expectations, Soma looked back at her quizzically. "It's *my* wish. There would be no point if I didn't make it happen myself."

Felicia sighed at his even more direct statement, thinking that it would have been tactless of her to say any more. It was another story whether she would agree to teach him witchcraft, however.

"Is that so... What is it that you're willing to do all of that for? You don't have to tell me if you'd rather not..."

"No, I don't mind. I have no reason to hide it. I want to use magic."

"Magic...?"

She wondered if he thought magic and witchcraft were the same thing. They weren't too different in terms of the results they could produce. Since magic followed laws and witchcraft used the power of miracles, they were completely different in terms of process, but they appeared alike.

But then she reconsidered. That didn't seem congruent with his strong intention.

And she was apparently right about that.

"Yes. I wanted to use magic from the beginning, but somebody I know told me that I need to gain the capability to first."

“I understand... Hence witchcraft.”

“I’m not familiar with the details, but I’ve heard that witchcraft can reverse the laws of the world. That led me to believe that it might be able to give me the capacity to use magic.”

What Soma said was true. Witchcraft was capable of disrupting the laws of the world. It could reverse night and day, or make rain fall from a clear blue sky.

But...

“To make a long story short, I regret to inform you that not even witchcraft can accomplish that.”

“It can’t?”

“No. I don’t know how trustworthy this person you know is...but if you would go so far as to seek out witchcraft, you must believe them. So I’ll speak on the assumption that it’s true... Talent is a part of a person, in a sense. Giving someone a talent that they don’t have would change who they are fundamentally as a person.”

Giving someone a talent they didn’t have was like giving them an extra arm. It might not change their external appearance from certain angles, but if you looked at them as a whole, they would be completely different.

So it wasn’t exactly impossible...but it would turn Soma into something else that only resembled Soma.

“Hmm... That’s logical. I suppose I have no choice but to give up on that method, then.”

“Yes, that would be for the best.”

Felicia sighed in relief. There was nothing she would hate to see more of than enemies of the world.

But in the next moment, Felicia was forced to realize she hadn’t understood what kind of person Soma was at all.

“I’ll just learn witchcraft, then, and I can find another way to learn magic later.”

“Huh? Um... You gave up on using witchcraft to grant your wish, didn’t you? Why would you...”

“That’s one thing, but since witchcraft is similar to magic in terms of results, I think learning it could give me a hint about how to learn magic. It would be worth trying.”

Felicia was rendered speechless when he said that as if it were common sense.

She could have understood if he’d wanted it to grant his wish, but this boy was proposing that he become an enemy of the world just for the possibility of a hint. It was so out of the bounds of what she could imagine, she had no words.

“Well, the question is whether I’m capable of learning witchcraft. There must be some way to learn it, right? Or possibly a way to become a witch.”

“Wh-What makes you think so?”

“You never told me that I’m not capable of learning witchcraft. If it weren’t possible, you would have said so.”

That was true—both the fact that she would have told him if there were no way for him to learn it, and the fact that it was possible for him to learn witchcraft.

Since witchcraft was a miraculous technique, you couldn’t use it simply because someone had told you how, but there was a way to gain the capability. More specifically, as Soma had supposed, he might be able to become a witch...but that wasn’t something Felicia could tell him about readily.

She didn’t have any obligation to, anyway. He was just asking her for something; there was no reason that she had to see to it that he got his wish.

However...

“Yes... There is a way. It’s only a chance...but it may be worth trying.”

Felicia sighed when she found herself replying thus as he looked directly at her with his black eyes.

# 7

Felicia slipped between the thickly growing trees and bushes as she walked. She saw tens of meters of trees before her, and that was nothing unusual. It was the same everywhere she looked; it was clear that this area was untouched by people.

While they were called woods, they were too large in scale for that name. However, they were still referred to as woods.

Yes, Felicia was in the Witch's Woods, a place that the general public knew as highly dangerous, but she walked through without a care. If anyone had seen her, they might have assumed that the rumors were overblown, but if they'd proceeded to venture inside, they would have met an unfortunate fate.

For example, most of the trees and shrubs growing in the Witch's Woods were poisonous. Few of them were so dangerous that you shouldn't even touch them, but accidentally ingesting any of them could be life-threatening.

Also, various monsters lived in the woods. Most of them weren't ferocious, but they were dangerous. Altogether, it wasn't a place suitable for people to live in, and if you went in, it wasn't guaranteed that you would come out in one piece. That was the place known as the Witch's Woods.

Felicia could walk through the woods without a care because she knew them so well. Since the area was closed off in space, no new species would come in from outside. She had memorized all of the plants that already grew in the woods, so she knew exactly which ones were dangerous and which weren't. It was only because she was subconsciously distinguishing between the plants that she was able to walk in such a seemingly carefree way.

Nevertheless, a lot of people would have wanted to visit, even with that understanding. The existence of the risk implied a reward to match; although the plants growing in the woods were dangerous, there were also those that were rare and valuable. A researcher in the field would have taken on the woods knowing the risk, and so would an adventurer. If people had known



more about the Witch's Woods, they might have been famous in a different sense than they were now.

But that didn't change anything about Felicia or the Witch's Woods as they currently existed. The woods were not only closed off in space but on a different plane of existence, so it was impossible to perceive them, let alone go inside. Even if someone knew where they were, locating them would have been like looking for a particular single grain of sand in a desert without even knowing how that grain differed from the rest.

And even if someone were able to find the woods through sheer luck, they would need a way to travel to another plane of existence as well as a way to break the witch's barrier. That was hardly realistic.

That was why it didn't make any difference whether or not people knew in detail about the Witch's Woods. As far as Felicia knew, no stranger had ever visited them...until just a couple days ago, at least.

Nevertheless, nothing that unlikely could ever happen again, so Felicia continued to walk as she always did.

She glanced around periodically, but not because she was watching out for danger. Since she knew these woods so well, she knew that there was nothing to look out for here. She was simply looking for something, but she still couldn't find it, even though she'd been searching for a bit...

"Oh, there it is."

Just then, Felicia spotted the thing she'd been looking for. She leaned over and reached out for a flower sprouting at the base of a tree.

But then she realized something. A vine was wrapped around the flower, making it impossible for her to pick the flower alone.

"Ah... I shouldn't take its life unnecessarily... But I have no choice right now."

She exhaled, squeezed her eyes shut briefly, then plucked both plants at once. She gently unwrapped the vine and stared at both plants, then sighed.

"I thought maybe I could use it for something, but that would have been too good to be true. At least I found what I was looking for."

If someone who knew had been watching, they may have screamed or even passed out in shock, because the plant that she tossed away carelessly with her delicate arm was a rare and valuable ingredient in a particular medicine. Selling just one could earn you enough money that you wouldn't have to work for the rest of your life.

That was true of most of the plants growing in that area. However, Felicia didn't know that—or maybe she did and it didn't mean anything to her. She stood up without another glance at her surroundings.

Just then, her pure white hair fell into her field of view, and she frowned slightly. Her face returned to neutral quickly, though, and she looked back at her hands.

She was holding a freshly picked flower with vivid red petals. After spending a moment gazing at the color, which was similar to that of her eyes, she stowed the flower away.

“All right, then...”

Just when she thought she might head back, she slightly furrowed her brow. Something she'd been told before coming here had crossed her mind.

She wouldn't have minded ignoring it, but...

“I said I would if I remembered, and I shouldn't break my promise,” she said to herself as if making an excuse, then turned in the opposite direction of the one she would have turned to go back.

She'd already made her theoretical justifications, so she continued forward without hesitation. Even as her surroundings grew dim, her footsteps were never unsure.

That was simply because she knew there was nothing to fear. The dimness was only because the trees were growing even denser and beginning to block out the sky. This was literally her backyard; what did she have to be afraid of?

She'd have more than shadows to be afraid of if she were attacked by a monster, of course, but she was still inside the anti-monster barrier. Generations before her had continually reinforced it so that not even a dragon —

Just then, Felicia's shoulders jumped at a sound that she should never have heard here—the sound of something moving through the bushes.

“No way...”

She wasn't making that sound herself, of course, and it wasn't the sound of the wind. Something was there, and it was moving around not far from her.

She stifled her breath and crouched down where she stood. She didn't know how much that would matter, but it beat trying to run away in a panic.

The rustling noise continued; the thing seemed to be in constant motion. Her body stiffened as she realized it seemed to be looking for something.

While she realized she wouldn't be able to run if it found her like this, she didn't think she would be able to get away regardless. She'd only felt so safe walking here because of the barrier. She had no way of fighting a monster.

After all—

She froze. There had been a sound directly beside her. At the same time, the branches of a tree far taller than her had swayed. Something was coming toward her.

Felicia hesitated for a moment, unsure which way to run. She'd never had the choice to fight...but she hesitated nonetheless.

That proved to be a decisive delay, as in the next moment, the bushes parted right in front of her.

And...

“Hmm... Nothing so far. I thought I would be able to find it... Oh?”

“Huh...?”

Felicia had her arms in front of her face, fully expecting a monster to leap out, but her mind went blank when she saw what appeared.

It was completely unexpected. She could tell at a glance it wasn't a monster. Nobody could have mistaken it for one, especially since it had been speaking human language—she knew that was a person, since they looked little different from her.

In fact, this was someone she'd seen before. She stared wordlessly at him, and he looked back at her quizzically.

"What might you be doing here, Felicia?"

"I should be asking you the same thing... What are you doing out here, Soma?"

As she looked at the black-haired, black-eyed boy who seemed to be almost *too* accustomed to this place, Felicia let out a huge sigh that contained several meanings.

## 8

What was he doing?

Soma attempted to answer that question, but found it difficult to explain.

Because...

"Hmm... I was taking a stroll to assess the terrain and risks in the area, as well as to give myself some physical rehab, as well as looking for something... It's hard to say which is my primary goal. I'm doing each one in about equal measure."

"Oh, I understand the general idea now, so it's okay. That isn't what I meant to say, though. Didn't I tell you to wait patiently until I come back?"

She'd definitely told him, and he'd been listening.

But...

"And don't tell me that you didn't agree."

"You knew what I was about to say...? Did you read my mind?!"

"I didn't and I can't. I'm just starting to grasp what sort of person you are."

She sighed, but Soma simply shrugged. He just thought it was a good thing if they were gaining some mutual understanding.

"You call it mutual understanding, but I don't feel like you understand me very well."

"You don't think so? I consider myself to have a decent understanding of you..."

"What basis do you have for saying that...?" she asked with a slight glare.

He actually did have some basis for saying so; not even Soma would have said that without one.

"If I didn't understand you, we wouldn't have met here."



“What do you mean...?”

“According to what you told me before you left, you didn’t plan to come here today.”

“That’s true, but... Oh.”

That was when she realized, apparently. She hadn’t been planning to come here, but she had because she was looking for something Soma had asked her to find.

However, when he’d asked, she hadn’t replied in the affirmative. She’d just coolly said that she’d look if she remembered and felt like it. But now, as Soma had predicted, she was out here looking...

“D-Didn’t you just ask me what I’m doing out here?”

“Well, I may be starting to understand you, but I don’t have a complete understanding. I was also expressing my gratitude that you came here after all.”

“Y-You always have *some* response...”

She glared at him even harder. Soma simply shrugged. They stayed like that for a moment until she sighed in resignation.

“So, if you predicted I would be here, there was no need for you to come out here yourself, right?”

“Why wouldn’t there be?” he asked.

“You said you were looking for something. You mean the thing you asked me to find, right? If you knew I would be looking, then you could have left it to me.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t just ask you and do nothing myself. I thought I would look for it, and if I happened to find it, all the better. If not, I could simply carry your things when we crossed paths.”

And as he’d said, he was also surveying the area and rehabilitating himself. It wouldn’t have been a waste of time regardless.

“Speaking of which...do you know what it looks like?”

“Not at all,” he replied.

“So how did you expect to find it?”

“I got the sense that I would know it when I saw it.”

“That’s absolutely just your imagination...”

She sighed once more, then held the basket she was holding out toward Soma. He looked at her in confusion.

“What is it?”

“You said you would carry my things, right? I thought I would take you up on that offer.”

“Understood. I will.”

“You really will... All right. Why don’t I take this chance to tell you a bit about this area, then?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

That would certainly be helpful, but it was far from what she’d originally planned. He’d offered to carry her things if she’d look for the thing he’d asked her to find...

“It’s no problem. I won’t actually give you a tour. I’ll just talk to you as I walk around. And...as you know, I have more time than I know what to do with.”

“Hmm... If you say so, then I’d appreciate that.”

“As you wish.”

She nodded and promptly began to walk. Soma followed.

Her white hair swayed before Soma’s eyes. He watched it, then faintly smiled when he noticed that he sensed less anxiety and wariness from her now.

Today marked a week since he’d met Felicia. Not much had happened in that time. She’d told him to stay inside until his pain was gone, and he’d had no choice but to obey her wishes, since he was in her care.

Because of that, all he’d been able to do was have idle exchanges with Felicia, but that may have been for the best. Having conversations meant understanding each other more. He hadn’t just been kidding when he’d said they were gaining a mutual understanding; he definitely knew more about her than he had a week ago, and Felicia must have known about Soma as well. That

was evident from her attitude, and it had resulted in her gradually trusting him more.

He was glad to see that. Although it was only natural that she would distrust a stranger, it didn't make him happy. It would take more time before she opened up to him, but that was to be expected, and as she'd said, they had plenty of time. He was curious, but it would all come in due time.

"Soma? Is something the matter?"

"Hmm?"

He realized that he was walking next to Felicia now instead of behind her. Apparently he'd gotten too absorbed in his thoughts.

"Sorry, I was only thinking to myself."

"Is that so..."

Felicia turned to look at him, perplexed. His eyes were drawn to her white hair as it swayed around her face. Comparing it to his own black hair, he murmured to himself.

"Is that a problem? Oh, I understand. You were going to tell me about the area."

"Well, I was going to, but I found it earlier than I expected."

"Oh? Where?"

"Right there. The blue flower. You can't miss it."

When he looked in the direction Felicia was pointing, he saw it immediately. There were many types of plants growing there, but just one blue flower.

While it was distinctive, though, there were very many plants around it. He must have overlooked it because of that. In fact, he'd checked this area before, but he didn't recall seeing a flower like that.

"Hmm... You found that quite easily. As expected of a witch."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he noticed her stiffen. He let out a sigh. He'd told her time and time again that he didn't mind that she was a witch, even considered it a good thing, but it still seemed to bother her.

Maybe they didn't have enough mutual understanding on that point; he couldn't blame her, though. Those things would come later, or maybe even soon.

Regardless, now that they had retrieved what they'd come to find, the two went to go back. They had no more business in these woods.

Well, Soma had wanted to look around more...but he had other priorities right now.

Suppressing his impatience, Soma listened to Felicia talk about the area as he followed her back down the same path they'd come by.

“Hmm... I thought there would be more things nearby, but that doesn’t appear to be the case,” Soma muttered to himself as he entered what looked like a familiar area. He’d gone back down the same path he’d come by, so it ought to have been familiar, but he couldn’t state with perfect certainty that it was. These woods were too untouched by human hands; every part of them looked alike. The only place he was certain he recognized was the area he saw every day. The fact that he was able to say for sure that he recognized this place, then, meant that he was approaching the house.

He hadn’t heard as much from Felicia on the way as he’d expected, though. He could see for himself that the woods were overgrown with plants, but since they were called the Witch’s Woods, he’d expected there to be a greater variety of things. That didn’t seem to be the case, however.

“When it comes down to it, these are only woods, after all,” Felicia explained. “They consist mostly of harvesting grounds. And I only know a small section of them. I’m not familiar with what lies outside of the barrier.”

“Even though these are the Witch’s Woods?”

“As I mentioned before, they’re only called the Witch’s Woods because witches live inside. They have no actual relation to us, and we don’t own them either. Well...some past witches behaved as if they owned them, but that isn’t the case for me... There are monsters here that could easily kill me.”

“In other words, the circumstances depend on the person... That’s not an uncommon thing, I suppose.”

They stopped walking in the middle of their conversation. The thick growth had vanished around them, replaced by an open space that seemed as if it had been carved out of the forest.

Before them stood what was unmistakably a house, one constructed mostly of logs. This was Felicia’s home, the place where Soma had been staying since



Felicia took him in.

“Home at last.”

“Yes, welcome home.”

“That made sense to say before...but you came back with me this time, Soma, so isn't that odd to say?”

“Wouldn't you feel lonesome without a response?”

“Not particularly... I've always gone without a response.”

“That doesn't make it any less lonesome,” Soma replied. “In that case, however, just accept it for the reason that it's my preference.”

“Where did that come from...? I swear, having you around has thrown me off-balance.”

“Well, you chose to take me in, so the responsibility for that problem lies with you. With that said, I've returned home as well.”

“That's quite the self-serving argument, but...I suppose it's reasonable for me to accept responsibility for taking you in, so...” Felicia hesitated. “Um, welcome home.”

Felicia had already told Soma that she was the only person who lived in these woods, as he'd predicted. In fact, she'd lived alone for multiple decades, so this may have been her first time welcoming someone home. The faltering way she said those words brought a slight smile to Soma's face.

“W-Well... Why don't we have lunch, now that it's midday?”

“Yes, let's.”

She was clearly trying to change the subject, but he had no witty comeback for her, so he played along with a wry smile and followed Felicia into the log house.

The house's interior came into view. There were hardly any decorations; although there were some tables and chairs, even those contributed to an overall bare-bones impression. He had learned after emerging from that room that it wasn't the only place in the house that was plain; the whole house was

like that. Considering that it was in the middle of the forest, though, he thought it was more than enough to serve as a proper home.

“Hmm...”

However, while he hadn't heard much on the subject, Felicia hadn't built it herself nor added the tables and chairs. It had been maintained and gradually expanded over time by witches who had come before.

He couldn't call those witches Felicia's ancestors because witches weren't connected by blood. It was said that any child born with white hair was called a witch, or that one's hair turned white upon becoming a witch; the specifics were unclear, or at least they supposedly were, which was evident from the fact people said white-haired beings were fundamentally impossible.

So if a child *was* born like that...

“Sorry to keep you waiting... Soma?”

“Oh, it's nothing.”

He abandoned that train of thought and sat down in a chair. It wasn't a good topic to think about during a meal, and it wouldn't have been pleasant to think about anyway. Instead he looked at the meal Felicia had brought...

“Hmm...”

“Wh-What is it? You look like you want to say something... Is something wrong with it?”

“No, nothing's wrong with it...”

He just didn't think the thing in front of him was a meal.

He wasn't making fun of Felicia's cooking; he meant that literally. What she had set in front of him would generally have been referred to as a fruit arrangement.

“I cut them up this time, so it should be okay...right?”

She sounded uncertain because this was the first time she'd served something that was sliced properly. Up to this point, she'd been serving him whole fruits. He could tell that she was learning and growing based on his

feedback, but...

“So it wasn’t meant as a sick person’s meal... I had a slight feeling that might be the case.”

“Sorry, were you speaking to me? I didn’t quite catch that.”

“No, but I have a question... Do you not typically eat meat or vegetables?”

Apart from the fact that they were uncut, he couldn’t call it a mistake to serve fruit to a sick person. Well, he hadn’t exactly been sick, only sore, but close enough.

Someone couldn’t keep eating fruit forever, though. They needed proper nutrition...and yet, based on the fact that she’d served nothing but fruits the next day, then the day after, up until today, he’d concluded that this was usual for her.

“Well...I don’t get any in the first place.”

She meant “get” as in receive. Despite the variety of plants in this forest, none were edible; that was what she’d meant when she’d said he would have no choice but to stay with her. Thus, about once a month, she received food from a friend of hers who lived outside these woods.

That fact intrigued Soma, but he set it aside for the time being.

“Have you never gotten any?”

“I got things like meat at first, and I felt it would be a waste to throw it out...but it tended to be tough, flavorless, and overall not very good to eat, so I stopped getting any after a while.”

“I see...”

As he’d surmised based on her reaction to being taught the technique known as cutting food, she didn’t even seem to understand the concept of cooking. He guessed she had been eating the meat and vegetables raw, so it was only natural that they hadn’t tasted any good and she’d stopped eating anything but fruit.

And he wouldn’t have minded that, if not for the issue of nutrition...

“On an unrelated note, do you catch colds often?”

“Colds...? I don’t recall ever catching one... In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been ill. It would pose a big problem in a place like this, after all.”

“Hmm...”

Soma narrowed his eyes. That was unthinkable; she must have been deficient in nutrients if she was eating nothing but fruit. She’d been living like that for a long time, too, given that she’d said she’d gotten meat “at first.”

She didn’t look especially malnourished, however. As far as he could see, Felicia was the picture of good health, even accounting for the fact that she was the same size as him despite being older. He could have taken that as proof that she was malnourished, but it was more likely genetic.

Felicia looked like a human at first glance, but he could tell she wasn’t by the way she spoke and behaved. She’d even mentioned just earlier that she’d been alive for multiple decades. That was his basis for assuming she was older than him. Since he was close to someone who looked younger than her age, it didn’t surprise him much, but it meant she must belong to a long-lived race.

Based on the fact that she didn’t get sick, one possibility was that she was demonkin, but demonkin only lived about as long as humans. There were only a few races that were known as long-lived in the first place...but maybe her life span and health came with being a witch. She might have told him if he’d asked, but he decided not to, figuring it wouldn’t be meaningful to pry.

“Hmm... Do you have any meat or vegetables left?”

“I don’t think so. If I had any, I would have thrown them away by now.”

“I suppose so.”

He didn’t know exactly when she’d last gotten them, but he figured it had been at least ten years ago. There was a place beneath the house to store food underground, but it wouldn’t last that long even in a place like that where the conditions were ideal for preservation.

“Um, why do you ask?”

“No reason in particular.”

Felicia could survive on nothing but fruit either because of her race or because she was a witch. Depending on how things went, Soma felt like he might collapse from malnutrition eventually...but that wasn't an urgent problem. He could wait and think of what to do about it.

Well, maybe it would be best to look around the area for edible things even though he'd been told there weren't any...

"That reminds me..."

That was exactly why he'd gone out today. It had also been to survey the area, and for the purpose of rehabilitating himself now that his pain was gone, but that had been the main purpose.

He thrust a hand into the basket, which he was still holding, and took out a single blue flower.

Felicia sighed. "I've already prepared lunch, you know."

"It won't go bad if we leave it for a while."

"But by the time we're done, it won't be lunchtime anymore."

"It will cause emotional problems for me otherwise."

"So this is just for your own convenience... My goodness."

Felicia sighed again, but she stood up from the table. Soma smiled, approached her, and handed her the flower.

"Yes. So, sorry to interrupt...but I'd like you to use this to give me the ability to use witchcraft."

Thus he stated his wish.

# 10

Felicia sighed as she felt the gaze on her. She knew he had high expectations, but she wasn't sure she would be able to meet them... In fact, it was far more likely that she couldn't, so she couldn't help letting out a sigh.

Well, in that case, maybe she shouldn't have accepted in the first place...or maybe she shouldn't even have told him about it.

"But if I could do that, I wouldn't be going through this trouble..." she muttered to herself.

"What was that you said? Don't tell me you're already...?!"

"No, not yet. Be patient. Didn't I tell you I would bring it to you when I'm done?"

"How can I possibly wait for that?"

"Why do you say that so brazenly...?"

Felicia averted her gaze as he looked intently at her with an anticipatory smile. His black eyes showed the difference between him and her...and they reminded her of that past day. Even now, she wondered why she'd answered him as she had.

It was too late now, but she'd come to think it had been careless of her. She was finally beginning to trust him, but she hadn't yet at that point.

Well, maybe it was inevitable, since she hadn't spoken to another person in decades except for a couple people whom she met once a month. That didn't make her response any less careless, however. They would be mad if they knew.

"But that might be all right, actually... They've been acting distant lately."

"Are you done now...?!"

"No, I'm not. Sit down."

She sighed, thinking that she couldn't even talk to herself aloud anymore.

This might be a good opportunity to fix that habit, though. She'd lived alone for almost her entire life, so she talked to herself often—not out of loneliness, but simply so as not to forget language.

Once, she'd gone for a year or so without speaking and realized she'd forgotten how. She didn't want that to happen again, so she'd deliberately started voicing her thoughts, and it had become a habit. That was one thing she'd noticed after Soma showed up.

"Well, it doesn't matter, I suppose..." she murmured.

"Hmm...?!"

"I understand you're impatient, but it's really starting to annoy me, so could you leave?"

"I'd rather not."

Soma sat down without another word, but his eyes were still glued to her as if to express his enthusiasm.

To be honest, Felicia didn't have the foggiest idea how he could have so much enthusiasm. She'd never once longed for anything so intensely.

In one sense, however, that was to be expected. Witches were fundamentally givers as opposed to receivers, and since they could cause miracles, they weren't supposed to wish anything for themselves. That was what Felicia had been taught, at least.

Thinking back, she may not have ever desired anything in the first place.

"Although that's never caused me any issues..."

Soma didn't say anything, but...

"It isn't any less annoying if you get out of your seat silently," she scolded him.

"What am I supposed to do?!"

"I told you, just sit there and be patient."

It was partially her own fault for continuing to talk to herself after deciding to



break the habit, however.

With that in mind, she turned her gaze, which had been focused on her hands, over her shoulder for a moment. Soma stood up without a word. Realizing that was completely her fault, she simply met his eyes, nodded, and turned back to her work.

When she heard him sit back down, a slight smile came to her face. She could sense his disappointment, which told her again how much he wanted this.

Maybe she'd told him about this then because she'd been inspired at the sight of something in his eyes that she didn't have.

"Or maybe I just got swept up in the moment."

There was no response to her murmur this time. Even when she glanced over, no reaction followed.



He was just watching her intently. Maybe he was doing as she said, or maybe it was because of what she was holding—the blue flower that Soma had given her. It was the most important ingredient in the potion she was making right now.

The two were in Felicia's workshop. It was in the back of her house, and she mainly used it to make herbal concoctions for witchcraft or other purposes. Now she was mixing ingredients for a purpose other than witchcraft—for a medicine that might be able to turn him into a witch.

There were two ways to become a witch: to be born one, or to become one after birth. This medicine was one way to become a witch.

That was all Felicia knew, however. She'd never tried it, and she didn't know how exactly it turned one into a witch. She just knew that if someone drank it and had the potential, they would become a witch.

She had drunk it once herself, in fact, but nothing had happened then. She'd expected that, since she was a witch already, but witches supposedly had to drink it. While she hadn't been told why, she'd been taught that it was necessary to be a witch.

Regardless, she had no idea what would happen when Soma drank this. He might become a witch and gain the ability to use witchcraft, or perhaps become a witch without being able to use witchcraft, or maybe nothing would happen at all. There was even the possibility that it would kill him, which she'd informed him of, naturally.

But Soma had immediately agreed to take the risk, so it wouldn't have made sense for her to refuse to make the medicine after that discussion.

She hadn't had the flower at the time, though, and she'd added the condition that she would only make it if they found one...

"Why on earth am I hesitating now?" she muttered to herself with an exhale. She'd not only told him the risks, she'd found the flower too.

As her question went unanswered, the color of the flower spread throughout the potion. She nodded at the familiar sight and turned all the way around this time.

“Thank you for waiting. It’s ready... *I think.*”

“Did I just hear two words that I shouldn’t be hearing right now?”

“You’re imagining it.”

She couldn’t help but be uncertain when she declared it was ready. While she’d been taught how to make this potion, that was decades ago. She’d committed it to memory, knowing she would need it, but she hadn’t ever made it before, so it was possible that she’d made a mistake or not used enough of some ingredient...

“Oh...”

“Hmm? Did you actually make the wrong potion?”

“No, I just need to mix it better. Please wait a second.”

She was lying, of course, but it was true that this was the right potion. She’d just remembered one last thing she needed to add. To be honest, she doubted whether it was really necessary, but it was in the recipe she’d been taught.

Biting her lip at the pain that shot through her fingertip, she carefully mixed the potion out of Soma’s sight. A single drop of red swirled into it, disappearing into the blue.

Once she had fully mixed it, she transferred it from the pot into a cup, hiding her fingertip. It was a step that wasn’t necessary per se...but she couldn’t exactly give it to him as is.

“All right, it’s done now. Here you go.”

“Hmm... I must admit, I’m nervous at the thought that drinking this may give me a hint as to how to use magic.”

“It’s really only a chance to have a chance...and the likelihood is quite small.”

“But there’s a small possibility, and that’s enough for me. One question just occurred to me, though...”

“What would that be?”

“If I actually become a witch when I drink this...what will happen to me?”

“What will happen...”

That was hard to explain. She'd told him what a witch was, and he'd seemed to understand, but she didn't know what happened to someone who newly became a witch.

"Given that I would be a *witch*, would I become female? I suppose my sex would be a small sacrifice compared to gaining the ability to use magic, but still..."

Felicia considered giving him a witty reply but stopped herself. He was genuinely concerned. She let out a breath.

"Don't worry, your sex shouldn't change. In fact, there was once a male witch before."

"Oh, all right, then."

There were several theories as to why they were called witches despite that, but there was no use thinking about it. Soma must have thought the same thing.

Their conversation ended there, and he brought the potion toward his mouth.

"Here I go, then."

Then he drank all of it in one gulp.

# 11

To make a long story short, Soma did not become a witch. If he had, his hair would have turned white, but it remained black.

He'd half expected that, so he wasn't especially disappointed. The same didn't appear true of Felicia, however. She'd seemed much more shocked than he was to see that she'd failed; she'd taken out what appeared to be a book and begun to read it closely.

"Ah, Felicia? There's no need for you to feel responsible for it not working. I more than half expected that outcome."

"No, that's not the problem. It certainly has a low chance of working...but now that I think about it, that's only if it's even the right potion. I may have mixed it incorrectly, which would make it sure to fail, and since I was relying on memory, I can't be certain that isn't what happened... I need to check whether that was the right potion. I'm sorry, I should have checked before trying it on you."

"Hmm... That's certainly true..."

But Soma had agreed to drink the potion with full knowledge that she was making it based on a hazy recollection, so if anyone had to take responsibility for it being wrong, it was him. He couldn't deny that she needed to check, however...

"Oh?"

"Is something the matter? You look confused."

"Well... I just had a thought. You can find out whether that potion was made correctly from that book... In other words, you can find the correct recipe, yes?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You think... Have you not read it before?"

"I have...but I wasn't able to understand it, so it amounts to the same thing."

“Do you mean you couldn’t understand the recipe?”

“To be more specific, I should say I couldn’t *read* it at all. It’s written in a language that I don’t know.”

What Felicia had brought out was a compilation of all the knowledge witches needed about witchcraft, potion recipes, and more. People called it the Witch Book.

And if it were written so that anyone could read it, the information would surely have been put to nefarious use, so it was written in a unique language that only witches could decode.

“If only witches can understand it, why aren’t you able to read it?”

“The way to read it is only taught to witches when they receive the book. But my...my predecessor passed away before she could teach me, so I don’t know how.”

“Oh...”

“You don’t need to feel sorry for me. It’s been decades. I hardly remember what it was like anymore.”

Soma thought she was downplaying her feelings for certain, but there was no need to touch on it. The issue was that she couldn’t read the book.

“Isn’t that an issue for you?”

“Well, yes, it’s a huge issue, in fact. Right now I’m not reading this book so much as trying to decipher it.”

“Hmm... That would explain why you didn’t check despite not being sure whether you knew the recipe.”

“Yes... I’m sorry about that.”

Soma didn’t think it required an apology, but Felicia must have felt bad. She couldn’t read a book she was supposed to as a witch, and as a result, she’d given him a potion that she hadn’t been sure was right.

Well, knowing Felicia, she’d probably been confident in it until it hadn’t worked, and that had swayed her confidence. He could tell that much after the

time he'd spent with her, even though it had only been a week.

"And you haven't been ignoring this book because you don't understand it, I assume."

"No, like I said, I've been trying to decipher it based on what I know."

"Oh? Do you know the contents?"

"No, almost nothing. There are a few essential recipes I was taught, including this potion, so I'm trying to find where those are written first."

"Wouldn't that be nearly impossible?"

"Well, I have more time than I can use, although it really hasn't amounted to anything so far, since I can't read a single entry. I must be a fool, wasting my time on this just because I have nothing else to do."

Soma wasn't sure what to call that, but he at least didn't think it was a waste of time. He didn't think it was foolish either.

If anything, he could relate. It was a familiar sight: someone stretching toward something they couldn't reach, whether it was real or not. Never giving up, despite finding the effort foolish, despite thinking it a waste of time.

And since he had that thought...

"Would you mind if I take a look at that book?"

He asked despite fully expecting that she would refuse, but...

"No, go ahead."

"You don't mind?"

"Well, you drank the potion, so even though it failed, I think I could consider you half a witch."

"Hmm..."

That was an unexpected response, to be honest, but he wasn't about to refuse if she was willing to show him.

And he was simply curious. The wisdom accumulated by generations of witches... He couldn't help but wonder if there was something of interest to



him there.

That was only if he could read it in the first place, however.

“Here you go.”

“All right... I’ll try to read it.”

Soma looked at the cover page. He couldn’t judge its quality, but he could at least tell that it was a very thick book. Something about it jogged his memory, as if he’d seen it before...but he must have been imagining it. He couldn’t have seen a book that was passed down between witches.

When he flipped it over, he realized he’d actually been looking at the back cover, because he saw what he thought must be the title. It certainly looked like the unique language he’d heard it was, so naturally he couldn’t read it...or could he?

“The Witch Book...?”

“Yes... I don’t know when we started calling it that, but since that’s what we call it, that’s most likely what the title says. The same series of letters appears several times in the text. Of course, knowing that is no help whatsoever in decoding it...”

“Ah, yes... Hmm...”

*The Witch Book.*

That was definitely what it said.

In other words, Soma had been able to read the text.

He could read it.

He felt an odd sense of guilt at that, but at the same time, it made him curious about something. As was evident from the fact that he could read it, these must have been...

“Felicia, I have one question for you.”

“Yes?”

“Are you familiar with ancient hieroglyphics?”

“I’ve heard of them but never seen them. Those are also mostly undeciphered, right? So maybe they’re similar in some ways...although I doubt it,” she replied with a crooked smile.

It wasn’t a question of whether they were *similar*, though. These were clearly ancient hieroglyphics.

But the writing here was meant to be unknown to anyone but witches in order to prevent leaks. Specifically, it was only taught to witches...

“Wait, does this mean...”

“Soma?”

Soma nodded to himself, not responding to Felicia’s apparent puzzlement. If his idea was accurate, then a lot of things had just clicked into place for him.

Soma had wondered for a long time why almost nobody could read ancient hieroglyphics anymore. It didn’t make sense that a language that was still in use, if only in rare cases, would have become unreadable even though civilization hadn’t collapsed.

It made sense, though, if it had been taught as a secret code to only a select few individuals. If, as in Felicia’s case, the chain of transmission had been broken along the way, that explained the current situation.

Furthermore, witches generally kept their distance from others. They would have no opportunity to see ancient hieroglyphics, which were only used in a select few cases.

The reverse was true as well. Nobody who had seen or learned to read ancient hieroglyphics would come across the Witch Book.

That being the case, they wouldn’t realize they were both using the same language...or maybe they wouldn’t care even if they did notice; those who could read would realize the intent was to obscure the book’s contents.

However, considering the current situation, Soma felt that things had already broken down in that area...but that was irrelevant right now.

He only had one thing to think about: whether or not to tell Felicia that he could read this.

If he did, she would be able to learn what was inside, but at the same time, all of the effort she'd put in until now...

"Hmm... How to make an elixir? This already seems like it might be it..."

"Huh? Soma, what..."

"But the next page is about witchcraft... There's no consistency to the order in which this is written. It looks like they wrote things down as they figured them out. There's clearly handwriting from several different people mixed in as well, so it must be true that this has been added to over several generations of witches... Hmm. Quite intriguing, as one would expect..."

"Um... Huh? Can you...read it?"

Unlike the spellbook, this information definitely had value. It would have been a crime to let it fall into obscurity...and Felicia would probably feel the same.

So he looked into her wavering eyes and responded with a pronounced nod.

## 12

Soma and Felicia woke up early in this forest. That was simply because they had nothing to do at night, however.

This place did have a night, but it changed suddenly when the time came. The sun went out as if someone had turned out the lights, and stars began to shine in its place. Since there was no moon, however, it was too dark to do anything.

They did have artificial lights, but there was never anything so urgent that they had to use them. That necessitated going to bed early at night and thus waking up early in the morning.

That was all it was...but it seemed even that habit might become a thing of the past.

“Oh, good morning, Soma.”

As soon as he woke up and headed toward the living room, he passed Felicia.

He'd already known that she woke up earlier than him, since he'd been too sore to move. It wasn't unusual for her to greet him like this just after he got up.

But there was one blatant difference between then and now. Felicia had always looked a bit sleepy...but right now, that was because she hadn't slept.

“It may be morning for me...but what about you? Didn't you stay up all night again?”

“How could I not? There are so many things to try.”

Felicia was like this now because Soma had deciphered the Witch Book...well, maybe not deciphered, but revealed the contents. There was a wealth of information inside, and Felicia was trying to make it her own. He was glad she hadn't become depressed as a result, but...

“I understand, but try not to overwork yourself.”

Soma didn't intend to stop her, though. He understood how she felt. Now

that she'd obtained the information necessary to reach something she'd been seeking, it would have been more foolish not to act on it.

"I know. I was about to go to sleep."

"Hmm... You've become nocturnal."

"Well, that's optimal in a lot of ways."

It in fact was. Felicia was focusing primarily on potion recipes right now, and apparently more of them than not were most effective when made at night and in the early hours of the morning. That meant that she was generally done with a recipe around this time, and then...

"Well, I hate to impose on you, but I've written down what I need. Thank you in advance."

"Understood. Should I take anything else I see that looks usable?"

"Yes, please do."

Felicia handed Soma a piece of parchment paper, dipped her head, and hurried back to her room. She looked a little unsteady on her feet; her tiredness must have hit all at once now that she was done.

Soma looked down at the paper and nodded. It was a list of items she needed for her potions.

"Well, I don't know if I'll be able to find them, but I'll do the best I can."

But first, he headed toward the living room for some breakfast.

†

While Soma had been able to read everything in the Witch Book, he hadn't understood all of it. There were some words that hadn't been explained, perhaps deliberately, but the potion recipes were the biggest problem. Their preparation methods, names, and effects were written down, as were other considerations to keep in mind, but most of the recipes didn't list the ingredients or describe them in detail.

Some were listed, Felicia knew some, and Soma even knew some, but neither of them knew what went into most of the potions. The ones Felicia knew, she

had been taught by her predecessor, and she would have been taught the others eventually.

That piecemeal transmission was probably in case a non-witch managed to read the Witch Book, but it meant more work for Felicia... Still, that couldn't be helped.

So what Felicia was doing right now wasn't so much mixing potions as determining what ingredients to use in them. Naturally, that was boring, difficult work. She couldn't know whether she was right or wrong until she tried actually mixing the ingredients. It was dangerous as well...but it was worth doing.

He was seeing her tired face more often, but at the same time, she seemed livelier than before.

So Soma was out gathering ingredients. Specifically, the process involved guessing the likely ingredients based on the names and the characteristics of the potions that were made by mixing them, then searching for and collecting those that seemed to fit the description. He also collected anything he found that looked potentially usable.

The process was very hit or miss, but Soma rather enjoyed it. It was kind of like a game of association, and if he did a good job finding things, it served to pay Felicia back. It also killed time, so it was an all around good option.

This was one of the things Felicia had meant when she'd said being nocturnal was optimal—he could find ingredients for her while she slept.

“Well, these aren't things one just conveniently stumbles upon,” he muttered, picking a flower he saw at his feet.

He didn't know what it was, but that was all the more reason to take it. If he'd never seen it before, that meant it might be an ingredient in something.

He wasn't saying that with no basis. These were the Witch's Woods; since they were cut off from the outside world, no strange plant seeds would blow in from elsewhere. And according to Felicia, at least five generations of witches had lived here. That meant they had probably found almost everything to be useful in some way. It was worth a try.

Of course, he wished he would find something he recognized so he didn't have to pick random flowers...

"This one is so well known, even I would know it if I saw it, so I doubt I'll find it right away if she hasn't—"

And just then, he saw it. He doubted his eyes for a second...but that was definitely the thing he was looking for.

†

"So, I found this."

"Wait... This is a mandrake, right?"

Indeed, Soma had found the notorious mandrake. There were potions in the Witch Book that used it as an ingredient, and their effects were powerful. Soma held it out, proud of his greatest success in ingredient-finding yet.

"I've never seen one before, but I can't imagine there's any other plant that looks like a mandrake... How did you find this—wait, and even once you found it, how did you take it?"

"What do you mean? I took it the normal way."

"I know about mandrakes...and I know that when they're picked, they scream so loudly it kills. There's no way... Did you withstand that somehow?"

"No, that would be impossible."

He hadn't known what, but if he hadn't had some countermeasure against it, a mandrake's scream would have killed him. He'd thought he could have managed if he'd had both hands free, but covering his ears some other way would have been more effective, and he hadn't prepared anything like that when he'd come across this one.

"So how did you take it?"

"It wasn't especially hard. Given that they kill you when you pick them, I simply didn't pick them."

Instead, he'd blasted the earth away from them. He'd been afraid of overdoing it with the sword he'd brought, so he'd used a stick he found on the

ground instead.

“Wait a minute...”

“I’ll wait as long as you need, but what about my statement has you so concerned?”

“Well, the idea itself is crazy, and I don’t see how you could use a stick to blast the earth away...”

“It’s quite simple, really.”

“Not usually.”

“You don’t think so...?”

In fact, he’d failed three times as a result of blasting away too much earth.

“I’m telling you, normally... Wait, what do you mean, three times?”

“I mean exactly what I said. Oh, but I still need to apologize for that. I actually found four of them, but I blasted the other three away along with the earth they were buried in. I’m sorry for wasting such precious ingredients.”

“Um... That’s all right, but...” Felicia sighed.

Soma couldn’t blame her for sighing even after he apologized. Mandrakes were highly valuable goods, and he’d wasted three of them. It made sense that she would be annoyed.

“That isn’t it... It’s just that I have a long way to go, apparently. I had a feeling based on the way you act, but to think it’s to that level... Well, I’m glad I found out in the end. Or maybe it would have been better if I didn’t know.”

“What do you mean, the end?” Soma asked.

It wasn’t that she’d said it in a disquieting way. It had rolled off her tongue smoothly, as if she were saying something that was common sense—

“What are you talking about? Aren’t you going to leave here tomorrow? So why wouldn’t I call it the end?”

—so Felicia replied as if it were a matter of course.



# 13

The world in which the Witch's Woods existed was extremely limited and closed off—a sealed world isolated in space from the outside. It was there to contain beings that were too dangerous to leave alone but that people either couldn't or weren't willing to kill.

That was what it had originally been created for, at least, but it had been a long time since then. Its name and existence had been forgotten, and it was now only known as the Witch's Woods.

Regardless, if one thing was certain, it was that this was an isolated place. That meant that any normal person would die within a few days if left here alone.

That was simply because they would have no way to secure food. There were plants and mushrooms that might have been edible, but given that there were many poisonous species as well, consuming them was little different from suicide.

There were animals that it would be theoretically possible to get meat from...but those animals were monsters. Whoever tried to turn them into meat would likely end up as their snack first.

Therefore, Felicia was brought food once a month. It made sense, since if they'd planned to let her starve to death, they would have killed her from the beginning.

The handoff place was about a ten-minute walk from the log house, just where the anti-monster barrier, which centered on the house, came to an end. If she took one step outside of it, she risked being attacked by a monster.

Yet as Felicia stood right on the edge, she felt no nervousness or anxiety. She was used to it, for one thing...but more importantly, there was literally nothing in front of her, let alone a monster. All she saw was a black void.

In other words, this was both the edge of the barrier and the edge of the

world.

The pitch-black expanse was unnerving to look at, but she was used to that as well. She stood still, gazing into it.

Just then, the space she was looking into began to shift. There was a slight ripple in it, which continued and grew more obvious.

The space distinctly warped, and in the next instant, a forest like the one she was standing in appeared where nothing should have been. There was also a single figure standing there.

Anyone who didn't know what that person was must not have been from this world. Blond hair, golden eyes—only one race was allowed to bear those colors.

It was an elf.

"You're right on time again."

"Of course I am. I have a lot of things to do. If I were late to this, it would impact the rest. With that said, let's get this over with. Here's your stuff."

The elf man—Joseph—tossed a bag through the portal. It wasn't very big; it was small enough for her to easily carry without holding it in both arms.

Someone seeing it for the first time wouldn't have known what to think. Felicia had felt the same at first, in fact. She'd wondered how a month's worth of food was supposed to fit in there. She didn't wonder anymore, of course.

"All right. Thank you as always."

"I always tell you, you don't have to thank me. It's a contract. I'm just paying my end."

"Even still, that doesn't change the fact that I can only stay alive thanks to you."

"Hmph... Well, suit yourself. It doesn't matter to me. Just hand over yours."

"Yes, here you go."

Felicia held out a bag like the one she'd been tossed just now...the very same kind of bag, in fact. It contained several potions she had crafted.

They had a contract, and this was her end of it. In exchange for food, she gave

him witch medicines.

Although they called it a contract, it was really little more than a verbal promise. They'd made a written contract, but since they hadn't used any Skills, it had no binding power.

The two were still faithful to it, however. And that was meaningful to Felicia if no one else.

It was the one remaining connection she had to them now, and most importantly, it was the reason she had a reliable source of food. They allowed her to live even though she was a failure of a witch who couldn't even read the Witch Book.

In fact, they'd taken that as a reason to reduce her food rations just after her predecessor had passed away. They'd claimed it was a month's worth but had only given her half of that. She had only barely escaped starvation.

But forming this contract with Joseph had significantly bettered her situation. They still called it a month's worth, but she received even more than that now. That was how she had gotten by even with Soma around.

That probably wasn't unrelated to the fact that Joseph had started giving her the food in that bag. It was a magical item, as was the one that Felicia had given him; the space inside was enlarged. It was large enough to store two months' worth of food, and that wasn't visible from the outside.

The potions Felicia gave him were ones that past witches had stocked over the years. She'd managed to continue paying her end of the contract by giving them away little by little. They wouldn't have lasted much longer...but now she could make it work thanks to Soma. In fact, now that she could understand the contents of that book, she might even be able to act as a proper witch.

Witches normally used witchcraft in exchange for being allowed to live. While Felicia could use witchcraft, she hadn't been able to use it with precision due to not being able to read the Witch Book, and the effects had been insufficient. She gave Joseph potions to make up the difference. That would go on no longer.

That would also mean cutting off her one remaining connection...but that was

normal. She couldn't keep relying on him now that she didn't have to.

As she mused to herself, Joseph lifted his head from checking the contents of the bag.

"All right. Looks good. I have to go—"

"Wait, may I ask you one question?"

"What is it? Make it short. I have a lot to do."

"I understand. So, just out of curiosity... What would happen if a stranger wandered into the Witch's Woods?"

"What? What's your point?"

"Like I said, I just ask out of curiosity. I was wondering what would happen to them."

"Hmph... So you have so much free time, you think about things like that. I wish I were as lucky."

Joseph crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. He seemed to be seriously considering it, despite what he'd said.

Felicia was talking about Soma, of course, and she had a reason for asking that question. However...

"Well, I would have to capture them for sure. Perhaps even chop their head off, depending."

"Their head...?! Would you really have to go that far?"

"I would. And here I thought you understood where you stand...but I guess not clearly enough. We absolutely have to avoid anyone knowing you're here. It would be bad enough if an average person found out, but if it were someone of a certain status, I would definitely do that."

"Y-You would, huh..."

Felicia was inwardly breaking into a cold sweat at the realization that Soma was right.

Yes, she'd asked that question because Soma had made exactly that point to her. She'd been sure he would be able to go back to his own world today, so it

had come as a complete surprise to her.

But after learning that his concern was well founded...she wondered what to do now. He couldn't go back to his world this way.

Well, she still didn't understand all of the Witch Book, so it would be useful to have him around for longer, but...

"Right, this involves all of us elves, so..."

"Um...?"

She noticed that Joseph had his head down and was muttering to himself in a vaguely menacing way. It sent a shiver of fear down her spine.

But the instant he lifted his head, the feeling vanished and he was the same Joseph she knew.

"Well, there you have it. Did that answer your question?"

"Y-Yes... Thank you."

"Hmph, well, that would never happen anyway. Nobody could get into a closed-off world like this one no matter what method they tried."

"Is that so..."

*What about Soma?* she wondered, but at the same time, she remembered what had happened yesterday. Maybe he of all people was capable of that, she thought.

"Is that all, then? I'm going to go."

"Oh... Yes."

She'd just remembered that Soma had wanted to eat something other than fruit, but it would have been strange to ask for that right now. She'd been starting to think it might be nice to try cooking again, but she swallowed the words.

"See you next month."

"Hmph... Right. Next month, yes."

Joseph's reply surprised Felicia because he'd never said anything like that

before. He'd always left without saying anything.

But as she watched his back, the space began to waver. There was a momentary strong ripple, and then, just as quickly, he and the forest vanished. Only a black void remained.

"Hmm... Fascinating, in multiple ways."

Felicia's shoulders jumped at the voice. She reflexively turned around to see Soma standing right behind her as if he were meant to be there.

"S-Soma...? What are you doing here?"

"Well, I couldn't suppress my curiosity, so I've been eavesdropping."

"What were you going to do if he saw you?!"

"I would have handled it when the time came. Also, I was confident I wouldn't be found. And I indeed wasn't."

"You can only say that in hindsight..." Felicia sighed instead of continuing. She felt all sorts of foolish after saying even that much. Another reason she sighed was that Soma's words were strangely persuasive, even if they were only said in hindsight.

"So you heard what we said?"

"Yes, I heard every word."

"That's nothing to be proud of, so I don't think you should puff your chest out like that...but fine. That means I don't need to repeat what he said, right?"

"Correct. And it means that my concerns proved to be valid."

"Yes... So about that... I apologize for not thinking enough."

"No, don't let it bother you. Frankly, I hardly thought about the possibility before I brought it up. I myself was surprised to find out that I was right."

"Oh...?"

What did he mean, he'd hardly thought about it? He'd stated it so confidently the day before.

"This Witch Book you have is highly intriguing, so I had no intention of leaving

just yet. I improvised a pretext for that. I probably could have pushed my way through if I had wanted to leave.”

“You...”

All of the tension left Felicia’s body at once, and she let out a huge sigh. She gave him a glare while she was at it, but it appeared to have no effect.

“Well, for now, I’ll just reiterate that I hope you don’t mind me staying for a while.”

Felicia sighed again. “Well, you have been a big help... I’m glad to have you for a while longer.”

When he gave her an overblown nod, she glared at him, but it was ultimately pointless. She smiled wryly.

She never would have imagined it two short weeks ago, but it looked like this new daily routine would continue for a while longer.

With that in mind, she let out a small breath and turned around. She couldn’t help thinking about how Joseph had seemed when he’d left.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing... Let’s be on our way back.”

“Yes, let’s. Oh, and I’ll carry that.”

“Will you? It isn’t especially heavy... But thank you for the offer. I appreciate it.”

Worrying about it wouldn’t change anything at this point, however. So Felicia pushed the thought of the man—her blood-related brother—out of her mind and began to walk back toward the house with Soma.

# 14

A strong wind blew, causing her golden hair to fly up slightly. She followed it with her gaze, a slight smile coming to her lips.

Thinking that this would be the last time she saw it for a while, she felt as if she had gained a little at the very end.

With that in mind, she pulled up her hood, completely hiding her face. It felt odd, though, since she could see as normal from inside it.

She smiled slightly again. This had been normal for her until recently, in fact. She'd kept the hood on even during her time living in that fort, but now she habitually kept it off. That was a bit funny to her.

A hypothetical crossed her mind. She didn't especially like theoretical discussions...but what if she'd never met him? What if she'd made a different choice?

What would she be doing right now?

"Definitely wouldn't have come here..."

She turned around to see buildings that were now very familiar to her. She'd declined to be seen off, and they'd entered a long break, so there was a rare lack of people there.

But she didn't even have to close her eyes to remember the scene that had been there. That was one thing that she wouldn't have gained if she hadn't come here...but right now, the most important part of that scene was missing.

She turned to face forward again, looking up at the sky.

That wasn't exactly her reason for returning home, but it was part of it. Elves as a race specialized in magic, and their power increased exponentially in their native forest. That meant that maybe she could look into where he'd gone. She hadn't mentioned the possibility in order to avoid giving anyone false hope, but it had been on her mind.



The long break would last two months. She would have more than enough time for a round trip if she hurried, and she could even get a couple other things done—like going to check on him if she found out where he'd gone.

If there was any problem, it was that some time had passed since he'd gone missing. She didn't doubt for a second that he was alive, but he could have moved on from wherever he'd initially gone, which would make it pointless to go there, and if he'd gone somewhere far away, she might not even be able to travel there.

Nevertheless, she figured she could play it by ear.

"Mm-hmm..."

Sierra nodded and stepped toward the academy exit.

And just then...

The thought of her homeland reminded her.

Were her older brother and sister doing well?

As she thought about her relatives, whom she would be seeing for the first time in many years if she was able, Sierra continued to walk toward her homeland.

†

There were two types of ingredients listed in the Witch Book: plant-based and animal-based.

Plant-based ingredients included things such as grasses, trees, flowers, and sometimes mushrooms, as well as substances derived from them. Animal-based ingredients, similarly, were things taken from animals, such as meat, claws, fangs, and blood.

However, any animal that lived in the Witch's Woods was a monster. That meant that animal-based ingredients had to be taken from monsters.

Felicia hadn't asked for any until now, despite the fact that monsters were often listed under a combination of their names and parts, making them easy to identify.

Soma hadn't asked why that was, but he thought it was probably because she was using herself as a standard.

Witches fundamentally had no combat ability. They couldn't use Skills, and witchcraft wasn't used for attacks. It made sense considering that.

As a result, witches typically created familiars to help them with combat, and the Witch Book contained instructions on how to do that. However, Felicia apparently had no intention of creating a familiar, so she focused on gathering plant-based ingredients.

But...

"Hmm... I wonder if I can find some fresh dragon blood lying around..."

"Soma? What is it? Have you finally gone batty?"

"You've become rather snarky, or should I say, less inhibited... I personally prefer you this way, however."

"Never mind your nonsense. Just tell me, what's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"Like I said, I'd like some fresh dragon blood."

That wasn't so he could drink it, of course. He was interested in it as a potion ingredient.

He looked back down at the book in his hands and narrowed his eyes at the sentence that stated dragon blood made it easier to focus on mystical power.

He didn't know what effect it had specifically, but one thing he thought of when he heard "mystical power" was magic. That made him think that something might happen if he drank it.

This was completely for his own personal reasons, though. Even if he could obtain this ingredient, he couldn't ask Felicia to make the potion—

"Oh, do these potions require a witch to make them?"

"I don't think so. I don't do anything special; I just mix the ingredients together. And if not just anyone could make them, I don't think the book would be written in such a way as to prevent people from misusing it."

“Hmm... That seems likely, now that you mention it.”

“Oh, but a witch may have to do the final steps. I just remembered hearing that it’s necessary for the potion to be high quality. I’ve never concerned myself with it until now.”

“I see. In other words, it shouldn’t be a problem if I do most of the recipe and ask you to finish it off.”

“That’s true...but if there’s something you’d like me to prioritize making, I can make it.”

“Oh? You don’t mind?”

“It’s rare for the specific effects to be written down, so we’ll have to try all of the recipes at some point. The order doesn’t matter. That’s only if you can find some dragon blood, however.”

“Hmm...”

There were several valuable ingredients stored here, but no dragon blood. Even if they’d had some in storage, it wouldn’t have been usable by now; dragon blood had to be fresh, apparently.

Unusually for the Witch Book, there was a proper description of dragon blood as an ingredient. According to that, the most important aspect of dragon blood was its mystique. Without special measures in place, the mystique would gradually weaken once the blood was removed from the dragon, so blood taken from an already-dead dragon couldn’t be used. One had to either take it by force or convince the dragon to give some up, so it was highly difficult to obtain.

“On that note, there are dragons living here, right?”

“Right... I’ve heard that the witches who came before me made all of these potions, so there must be dragons here.”

“Hmm... Your predecessor was strong enough that she could obtain fresh dragon blood?”

“I don’t know. I was only with her for a few decades. I ventured outside the barrier with her once, but for some reason, no monsters approached us. Her familiar appeared as a normal cat, but you can’t judge a familiar by its

appearance; it could have had the power to prevent monsters from getting near.”

Soma flipped through the Witch Book as they chatted. The potion required several other ingredients in addition to dragon blood. It was certainly intriguing to consider how past witches had obtained these.

“It would be fastest to check for myself, I suppose.”

He wasn’t back to his full strength yet, but the exercise would serve to rehabilitate him. Also, he didn’t know what he might find.

He remembered the look that had been in the man Joseph’s eyes for a moment when he’d parted with Felicia. It was vaguely familiar to Soma—a look that revealed a strong sense of responsibility and guilt.

“It seems that I’ll be facing trouble on multiple fronts...”

“What was that you said?”

“It was nothing. I think I’ll head out to start collecting ingredients now.”

“Oh, all right. Thank you.”

Soma closed the Witch Book, handed it to Felicia, and stood up.

It was already midday, but he hadn’t gone out to collect ingredients yet because he’d already finished looking for what he thought he could find inside the barrier. That meant his next step was to venture outside the barrier, but that in turn meant encountering monsters. He’d been rereading the Witch Book to learn what he could about those ingredients first.

Well, Felicia had told him she still didn’t know a lot about the ingredients inside the barrier, so he didn’t have to go anywhere dangerous, but it was eighty percent his own idea to go out there. He wanted to rehabilitate himself, and besides, he was simply interested. Also, there were some very intriguing potions that could be made using animal ingredients.

A lot of things were unclear, and he had to try for himself before he understood. So even as he sensed a worried look on his back, Soma left to head toward the unexplored area.

# 15

Naturally, the area outside the barrier was indistinguishable from inside the barrier at first glance. The only difference was that he sensed the presence of monsters here.

Soma looked around him, double-checked that the monsters he sensed were far away, and continued to walk along carefreely.

He'd heard that this world was made in the shape of a square. Cut out in that shape, to be precise...but that didn't matter.

Felicia's house was situated on the southern edge, and the barrier was circular, with a radius of about one kilometer, but the size of the world was unknown. He knew it was more than several times the size of the barrier, though.

And in any case, it was entirely covered with trees. There were a few open spaces, like the place where the house was, but there were also places where the trees grew so thick that light could hardly reach the ground. That meant that a wide variety of plants could grow here.

"Speaking of light, I really wonder how that works..." he muttered, looking up. There he saw the sky, of course, and the sun floating in it.

The sun never changed position from the middle of the sky, and Felicia had apparently never seen it move. It rained occasionally, and the sun would be hidden then, but apart from that, it was never cloudy. He couldn't imagine how it worked.

Felicia had said she didn't know the details, but she had told him one thing: this world had originally been created by the elves. Hundreds of them had combined forces to create it using a grand spell.

Soma had to be impressed that magic was capable of such incomprehensible phenomena. He hoped he would soon be able to make something similar himself, but there would be no point in rushing.

All he had to do was...

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Combat Ready / Sense Presence (Special-Grade): Negate Sneak Attack.

“...keep going at my own pace.”

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Lightning Speed: Glint.

He instantly sent the head flying from the shadowy figure charging at him from behind. A second later, he realized what it was and breathed a sigh of relief.

The thing he'd just taken down looked like a wild boar. There were several species of boar-like monsters in this forest, and all of the ingredients he needed from them were things like claws, fangs, or pieces of meat—nothing that cutting its head off would prevent him from taking.

But that was only luck. Depending on the part he was looking for, he could have just wasted it right now.

“I suppose I can't act as I normally do...”

It would take some extra effort, but whenever a monster attacked him, he would need to check what kind it was. He would have to be careful not to kill them instantly, which sounded a bit strange, but that was the way things were sometimes.

With that in mind, Soma took what he thought he would need from the monster and continued with his search.

†

“This is all I was able to collect today.”

Felicia blinked thrice at what Soma had laid out on the table.

He'd come back about three hours after he'd left to search for ingredients.

That was more time than it usually took him, but that was to be expected, since he'd gone outside of the barrier. That meant he had been searching over a larger distance, so he would naturally have taken more time; she had no reason to doubt that.

She hadn't doubted his word for a second, in fact, because the things laid out before her told her it was true.

Soma normally brought a basket when he went ingredient hunting because he only took things that would fit inside it. This time, however, Felicia had lent him one of the magical bags she received food in so that he could use it to collect ingredients from monsters...but she hadn't expected to see what he'd taken out of it.

Out of all the ingredients taken from monsters, the one most necessary for potions was actually blood, and it was also the hardest to obtain. Not every kind was as hard as dragon blood, but it had to be as fresh as possible, and preferably from a living monster. That wouldn't have been a problem if she'd had sufficient manpower and equipment. Unfortunately, she had neither.

But while she didn't have equipment, she did have containers to store blood—about thirty of them in various sizes. They weren't intended for long-term storage, however, since blood was meant to be used fresh. She hadn't used them since her predecessor had passed away, leaving her alone here.

For that reason, she'd lent all of them to Soma along with the bags, figuring they weren't any use just lying around, but...

"I never expected you to collect so much blood."

"You didn't? About one third of the monsters I encountered were ones whose blood is usable in potions, so I thought this would be typical."

In other words, the number of monsters he'd encountered and defeated was nearly in the three digit range. She'd certainly thought there were quite a lot of fangs and claws...but she couldn't imagine how he was capable of that.

As previously mentioned, Felicia had only been outside the barrier once, with her predecessor. She had been young, so she didn't remember it very clearly, but the fear she'd felt had been burned into her memory, and in all the time

since, she had never thought about going outside.

She suddenly had a question in her mind that she hadn't given much thought before: how strong was Soma, really? She'd known that he could use a sword, but since she had next to zero combat ability, she hadn't given it much thought. If he could defeat so many monsters, though, he must have had strength to match...

But that question was blown out of her mind without a trace by the event that happened next—when Soma remembered to take out one last item.

“Oh, and I forgot to take this out.”

“You have even more...?”

“Yes, I left this for last to surprise you.”

As he said that, Soma took one of the containers of blood out of the bag. It was the largest of all of them; Felicia remembered thinking when she gave him the container that if she saved that much blood, she wouldn't be able to use all of it before it went bad.

It wasn't because she had a calm disposition that that memory crossed her mind, though. It was because she was in such shock, she was dissociating from reality.

That was because the blood in the container before her couldn't possibly be from any normal monster. She could sense the overwhelming mystique contained in it with one glance.

She'd only seen this once before. She'd felt almost intimidated by it then, but she hadn't known why that was at the time...

“Soma... Could this be...?”

“Oh, you can tell just by looking at it? Impressive. Yes, this is fresh dragon blood!”

There was no need to check whether he was telling the truth. Nothing but dragon blood could possibly have given her the same feeling that she'd had before.

But at the same time, it was unbelievable. This meant...he'd managed to take



blood from a dragon.

What was more, he couldn't have killed the dragon—that should have been impossible in itself. He'd most likely gotten the dragon to give up some of its blood.

She thought so because the container gave her the same feeling she'd had the last time she'd seen dragon blood. Dragon blood differed depending on the circumstances under which it was obtained, and the blood she'd seen last time had been given up by the dragon, so the same must have been true of this.

But that required one to gain the respect of a dragon—and she'd heard dragons only respected those above them.

That didn't have to be in terms of fighting power; it could be in any aspect. But still...

"So...may I ask how you got this?"

"I don't mind, but I didn't do anything in particular."

"What do you mean, you didn't do anything? Do you mean to tell me that the dragon just *gave* you this blood without you having to do anything?"

"Well, yes...?"

*"Excuse me...?"*

According to Soma, he'd been going around defeating monsters and taking ingredients when he'd happened to come across a dragon. Just when he'd been overjoyed at the chance to get some dragon blood, the dragon had prostrated itself before him.

"It...prostrated itself?"

"Yes; it didn't go as far as to lower its head, but it lowered its entire torso to the ground. Well, actually, it showed its stomach after that, so it's not quite prostration..."

"The minor details don't matter."

They didn't make the scenario any less unthinkable.

"Is that so? Well, in any case, I don't know why it did that, but I asked it to

give me some blood since it wasn't doing anything, and it generously gave me a lot. It was quite the upstanding dragon."

Felicia sighed. She didn't think it was a matter of whether or not it was upstanding for a dragon...but this whole thing felt unreal to her, so she figured it must just have been like that.

Yet even though she was half detached from reality, there was one thing she had to ask.

"Soma... What in the world *are* you?"

"Nothing more than your everyday aspiring mage and former swordsman."

Felicia was aware that she wasn't very worldly. She was a witch, and she'd been in this place forever.

But still...she was very sure that you couldn't find beings who could do things like that with a straight face every day.

# 16

“So that’s how it is, huh...”

Sierra watched with a smile as Doris replied to her in an amused tone. Night had already fallen, and moonlight was illuminating the view outside of the window. Doris would probably suffer tomorrow if she didn’t sleep, but she wasn’t letting that show in the slightest.

Sierra had more to say, so she took advantage of Doris’s willingness to sacrifice sleep for her and opened her mouth again. “Mm-hmm... Whenever I see Soma, I think...I have further to go.”

“I don’t really think so...and I’m not just saying that to make you feel better. But if that’s what you think, it doesn’t matter what I say, does it?”

“It does... But... Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I guess I am a bit jealous, though.”

Sierra looked back at Doris with puzzlement, but all Doris did was narrow her eyes as if looking into the distance and smile.

It might just have been that Doris was drunk.



She'd been drinking like a fish, supposedly to celebrate their long-awaited reunion, despite the fact that she didn't have much tolerance.

"Well, looks like I was right to trust them with you. Not that I should be saying that, since I never ended up accomplishing anything."

"That's not true... I wouldn't be here now if you hadn't taken me." Sierra was speaking from the heart, and it was an undeniable fact. The choices she'd made after that wouldn't have been available to her if Doris hadn't taken her along.

She didn't hate that place even now, of course. Everyone there mattered to her, even more so now because of everything she'd experienced after leaving.

"Right, there's one thing I was wondering about based on what you told me... Mind if I ask?"

"What...?"

"I'm just curious, and it's none of my business anyway, so you don't have to answer... I probably shouldn't even be asking. Just think of it as some drunk rambling, I guess."

Sierra must have been right to think Doris was drunk if she said that herself.

But then...

"This is one of those hypotheticals you hate so much, but... What if something forced you to choose between the elves in the forest and your new friends?"

*Which one would you choose?*

As Doris asked that question, she looked at Sierra with eyes that were serious to no end.

†

Needless to say, Soma had been searching for fresh dragon blood in order to make and consume the potion that was said to make it easier to focus on mystical power. He had all of the ingredients for it now. Ten of them, all rare, were lined up on the work table, from the nectar of a flower that only bloomed on the night of a full moon to another mandrake that Soma had found.

"I've never handled so many things like this all at once..." Felicia said. "But I

suppose since all of these can be obtained inside the barrier except for the dragon blood, they aren't especially remarkable to me, even being rare."

"I feel the same. The important thing is whether or not I can use this to gain the power of magic."

As they exchanged those words, which would have made someone in the know faint in shock, they looked down at the last item laid out on the work table. It was a note on which Soma had written the recipe to make the potion.

He'd written it down because Felicia couldn't read the original recipe, of course, but he hadn't especially gone out of his way to do so in this case; he wrote down all of the recipes for what she planned to make every day.

"I can do this on my own like usual, you know," Felicia stated.

"It's just that I'd like to help. I can stand back if I get in your way."

"You wouldn't... I wish I had help sometimes, in fact," she admitted. "Thank you."

"You can count on me. I won't be able to do anything that requires special skills, however..."

"As I said before, I don't do anything special. It should be fine as long as you can follow the instructions."

"Hmm..."

Soma had done one or two potion experiments, and he'd tried his hand at mixing things then. He hadn't made any major mistakes, but he had no reason to think he was especially talented at it.

That meant it was like cooking. You couldn't mess it up if you followed the instructions. It was when you tried to add your own flair that things went wrong. As long as you didn't use the wrong quantities or add them in the wrong order, it would be fine.

It *should* have been fine, at least...

"I do have one question."

"Is there something you don't understand? Since you wrote it down, I would

think I should be the one asking the questions...”

“Well, I can read what I have written down, but this is my first time actually making a potion. So what I was wondering about is... It says to ‘eyeball’ the amounts or add ‘to taste,’ doesn’t it?”

In fact, he didn’t think there was a specific measurement for a single ingredient in this entire book. He couldn’t recall ever writing one down or reading one.

Actually, he’d realized how nonspecific the Witch Book was the first time he glanced over it. However, there were some recipe books that would confuse an amateur, while someone with experience would know what to do, so he wondered if this was some kind of code that witches would understand. It was also possible that they’d edited the recipes in case someone read them...

“No, we don’t do anything like that with the measurements. It just means to put in as much as you feel is necessary. I watched my predecessor make potions countless times, and I never saw her measure anything.”

“Really... This shatters the image I had of witches.”

He’d thought that since they crafted potions, they would be quite precise.

But the first thing that came to his mind when he thought of witches was the image of them simmering something in a large pot, so the imprecise methods that Felicia was describing may actually have fit with that.

“Hmm... Well, that’s all well and good, but what should I do specifically? Would it be more effective if I left that part to you and helped with the other tasks?”

“That would be all right, but I think it would be more effective if you did that yourself...”

“Why is that? I have no idea what the appropriate amounts are.”

“If anything, I think only you would know what they are.”

“What do you mean?”

According to Felicia, potions had to be crafted to match the individual, and most of the ones in the Witch Book were used to support witchcraft. They had

to be altered to fit each witch's physical and mental traits.

"Ah, hence the instruction to add as much as you feel is necessary... So it isn't that it's done sloppily."

"I can't completely deny that, though... I remember my predecessor sometimes saying she might have added too much when she made potions."

"Well, that's all well and good... Oh? But in that case, what's the point of giving them potions in exchange for food?"

"The potions are meant to be used in witchcraft, so they never had a point in that sense...but they say they want them to study them and determine whether they can make ones that they can use."

"Hmm..."

If the potions were just for research purposes, Soma wouldn't have thought they would need a set number of new ones every month for decades...but it would be best not to touch on that. More importantly...

"How should I determine the appropriate amount, then?"

"Well, the only way is to try different amounts... I don't use these ingredients in anything else, so I can't estimate based on experience."

"We don't have enough ingredients, in that case... There's no telling how many times we'll need to try if we don't know whether it works or what effect it has."

"Oh, we won't need any more. You can tell whether you have the right amount by the taste."

"You can tell by tasting it?"

"Yes. Potions taste different to different people, but they taste very good when you have the right amount of each ingredient, and they taste worse the more you deviate from that."

"Hmm... How do they taste to you, then?"

"Either sweet or bitter, in my case. They taste delicious and sweet when the amounts are all right, and they get bitter and nasty when I use the wrong



amounts.”

In the end, he had no choice but to brute force it by trial and error, but it wouldn't cost him much. Not even the worst flavor in the world would kill him.

“How about this, then...”

“Felicia?”

“I think we should just start trying things. We can start with a small amount.”

“Hmm... I've been getting a bad feeling about this for some reason. Part of me is saying I should stop you...”

“There's no need. Don't you need this for your goal, anyway?”

“I do, in fact... That means I have no time for fear...!”

“Yes, that's the spirit. Let's get started. And then...you can taste it too.”

Soma thought he heard Felicia mumble something at the end, but he paid it no mind since he was so filled with motivation right at that moment.

The two set about mixing the potion...and long story short, after tens of trials, the potion itself was complete. It tasted good to Soma, at least, so nothing should have been wrong with it.

Yet there were no results...and as Soma thought back on everything that had led up to this point, he resolved both to continue helping Felicia and to never make a potion for himself again.

# 17

“So, what can witchcraft do, exactly?”

It all started when Soma asked that, at a point in time that could have been described as neither a chat nor a debate.

Soma had started helping Felicia mix potions, and it was becoming increasingly easy for her. That meant she could finish faster, but it didn't change the cooking time, so she was left with nothing to do. Soma had suggested they use that time to share knowledge with each other.

Felicia told him about witchcraft and things about witches that weren't mentioned in the Witch Book. Soma talked mainly about magic in general, which had led to the previous comment.

“I suppose I haven't shown you any witchcraft... I haven't had the opportunity.”

“Right, you've been busy mixing potions.”

“It isn't easy to explain what exactly it can do, however... Would you like to see for yourself?”

She'd probably suggested it because she understood how interested Soma was in magic after all this time with him. It might also have been that she wanted to do something for him in return after all his help.

“I couldn't possibly answer no to that,” he declared with a straight face.

She smiled crookedly. She could keenly sense his strong feelings toward magic.

Showing him witchcraft probably wouldn't lead to anything...but Soma often said that you never knew what might serve as a catalyst. If she thought of this as a chance for him, then it wouldn't be pointless.

In any case...

“Let's go, then.”

“Oh? You aren’t going to do it here?”

“This wouldn’t be the best place. And this is a good opportunity, also.”

Felicia smiled slightly as Soma looked at her in puzzlement. It was an unusual sight from someone who usually acted as if he knew it all.

With Soma tagging along, she left the living room, heading not for the door into the back rooms but to stand under the starry sky.

†

In a sea of twinkling stars, Felicia stood with her eyes closed and hands clasped as if in prayer.

It *was* a prayer, in fact. And at the same time, it was repentance.

She prayed to this world.

She also repented to this world.

A wish that violated the world.

A curse that blighted the world.

Those were equivalent, identical. To the world, and to witches, there was not one difference between the two.

It was only humans who always saw them as different.

And that was why witches wished and prayed only for others.

No matter how the world looked at them because of it.

And no matter what others thought of her as a result.

Such wandering thoughts floated into her mind one after another, then vanished without halting there.

This was how it always was. When she used witchcraft, she fell into a sort of mild hypnotic state and was unable to maintain proper consciousness for very long.

But it was precisely what lay beyond that.

After feeling as if she were drifting off somewhere, letting the current of a river carry her along—she suddenly felt a connection to something.

“Rain.”

Witch’s Curse (Core Excitation): Witchcraft / Rain Prayer.

At the same time, her wish naturally escaped her lips.

In the next instant, she felt the connection fade, but she also knew that her wish had been received.

The change happened immediately after that.

Clouds began to gather in the clear night sky.

And then...

“Weather manipulation, huh... And you can do it so easily. I can see why they call it miraculous. I’m starting to understand why witches are considered exceptional.”

Soma’s impressed comment mixed with the sound of falling rain.

Felicia parted her hands and opened her eyes, then, with a large exhale, turned around and looked at Soma with puzzlement.

“Do you think so? It seems to me like we just have different specialties...”

She genuinely thought so. She hadn’t seen any other magic, but she thought she understood it somewhat well after hearing about it from Soma.

“Hmm... It must be a difference of perception...or simply a matter of common sense and values. As far as I know, interfering with weather would fall into the category of wide-area spells... I don’t even know if someone with Special-Grade Sorcery could do this on their own.”

“Well, that also seems like a matter of individual differences... It’s much harder for me to light a fire than it is to do this.”

“Oh? It is?”

“Yes.”

That was also true; lighting a cooking flame would have taken her three times

as much energy as this had. That was also the reason that she only ate fruit...or it would have been, if there hadn't been a bigger reason before that.

It was because she wasn't capable of using witchcraft for herself.

Actually, she had all the necessary tools for cooking, so fire wasn't the problem. She'd even cooked for herself before, in fact. Her predecessor had cooked, and Felicia had kept up the habit at first. She'd even found it enjoyable.

She'd given Soma raw fruit, though, because she'd completely forgotten to cook it.

By then, she hadn't cooked in a long time, because it had hit her at some point...how empty it felt to cook only for herself.

"Hmm... By appearance alone, this looks closer to thaumaturgy than normal magic."

"Thaumaturgy? I can't say I've ever heard that word..."

Felicia replied to cover up the feelings that had resurfaced. It wasn't false to say that she was also interested in the topic...but her relief at Soma continuing the conversation was an indicator of what was really going on.

"Well, it isn't technically considered a type of magic. I haven't seen it myself; I've only read about it in literature."

"What is it, exactly?"

"Thaumaturgy, essentially, is said to be a procedure to bring about miracles by praying to God. It's mainly used in and around the Kingdom of the Law, and I've also heard that one can gain the ability to use it by converting to Divinism..."

"Oh, speaking of Divinism, didn't you also mention that people say you can use magic if you become a Divinist?"

"Yes, that's correct. It was originally thaumaturgy that was used by Divinists, though... The impression I got based on what I read is that they adopted that rhetoric to gain more converts."

"That's... How do I put this..." Felicia said with a sigh.

“Quite calculating, or perhaps greedy. In any case, what you did reminded me of thaumaturgy because it requires prayer.”

Felicia smiled crookedly when she realized they were back to one of their usual discussions already. She could really sense how much Soma loved these subjects.

And that was why...she thought about how Soma would probably be leaving soon.

He hadn't gained any benefit from drinking the potion best suited to him, and now he'd been able to see witchcraft. It was only a matter of time before Soma ran out of things to gain from staying here...and then he wouldn't hesitate to leave. For whatever reason, she was confident of that if nothing else.

It might be next month, or it might be in half a year. Not even Soma could know exactly when it would be.

But that time was sure to come eventually...and Felicia thought to herself, maybe she should have asked for some meat even if it meant being suspected.

Soma seemed to have gotten accustomed to fruit, and it was easy and convenient...but if she'd had other ingredients, she might have been able to cook without it feeling so empty.

No...maybe it wasn't too late.

She would be receiving food the very next day. Maybe she could ask for some then.

It might go to waste, of course...but it was better than parting with him without trying.

That was what was on Felicia's mind as she conversed with Soma, sheltering from the rain.

†

Joseph happened to notice that it had started raining outside. As he listened to the raindrops, he mused that that time of year had come around.

The elves' forest, which was full of the forest god's power, rarely got rain. They had rivers and springs, so there was no shortage of water, but they still

needed a blessing from the heavens every so often.

Not even the elves, the beneficiaries of the forest god's power, could control that power, however.

Therefore, they wished for miracles.

The power to distort the principles of the world, unilaterally and unreasonably.

"Hmph... And they want it even more unreasonable? How arrogant and shameless we are..."

He tightened his crossed arms, straining them against each other.

He knew that, of course. He'd known from the beginning.

It was too late now...

"You can feel guilty all you want, but shouldn't you be getting ready, mister?"

Joseph reflexively turned toward the voice behind him. There was nobody else in this room, and yet this familiar voice...

"Hope you don't mind me taking shelter from the rain here. It came on so suddenly, you know? I guess she can do things like that."

"What are you here for...? And how did you get here?!"

"Well, how aside, you should know what I'm here for. I've got to encourage you, since you haven't made up your mind."

"Encourage me...?"

"I'm thinking of you like that, see? I gave you a plan that will save you, so it'd put a bad taste in my mouth if you got wiped out because you didn't follow it."

"Hmph... It's none of your business. And it wasn't out of guilt that I didn't bring her."

"Oh, it wasn't?"

That was true. He hadn't told her last month simply because he hadn't been fully prepared.

"We can't allow even the slightest chance of failure. I haven't found guards to

ensure it goes well.”

“Hmm, okay... But you could have just told her last month. Then she would have had more time to come to terms with it.”

“I told you, it’s none of your business... Wait, how do you know I haven’t told her?”

“Oh, I knew it! I was just bluffing to see whether you did or not.”

Taken aback and realizing that anything more he said would be futile, Joseph turned his head away from the owner of the voice and faced forward.

“If you just wanted to say that, then go away. I have a lot to do.”

“You don’t look busy... But fine. I have one more thing to say, though.”

“I don’t want to hear it. Just get—”

“The seal doesn’t even have a month left, you know? It’s beyond the point when you can put it off ’cause of sentimental family stuff and guilt or whatever. If you don’t want to die... No, if you don’t want to doom your race, then you should make up your mind. Not that it matters to me what you end up doing.”

Joseph’s breath caught. He turned around again, but nobody was there anymore. Only the sound of rain resonated in the dark expanse.

“I know... Yes, I know, but...!” he mumbled to himself, glaring into the darkness.



## 18

Sierra couldn't help but smile as she stood before her hometown. Apparently, she had more feelings about it than she'd expected.

However, as she was soaking up the nostalgia, a puzzled look suddenly came to her face.

Something...she couldn't say what, but something seemed different.

It didn't manifest as what she could call a sense of unease, however, because someone she hadn't expected to see appeared first.

"Hmph... Just when I thought I sensed someone familiar. So it's you, Sierra."

"Huh...?"

He was a fellow elf, naturally, but he shouldn't have been here, since...

"Why...?"

"Is it strange that I'd greet my little sister when she comes home? I don't think so."

"I thought you didn't know it was me..."

"Hmph... Don't sweat the details."

"I have to... You're the chieftain. And you came out here to see me."

Yes, the person before her was her older brother as well as the leader of all the elves. It was unthinkable that someone like that would come out to see a visitor when he didn't even know who they were.

"Did something happen?"

"No...but I guess you won't take that for an answer."

"Mm-mm."

Of course she wouldn't. And as this was happening, she began to wonder about the feeling of unease she'd experienced.

As she stared at him, wondering what was going on, her brother, Joseph Leonhardt, let out a sigh of resignation.

“Well, maybe it was the heavens that led you back here at this time. In that case... Let’s just say there’s something I need to do as chieftain.”

Sierra looked back at him with confusion.

“I’m asking you not as your brother, Sierra, but as chieftain—in fact, this is an order. You have to be the cornerstone of our kind.”

So Joseph said with a hard look in his eye.

†

“What was that you just said?” Soma asked in surprise, not having expected what Felicia had just told him at all.

Today was the day she got her rations...or maybe that was an odd way of putting it, but that was essentially what it was, no matter what words he used for it. It was the day she got more food from the elves—or in other words, added to her stockpile of fruit.

Soma was somehow managing to avoid malnutrition, but just when he’d been wishing he could have some meat already...

“I was telling you something important, and you weren’t listening? I suppose I’ll repeat myself...but listen carefully this time, all right? I won’t be receiving any more food from now on, starting today. In exchange, we can leave this place now.”

As he’d known was the case, he hadn’t misheard her. But that would mean...

“So my long wait is over? I don’t expect they will let me leave without a fight, but I suppose if I half destroy the forest—”

“Please don’t. And I said ‘we,’ didn’t I?”

“Oh, yes, so I didn’t mishear you. But that would mean I have permission to leave... And wait, did you tell them about me?”

“Yes... I’m sorry I did that without consulting you.”

“Hmm... I don’t particularly mind, but I’m surprised they agreed. It sounded to

me like it wouldn't be possible without a fight."

Last month, Soma had stayed to continue reading the Witch Book, but he remembered what had happened that time.

And knowing what witches were like, he didn't think it was an excessive reaction. It was understandable, if anything. The other party probably knew that even better than Soma himself, so this change of heart was surprising, to say the least.

"Right... I think something must have happened over there that compelled them to do so," Felicia theorized.

"Something that made them willing to let it be known that they were harboring a witch..."

Yes, harboring—this situation seemed more like imprisonment at a glance, but it was actually compassionate treatment considering that she was a witch. There was no other way to keep a witch alive. Soma didn't know of any other, at least, and the same must have been true of the elves.

That wasn't to say it was for humanitarian reasons—while it might have been partially, it was mostly a calculated decision. Witches could bring large benefits, such as the rain he'd seen the day before.

But one wrong step down that path would lead to ruin. The elves may all have agreed to this...but if it got out, they couldn't complain about their entire race being taken out. That was how great a sin this was.

"Hmm... Well, elves can even create spaces like these if they put their minds to it, right? It would depend on how well they can respond to it, but I feel like they could handle most situations to a certain extent..."

"They didn't tell me much, but it sounds like this is past that extent. My release is conditional on whether they can manage it."

"Can they really do that?"

"I don't think they would give me that condition if they couldn't. I guess it would be the same either way, though."

"Why didn't you ask for more information, anyway?"

What if it was actually something that was impossible to deal with? In the worst-case scenario, it could even mean death.

“It’s the same thing either way. I’ll get a full explanation afterward.”

“Hmm... We can’t put any countermeasures in place if we don’t know what’s going on... Well, we’ll see what happens. I doubt it could be anything stronger than Hildegard used to be.”

And when he thought that far, he concluded that you didn’t run across evils that great every day, so it would work out somehow.

“Um, Soma...?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What you said just now...makes it sound like you want to help.”

“What are you talking about?”

Indeed, what could she possibly be thinking?

“Of course I do.”

“You know...that condition only applies to me and not you, right?”

“Well, it may not be relevant to me, but this sounds serious. I don’t know whether I have a duty to help the elves, exactly...but I have more than enough reason to help you.”

And what more than that could he need?

“I feel like I owe you a lot, if anything...”

“It’s a matter of opinion. I also feel that I’m in your debt.”

The two looked into each other’s eyes. Felicia was the first to look away, sighing as if she’d given up.

“I understand... But remember, I accepted this. If I think I can’t do it and ask for help, only then do I want you to come help me.”

“Hmm... So that’s the compromise. All right, I understand.”

“What am I supposed to do with you...” Felicia sighed. “Anyway, that said, we have to start getting ready to go right away.”

“Understood, but what are we going to bring? Should I pack up everything I can find?”

“No, we actually won’t bring very much. Most of it was here before me...and whoever comes after me will use it.”

“Oh, but that means we’re leaving the Witch Book... I didn’t get to read everything I wanted to.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the one thing that we absolutely can’t take.”

“I imagined so.”

They’d been destroying even the translated notes once they finished creating the potions. Now that they knew it was possible for beings other than witches to read it, they couldn’t risk taking it with them. Well, he remembered most of it, so he would have to depend on his memories.

Before long, they were ready to set out, but all they had was what they’d brought with them in the first place.

Soma had his trusty sword.

And Felicia...

“I haven’t seen you like this before.”

“Yes, this is the first time I’m showing it to you. It’s my witch uniform, in a sense.”

Her clothes were mainly black, like the clothes she’d worn until now. He thought the black made her look rather witchlike on its own...but the pointy hat and the broom were maybe a bit too on the nose.

“It isn’t especially that I want to wear this because we’re leaving. I just want to make sure I take these with me. They used to belong to my mother.”

“Is that so...”

He wasn’t about to ask what that meant. He simply nodded and took one last look at the house he’d been staying in for these six short weeks.

And then...

“Let’s go, then.”

“Yes, why don’t we...”

The two walked away side by side.

“So if we go over there, will he come to pick us up?”

“Yes, he should. We might have to wait, though.”

“I don’t mind that. Will this thing you need to do be over within a day? If not, I’ll need somewhere to stay...”

“Well, I plan to stay at the chieftain’s house... But I forgot to ask about you. I’m sorry. I’ll check with him later.”

“Hmm... Well, if it comes down to it, I wouldn’t mind sleeping outside. There are plenty of places to do that.”

They proceeded toward their destination as they talked, and before long, they reached it. At about the same time, the space there began to ripple as it had before.

“So we don’t have to wait at all...”

“He’s very punctual.”

Then a forest like the one they were currently in appeared, along with a blond man, whose name was apparently Joseph. He looked Soma over with a tense face and huffed.

“So this is the guy.”

“Yes. Apologies for the trouble.”

“Don’t mention it. In fact... I should be the one saying that.”

“Oh?”

Soma looked at Joseph with puzzlement after the elf muttered something, but he didn’t clarify. He simply turned around and began to walk.

“Well, let’s go. I have a lot to do...but time is our most precious resource right now. I’ll give you the details later.”

“I understand.”

“Hmm...”

Felicia readily agreed and followed Joseph...but Soma paused for a moment and looked at the two.

Joseph hadn't so much as glanced at Felicia just now. What could that have meant?

It might not have meant anything, but...

"This seems serious on multiple fronts," Soma muttered as he followed the other two.

# 19

As he looked at the unfamiliar scene, Soma let out a sigh of bewilderment. Joseph had led him this far, but...

“Hmm... I certainly did not expect this.”

That was his honest opinion, and it was probably to be expected. Nobody in Soma’s situation would have been able to remain calm. After all, he hadn’t been told why he’d been brought here or why he was supposed to be sitting down.

Before his eyes was, as said before, an unfamiliar scene—a forest, specifically. Around him grew a tangle of countless trees, so tall their tops weren’t visible. He couldn’t see the other side, which was shrouded in darkness, so it must have been a deep forest.

He was sitting in a clearing—or maybe it would be better called an open space. There were about thirty meters from him to the trees, but there was something else filling that space right now.

That was a lively, strangely cheerful sound—the voices of people. He looked toward the noise to see tens of figures, all of whom displayed the same distinctive traits.

“Hey, what’s the matter, guest? Why so glum? It’s a happy occasion today, so you gotta enjoy yourself!”

Just as Soma was observing the others, someone struck up a conversation with him. It was a man who, naturally, had the same characteristics as the rest. In other words, he had pointed ears, strikingly beautiful features, and golden hair and eyes.

Yes, he, like all the others, was an elf.

“Hmm... Well, that’s easier said than done, because I wasn’t told what’s going on here, so I don’t know what I should be enjoying.”

“Huh? That so? Man, I don’t know who brought you, but they didn’t fill you in



very well, huh? I guess it's no big deal on a day like this, though!"

But seeing him guffaw like that made Soma doubt whether he was really an elf. If you ignored the eyes, he looked like an ordinary drunk uncle. Soma had thought of elves as serene and rational, but he felt like that impression had just been swiftly destroyed.

And it wasn't just this man. All of the elves around him, even the ones farther away, were laughing and chatting away. It reminded Soma of a cherry blossom viewing picnic, but it wasn't—at least, he didn't see a single flower anywhere.

He wanted to turn the question of what the matter was back on this man, though. Soma really hadn't been told anything—just that there was no time and Joseph would explain later. He had no way of knowing why the elves were so excited. In fact, he couldn't even be sure where he was right now.

He could make an educated guess, of course. Considering the situation, this must have been the elves' forest; it couldn't have been anywhere else, given how many elves were here.

He could have guessed that much once he'd seen Joseph, though. The problem was this situation. Not only did he not know what the fuss was about, he was under the impression that elves had an exclusionary culture.

What in the world could possibly have led to a scenario like this? He genuinely had no idea.

"Gah hah hah... Oh, sorry, what were you saying?"

"Right... So, what is this commotion about?"

"What's it about? Well, nothing in particular, I guess... We're kind of just hanging out right now. If I had to say, it's a festival to pray to the forest god...or the pre-party, at least. It hasn't started yet."

"The forest god...?"

Soma hadn't heard that name before. He knew that there were those who worshipped spirits of the land, though, and since the elves had apparently once been forest spirits, it was no wonder that they would revere the place in which they lived.

But...

“Yeah, I suppose you would react that way, since only we know about him. But he’s really here, and he helps us out, y’know? That’s why we get a power boost in this forest.”

“Oh...?”

If he could state that much with confidence, this being must really exist. Soma couldn’t deny that. But even then, it probably wasn’t really a god.

The only gods in this world were the one who had fallen and become the Archdevil, and the Goddess. Hildegard had said as much, and she had personally met the Goddess, so she had to be right.

The question, then, was whether this being called themselves a god or had been given the title by others. If they gave the elves a significant amount of power, which was certain, they must have been a high-ranking being, at least. Maybe it was something like an apparition.

It didn’t really matter to Soma whether or not something like that existed, however. What he was more curious about was...

“Hmm... So is this a regularly held festival?”

“Huh? Nah, of course not. Then we wouldn’t be so worked up over it.”

“I see... So it’s been a while. When was the last time this happened, then?”

“Ahh, when was it... Sorry, man, but I don’t really know. It was before my time. I think my gramps was in one, so must’ve been a few hundred years ago...”

That was more than just a while. Well, it may have been just a while to the elves, but it wasn’t to Soma, at least.

In that case, though, it was just about confirmed...Felicia had been summoned here for some reason related to this. It would have been unreasonable to conclude it was just a coincidence.

“I can see the reason for such commotion, then, as well as how I was able to come here...or be here, I should say. While I hate to put it this way, I’ve heard that elves are quite exclusive.”

“Well, that’s true. Nobody would’ve invited you any other time. They would’ve just thrown you out of the forest and left it at that. No clue why you came out here, though.”

“Hmm... I suppose I was lucky, then.”

He couldn’t say that was true across the board, since he would still have been in the Witch’s Woods if not for this...but considering how easily he’d been able to come here, it wasn’t wrong to say that he’d had good luck.

Just then...

“Oh...?”

“Hey, it’s the star of the show.”

The chatter increased in volume, and everyone’s attention was pulled in the same direction. The same was true of the man, and based on his comment, he knew exactly what was going on.

And Soma didn’t need to ask him for an explanation. He could immediately tell what was happening...or more precisely, who had just shown up.

What had drawn everyone’s attention was the appearance of new figures—two of them.

One of them was Joseph. Dressed as he had been when he’d parted with Soma, he slowly walked out of the forest as if guiding the other figure behind him, who was unfamiliar to Soma.

No...when she came closer, Soma realized he just hadn’t recognized her at first.

“Felicia...?”

It was definitely Felicia, but she was wearing clothes the likes of which he’d never seen in this world, and they made her look completely different. On top she wore a white kimono-like robe, and on the bottom she wore a pair of red, wide-legged pleated trousers tied at her waist.

He was looking at a fair girl in the traditional clothing of a shrine maiden.



## 20

Joseph, with Felicia accompanying him in shrine maiden clothing, proceeded to the clearing and stopped there. Standing at the forest's edge, he gazed around and then opened his mouth.

"Thanks for your patience. Without any further ado, let's begin."

The elves, who had been watching him, began to move immediately. They started gathering around Joseph...no, around Felicia behind him.

The sight made it clear that they were beginning some process, but that was all that Soma could tell. All he could do, not having been told the specifics, was look on in puzzlement.

"Hmm..."

As he kept watching, he began to understand what they were doing. The elves had formed a line, and one by one, they knelt before Felicia and clasped their hands.

"It looks as if they're praying..."

"That'd be because they are. Well, more like wishing than praying."

"Oh...?"

Soma had thought he was talking to himself, but when he received a reply, he turned around to look. As he'd gathered the moment he heard the voice, the man was still sitting there. Apparently he hadn't joined the line like Soma had assumed.

"Hmm... Aren't you going to go?"

"I missed my chance to get in early. I'd be waiting just as long if I got in line right now, so I figure I'll wait here till it gets shorter. And I wouldn't want to leave our guest all alone."

"Is that so... May I ask you some questions, in that case?"

“Sure, go ahead. It’ll be a while till they’re done, anyway.”

“I appreciate it. So...”

As Soma considered where to start, he looked over toward Felicia. She might tell him about it later...but he could still ask the question that was currently on his mind.

“I know you said they’re wishing...but what are they doing exactly?”

“Basically the same thing I mentioned before. It’s a festival to give thanks and pray to the forest god, and this is kind of...the prep stage? Or the first step, I guess.”

“So you wish for something from someone else in preparation for praying to the forest god?”

“Ahh, well, about that... How do I put it...”

“Oh, it’s all right if you can’t tell me.”

“No, it’s not like that, but...”

The man crossed his arms and began to murmur to himself, looking toward Felicia.

Elves were exclusive, and they also had their own laws. Since Soma was asking mostly out of curiosity, he didn’t mind not finding out if it conflicted with those laws.

But that really seemed to not be the case, as the man scratched his head, sighed, and began to tell Soma why they were praying.

“It’s no use, man... I wanted to give it to you short and sweet, but I can’t think of how. Mind if I give you the long version?”

“Of course not, since I’m the one who asked.”

“All right, so... That girl they’re all praying to right there... She’s the star of the show, like I said. She was picked to be a shrine maiden for the forest god.”

“Hmm...”

He’d wondered if it could possibly be the case when he’d seen her in shrine maiden clothing, and apparently she really was a shrine maiden, but...

“Do you mean...a *shrine maiden* shrine maiden?”

“I only know of one kind, so yeah.”

“But I thought they were only in the Holy City... Wait, I see...”

In this world, shrine maidens connected God with people and people with God. That was the kind of shrine maiden Soma was familiar with, at least, and some called them divine messengers. Essentially, they conveyed God’s voice to the people and communicated with God on their behalf.

There could only be one shrine maiden at a time, and when she died, another would inherit the position. Because of her nature as a proxy for God, she lived in the Holy City, the central location of Divinism.

Technically, they weren’t called shrine maidens anymore, but saints or saintesses...and they certainly didn’t live anywhere but the Holy City.

Nevertheless, the reason that shrine maidens lived only in the Holy City was that the only god was the Goddess whom Divinists worshipped. In other words, if there were other gods, it would make sense for there to be shrine maidens elsewhere. They would just have different objects of worship.

But...

“You said she was chosen as a shrine maiden. Who chose her?”

“Huh? The chieftain, of course. He’s a priest too, after all.”

“Hmm... I understand.”

That deepened Soma’s conviction that this “forest god” wasn’t a real god, because the Goddess herself chose Divinist shrine maidens. That was precisely why they were treated as divine messengers.

And that wasn’t exactly a secret. It was widely known, in fact. It was hard to imagine that anyone who knew what a shrine maiden was wouldn’t know that.

In that case...

“Well, that aside... They’re praying in order to have their wishes communicated to the god, then? I don’t see any of them speaking...”

Even as Soma spoke, the elves were offering their prayers and then returning

to where they had been before. They were really only praying silently, though. None of them said what they'd prayed for out loud.

"If shrine maidens have mind-reading Skills, I wasn't aware of that..."

"No, she doesn't know what they're praying for. But apparently if you pray to her, it gets through to the forest god. Maybe that's just what they say, though, and they used to actually read minds in the past."

"Oh, that's plausible."

The gods of this world were more like managers, not creators. Their jurisdiction was limited and they were far from omnipotent. That meant that they couldn't receive all the prayers directed toward them. That was precisely why there were shrine maidens.

But if shrine maidens could communicate with even the Divinist God, they must have been able to do the same with this being called the forest god. It made sense to think that their god would know what they prayed for.

Alternatively, maybe none of their prayers were meant to come true in the first place, which would remove the need for their god to hear the prayers. If they wouldn't come true, though, it would make this whole thing pointless...

"I suppose it doesn't matter."

"Nope. Whatever it used to be like, there's only one thing for us to pray for now."

"There is?"

"That's why we're having this festival after all this time."

"Hmm... I see."

Soma had wondered why they were holding a festival that hadn't been held for centuries, but apparently it was simply because there was a need to. He'd half predicted that would be the case, though.

"May I ask what that reason is?"

"Sure...but you wouldn't get it anyway. It's obvious to us, since we're always with this forest, but if you don't know how it usually is..."



“What do you mean?”

The man shut his mouth at that question. He appeared almost afraid of something.

“Don’t you sense something kind of...troubled and frightening from this forest?”

“Hmm... Yes, I suppose I do.”

It was a matter of sensitivity whether one would describe it as frightening, but there was certainly some large presence there. He’d wondered during their conversation whether that was the being in question...and the man seemed to grasp what was on Soma’s mind.

The man nodded. “Yeah... That there’s the forest god. We’re doing this festival to pacify him...just like we did all those years ago.”

He definitely seemed afraid as he said that. Soma gave him a questioning look.

“I’m sorry if this offends you, but do you really need to be so scared?”

“Right... You don’t know this forest. We can tell, since we’ve lived here for so long and borrowed its power. The forest god’s power isn’t supposed to be like this...and it could wipe us all out on a whim.”

“Hmm...”

When you worshipped a powerful being, it was natural to be in awe once you knew the true extent of its power. As the man talked about it, though, his face showed emotions other than awe.

It was almost as if...

“Oh, I’d better go or they’ll all finish praying. Thanks for keeping me company.”

“I should be thanking you.”

Soma shrugged as the man hurried toward Felicia, then murmured to himself.

What was he to do now? He didn’t think Joseph would have brought him along only to completely abandon him, but he didn’t know how long he was

supposed to wait, and he had nothing to do in the meantime. He couldn't exactly go up there and pray.

"No, maybe I could... And I could ask what I'm meant to do at the same time."

He seriously considered it for a moment but decided against it. He was an outsider who'd been brought here; he wouldn't mind praying if he had to, but he shouldn't do anything that would interfere with their festival.

He'd only been able to ask the man about the basics, and he wasn't even sure whether he could assume those answers were correct. That was even more reason not to do anything unnecessary.

"Well, regardless..."

It didn't seem like anyone else would be available to tell him about it like that man had been. He glanced around again; the elves who had finished hadn't resumed their merrymaking but were watching Felicia in silence as if waiting for something. It wouldn't do to interrupt them.

Just as Soma was thinking that, the man from before came to the front of the line. Soma saw him kneel before Felicia and clasp his hands in prayer. He seemed so serious that it was hard to believe he'd just been laughing so raucously.

He was done praying within seconds, and when he stood up and turned around, he noticed Soma watching and shot him a crooked smile as if caught in a compromising position. Soma shrugged back.

And he was apparently the last one; the line was all gone now. Felicia, who had been steadfastly looking downward, lifted her head and exhaled—and their eyes met.

She instantly averted her eyes. Soma looked at her in confusion. She must have known he'd been watching...and she didn't look shy, exactly, but like a kid who'd gotten in trouble. No...closer to a kid who was trying to hide that they'd been up to no good.

"Hmm..."

But he couldn't continue to observe Felicia. Joseph was first to act, and they

moved on.

“All right, has everyone finished praying to the shrine maiden? Let’s move on to the next rite.”

Joseph glanced at Soma briefly but didn’t say anything, from which Soma surmised that he’d been right not to participate. They started the next rite before Soma heard any more information, though.

The elves hadn’t been told the details either, but they must have heard about it beforehand, judging by how they seemed to know what to do. That didn’t change that Soma had no idea, however...

“What are they doing this time anyway?”

The elves were lining up again, even though they’d just finished going through a line. This time, however, each was holding something.

He couldn’t tell what they were from afar, but each one seemed to have something different. Some of the things looked like knives, and some looked like seashells. There were even elves holding furry things or arrows. There was no commonality. As each elf approached Felicia, they handed their object to her.

“It’s as if they’re presenting her with gifts...”

“Yeah, kind of, in a sense. They’re offerings, actually.”

“Hmm?”

Soma turned to look; it was that same man again. He’d assumed the man had gone up there, but he’d come back here for some reason.

“Are you some kind of loner? Is that why you wanted to speak with me before?”

“What’re you talking about? I can’t just leave a guest unattended, can I? And the others won’t keep you company, since they’re pretty wary.”

“Well, that’s to be expected.”

“And that’s why the job’s fallen to me.”

“Do you mean to say you spoke to the others about it?”

There had been a bit of time between the prayers and when he'd come back, so Soma thought he might have gone somewhere else in between.

"Actually, I was asked to do this."

"Oh? Who asked?"

"The chieftain."

"Hmm..."

In other words, Joseph had asked. It must have been while Soma was distracted by Felicia. Joseph must have had other things to do, so he wanted someone else to take care of Soma in the meantime.

But...

"Did he say anything else to you?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, he said to let you stay at my place tonight. You don't have a place yet, right?"

"Hmm... I would certainly appreciate that..."

If he hadn't been told anything else, that meant Joseph didn't intend to give Soma a direct explanation.

No...considering that he'd arranged a place for Soma to stay, it was too early to conclude that. There would be no need to have Soma here if Joseph didn't want him to know what was going on, so they would probably have a chance to talk one-on-one at some point. Soma had a lot of questions, but they could wait until then. For now, he would be patient and watch the ceremony.

"And if the time comes, I can get in on it myself..."

"Hey, did I just hear you say something concerning?"

"You're hearing things. That aside, what did you mean by offerings?"

"I really don't think I'm hearing things...but whatever. Anyway, what I mean is..."

Figuring that this was as good a way to pass time as any other, Soma watched Felicia and the others as he listened to the man.

## 21

By offerings, the man had meant that they each offered up something important to them. It wasn't for the shrine maiden, however, but the forest god. The shrine maiden was nothing more than a proxy, a middleman of sorts.

This was actually the first time this ritual had been conducted, however. It hadn't been done centuries ago but had been newly added this time.

Soma thought this must be more proper, though; in order to have a wish granted, they gave something in return. He felt like he'd heard that somewhere before...

"Hmm... So what are they doing now?"

While he was talking, they had moved on to the next step. Soma hadn't done anything this time either, and nobody had said anything to him. The man had made his own offering at the end, then come straight back to Soma...and just after that, this had started.

It was hard to explain what exactly this was, but the closest thing Soma could recall was seeing people greet higher-ups at a work party. The higher-up in this case was Felicia, of course, and the elves were "greeting" her. Basically, they were pouring drinks for her and talking to her about something.

And while the prior rituals had only taken seconds per person, each one was taking longer this time—at least a minute each. What could they possibly be doing?

"Well, how to explain... First we pray, then we make offerings, and then we confess our true intentions to the forest god, I think? I'm pretty sure that's what the chieftain said."

"Your true intentions..."

"Yep. We can't start with that, of course. And apparently we have to actually talk for it to understand us."

“Hmm... Is there a barrier making it impossible to hear them?”

“Apparently. I think it’s so people can be honest about things they don’t want the others to hear or something. That’s what we were told, at least. Oh, and the chieftain has a message for you this time.”

“Oh...?”

He’d thought he still wouldn’t hear anything, but now that he thought about it, it had already been quite some time. And considering how long each person was taking and how many were left, it would probably be night by the time they were all done. Soma didn’t know how long these rituals would continue, but it made sense that he would receive some order right now.

“What did he say?”

“Yeah... He said you have to participate in this one too. At the very end, though.”

“Hmm...”

Soma didn’t have a problem with that, but he wondered what Joseph’s intention was in this. He wouldn’t be able to figure it out just by thinking about it, though, and he had no reason to refuse. After a moment of consideration, he nodded.

“I’d like to know why, but I can ask him myself. I’ll do it.”

“It’ll be some time till then, anyway.”

“It will indeed.”

There was still a long line of elves before him. Soma met eyes with the man, and they exchanged wry smiles with a shrug.

†

Darkness was upon them before he knew it, probably because the trees surrounding the clearing grew so high. Leaves and branches towered above their heads, blocking most of the sunlight. The sky was still visible through the gaps, but it was growing closer and closer to black.

That was when the man before Soma finished, and it was finally Soma’s turn.

“Hmm...”

He stepped forward, changing places with the man, and felt a momentary disturbance. That was proof that he'd passed through the barrier.

He glanced around and naturally saw Felicia and Joseph. Joseph had his usual surly look. Soma had only seen his face a few times, but that expression had been the same each time. It was probably safe to say that was typical of him.

And as for Felicia...

“How do I explain this... Something feels off about you.”

“Huh...? Um... Do I look weird?”

“Do you mean to tell her she looks bad like this?!”

“No, it isn't like that. I'm simply not used to seeing you like this. You give off a different impression than usual. I think it suits you, however.”

She'd gone from a witch to a shrine maiden, so it was an understatement to say she looked different; she was almost like a different person. He wasn't just being polite when he said it suited her, though. The clothing brought out her white hair and red eyes shockingly well. That was also probably because she had good features in the first place, but it looked so natural on her that he would have believed her if she'd said this was how she normally would have dressed.

“I-Is that so... Thank you.”

“You...”

Joseph's face grew even more surly, even though Soma had complimented her. There was even a faint hint of anger lurking there, although that had been the case before now as well.

But Joseph and Felicia's relationship was that of a chieftain and the witch he was harboring. He should have had no reason to be angry on her behalf.

So why was that... Soma wondered, but shook it off with a shrug. He hadn't asked him directly, but he had a guess, and he had no need to bring it up. That wasn't what he'd come here to do.

“So why did you call me here? I assume it isn’t to make me participate in this ceremony.”

Joseph seemed to remember when asked; the slight anger subsided, leaving his normal stern expression. He huffed once as if to recenter himself, then opened his mouth.

“I would have made you join in from the beginning if I’d wanted that. But this is for us elves. It isn’t something for outsiders like you to get involved in.”

“As I gathered. Why, then?”

“To tell you what we’re going to do, of course. I didn’t think I’d need to tell you the details, but...”

“But you ended up telling me you would explain later, hence you have to give me a proper explanation.”

“Hmph...” Joseph huffed, unamused, but he seemed to intend to explain. He looked upward as if thinking of what to tell Soma. “Well, this pertains to a top secret of ours, so there’s a limit to what I can tell you. To sum it up...we’re trying to conduct a ceremony to pacify our god, the god of the forest.”

“Hmm... And you needed Felicia for that? Even though she’s a witch?”

As soon as the words left Soma’s mouth, Joseph’s eyes fell onto him, narrowing. The emotion in them wasn’t in the anger family, however. It was something else.

Before Soma could ascertain what it was, though, Joseph closed his eyes and sighed.

“Right, you wouldn’t be able to pick up on it. This concerns the survival of our race, though, and I needed all the help I could get. I would have preferred not to, though... If possible, we should have solved this problem on our own.”

“That’s all fine and good, but couldn’t you have told me that from the beginning? Why set this time aside?”

“Hmph... Do you mean to say you’ll accept that as an explanation? I put this off because I thought that was unlikely. You’re taking me at my word because you saw us conducting the ceremony, right?”



“Hmm...”

That may have been the case, when Joseph put it like that. If Soma hadn't seen how the elves were behaving and heard the other man's explanation afterward, he might not have accepted that as an explanation so quickly.

“I see... So telling me earlier might have ended up taking longer.”

“Hmph, exactly. I also didn't have any extra time.”

That also made sense. It was already just about night. It would have been even later if Joseph had taken the time to give Soma a full explanation.

“Hmm... So I'll take that as an explanation, but may I ask you one thing?”

“What?”

“Are you really going to just let me leave?”

It could potentially be a fatal mistake for them. Although Soma didn't intend to, he could spread the news that the elves were harboring a witch, and it would threaten their continued existence. Joseph shouldn't normally have been able to leave that risk unchecked.

“Hmph... I promised that to this one, and we keep our promises. No matter what. Also, it won't be an issue for us even if you talk.”

“What do you mean?”

“You heard that I'm banishing this one if this goes well, right? In that case, there would be no witch here, so we could handle it. We're elves, so we'd be perfectly capable of hiding any trace of her in this forest.”

Soma couldn't confidently call that an exaggeration, because he really hadn't noticed the slightest sign that there was a witch being sheltered here. They must have been capable of hiding the evidence, in that case.

The problem was...

“Are you sure you should banish a witch, though?”

“Hmph... This is just that important. I'd rather keep her around, yes, but a witch isn't worth letting our race die out. And you've heard that elves can't lie, haven't you? So everything I've said is true.”

“Hmm...”

Soma looked toward Felicia. She met his gaze directly. Her eyes showed sincerity, and Soma didn't sense any intention other than her own in them. It didn't appear that she was being forced into this.

“Is that right?” he asked just to be sure.

She nodded. “Yes, it's true. And... I'm sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“You promised to help me, but I won't be needing it anymore.”

“I still don't understand... Is this the end of the ceremony?”

“No, we're not even doing the ceremony right now,” Joseph said. “This is the preparation. The ceremony is tomorrow. It's true that we won't need your help, though.”

“If it warrants getting help from a witch, I would think that you could use any help you can get.”

“Didn't I tell you that if possible, we would have done this all on our own? Or maybe I should put it this way... Having anyone else but her involved would only get in our way.”

Joseph's face remained stern, and Felicia continued to look directly at Soma.

And then...

“He's right. And, one more thing... I owe you a lot, but it seems I won't be able to repay you. I'm sorry.”

“As I've told you, you've done more than enough for me...but what do you mean by that?”

“I meant exactly what I said. This is goodbye, Soma. Thank you for everything.”

Those were the next words she said to him.

## 22

The clearing had temporarily been noisy, but there was not even a trace of that left now. Only Soma and the man remained. Apparently that had really been the end of today's proceedings, and everyone had dispersed.

It hadn't been long since Felicia had said her goodbyes to Soma. Joseph had quickly indicated it was time to finish, and the elves had obeyed and immediately withdrawn.

The only people left were Soma, who had been pondering what she'd just said to him, and the man accompanying him.

"How about we get going? No point in us sticking around."

"Hmm... Understood."

Soma agreed because he'd just finished thinking. He hadn't had much to ponder in the first place, and he had no objection to going somewhere else.

What had been on his mind was why Felicia had said goodbye to him. It wasn't very complicated, though, hence why it hadn't taken him long to come to a conclusion.

It was based on elf laws. According to those, Soma wouldn't be able to stay here.

Joseph had said that elves were exclusionary not so much because of their dispositions as because of their laws. With rare exceptions, they weren't allowed to bring any non-elves into this forest. That added to the exclusivity of the situation.

Soma could be here because he counted as an exception. However, now that Felicia had determined she wouldn't need his help, he wouldn't be allowed to stay any longer.

He had been invited here on the pretense that Felicia might need his help, so it made sense that he would have to leave if he couldn't fulfill that condition.

He would have until the next morning before they kicked him out, apparently, but that was all.

Of course, that was just what the elves said. Soma honestly had no obligation to obey. However...the question was whether he had any reason *not* to obey.

“It may be unreasonable, but is that a good reason not to listen...”

“Huh? Oh, you mean how you’re getting kicked out tomorrow? Well, I guess it must look unreasonable to you... But I hope you’ll cooperate.”

“Because it’s the law?”

“That, and because we’re in the middle of an important ceremony. It’ll be hard to handle tomorrow if you don’t.”

“Oh, since the main event is the day after tomorrow, you’re doing something tomorrow as well...”

“Well, we sure are doing something, but if I had to say... Oh, before I tell you about that, here we are. This is my house.”

The two had been walking through the forest as they spoke, and the man stopped as he said that. Soma stopped as well and looked around, but he didn’t see a house anywhere. It was just a gigantic tree with a thick trunk...

“Oh, right, elves make houses in the treetops and live there.”

“Exactly. We don’t come down to the ground much. We only use that clearing about once a year. Anyway, wait a sec. I’m not that high up, but it’s still a ways off the ground. I’m gonna get ready to take you up with magic.”

Soma looked up and saw the shadow of something like a house. It was certainly rather high, but not *too* high.

“No, I won’t be needing that. I can get up there on my own.”

†

He’d wondered what a house built in the treetops would be like, and the interior was more normal than he’d expected. It resembled Felicia’s house, as did the outside, which made him think this style may have been typical of elves.

It appeared to just be sitting on top of the branches, so he’d been somewhat

nervous, but it seemed more stable than he'd thought. Between that and the fact that it was larger on the inside than the outside, it was probably enchanted. Apart from places like the academy, magic wasn't typically used on buildings like personal homes because of the difficulty in maintaining it...but it made sense for an elf.

While Soma studied the inside of the house with great interest, despite thinking it might be rude, the man spoke to him, sounding taken aback.

"I figured you meant you could use magic too... Didn't expect what you did instead."

Soma turned a puzzled look to him. He didn't recall doing anything particularly weird. He'd only come up here by the most common of methods.

Well, maybe that was genuinely unexpected for elves, since they could use magic as easily as their arms and legs.

All Soma had done was climb the tree, though...

"I've never heard of anyone 'climbing a tree' by running straight up the trunk...but whatever. Goes to show why the chieftain invited you."

"I wonder..."

Soma didn't feel like that was related. It half seemed like it had just been a series of coincidences.

"Even so, he wouldn't bring just any human. Anyway... Now that we're at the house, let's continue."

"Continue what?"

"The party, of course."

As soon as he said that, the man proceeded into the back. For a moment, Soma considered following, but he was in what seemed like a living room right now. He didn't know what the man was planning, but just as Soma had concluded that it would be best to wait here, the man returned. In his arm, he held a bottle whose contents Soma identified immediately.

"Alcohol?"

“Well, it’s a celebration. We were all drinking before the activities started earlier, remember? Weren’t you?”

“I suppose I didn’t know. I’ve never been much of a drinker, however.”

And he wasn’t physically mature in the first place. Ladius law ruled that only adults could consume alcohol, and although this wasn’t Ladius, it would be bad for his health to drink as a minor. It was also true that he hadn’t much liked alcohol in his past life, so he didn’t intend to enjoy a drink.

“That’s a shame... But I won’t force it on you. It defeats the purpose of a celebration if you don’t enjoy it.”

“Oh, that reminds me... I was wondering if it’s okay for you to enjoy yourselves.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, everyone seemed solemn during the preparation for the ritual earlier. And the ceremony is meant to pacify the forest god, right? Celebrating seems out of place...”

“Oh, the chieftain told you all that? I can see how it’d seem strange in that case...but that’s one thing and this is another, y’know? We have to keep quiet tomorrow either way, so why not pull out all the stops today after all these centuries?”

“Tomorrow...?”

That reminded Soma—they’d been in the middle of talking about doing something tomorrow.

“Right, I was in the middle of telling you about that. Well, it’s nothing much. Since the main event is the day after tomorrow, we all have to stay home and pray all day tomorrow. That’s why it’ll be an issue if you don’t leave in the morning, since we can’t leave our houses.”

“Hmm... Praying nonstop in your homes. That must take a lot of patience... I don’t hear of things like that often.”

“It’s strange to me too, but this is the first time we’ve done it in centuries, and apparently that’s just how it’s done. That’s why I want you to leave tomorrow

like we asked, and why I want to have some fun today. And I hope you'll enjoy yourself today too! Forget all your worries!"

The man definitely seemed to be having fun as he took a gulp of the drink. He was grinning and laughing out loud as if to proclaim that he was enjoying the moment.

Almost as if he was trying to convince *himself* that he was having a good time right now.

Soma watched him, narrowing his eyes, and let out a sigh as he reflected on what had happened that day.

## 23

Felicia stared blankly at the wooden wall. She had nothing to do, and she didn't feel like doing anything.

But as she sat idly, she couldn't help but think about the events of earlier today...when she'd said goodbye, and the person she'd said it to.

What she'd said hadn't been a lie. No, it wasn't false, but...if asked whether it was true, she would have to say no.

That was the sort of thing she'd said to him—to Soma.

She'd thought it was for the best that she did that. It might have just been self-centeredness...but she felt like if she told him the truth about her situation, he would try to save her. He'd actually told her he would, after all.

That was precisely why she'd decided to shake that helping hand off, though. If she intended to be the sole survivor, it was unnecessary.

Soma had gained the respect of a dragon. If she'd really asked him to help, he would surely have been able to take her away.

Witches used witchcraft equivalent in power to others' wishes; they couldn't use it on themselves. If not for witchcraft, witches would have been below even an average person in ability.

That meant that if she wanted to escape, all she would need to do was have someone do something about it.

That was *if* she wanted to escape, however.

Yes, that was what the problem came down to—she didn't think it would be good for her to escape.

She'd chosen this path because she wanted everyone to live more than she wanted to survive herself. That was all.

Just as her father and mother had done.



Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. She immediately knew who it was. Smiling wryly at how conscientious he was despite the lack of a need for it, she replied.

“Come in.”

“Hmph... Excuse me.”

As she'd expected, a familiar face appeared. It was the chieftain of the elves and her older brother, Joseph.

He'd gone away to do some more work after today's rituals, but he was apparently done. When she glanced at him, he looked down at her as if in ill humor and huffed.

“You look well.”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Why would it be? I'm alive and well right now because of all the accommodations you've made for me as my brother, and today is no exception. I really mean it.”

“Hmph... Is that so?”

“Huh...?”

Felicia responded with confusion, because he'd simply nodded. Before now, he always...

“What?”

“Nothing... It's just that you didn't correct me when I called you my brother.”

“Hmph... Well, I am, so there's no need to. It's just the two of us here right now, after all.”

That would also have been true of most of the times they'd met... He could be so awkward.

She wasn't one to talk, though.

“Is that so...”

“Yeah.”

Their conversation petered out. Silence filled the space.

But it wasn't a bad thing. Felicia didn't dislike it, at least.

Joseph, however, seemed uncomfortable, which made her smile a little. He really hadn't changed at all.

“You didn't just come here to check on me, did you?”

Joseph blinked several times and huffed. The smile on Felicia's face grew; that habit of his was one more thing that hadn't changed.

He'd picked up the habit when their parents had passed and he'd inherited the position of chieftain. He'd been under the impression it would project authority or something like that.

What it really projected was arrogance, of course. She wondered what things would be like now if she'd pointed that out to him.

“Of course not. I'm here to go over our plans for tomorrow.”

But those words dragged Felicia's thoughts back to reality. She'd already known and been prepared...but she couldn't stand up and face it so easily.

But she had to be strong and not worry her family, so she feigned calmness and nodded. “All right.”

“We're going to spend tomorrow cleansing you and making the preparations. Then, the next day...you die.”

The direct and uncompromising yet awkward way he said it brought a smile to her face. He really hadn't changed a bit. He could have just used the word “sacrifice”... It made her worry for her brother.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Is that so...”

Joseph tried to say something after that, but his mouth stopped in an awkward, half-open position. He finally just nodded and closed it.

The next thing he said probably wasn't what he'd just attempted to say, but it was sufficient to surprise Felicia.

“You won’t have any freedom going forward. In exchange, I swear that we’ll keep you safe. And this is who’ll be most closely protecting you. Come in.”

“Mm-hmm... I’ll do my best.”

“Huh...?”

Another familiar face appeared before Felicia.



It had been several years since they'd seen each other, but she hadn't forgotten the other girl's face. She couldn't possibly.

It was their younger sister, Sierra.

"S-Sierra... Why are you here? I thought you were on a journey."

"Mm-hmm. I just got back."

"It really was just a couple days ago," Joseph added. "She hasn't had time to let everyone know she's back."

"That's...amazing timing."

If Sierra had been even a little later or earlier in returning, she might have gone without knowing about or being involved in this.

Felicia was glad to see her sister, of course. But...she also thought it may have been better if Sierra hadn't found out.

"It's okay." Sierra looked directly at Felicia as if she'd read her mind. There was a slight uncertainty in her eyes but also a strong will.

"Have you changed a little?" Felicia asked.

"Have I...?"

"I think you would have been more unsure years ago." Even elves changed over the years, especially after going on a journey. But Felicia got the feeling that this was more than that.

"Mm-hmm... If it seems like that...it's thanks to them."

"Is that so..."

A subtle smile came to Sierra's usually expressionless face as Felicia replied.

So Felicia thought her sister would be okay. This might be hard for her...but she'd met people who made her feel that way. That made Felicia happy as an older sister, and she couldn't help but smile as well.

"Hmph, well, you can talk about those things after this. We'll be busy tomorrow, but there's some time left today," Joseph reminded the two.

"Wait, really...?" Felicia was taken aback.

“I told you the plans start tomorrow. I have no plans for you today. You can spend it however you want.”

“All right... Thank you.”

“Mm-hmm, thanks.”

Immediately after Felicia and Sierra thanked their brother, he huffed and turned around, at which point the two girls met eyes and exchanged smiles. It was heartwarming to see that their relationship hadn't changed at all.

Whatever happened after this, the time they had right now was certain.

“What are you doing after this?” Felicia asked Joseph.

“This is my house, and I just got back to it. I'm going to take some time to relax, of course.”

“I thought you usually worked later...” Sierra said dubiously.

“When are you thinking of? Of course I've gotten more efficient over the years. Well...my work happened to go especially well today, partially thanks to everyone putting in extra effort for some reason.”

“I see...”

In other words, he'd worked hard so that the three of them could have time together, and the others had helped. He could have just been honest about that... Their brother could be so awkward.

But thanks to him, it looked like Felicia could pass without reservations. It had been weighing on her mind a little that the three hadn't spent much time together.

This might weigh more heavily on the ones left behind, however. She hoped they would forgive that.

Regardless, after this...

“Oh...”

“What is it...?” asked Sierra.

“Oh, nothing... I just remembered something that doesn't matter.”

“You did...?”

“Yes...”

Indeed, it really didn't matter. Not to the person she was thinking of, at least... It might have even been one of the most self-centered thoughts she'd ever had.

But it had just occurred to her...

She'd said her goodbyes, but he hadn't said goodbye to her yet.

That was what Felicia thought about the boy who had crossed her mind.

## 24

The dark-haired girl doubted her eyes the instant she saw him. A boy was there who shouldn't have been.

"Wh-Why is *he* here...?!"

As she observed from where she was hidden in the shade of the trees, the resemblance didn't seem to be coincidental. But that was unthinkable.

"How far does he think it is from there to here? I guess it'd be possible if he hurried..."

The problem was that he had no reason to do that. Unless he'd known about this beforehand...

"But that's unthinkable too... All the other times seemed to just be coincidences. So what's the meaning of this...?"

The timing was just too good. There had been no sign of him before, but he had shown up at this exact moment.

"Is there a spy among us? No, but..."

That was hard to imagine, to be honest, because they didn't have anyone left who was capable of that. It was hard for them to even maintain the appearance of an organization right now; they would have noticed a spy right away.

And she hadn't told anyone about this. There was no way someone could have leaked it.

That left her with no way to explain it but luck.

"So he's here for some reason, and at this time... How unlucky can one be? No, but maybe..."

Maybe somewhere deep down, she wanted that.

She considered it for a moment, but hastily shook her head.

It wasn't true. It couldn't be true.



It was just her imagination, and she didn't have time to think about things like that right now.

"Maybe he just wandered here and isn't going to do anything before he goes back. For now, I'll keep an eye on him..."

She muttered as if trying to convince herself, following him deeper into the forest.

†

Soma was walking alone through the overgrown forest. He mumbled to himself about what to do next, but the only other sound was the rustling of the wind through the trees. He couldn't hear the voice of a single elf, and he didn't sense any of their presences either. It seemed like they were all really at home.

It was hard to tell from where he was standing, but the sun had already risen, and Soma was outside after having left the man's house.

There was a simple reason that he was lingering in the forest, however. He'd never had any intention of leaving.

Even a fool could have noticed that Felicia had been acting strange. It wasn't difficult to guess that what she'd told him might not have been a complete lie but wasn't true either.

And even disregarding Felicia, Joseph had definitely lied to him.

Soma knew that because of something Sierra had told him. Elves *didn't* lie, but it was just against the law. It wasn't that they *couldn't* lie. That was a huge difference, and someone like Joseph would know that.

And Sierra had also said that there were exceptions to that rule. He hadn't asked her what those were...but this must have fallen under the heading of one of them.

"It honestly doesn't matter, though."

The important thing was that Felicia had gone so far to distance herself from Soma.

It was probably true that lying was against their law. But that couldn't have been all. There were several things that couldn't be explained by that alone,

and Soma had guesses about those.

There weren't many options for someone who wanted to pacify a frightful being. If it would calm down when they prayed for its rage to subside, there would have been no need for the formal rituals—and no need to be afraid in the first place, for that matter.

To simplify the scenario, there were two options one could take in dealing with such a being: resist, or obey.

Whichever they chose, though, they would be setting themselves against a higher power. It would be too optimistic to expect to fix the problem without giving anything up in exchange.

It would have made sense if they had said that was why they had a witch. That was actually accurate, in a sense. He didn't have to consider the rituals and whatnot to know that a witch was the ideal being if you wanted to exchange something for something else.

The question, then, was what they would exchange, and for what.

If they planned to use the items they'd offered at today's ritual, there was no problem. In that case, however, the whole ritual would have been unnecessary.

But the most useless thing would have been the final ritual.

A conversation to confess their true intent? That was clearly a pretext.

He could state that because the elves had been overly familiar for people speaking to a shrine maiden, or, for that matter, to a witch.

And at the same time, there had been too great a sense of grim resolve in the air. They couldn't have disguised it without drinking and making merry.

Soma recalled a story the man had told the night before, after alcohol had loosened his tongue—the story of a white-haired girl who had once lived in this forest.

She'd been separated from her mother, who shared her hair color, but had lived with her father, the chieftain, and her siblings, who took after their father. She'd gotten along with everyone but had eventually gone to live with her mother. Several years later, she'd lost both parents and ended up alone. Her

siblings had kept infrequent contact with her...but that couldn't have been any consolation, the man had said.

"What is to be done..."

There must have been a lot Soma hadn't been told. Things that the man had judged neither necessary nor valuable to tell him.

But nevertheless...

"That doesn't change what I'm going to do."

That was why he was walking out here.

He was looking for Felicia, and then...

"Well, it all depends on whether I can make it to Felicia," he muttered with a sigh as he looked around.

He'd left the man's house as soon as the sun had come up, but it was almost in the middle of the sky now, although it was hard to see. This forest was rather large, but with all this time, he was perfectly capable of searching every corner of it.

And yet he hadn't managed to find a single trace of Felicia's existence, even though she'd been in that clearing just the day before.

There were only a few possibilities in that case, and the likeliest was that she was somewhere he couldn't reach, somewhere like the Witch's Woods.

But even knowing that, he couldn't think of any practical solution. The fastest way would be to go ask, but he didn't think they would tell him. The elves were all staying home today, and Soma was supposed to have left the forest already. It wouldn't make sense for them to answer his questions after that. The same went for that man.

Well, if it came to it, Soma would force the answer out of him. It wasn't time for that yet, however.

The main event was tomorrow. Nothing drastic would happen before then. Setting his last resort aside for the time being...

"I suppose I'll start cutting into anywhere that looks suspicious. I see a few

places to start... I doubt I'll leave the place half destroyed, even in the worst-case scenario. They might be surprised when they come outside tomorrow, but that's within allowable limits—"

"No way it is! What's the deal with your priorities?!" someone yelled from behind him. The voice was unfamiliar, and when he turned to see who it was, he didn't recognize the girl there.

However...

"Oh, you fell for it."

"Wha... I finally did it... Wait... Fell for it...?"

"Yes, I could tell somebody was following me."

"Wha—"

This place wasn't suited to trailing someone. Soma thought she'd done well despite that. He hadn't noticed her at first.

But it had proven impossible for her to keep hidden as he continued to walk around the forest. He'd ignored her because he hadn't known what her objective was...and he'd drawn her out now because he'd been at a loss for what to do next. To be honest, though, he hadn't thought that would actually draw her out.

"Tsk... To think I'd make such a foolish mistake... How stupid of me!"

"Now, don't disparage yourself like that. I thought you did a fine job of following me."

"Don't back me up like that! It just makes it more pathetic!"

"Is that so? I'll just come right out and ask, then: who are you?"

The girl, whose breath caught at that question, was plainly not an elf. That was evident from her hair color, which was a deep purple, almost black. She was most likely human.

It was possible for non-elves to be here, however, like Soma was right now and like Doris had once been. He also couldn't say for sure that somebody hadn't coincidentally happened to come here. Given that she'd been tailing

Soma, though, he couldn't conclude with certainty that it was a coincidence.

Soma was aware that his actions had appeared suspicious, though, so he wasn't sure what he would do if she stated that as her reason, but...

"You leave me no choice..." she said with a sigh, not attempting to make any excuse. "I don't want to tell you who I am, so I'm not gonna. I'll tell you one useful thing instead."

"Something useful?"

Then, with a resigned yet somehow relieved face, she told him...

"The thing you want to know most right now. Where they're doing the ceremony tomorrow. I'll tell you how to get there."

## 25

“Hmm... I would certainly like to know that, but it isn’t necessarily what I want to know most. I’d like to resolve it within the day.”

She smiled wryly. She’d expected him to respond exactly like that, so she didn’t hesitate with her next words.

“I don’t know what your goal is in moving around, but I think you should stop. If you want to interrupt the ritual, you could just do something about the sacrifice, but that wouldn’t solve the root issue... She wouldn’t be satisfied with that.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

She wondered why she was telling him this, of course. But she had no choice. She didn’t think he would let her go unless she talked, and she also got a feeling that he might spot any lies she tried to tell.

This, then, was the only thing she could tell him. She muttered under her breath that she had no other choice, then opened her mouth.

“It’s simple. She doesn’t have to be the sacrifice. You must know what the ritual they’re about to perform is, right?”

“I had a general idea...and your use of the word ‘sacrifice’ confirmed it. I’m more curious how you know about it, however.”

That was an obvious question, but she shrugged it off. She wasn’t obligated to tell him everything politely.

“So, it’s true that it would be an issue to lose her, and you could find another sacrifice. But if you don’t use her, what they’re trying to do this time won’t work, and they’ll need more sacrifices periodically. You could stop the whole thing, but that would be the end of the elves, and someone else would do it instead. The result would be the same in the end, though.”

“Hmm... I don’t quite understand, but I take it that it won’t be good enough

to just save Felicia. I thought that might be the case... If she could escape and it would turn out all right, I don't think she would be going along with it. What should I do, then?"

He looked at her questioningly but without any sign that he doubted her words.

That was probably why she ended up asking an unnecessary question.

"I know / shouldn't be asking this, but are you in your right mind, listening to some suspicious girl like this?"

"It can't hurt to just hear what you have to say. I can decide afterward what I'm actually going to do."

"Well, I don't mind, I guess..."

She felt like this whole thing was throwing her off. Why was she talking about this, anyway? She'd tried to exclude any information that might hinder her, but at this rate, all her hard work would go down the drain.

Of course, the thing that would probably hinder her most was standing right in front of her.

Well, maybe that was exactly why, she thought. Compared to him, it was no problem if *she* was left alive.

Her top priority was getting out of here in one piece, so she continued to speak in order to fulfill that goal.

"So it's simple. Just defeat the forest god. Considering what would come afterward, though, that alone wouldn't work out well."

"Oh? Why?"

"The elves here can only use extra power because of the forest god."

"Oh, that's right. In that case... That would certainly have negative consequences."

"That's why they were trying to seal it away."

"Hmm... Actually, why were they trying to seal it away in the first place? They revered it and called it a god, right? I can somewhat imagine, though, based on

how afraid they seemed...”

“It’s pretty much how you imagine.”

They’d called it a god because it gave them power, but at the same time, it was a being capable of wiping them out. They’d stayed and continued their warped commensal relationship, though, because if they ran away, some other race would just take that power. The elves had decided to seal away what they called a god in order to do something about that...and the past chieftain had given his own life in exchange.

“So that was the past ceremony... It’s a little different from what I imagined—in a good way. How do you know all this, though?”

“Well, there are some things you can’t hide no matter how hard you try, is all. And it’s another story whether knowing those things is meaningful.”

She’d been able to disturb the current chieftain, but that was the extent of it. And she’d only been able to accomplish that much because he’d been anxious. It wasn’t much return on the effort she’d invested.

“Hmm... So what should I do, ultimately?”

“It’s been sealed all this time, so I think it’s going to go berserk. I think if you subdue it then and make it listen to what you have to say, there won’t be any problem. That’s if you can do that, of course.”

According to the information she’d obtained, the forest god’s power increased over time. That continued while it was sealed, and it might even be close in power to an actual god now. In addition to simply being that immense, its power was now probably closer in nature to her side’s. Only the Dark Lord would be able to make it obey.

“I see... Where is this place, then?”

“Do you really understand...? You have to defeat the forest god and make it listen to you.”

“Well, I can’t know how it will go until I try. If it doesn’t work, then it doesn’t work. It would certainly be superior to death, so I’d just have to ask the elves to put up with it.”



He said that as if it was common sense, like it was normal to be able to defeat a forest god. She didn't think this was that kind of opponent...but maybe it was to someone like him.

And when she thought further, that wasn't even a problem. Ideally, the forest god and the witch—the two unpredictable elements—would destroy each other, but it wasn't certain that sacrificing the witch would do anything about the forest god. If he said he could defeat it, then she had no reason to shoot down that hope. She could accept the witch remaining alive if she thought of it as an exchange for that outcome.

“Well, do what you want. It doesn't matter to me.”

“I will. On that note...could I defeat this forest god today?”

“Well, it's still sealed, and only the elves can release it. There's nothing you can do.”

That was one of the reasons she'd stopped him. If he went now, it would only cause chaos. There wouldn't be any point to it.

“Hmm...all right... So where is this place?”

“There's a spot in this forest with conspicuously tall trees. It's connected to the space above there. That's where the elf chieftain's house is, and then there's a road to the spot.”

That meant he would have to get into the closed space somehow, but she didn't bother making that explicit. She thought that handling that would be a piece of cake for the boy in front of her.

“So in other words, I need to break into the chieftain's house first...”

“I don't have any advice for how to sneak in, so figure that out yourself. Well, that's all I have to tell you, so I'll be off now.”

She went to walk away, but Soma looked taken aback, which made her pause in puzzlement.

“Hmm? Did you not want anything from me?”

“Oh...”

That was a natural question for him to ask. She'd been tracking him, so it was normal to think that she had business with him.

She'd felt as if she'd wrapped up her business already. She hadn't been able to ask why he was here...but it would be awkward to no end to ask that now. Well, she'd forgotten it until just now, so she would simply have to give up on ever learning the reason.

"Well, I did, but forget about it. I don't need it anymore."

"You don't? Hmm... Well, thank you for telling me all this, then."

"Don't worry about it. I have my own reasons."

In fact, there was no reason he should be grateful to her.

She turned around and quickly left the area, wondering what in the world she was doing.

†

"I suppose I forgot to ask her name..."

Soma remembered that as he watched the girl leave, but she was already out of sight by then. He sighed and gave up on it for the time being.

"Well, I'm sure we'll meet again."

He had a feeling about that, and he was nearly certain. While she hadn't told him, she'd definitely had business with him. All she'd done in the end was give him information and leave...but he didn't think it was false information, so he would gratefully put it to use.

Whatever happened later would happen. There was something else he had to do right now.

"All right, the biggest trees, then..."

That was one of the places Soma had had his eye on. He'd thought it was one of the likeliest places, since he'd sensed such a large presence there.

That meant he likely would have gone even without her advice, but now that he knew that, he would approach it differently. Their conversation had been more than meaningful enough.

“Regardless...”

He couldn't think of any good ways to sneak in. He was confident that he could attack the area, and also that he could find it, but not that he could infiltrate it without being spotted.

If it came down to it, he could just charge straight into it, but...

“Hmm... Well, I have time, so I'll think about it a bit.”

There was no more information for him to gather, and the elves were all at home. The only thing he had left to do was to go back to that spot.

“I don't know what I'll do once I get there...”

But maybe seeing it would give him some ideas. With that in mind, he began to move.

There were countless trees in the elves' forest, but he recognized the place both because he'd taken notice of it before and because it was simply recognizable. It was plainly different in size from the rest of the forest, and most of all, it was situated directly in the middle. He couldn't possibly forget it.

So he knew it when he came upon it on his way toward the center of the forest. Its grandeur was clearly visible even without getting near, and as he approached, he sensed an overwhelming presence.

The forest Soma was most familiar with was the Devils' Woods, and the trees here were more formidable than any of the trees there. It hurt his neck to look up at their tops, and they were so wide that only several adults holding hands would have been able to encircle one. These were truly large, majestic trees.

It would hurt if he fell out of one of them, but they had footholds appropriate to their size. It didn't look like getting up would be a problem.

“The question is how to sneak in...”

Now that he thought about it, the only way he could get into the space was to cut it with his sword, but that would give him away immediately. But he didn't have any other ideas...and he couldn't exactly ask an elf for help.

“Hmm... Well, all I can say now is, whatever will be will be.”

He even considered the possibility that there might not be any need to sneak in. He'd already confirmed what tomorrow's ritual would be from that girl's use of the word "sacrifice." She'd affirmed that herself.

If he was going to ruin that ritual, kidnap Felicia, and even defeat the forest god, there was no point in worrying about the minor details. Of course, he would prefer not to get in anyone's way or cause unnecessary damage, but...

"Well, you've got to crack a few eggs to make an omelet."

With that in mind, he decided to let it go. Come what may, it would all happen tomorrow. He didn't know how it would turn out...but there was only one thing he could do.

Whatever came, he would slash it away and cut a path forward.

That was all he could do, he thought, narrowing his eyes as if glaring into the empty space before him.

## 26

Morning arrived in the forest of the elves, ushering tranquility into the shrine. The light of the sun, which was just showing its face, illuminated the highest point of the thicket.

Just then, a quiet sound broke the silence.

“Mine is the sword which slays evil.”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic*  
*Blessing* Absolute Severance *Sword of Pandemonium* Steadfast  
Resolve *Lightning Speed* Mental Stillness: Strike /  
Annihilator of Evil

Instantly, there was a sound like glass shattering. A gigantic, although warped, hole appeared as if to announce that the sound hadn't been just for show.

Soma, having relaxed his stance, narrowed his eyes as he looked into the hole. Contrary to his expectations, he saw forest in there as well. It was identical to the scenery he saw when he looked down from where he was standing, the only difference being that there was a large log house built in the treetops on the other side.

Soma wondered how it had been built there and whether it might fall, but it seemed stable, perhaps thanks to magic, and showed no signs of collapsing.

This must have been the chieftain's house.

“All right... Time to head out.”

He had to admit he was curious about the house, but he had a higher priority right now. Letting out a breath, Soma leapt into the hole without hesitation.

†

Joseph couldn't immediately comprehend what had happened. There was an

intense jolt, as if the world itself had been shaken, and then a booming sound, as if part of the world had been crushed. He'd never experienced anything like it before.

It was several seconds later when he finally grasped what had just happened.

"No... Was that...?!"

The fact he'd never experienced this before meant it had never happened before.

And given that it had been so intense...the barrier between this place and the outside must have been broken.

But the problem, he thought as he furrowed his brow at that conclusion, was that he didn't know why. They were about to begin an important ceremony, yes, but who would benefit from attacking the barrier?

"Hmph... I'll have to check for myself."

If they really wanted to do something about the ceremony, they would come to where Joseph was right now. He could ask whomever showed up then.

They wouldn't necessarily answer him, of course, and it was possible they would attack him without reservation.

But...

"My role in this is already finished. If it comes to that...so be it," he muttered.

Assuming an unyielding stance, Joseph waited for the intruder who was to come.

†

Naturally, the chieftain's house was rather large. It was similar in appearance to Felicia's home in the Witch's Woods, but it was clearly far greater in size. It must have had a spell cast on it to enlarge the interior, just like the house of the man whom Soma had stayed overnight with.

But even still, it was *overly* large. As previously mentioned, space-enlarging magic wasn't that easy to use. This level of expansion would require a lot of effort to maintain, even for an elf. If Joseph's house was in a place like this, he

must have maintained it himself... He must have had significant magic ability, then.

And Soma would be facing him soon.

“Well... It doesn’t matter.”

He would have preferred not to use violence, but if Joseph got in his way, Soma wouldn’t spare him. With that conviction, he dashed down the wooden corridor.

He had no doubts about where to go; he’d felt a definite presence ever since arriving here. It was quite intense compared to what he’d felt in the elves’ forest, but it was definitely that of the forest god. That meant he could simply head toward it.

And once he’d turned several corners...

“Ah.”

“You’re here.”

Soma halted when he came upon the wide space and the man standing silently there.

“Hmph... So it was you. I suppose it couldn’t have been anyone else, now that I consider it.”

“Yes, there you have it. And why might you be waiting here, brother?”

One of Joseph’s eyebrows twitched momentarily, but he made no further reaction. Soma had called him “brother” to rile him up, but he remained rather calm, like a good chieftain.

“Why, you ask? That should be obvious. Why are *you* here?”

“I believe that should be obvious as well.”

“Hmph... Right. That’s true.”

Both of their questions had been pointless, but at the same time, they had served to confirm the other’s intentions. In other words, each was an obstacle to the other.

But even knowing that, and knowing that he was up against a user of magic...

Soma didn't sense any intent to fight, so he didn't try to beat Joseph to the punch.

And it didn't seem like Joseph was just that good at hiding his intentions. It seemed more like...he was uncertain.

Joseph had been about to move his arm, but he seemed to reconsider; he lowered his hand, clenched it into a fist, then released it and crossed his arms once again. Then he took a step back and moved aside, as if to yield the way to Soma.

"What are you doing?" Soma asked.

"Exactly what it looks like I'm doing. I thought about it, and I'm the chieftain... Maybe I should prevent you from doing what you're going to, but I shouldn't cause you unnecessary harm right now. It would affect the two of us going forward as well as make trouble for the others."

"That may be the case, but..."

"And I'm not much of a fighter. You seem rather capable, so I don't expect I can do much to stop you."

Soma didn't sense any deceit in Joseph's eyes. It didn't seem as if he was planning a sneak attack.

"Are you sure?"

"Hmph... I just mean there's a right person for every job. The strongest of all the elves is standing guard. It's her job to get in your way."

"Is that so... Well, I'd like to finish this quickly, so if you say I can pass, then I will."

"Yes, waste as much time as you want. I wouldn't be surprised if she's one of the strongest elves who has ever lived. And even if you manage to get past her, there's nothing you can do. The seal is already broken. Before the forest god...whatever any one of us does is futile."

Rather than responding to Joseph, Soma simply shrugged.

He'd actually been slightly concerned about the seal, so if it was already broken, that was perfect. Although he'd infiltrated as soon as morning came, it



wasn't as if he'd had a reason for choosing that time; he'd taken a nap near the highest point of the forest, figuring he would know if anything happened, but the reason for his timing had simply been that he couldn't wait any longer. If the seal hadn't been broken yet, he would have had to wait for that anyway, however.

Regardless, that meant he had to hurry, so he couldn't simply be relieved. Warily, he proceeded past Joseph.

"Ah, right... I have one last thing to say to you."

"Hmph... What?"

"Be prepared when you get back. Speed is my highest priority right now...but when we get back, I'm going to punch you in the face, as brothers who don't protect their younger sisters deserve. What happens after that is up to Felicia."

"Hmph, is that so... I'll keep that in mind."

Hearing Joseph say that behind him, Soma left the room. He dashed down the following corridor in one spurt...but then paused once again.

The end of the corridor was open to the outside. Where he'd expected forest, though, it mysteriously continued to ground level. Space was apparently warped somehow.

Around him were many trees. From the looks of it, this was another part of the forest. The trees were some distance away, however; this seemed to be a sizable open space.

And...

"Oh, it's been a while...or is there another way I should greet you? Well, regardless, it's been a while."

He wasn't surprised to see her there. He'd had a gut feeling.

Seeming to feel similarly, the familiar figure nodded slightly, her golden hair swaying. However, the golden eyes with which she had always met his gaze remained turned away from him this time.

Yet the familiar girl—Sierra—responded likewise.

“Mm-hmm... It’s been a while, Soma.”

She'd had a vague feeling this would happen. As soon as she'd felt the jolt, she'd known someone had forced their way into this space...and she only knew one person who could do that.

She hadn't known Soma was here, of course, and she had no idea why...but considering what he was like, it made sense to her.

But that was one thing, and this was another.

She wasn't going to ask what he'd come here to do. She didn't have to ask in order to know the answer.

She would have to admit, she was curious why he'd decided to do this...but this wasn't the time to ask.

There was only one thing for her to do, and his answer wouldn't change that.

"Hmm... You seem rather determined."

"Of course..."

This was her duty, after all—the duty given solely to her by her brother, the chieftain. This was a charge she never would have imagined receiving back when she had to rely on everyone else, and so there was no way she wouldn't fulfill it.

"Hmm... I see how it is. I suppose this leaves me with one more face to punch..."

Soma, who had been observing her, muttered some words she didn't understand and let out a sigh. There was something almost discouraged-seeming about it.

But his demeanor flipped immediately. His eyes, which she'd consciously been trying not to meet but could see in her peripheral vision, narrowed into slits.

Instantly, she knew all too well that his state of mind had switched. She was struck by the sensation that her very heart was in a vice grip, or perhaps that

the edge of a sword was pressed against her throat—the sensation of certain death.

“Well, if you say so, then I have no choice but to take this seriously as well.”

Despite his words, he hadn’t assumed a fighting stance.

But Sierra knew—that was exactly how Soma held himself before a real fight.

In other words, he wasn’t going to hold anything back.

“Mm-hmm... Bring it on.”

That was how she wanted it, if anything. It had to be this way.

Otherwise...

Breathing slowly in and out to calm her mind, she took stock of the situation. He was about ten meters away—but that was as good as no distance between them. That was the case even for Sierra; how much more so for Soma?

The battlefield was approximately twenty meters in diameter. There was no room for complex strategy, and although Soma couldn’t have done anything to the area, she hadn’t either.

Essentially, she was at an overwhelming disadvantage. She had as good as no terrain advantage, and she already knew which way the skill gap leaned.

But...even if she couldn’t win, she couldn’t afford to lose.

Though her body threatened to shake, she steadied her hand and brought it to her sword. She brought her right arm and leg to the fore and thrust the top half of her body forward.

There was no need for any more words. With a sharp exhale, she kicked off at full force.

“One stroke, one slice.”

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration *Quick Draw* Mind’s Eye: One Stroke, One Slice.

She closed the distance in less than a second, stepping forward and swinging her arm simultaneously. She was going all out from her first move, not sparing any force. Her sword swung out in an intentionally lethal gray arc.

But when it made contact, it was with a hard surface. A high-pitched clang sounded.

She had known that was going to happen, however. That was why she was already taking another step.

“Dissipate.”

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration *Quick Draw* Mind’s Eye *Intuition (Imitation)* Combo: Dissipation Blade.

Sierra vanished instantly—not because she’d obscured her presence but because of the nature of the technique itself.

She’d done this in front of Soma once before, but he couldn’t have seen it in its entirety at that time. She would disappear, make him think she was about to attack from behind, then slash from the same position he’d just seen her in.

As she gripped the hilt of her sword, the blade made a shallow cut to the mouth of the sheath she’d returned it to...

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Sense Presence (Middle-Grade) / *Intuition (Imitation)*: Sense Danger.

Immediately, her instincts screamed she couldn’t follow through on her plan. A chill shot up her back, and she threw her body to the right, not resisting the impulse.

The second she collapsed to the earth, something sharp rushed by above her. If she’d moved even an instant later, she would have been sliced.

But there was no time for relief. She leapt to her feet, still holding her sword tightly, and swung it outward.

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mind's Eye / Obscure Presence (Low-Grade) *Combo: Vestigial Sword Haze*.

The attack was too aggressive, but she couldn't afford to be concerned with appearances right now. As a consequence, it struck thin air, but she'd expected that—and the slash hidden within that first slash reached Soma. But naturally, he parried it easily.

She was no match for him. It barely even felt like a fight. She felt as if she'd been drained of all her mental energy in just these few seconds. If she let her concentration slip for even a moment, she could only imagine she would end up in a heap on the ground. *This* was Soma taking a fight seriously, she felt viscerally.

She'd sparred with Soma several times, and she'd known that he hadn't been seriously fighting her. But she hadn't really *understood* that until now.

And while he was taking this seriously, he still wasn't at full power. If he had been, her head would have been separated from her body by now.

But that was precisely why Soma couldn't come at her at full power, and if there was any weakness of his she could exploit, that was it.

Whatever Soma said, he had a soft spot for those he deemed friends—an extremely soft spot. And Sierra thought that included her. If it hadn't, he would have already wiped the floor with her.

Considering that, she began to worry for her brother... He could be awkward at times, but he was a good brother when it came down to it.

All she could do was trust that he was okay, and she didn't have time to think about that, anyway. Putting distance between herself and Soma, she steadied her breathing and got back into stance.

This was whittling away at her energy, but she forced strength into the hand

gripping the hilt of her sword. Watching Soma's entire body, not just one point on it, she focused so as not to lose sight of any of his limbs.

If she would lose the fight as soon as she lost concentration, then she simply had to maintain constant concentration. Soma was holding back just enough that she could handle him as long as she managed that.

That was easier said than done, of course; she knew that more than well enough. She'd just actually fought him, if only for a few seconds. She couldn't help but be conscious of how hard it would be.

But still...

"Not yet..."

*I can't give up yet.*

Biting her lip, she leapt at Soma.

From that point, she would repeat the preceding events over and over, barely dodging his attacks.

She didn't have to be successful. In fact, she *shouldn't* win.

What she had to do was waylay him here as long as possible. Every second counted.

It would be best if they finished the ritual in that time, but the seal had just been broken. She wouldn't ask for too much, then—as long as it got to a point at which not even Soma could do anything about it.

Once that happened...

Amidst her accelerated thoughts, Sierra single-mindedly swung her blade. It was all for a single goal...to let them finish the ritual.

She didn't need anyone to tell her what awaited her after that. The three of them had understood that, accepted it, resolved themselves...and made the decision.

They had no other choice. The world wasn't kind enough to give them one.

If it had been...her sister wouldn't have been a witch in the first place.

None of this would have happened.

So this was the best fight they could muster against their circumstances.

Her brother had thought long and hard about how to improve the outcome, even by a little.

This issue concerned the entire elf race. Whatever he chose, there would be negative consequences.

This was the choice that would result in the smallest possible sacrifice—her sister. That was all there was to it.

It would have been easy to censure her brother as heartless or cruel, but all of the others understood that wasn't the case—even more so because he hadn't offered a single word of explanation.

And Sierra knew he must have gone through more deliberation and suffering than anyone else, so she'd decided she would help however she could.

It was just as their parents had once done—although they had probably been trying to live, not to die.

But there was nothing they could do about it.

It wasn't as if Sierra hadn't given it thought. She couldn't have helped but give it thought.

Her power was for times just like these. She'd trained for a time like this.

But as soon as she'd sensed *that* power, her confidence, minuscule in comparison, had been shattered. And all she'd sensed had been the remnants leaking from the seal.

It had been more than enough to break her heart, make her realize that anyone would be powerless before that, and force her to conclude that her brother had been right all along.

*Unless...*

Yes, if someone had been present here who made her think they might still be able to do something about it, she might not have been so sure.

If she'd seen that invincible figure, she might have come to a different conviction, even while thinking it was probably impossible.



But he hadn't been there then. And it was too late now.

As she had that thought, she gritted her teeth. So as not to lose to the cowardice bubbling up from the depths of her heart, she lifted her face...

"Oh—"

Their eyes met instantly. The all-encompassing jet black, like the dark of night, captivated her at once—his direct gaze seemed to look into the depths of her soul. It gave her the sense that all she'd been hiding would be exposed, that all she'd been suppressing would be unleashed.

That was why she hadn't wanted to look him in the eye. She'd known that she couldn't lie to herself before those unyielding eyes.

Instantly, there was a clang. The weight disappeared from her hand. The thing she'd been holding in it vanished from sight, and a gray object flashed through her peripheral vision.

As she looked up in disbelief, she thought...

Her sister had said she'd changed, but she really hadn't changed at all.

Sierra hadn't changed one bit since Doris had taken her away from this forest.

She'd wanted to live up to their expectations.

She'd wanted to be of use.

She'd wanted to fulfill her responsibility as royalty.

Those were her own feelings, her desires, her wishes.

She'd always felt that way from the bottom of her heart.

And naturally, she still felt that way.

But...

Above all else, she didn't want them to die.

That went for everyone. All of the elves, and Soma too.

But her big sister was among all of those people whom she didn't want to die.

She wanted to spend more time together.

She wanted to talk about more things.

She wanted her sister to cook food.

She wanted her to laugh, and to laugh with her.

She wanted her to live.

*Save her.*

“Please...save my sister.”

She found her wish spilling from her lips before she knew it. Her vision blurred and warped, and yet that blackness to which she spoke her request was still clearly visible within it.

Because she couldn't do it herself.

It was a selfish request.

It would be too good to be true.

But still...

She was about to open her mouth again but was interrupted by an impact to her head.

It was a hand placed on it, forcefully yet gently.

“You can count on me.”

As she heard him speak and felt his hand on her, Sierra noticed that Soma, who had been the same height as her before, had now surpassed her.

As Soma hurried ahead, he could feel the forest god's power on his skin, getting stronger moment by moment. It couldn't be just because he was getting closer to it; when he paused to check, it continued to grow stronger. That must have meant the seal was still coming undone.

"There are far too many things sealed away in this world..."

This was the third time he'd encountered one. It was more natural to conclude that things like this existed everywhere than that he'd just happened to come across a few rare cases. How unsettled was this world?

"But it may be superior to having hundreds of gods running rampant, including dragon gods..."

Well, either way, he thought as he turned to look behind him for a moment.

The events of a few minutes ago crossed his mind. He let out a sigh.

"Such troublesome siblings."

That gave him one more person to lecture when he was done with this. He would have to throw at least one punch.

"What good is a sister who makes her little sister cry?" he muttered, then faced forward and began to run again.

†

Felicia stood alone in the forest, her hands clasped and her eyes shut as if in prayer.

She wasn't really praying, and she wasn't attempting witchcraft either. She simply had nothing else to do.

Before her was something like an altar. A spherical light floated at its center, pulsing and flickering. There was a sound like a heartbeat. The intervals between the pulses were gradually shortening, and the flickering was accelerating too.

With her eyes closed, all Felicia could sense was the sound, but she understood that it would appear any moment now.

The forest god.

It was the lord of all the forest spirits, and the being that the elves worshipped.

And it was the being to which Felicia was to give her life in this ritual.

It sounded better when called a ritual, but it was essentially a human sacrifice. Felicia wasn't unhappy with that, though. She could even say she was satisfied.

That was because she knew it was a meaningful end, just as her mother had once known.

Felicia Leonhardt Waldstein was a so-called half-elf—the daughter of a high elf father and a witch mother.

There was no causal relationship between Felicia's parentage and the fact that she was a witch, however; the proof was that Sierra was a normal elf despite having the same parents.

Well, Sierra was unlike most elves in that she couldn't use magic, but that was simply because her talent was focused on swordsmanship. Special-Grade Skills were too substantial for a holder to have other exceptional talents at the same time; only someone superhuman would have been capable of that.

Regardless, that was why Felicia knew a lot about witches. She'd lived in the Witch's Woods and been taught many things, although only for a few years.

And one of those things was what it meant to meet her end...to grant her own wish.

Contrary to what was said previously, it wasn't strictly true that witches could never use witchcraft to grant their own wishes.

In fact, a witch could grant any wish...in exchange for their own life.

And generally, that was how witches met their ends.

While witches were enemies of the world, they were rarely actually killed.

They were simply too valuable for that. Although it required a price, they could make anyone's wish come true, even distorting the laws of reason if necessary. Anyone could understand the value of that.

And that was why witches were secluded. They were useful to everyone, but their power was limited. If they couldn't grant just anyone's wish, then their power was yours alone.

At the same time, that was why they were harbored. If their existence was exposed, they would be denounced by those who found them objectionable. Although everyone acknowledged their usefulness, witches were enemies of the world nevertheless.

It was another story whether they themselves were happy with that state of affairs, however.

Or, to put it another way...even if they weren't killed, they couldn't necessarily live like people.

The culmination of that was how they died. Most witches died granting wishes, but not necessarily wishes they'd made for themselves...and in rare cases, they were even executed, if they were discovered, or if someone wanted to get one last use out of a witch by announcing that they'd vanquished an enemy of the world.

Considering that, Felicia had been able to live so much like a human, so happily. She'd lived with her mother for several years and been able to see her family, if only once a month. That was more than human enough, no matter what anyone said.

So this was her own wish.

Her wish to save everyone, including her family.

The forest god was the source of the elves' power, hence why they worshipped it...but if it awakened, it meant extinction for them.

That was because the forest god ate elves. More as a delicacy than out of gluttony, apparently, but there were records stating that it had halved the elf population in the past. It was said they would have gone extinct if they hadn't sealed it away.

It was unclear why such a being gave the elves power. Some theorized that it was simply exerting an influence on the elves, not granting them power...but in any event, it was unexplained.

And Felicia would never know the answer.

She was going to grant her own wish here—to seal the forest god away once again, never to awaken.

In exchange for her life.

That was the whole of this ceremony.

The last time the seal had nearly come undone, it had taken elf lives to reseal it. That was how their sealing method worked.

However, doing that now would take half of all the currently living elves.

It would have been possible to leave the forest god unsealed, but that was out of the question. In that case, it would eat them...and they couldn't leave this place either.

Elves were only able to maintain neutrality because of this forest. Outside of it, they were nothing more than humans with a little extra talent for magic. They would only be preyed on, needless to say, especially considering what had happened in the past.

So there was no way for the elves to survive except by sealing away the forest god as they had before...sacrificing half of their lives in the process.

Or rather, there wouldn't have been any other way.

But thankfully, they had one more trick left.

Forty years ago, a witch's wish and a chief's devotion had saved the clan from crisis.

They'd predicted that a witch's wish would be enough this time too, and that in fact, this wish would seal the forest god away longer than ever before.

As soon as she'd heard that, Felicia had agreed. She hadn't met most of the elves, but she knew how they felt through the food she received monthly.

So, if sacrificing herself would solve everything...

She'd been ready for a time like this to come eventually. That time was today. That was all it was.

And so...

And so.

Just then, she heard a heartbeat so loud it blew all of her thoughts away. Forgetting what she'd been thinking about, she opened her eyes in surprise...and there it was.

The light had vanished, and in its place was something she couldn't comprehend—but at the same time, she knew exactly what it was.

*That* was the forest god.

She watched, motionless, as the incomprehensible thing stretched something incomprehensible toward her. It was probably an arm, she thought, but nothing else—it didn't even occur to her to run away.

That wasn't because of the ceremony. It was just fear.

To Felicia, who had unconsciously sensed the presence of the forest god ever since she was a child, its existence was imprinted on her consciousness as fear itself, as it was for all elves. Just sensing its imminent revival would have been enough to send dread into any elf's heart...so it was only natural she would end up like this when confronted with it.

That may have been for the best. In order for a witch to grant their own wish, they had to die; and while Felicia looked mostly human, she was elven by blood nevertheless, and part high elf at that. She should have seemed like a feast to the forest god.

Possibly understanding that, it unreservedly took her in its hand. A crushing pain shot through her.

But that was only for a moment.

The arm retracted and let go of her in midair. She floated for a moment, then began to fall.

"Huh...?"

The question that occurred to her was answered right away—the solution was right in front of her.

What she was near must have been its head...and the place she thought was its mouth was wide open.

She fell toward it as if being sucked in.

“Ah...”

The instant she saw the empty void, several thoughts ran through her mind. There were so many, she couldn't understand right away what they were.

But...

There was one thing she remembered crystal clear.

A promise—one she'd made without much thought just three days ago.

If she ever needed help...

Just then, she had a thought.

Something that she'd been keeping deep in her heart...but that she'd really thought the whole time.

*I don't want to die.*

“Help...”

Her body was shaking gracelessly.

Her vision was blurring pitifully.

All she saw in her mind's eye was the boy she'd lived with for only a month.

It was pathetic...but in spite of that, or perhaps even because of that, she didn't want to die.

“Please...help me.”

But her voice echoed into emptiness—

“Understood.”

With a loud boom, it was blown away.





Soma clicked his tongue as he observed the thing he'd just blown to bits. He hadn't felt nearly enough resistance upon hitting it with his sword; it had felt as if he'd broken a hollow tree branch. As he narrowed his eyes toward the innumerable fragments, it was as if most of his vision was actually filled with splinters of wood.

But if those were really parts of its main body, slashing it probably wouldn't have felt like that. In other words, this was something far from its true form. It probably hadn't taken much damage. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that it hadn't taken any damage at all, in fact.

As he'd guessed the moment he saw it, this was something like a conceptual being. Its physical form didn't mean much, so neither did destroying it. He would need something greater than a physical attack to defeat it. That meant it wasn't called a god for nothing.

Well, regardless, he hadn't had time to investigate all that, so he'd prioritized destroying that form of its. That had been better for the one it was attacking, anyway.

However, for some reason, that particular person was now staring blankly at him. He'd made sure to grab her before she hit the ground and set her down gently, and he'd done a brief check to make sure she wasn't injured, but...

"Felicia? Is something the matter?"

"Soma... *It is* you, right? But...why are you here?"

Felicia continued to stare at him in disbelief. Soma shrugged at her. He didn't see why she would give him that look or ask him such a question.

"Why do you look so mystified? You asked for help, and I came. That was the promise we made to each other, wasn't it?"

Well, he'd only barely made it in time, but there was no need to point that out to her. He didn't need to cause her unnecessary worry.

“Yes, I suppose we did make an agreement of sorts along those lines... But is that really all...?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that that’s the only reason...”

He’d thought something was fishy from the very beginning and become fully convinced along the way. That was why he’d made that promise.

But...

“What other reason would I need to save you?”

He’d promised to help her, and so he had. That was all it was when it came down to it. That, and he’d helped her because she’d asked for help. That was really all.

But that didn’t necessarily mean he wouldn’t have helped if she hadn’t asked for it.

“What on earth...? That’s... That’s absurd.”

“Hmm... Well, to be honest, I have no choice but to concede that it may be absurd.”

It certainly wasn’t especially bright of him. There must have been several smarter ways to go about it, but someone intelligent wouldn’t have butted into a problem like this in the first place. That being the case, he was content to be foolish.

“Well, setting aside the question of whether or not I’m foolish, it’s too early to let down your guard.”

“I...suppose it is.”

Keeping Felicia in his peripheral vision as she tensed, Soma turned to look around. The forest god’s presence, which he’d been conscious of, was clearly growing stronger still. It didn’t seem resigned to giving up; if anything, it seemed enraged.

But that was exactly what Soma wanted. He hadn’t been sure what he would do if it retreated; that would have meant letting it get away, and he wasn’t about to let that be the conclusion.

As Soma watched with that in mind, it began to take shape again, but in a different form.

The previous form had been humanlike. Though only an upper body, and an unshapely one at that, the shapes of its arms and legs had just barely placed it in the category of humanoid.

But this thing was...

“Hmm... It seems that it’s revealed its true nature, or, how to put this... How could you call such a thing a god?”

“It gave us blessings all the same. Also, gods are more than objects of reverence, aren’t they?”

“I suppose I have heard the phrase ‘the fear of God...’ But even still, I don’t know about this.”

They were in an open area inside the forest. There had been something like an altar in its center...but now it was transforming moment by moment.

That was visually apparent. The clearing was expanding in size before their eyes.

No, that wasn’t strictly accurate. The trees around them were vanishing as if being swallowed by the ground...and the reason was clear to see based on what had appeared in front of them. The form, which was already over ten meters tall and growing, was made of earth, sand, and numerous plants.

“I see why they call it a forest god. It’s as if it’s saying this entire forest belongs to it.”

That may have been the case, actually. If Soma’s perception wasn’t betraying him, its presence had expanded to fill the entire forest. In fact, it felt more like something that had been slumbering there this whole time had awoken. It would normally have been hard to believe, but it was no wonder considering what type of being this was.

What he’d heard from Sierra also affirmed that idea. She’d said that when elves took even one step outside the forest, they were unable to use their usual power. Considering that and what was going on right now, the forest god must

have been the forest itself, or something nearly synonymous with it.

And the elves weren't attempting to do anything about it because of its sheer size. In human terms, it was as if it could manipulate each and every cell in its body. That was how it was able to create that body.

And if it was taking that form, it must have judged that size necessary.

"Or perhaps it thinks that's all it needs... Well, I suppose I won't know until I try."

"Huh...? Are you...going to fight that thing?"

"Yes, of course? It seems a little late to ask that question of me."

"I mean... Maybe it is, but..."

It was continuing to increase in size as they spoke. Once it had reached around fifty meters in height, it finally stopped. Its aura had become more substantial as well, telling Soma that it hadn't only grown larger. It must have had about half the power of the fragment of the Archdevil's power that he'd encountered before.

He couldn't underestimate it, though. Kurt hadn't been able to utilize all of that power, but in this being's case, the power originally belonged to it. Soma didn't have to think long to know which was more formidable.

Felicia sensed its might as well. Her face paled and her body shook...yet she pressed her lips into a thin line as if resolving herself. Seeing that, Soma sighed wearily.

"Felicia, you aren't thinking of sacrificing yourself to seal it away after all, are you?"

"Well... What other choice is there? I certainly didn't want to die, and I'm grateful that you saved me, but... We can't possibly win against that. So..."

Trembling, Felicia looked at Soma with eyes full of determination. But Soma simply sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You should have more faith in me. How could I lose to a foe like this?"

It was a mighty foe, yes, and unlike during his recent fight, he wouldn't have

time to patiently wait for its next move. He couldn't afford to let his focus slip.

But that was all. It made sense, given its power, that it was called a god, but it was simply closer to a god than a normal human; it was far from an actual god.

It may have been the forest god, but it was nothing but a fake—a shoddy imitation of a god at best. Technically, it was probably a demigod, like the pseudo-angel he'd encountered before.

But in any case...

“Just sit back and watch. I'll show it which one of us is superior,” Soma pronounced before dashing directly toward it.

Now that Felicia thought about it, this was her first time really seeing a fight.

When her mother had brought her outside the barrier, there hadn't been any actual fights. Although they'd encountered monsters, her mother had put them to sleep somehow. There hadn't been any proper combat.

Felicia had never seen a fight in the many years she'd lived in the Witch's Woods. She'd only heard about them from her sister at times. Because of that, her perception of combat was as something solely frightening, best to be avoided.

And that wasn't exactly mistaken. Fighting and killing weren't necessarily the same thing, but they basically were in this case.

Someone she knew was going to be hurt, suffer, and eventually die. It was reasonable not to want to see such a scene.

That was the inevitable future in Felicia's mind, at least. Soma had saved her, so it wasn't that she didn't trust him; this was a separate problem altogether. The fear that had been imprinted on her since she was a child was so strong that it easily swallowed up such faint feelings, and from the swelling, concentrated presence, she could only smell the scent of death.

So even as Soma headed toward the forest god with fearless words and a smile on his face, Felicia could feel nothing but despair.

She should have just died there instead of trying to live, she thought. She didn't think sacrificing herself would really take care of that thing...but maybe if she had, she could have at least saved Soma.

That was the thought on her mind as she watched his back—and as if to make a mockery of her misconception, about a third of the fifty-meter-tall creature was blown away in an instant. It was only another moment before the remainder flew away. It was so abrupt, it was like a god breaking a toy it had tired of playing with.

“What...?”

No, Felicia had never seen a fight before, but that didn't mean she didn't *know* about them. She definitely knew enough to know how unthinkable what she'd just seen was. Thus, she hadn't been able to help letting out a murmur of astonishment.

It wasn't exactly that Soma had done something she couldn't understand. It had been exceedingly simple, actually.

The form the forest god had taken was hard to describe. It was like it had gathered earth, sand, and plants and forcibly compressed them together. It had stood at about fifty meters tall, and several plant-composed things, neither quite arms nor tentacles, had been growing out of it every which way.

Even monsters maintained the forms of actual animals, but this *creature* had seemed to ignore that, thrusting its countless tentacles at Soma as he ran toward it.

What it had done was simple, and so Soma had acted likewise. Right before the tentacles made contact, he'd taken the sword in his hand and swung it forward.

That was all. And that was all it had taken to scatter a third of the forest god's body.

There was nothing mysterious about what he'd done...but what happened next went beyond mysterious into nonsensical. The only reason she could tell that the forest god hadn't just self-destructed was that the remainder had been blown away the second Soma had swung his sword again.

In other words, Soma had caused that just by swinging a sword. It didn't make any sense.

But that was as much time as Felicia had to ponder it. It wasn't that the forest god had done anything... Well, maybe it had, but it probably wasn't intending to hurt Felicia. Not many people pay attention to rocks on the side of the road, after all.

“—————!”



She didn't know for sure, but she thought it had just howled. She hadn't perceived any sound, and naturally, she didn't know what it was saying, but its intent had been conveyed clearly in that instant. It must have been enraged that its form had been destroyed instantly—or maybe it was reacting to Soma's interference with it in general.

In any case, the result was clear. Felicia felt her heart stop beating in her chest.

“...?!”

She couldn't breathe either. She opened and closed her mouth, but no air would pass through.

But she was just collateral damage. Soma was the one who had been hit directly with that...or maybe it hadn't even intended this and was just venting its rage. That was just how much it was capable of doing, even without meaning to.

A god is a god, no matter what form it takes, she thought... She'd been mistaken to think she could resist its will, let alone defeat it—

“Less noise, you pile of sawdust. At least speak in human words.”

It wasn't a loud yell by any means; in fact, it was nothing but a murmur, yet Felicia heard it crystal clear.

Her heart resumed beating, she could breathe again, and just as naturally, as if it were a matter of course, the rest of the forest god's body was blown away.

“————?!?!?!”

Its scream hit her again, but her heart didn't stop this time. It might have been that this yell didn't only contain rage... There was also shock, and perhaps even fear.

“—————!”

But as if refusing to acknowledge what had happened, the forest god screamed and reformed its body. The process had taken some time before, but the god must have gotten the hang of it, because it had only taken a second this time, and now its body was five times larger than before.

“Why make your form larger when it only gives me a larger target? What a phony god you are to not grasp that.”

With one swing from Soma, all of it instantly flew apart. It was as if his previous attacks had just been test swings.

As for Felicia, she was beginning to exit astonishment and enter consternation.

“I thought I knew he was no ordinary person after what happened with the dragon...”

But apparently, she hadn’t fully grasped that. It wouldn’t have been reasonable to expect her to know this was going to happen, though.

But in this brief interval, even Felicia had come to understand just how extraordinary Soma was...as well as which of the two currently locked in combat was more powerful.

The forest god must have known that, but it wasn’t giving in, perhaps out of sheer willpower. It clearly had some sort of will, and a very powerful one at that, whether or not it was based on the same values and standards as theirs.

But it should have understood what would happen to it if it continued to face Soma, and yet it wasn’t retreating. It was possible that it hadn’t been using its full capacity, but Felicia didn’t feel like that was the case...because its next scream contained apparent terror.

“—————!”

Now that it had learned that any attempt of its to make a body would be thwarted immediately, it grew numerous tentacles from the ground and attacked Soma with those. Felicia could tell, even from a distance, that each one had frightening force. Maybe it was using the power that it had been using to hold its shape before. Just seeing them put her heart in a vice grip of fear and anxiety, and if even one of them had been aimed at her, she would have been dead in the blink of an eye.

But she wasn’t actually worried about that, nor that Soma might be killed.

That was simply because as Soma watched them approach, he let out a bored

sigh...

“This is better than before, but you still don’t seem to grasp the power differential. I suppose I’ll just keep going until you do.”

...then leapt up and swiftly cut all of them away.

He didn’t seem to have been in danger at all; it looked easy for him, even. The tentacles regrew and attacked again to the same result: Soma simply cut them away with ease and let out an exasperated sigh.

From that point on, it was like watching a performance in which they repeated the same trick over and over. Although the tentacles tried different strategies at times, they had a limited number of ways to attack. All they could do was try to hit him, try to stab him with a sharp point, or try to wrap around him. They changed speeds, gathered into larger clumps, and attacked at different intervals, but all to no avail. Soma cut each one away, barely even shifting from his spot.

The power differential was overwhelming...but Felicia didn’t think that was the only reason the fight was turning out like this.

It wasn’t that she doubted the power gap. Her question was why he was putting on this display despite the lack of any need for it.

He had enough of an advantage that he could have settled it right away. That was one reason she thought of it like a performance. It was almost as if he was showing off, which felt off to her. Soma didn’t seem like that kind of person.

In fact, Soma was the type to only be interested in practical results. He wouldn’t want to put on an unnecessary display—maybe not even a necessary one.

So why was he doing what he was doing?

“Does that mean there’s a need for it...? But what would be the meaning of this?”

The silly thought crossed her mind that he wanted her to see it, but it was truly nothing but a silly thought. That couldn’t have been it.

She sighed as if to scold herself for letting her mind wander...and that was

why she was late to notice it.

Reacting to a slight movement in her peripheral vision, she turned around and saw something familiar.

It was one of the same tentacles that were attacking Soma—but it was only about a tenth of the size of the others. Even so, it was more than enough to kill her.

She wondered why it was suddenly coming her way, but quickly put the pieces together. It wasn't that the forest god was interested in her. It had judged that killing her would cause Soma distress.

She didn't know whether that was true, but it wasn't a bad judgment. The forest god had no reason not to try, at least.

But even knowing that, there was nothing Felicia could do.

It would have been a mistake to even wonder whether she could dodge it. Of course she couldn't.

But it wouldn't have been right to ask for Soma's help either. Even disregarding the question of whether he could make it in time, trying would only hinder him.

So there was only one conclusion—she would meet the fate she'd expected after all...

"I see. You have quite the death wish."

Her heart skipped a beat when she heard the voice next to her. At the same time, the tentacle that had been headed her way was blown apart, leaving not a trace behind. Even the ground below it had been gouged out.

There was a loud boom, as if to express the state of mind of the person who had caused it, yet a clear voice, not to be drowned out, still reached Felicia's ears.

"In that case, I won't bother holding back either. If I use too much force... I suppose I'll apologize to everyone later. Pray that you get lucky and survive."

Even knowing she wasn't the target of those words, Felicia felt frozen in place.

No, it might have been because she knew that part of that anger *was* directed at her.

Soma must have been mad that she'd given up on her life, and that she hadn't called for help.

Feeling both sorry and abashed at that...

"Mine is the blade which pierces the heavens and shatters the earth."

Knowing that this was the end, Felicia watched intently as he brought his arm down.

# 31

Joseph sighed at the mountain of papers in front of him.

He couldn't help it; he knew he had a mountain of reports to make, and this was a mere fraction of that. It was only natural that he would sigh when considering how much time it would take to finish all of this.

"Well, I can't make anyone else do it."

And even if he had, he would have had to check their work anyway, so it would have been pointless.

"Hmph... If I have time to think, then I have time to get this over with," he muttered, picking up a paper at random and glancing over it briefly before stamping it. He didn't have time to read each one carefully, and he was familiar with most of the contents. As long as there was proof he'd checked it, the person responsible would handle it accordingly.

He continued to go through the papers. Most of them were as he'd predicted: they expressed fears about the forest god incident.

Well, Joseph still remembered the impact as well. It mattered that he had been nearby, but it probably wouldn't have made much of a difference even if he had been far away. That dreadful presence and the fear that accompanied it weren't things he could forget easily.

"Hmph... Well, that's just how important it was. They won't be too relieved to hear it perished."

Luckily, although strangely, the elves hadn't lost their predominance in this area as a result of the forest god's death, but even so, they'd felt its presence since birth. It would have been strange if they hadn't been unsettled to feel it so powerfully, and many of them were also nervous now that they couldn't feel it anymore. It would take some time for them to return to life as normal.

"Well, I don't know what solution there is other than time. Maybe if I showed them...but maybe that would only make them anxious in a different way."

That was how Joseph himself felt, after all. He didn't think he would ever be able to forget the shock. It had been greater than when he'd felt the forest god awaken.

There had been a powerful impact and a boom, as if the world had been blown to bits. He'd rushed outside...and been shocked at what he saw.

The earth had literally been crushed; about eighty percent of it was gone. There were cracks in the space, as if it was about to fall apart. It would have taken much more damage if it hadn't been on a separate plane. Thanks to that, though, there hadn't been any real injuries, and it wasn't such a bad thing considering that it made their claim that the witch had perished more convincing.

"Hmph, well, we can't use that space anymore, and I've had to move to this side...but so be it. It was too big for its own good anyway, and this is more convenient."

Although he'd preserved it as proof of the destruction in case another country butted in, he'd abandoned the entire space, along with his house. It could have been used for something else if he'd been able to restore it, but unfortunately, like the space containing the Witch's Woods, it had been created with a great spell that the originator had been granted as a gift by the Mage of the Beginning. The creator had then disappeared without telling anyone, possibly considering the risk, so nobody else could alter it. It was regrettable, but Joseph had no choice.

"I wish I could seek compensation, but that wouldn't work, since our story is that a witch traded her life for it... Hmph, oh well..."

As he continued taking care of business and thinking over what had happened, he spotted a report that looked like a good one to end on. It was from his sister Sierra, who was informing him of her intent to leave the forest once again.

"Two companions, huh..." he muttered as he stamped it, then carelessly tossed it aside.

Joseph glared up toward the ceiling, rubbing his still-sore cheek as the slightest of smiles came to his face.

“I won’t make you cover the damages...but you better not make my little sisters cry.”

†

“Oh...?”

Soma stopped in his tracks, feeling as if someone was looking at him, but all he saw was the thick forest. It would be perfect to hide in, but he didn’t sense anyone lurking there. He looked at it in puzzlement, wondering if he was imagining things.

“Soma? Is something the matter?” Felicia asked.

“What is it...?”

He shrugged in response to the questions of the two girls walking ahead of him.

“I thought I noticed a devoted older brother looking our way, but I must have been imagining it.”

“What? That was either oddly specific, or you just made it up...” Felicia said bemusedly.

“I think...he made it up,” Sierra declared.

“Ah, good job, Sierra. You got it right.”

“Heh heh...?”

“At least say that proudly, not with a question mark on the end,” Felicia chided Sierra.

They resumed walking as they had that pointless exchange. They had no particular reason to hurry, but they’d just exited the forest, so they didn’t know who might see them. It would be best to put some distance between them and the forest.

In any case...

“I heard that we should go straight after leaving the forest. Is this the right way? I don’t see any landmarks.”

Soma hadn’t known, since he’d jumped directly into the elves’ forest from the



Witch's Woods, but the forest was surrounded by grassy fields as far as the eye could see. There weren't even any paths, so he didn't know which way was supposed to be straight. He'd made it this far with Sierra's guidance, and she was walking in the front, so she must have known...

"Mm-hmm... I think this is right?"

"Suddenly I don't feel so good about this."

"Sierra... This *is* right, isn't it?"

"I haven't been this way before... Don't know for sure."

"Ah, I see. You went around that way to get to Ladius."

"Mm-hmm."

Soma didn't know anything apart from what he'd heard, but apparently there were three main roads to get from the elves' forest to another town or country. It was possible to travel to other countries after crossing the border, of course, and there were two from which they could get to Ladius.

Sierra had taken one of those two routes, but it had been the longer way to Ladius. She, or rather Doris, had chosen that path for two reasons: Doris had wanted to show Sierra more places...and avoid passing through devil territory.

In other words, they were taking the path that led through devil territory, which Sierra hadn't gone down before.

"Well, it may be a bit closer, but we don't have much reason to choose the more dangerous path, so... Are you really sure?" Felicia asked.

"About what?"

"You're trying to go this way...because of me, right?"

"Well, that's certainly part of the reason. Your faces are hidden, but walking around with two people like that is begging to draw suspicion."

"Mm-hmm... Suspicious."

"That applies to you too, Sierra, so don't agree...although it is suspicious."

Just as their conversation indicated, the two girls walking with Soma were in shady outfits. Sierra was dressed as Soma was used to seeing her—in a full-

body robe with a hood so that he couldn't see her face. And the other girl, Felicia, looked much the same. Taking them to a border checkpoint was asking to be investigated.

In fact, a guard had asked to see Sierra's face when she'd come through with Doris. She'd been given the all-clear once they saw she was an elf, but that wouldn't work this time with how Felicia looked. To most people, white hair was synonymous with witches, and Felicia was, in fact, a witch, so that assumption wouldn't be mistaken. There was a limit to how much the three of them could get away with, and going the other way, they would cross several checkpoints before reaching Ladius, so it was natural to conclude that they would be safer crossing through devil territory.

So in a sense, it was Felicia's fault...

"But it's for the best if we can make it back sooner."

It was for Soma's sake that they were going to Ladius, anyway. He'd spent more than enough time here; he had to go back to the academy and let people know that he was all right, the sooner the better. He probably would have chosen this path even if not for Felicia.

Well...he might have gone the long way in hopes of finding something related to magic, so maybe he should thank Felicia for making him go this way.

"That logic seems flawed to me."

"Mm-hmm... But Soma might have done that."

"Yes, indeed."

"Why are you puffing your chest out like that...? It's nothing to be proud of." Felicia sighed. "Anyway, there's no actual need for me to go with you... Or no, I should say, there's no need for you two to come with me, is there?"

"I should go with you, at least, given that it's my fault that you had to leave."

The reason they'd left the elves' forest for Ladius in the first place was that Soma had forcefully subdued the forest god just the day before. He'd made it agree to his terms: the forest god would continue to lend its power to the elves, but it wouldn't make its presence known. In exchange, he would make the elves

think the forest god was dead.

He'd chosen that route for the elves' sake, but also to put them in his debt. The forest god's power was their lifeline, and ensuring it was an act on par with saving their lives.

That was how Soma had negotiated with Joseph to bring Felicia out of that little forest.

Both Joseph and Felicia herself had asked why, but Soma didn't understand why they even had to ask. It was plain to see that Felicia didn't want to be isolated in those woods; nobody in the world would have wanted that, in fact.

But due to several obligations, they'd had no choice but to keep her in that situation...until Soma had found himself in a position to negate all of those obligations and enforce his own wishes. He'd simply used that privilege.

Over the course of that conversation, they'd agreed on a number of things, but most of them had been givens—things he'd been planning to do regardless. In particular, he had no room for counterargument to the point that he had to accept full responsibility for Felicia if he was to take her out of the forest.

The story he'd ultimately given them was that they had tried to seal the forest god away as originally planned but had used too much force and accidentally destroyed it, leaving its power behind somehow. It wasn't the most solid cover story, but he didn't mind if they caught on. He intended to tell them the truth eventually; he just needed a pretext for the meantime.

The important thing was that everyone now knew that there had been a witch in the elves' forest, but believed she had perished. Once the dust cleared, they could come full circle and bring Felicia back to the forest. Soma intended to do so, at least, and he wasn't about to let anybody get in the way of that. He felt he owed her at least that much...and mostly, he just wanted to.

So...

"Well, and Joseph asked me to do this. I don't feel bad at all for punching him in the face...but I suppose I should accept a request like that."

Ladius was the only place where Soma could get away with doing practically whatever he wanted, and the academy was a kind of extraterritoriality. He

could guard her as closely as he needed there, and that was one factor in why they were heading back...well, *the* reason, actually.



But regardless...

"Since I'm at fault for this and was asked to take responsibility, I can't abandon you."

"Mm-hmm... I couldn't abandon my sister."

"You two are too soft on me... I'm not as sheltered as you may think. I'm older than both of you, you know."

"Despite how you look?"

Her face was shrouded in a hood right now...but actually, that just made her claim less convincing. She looked like a mere child in every respect. The robe didn't make much of a difference considering that she didn't have any visible elf traits, however.

"I'm actually rather self-conscious about my appearance, so please don't bring it up. And it isn't because I'm a witch but because of my elf heritage."

"Mm-hmm... She's like...a loli hag?"

"Soma, I don't appreciate you teaching my little sister rude words."

"Wait a moment. Why are you blaming me? I don't recall ever teaching Sierra such a word."

"You didn't... But I heard you call Hildegard that."

"Oh, you did?"

*Did I?* he wondered. He felt like he might have or he might not have. He didn't have to watch what he said to Hildegard very much, so at times he found himself talking to her off the cuff and didn't remember everything he said afterward. If Sierra knew the word, though, he must have said it.

"I retract my previous statement. It seems to be my fault. My apologies."

"Look at you, being all chivalrous again..."

Felicia sighed, but Soma could tell without seeing her face that she was smiling, so he smiled as well as he shrugged back. He could sense that Sierra, too, was faintly smiling behind him.

It was in this way that the three headed directly toward Dement—the territory of the devils.

A girl sat on her bed with a puzzled look. Night had already fallen outside; in fact, the date would change any minute now. Usually, she should have been asleep by this time.

She was in her room in the academy dorms. Being in the instructor dorm, it was larger than the student rooms, but the basic layout was the same. Due to the long break, there were fewer people around than usual, especially at this time of night.

Twisting her neck, the girl looked around the room, which contained nobody but herself.

“Mmm... Now, why might I have woken up? I don’t sense anything, and I shouldn’t have any plans...”

It had been a long time since she could rely on plans, but she was correct. There was nothing anyone should have needed her for around this time—well, no, maybe one thing, but that should have come a bit later, and even if it had come early, it would still have been too far away now. And there wouldn’t have been a single thing she could do even if she’d been woken up for it.

“Hey, I have feelings too, you know? It may be true that there wouldn’t be a single thing I could do, but you don’t have to say it... You have no idea how girls work, do you?”

Her complaint was met with the indifference of someone who never cared to understand “how girls work” anyway...but that aside, what had she woken up for in the first place? She’d wondered that on previous occasions when she’d woken up like this, but this was the absolute least that had happened so far.

It was possible that something had occurred outside of her awareness, though...

Suddenly alerted to that possibility, she flipped around, but all her gaze met was a window, behind which was nothing and no one.



As should have been the case; not only was she on the second floor, but the instructor dorms were built at a slight distance from the other buildings. They were exposed to people's eyes—albeit there were few around right now—so nobody could have snuck in...

"Well, what a sleuth we have here. I thought I'd hidden my presence quite thoroughly."

As if to mock her mistaken idea, a silhouette appeared in front of the window inside the room.

Moonlight illuminated the figure's pink hair. This person wasn't especially tall for an adult, but far taller than the girl, and there was a smile on their face.

This was a woman. Not a girl but a grown adult.

The girl couldn't determine anything else, however. The woman's carriage alone gave her an air of expertise, but her appearance and expression were youthful. Basically, she was of indeterminate age.

In the next instant, the woman's eyes moved, definitively catching the girl. Their gaze felt penetrating; she couldn't look away. Although she knew it was an illusion, she nearly felt her breath catch in her throat.

She was released when the woman's face softened.

"Apologies. It was bothering me that you were looking at me without me looking at you."

"You can see me?"

"Of course I can. That would be my specialty and my role. You must understand, being the Sword."

The girl's breath caught. She understood what the woman meant by that.

Or maybe it was because that was the final piece of proof she needed. She'd known what this woman was from the moment she'd seen her.

"So you really are..."

"I am. To sum it up, I would be the Eyes. And... Oh, excuse me, I haven't given you a proper greeting yet."

“Right...”

It seemed a little late for that, but the woman straightened her posture and bowed with a bright smile.

“It’s nice to meet you...or rather, to see you again, should I say?”

“I think ‘meet’ would be best. This is *my* first time meeting you, at least.”

“That is certainly the case. Then, once again... It’s nice to meet you.” The woman dipped her head low.

Her face, as she lifted it with a smile, was certainly familiar to the girl. Lina had met her once before. Even if she hadn’t, however, she would have known what this woman was at a glance.

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you,” the girl replied in turn before asking a question—possibly the most important one. “So what should I call you?”

“Oh, whatever you please. It is of no matter to me. The Saintess, the Fifth Elite, the Heavenly Eyes...even the Observer of Mankind. Yes, I wouldn’t mind any name you called me...for we are of the same kind, are we not?”

The woman’s smile was genuine, but that in itself made the girl hold her breath momentarily. Several things floated through her mind. She considered them, made her guesses...and ultimately went on to ask another question.

“All right... May I ask why you came here, then?”

“Oh, what a shame. I was curious what you were going to call me...but I suppose I can save that surprise for later. Things being as they are, it would be for the best to tell you sooner rather than later.”

The smile vanished from her face, instantly transforming her demeanor to one of grandeur. The girl could see why this woman was known as the center of the Holy City, the saint chosen by God.

And then...

“This has not been definitively confirmed...but it is as good as confirmed. There will be a new Dark Lord born in this land in the near future.”

She pronounced that statement.

“Let us embark on a journey.”

As soon as Hildegard laid eyes on Aina, who had dropped by the headmaster’s office, she blurted out that statement as if it had just occurred to her.

Aina furrowed her brow, not getting what the idea was. “But you’re the headmaster. The long break doesn’t make it okay for you to just...go on a journey.”

Classes weren’t in session, but there were still students at the academy, and the instructors were all there, still working. They were taking care of things they hadn’t had time to do before as well as getting ready for classes to resume; they were actually busier right now than they had been during the school year.

In fact, Aina thought the person in front of her had complained about that herself...but she gave Aina a fed up look for some reason.

“I am fully aware of that.”

“So you know you can’t and you *still* brought it up?”

“You two are responsible for this!”

“Huh...?” Aina muttered, disoriented at having the blame thrown onto her. She was here because Hildegard had suddenly summoned her, so she didn’t know what to make of this irrationality.

“It is not fair! I want to search for Soma as well!”

“Oh... That’s what this is about.” Aina sighed, finally understanding what Hildegard was going on about. That didn’t mean she accepted it as a justification, though. “Yeah, I’m about to leave, but not to look for Soma. And I know you mean Sierra too, but she’s just visiting home.”

“Lies! You intend to look for Soma while you are away!”

“I mean, I’m not *not* going to look, but that isn’t my main reason for going.”

“Whatever your main reason may be, it is not fair that you get to search for Soma! I want to go!”

“So you’re just throwing a tantrum...” Aina said with a sigh.

She understood how Hildegard felt, though. She might have thought the same thing in the headmaster's place. But that was one thing, and this was another. In fact, she *wished* Hildegard could take her place.

"It's not like I'm going for fun, you know."

"Of course you are! That is what visiting home entails!"

Yes, Aina was about to leave the academy to visit the place where she'd grown up. And for most people, that would have been tantamount to a vacation, but not in Aina's case.

She hadn't been in contact with them for over two years. She didn't know what they would say when she showed up... Actually, she didn't even know if they would accept her. She wouldn't have gone so far as to say she didn't want to go, but she wasn't feeling very enthusiastic about it.

But after lengthy consideration, she'd come to the decision to go back. Sierra had inspired her to think...she couldn't keep running away.

Regardless...

"So why did you call me here, anyway? And don't tell me it was just to say that."

Aina had been called to the headmaster's office immediately after submitting her notice that she would be visiting home. She hadn't been given a reason, just told to come to the office.

She didn't need to contact the headmaster for permission to leave, of course. That was the case normally, and it was no different during breaks.

But it was hard to imagine that Hildegard had summoned her for personal reasons. While she'd started seeing more of the headmaster since Soma had gone missing—or rather, the headmaster had begun complaining to her about it—this was the office. The headmaster would have called her somewhere else for personal business.

And just as Aina was thinking Hildegard couldn't possibly have summoned her simply to whine at her, the headmaster began to rummage through her desk.

"Oh, yes, I have a proper reason. There happens to be a delivery I would like

you to make.”

“A delivery? I mean, I really wasn’t planning on doing anything but visiting home...”

She was going to look for Soma on the way, but only on the route she’d be taking anyway. She didn’t have any clues that would enable her to do anything else. It might be another story if she found a lead during the trip, but she didn’t think she would get that lucky.

And even if the destination was on her way, to be honest, Aina didn’t know the lay of the land in detail. All she knew was how to find her way to where she was going. She didn’t think she would know where to go if told a specific location.

But...

“And that is why I am asking you, as I would like this delivered to your father.”

“Huh...? My father?” Aina repeated inanely, blinking at the unforeseen request.

It was true that Aina’s father was the king of a nation in a sense. It was no wonder that he would receive deliveries.

But he was generally referred to as the Dark Lord—in other words, he was detested. If he was getting a package from outside the country, let alone from outside the devils...

“It isn’t anything messed up, is it?”

“What need would I have to send him something messed up? It is merely a letter. There is something I wish to inform him of.”

“Inform him? The way you put that, it sounds like you know my father.”

“I do, in fact.”

“You...do?”

How would the headmaster of the Ladius Royal Academy have met the king of the devils? Well...given that she’d apparently also met Soma before, maybe it was too late to be asking questions like that.

Regardless, there was something else Aina wanted to ask.

“Well, I don’t mind bringing it to him, but I don’t know if he’ll take it. He doesn’t know I’m here, so he might not believe it’s really from the headmaster.”

He wasn’t so naive as to believe that just because his daughter brought it to him. They hadn’t spoken in the two years since she’d run away from home. If anything, considering her status, it would be more natural for him to doubt her.

“He is not aware? Have you not been in contact?”

“We haven’t, and I haven’t told him I’m coming back either. He might even turn me away at the gate if I’m unlucky,” Aina said with a self-deprecating shrug.

She didn’t legitimately think that would happen, though. While Albert had been behind her decision to run away, it had ultimately been a result of overthinking gone wild. It probably—no, definitely wouldn’t have turned out like it had if she’d just told her father how she felt.

But only now was she able to recognize that. She couldn’t have at that time, and that was the reason she hadn’t contacted him once.

It was also partly because she didn’t have a way to contact him, but more because she felt awkward about it. Most likely, it would have been possible if she’d tried. Soma’s mother, Sophia, was a Special-Grade mage; she probably could have taught her a way or two to get in touch. But Aina hadn’t asked because the prospect had felt awkward, and the longer the impasse had gone on, the harder it had felt to reach out.

She’d resolved to go back now, but she was still reluctant, and she wasn’t optimistic that he would simply believe her and take the letter. She wouldn’t be surprised if he took it and threw it away in front of her.

That was the natural conclusion Aina reached, but Hildegard gave her a puzzled look and a strange reply in return.

“He would not believe his daughter... Well, he could be inept in such matters, so it would not surprise me. However, setting that aside, I expect that he knows you are here.”

“What? How would he know?”

“He would be fully capable of finding you if he put his mind to it...and I expect that the Neumonds have been in contact with him.”

“Huh? Why would the Neumonds...?”

It was true that Soma’s parents were the ones who had vouched for Aina’s status, so under normal circumstances, it would have made sense for them to be in contact with her parents.

She wasn’t any normal girl, though, and she hadn’t told them she was the Dark Lord’s daughter. They shouldn’t have had any way to get in touch with her father.

“Oh, were you not aware? Your father and the Neumonds are longtime acquaintances. They still have one or two methods of keeping contact, and I expect they are making use of those. In all likelihood, they have realized that you are his daughter.”

“They know each other...?”

She hadn’t heard about that. She hadn’t noticed any signs in the several months she’d lived with Sophia. But the headmaster wouldn’t have made that up; she would have no reason to. That meant it was most likely true.

“I guess they are physically nearby, so they could have come across each other...”

They were close in age, and Aina had met Soma by coincidence, after all. Maybe something similar had happened with their parents. She couldn’t rule it out, although it wasn’t a satisfying explanation to her.

Hildegard nodded as if she’d just had an insight. “I see... You are unaware. I suppose Soma also told me that he did not know before coming here, so that would make sense. He is not the type to boast, after all.”

“The fact you’re being so vague about it makes me want to know even more...”

“There is nothing to hide. It is common knowledge...perhaps not everywhere, but the majority of those in our nation are aware.”

“Then why can’t you just tell me?”

“I could, but you are to go home, yes? Then you may simply ask him. I doubt that he shall tell you, however.”

“What’s the point, then? I don’t feel like he’d tell me either.”

Her memories of him were hazy after more than two years, but she didn’t remember him ever telling her about his past. She hadn’t asked him to, but she didn’t think the results would have been much different if she had.

“Well, if he is not willing to tell you and you would like to know, then I shall tell you. You do not intend to stay there long, correct?”

“Yeah, I’m just planning to go back, not do anything in particular. I want to return here as soon as I can.”

“Considering the distance, you do not have much time to stay regardless. I could make some time for you if necessary, however.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t want to stay long.”

That was partially because she’d been away for over two years, besides which she didn’t remember the two of them ever spending much time together as family. Her father had been busy as the Dark Lord, and he hadn’t been very good with kids. She’d come to that conclusion after seeing Soma’s family—she felt like they were similar to hers.

So she didn’t think her father disliked her, exactly, but he didn’t know how to act around her, and to be honest, she didn’t know how to act around him either. She got the feeling they wouldn’t be able to have much of a conversation when she got back.

But she’d chosen to go back anyway because she thought it was a good opportunity...and as mentioned before, she didn’t want to keep running away.

Aina had run away two years ago, and she had continued running away to this day. She didn’t want to stay like that forever, and now that Soma was gone, she thought she would go back and put an end to it.

There was Sierra as well. She’d chosen to stand up and face her past—to not run away. As her friend, and as her rival, Aina couldn’t stand to lose to her.



As Aina was lost in thought, Hildegard regarded her with narrowed eyes. “Well, do not overthink it. He is merely inept. I do not believe that he has negative feelings toward you.”

“Yeah, I know. He’s my father. And he’s had plenty of time to think about it.”

But that was one thing. Understanding wouldn’t be enough to smooth over this issue.

“And anyway, is this the time to be concerned about *me*? You haven’t even found the letter for my father yet.”

Indeed, Hildegard had continued looking throughout the conversation, and she still hadn’t found the letter. Aina’s impression of her as a put-together adult had been completely destroyed.

“I believe it is... Ah, yes, here!” Hildegard picked up a piece of parchment that had been sitting on top of her desk; the exterior bore a seal. Aina honestly couldn’t tell if that was the right thing from looking at it, but if Hildegard said so, it must have been.

“Well, concerned or not, I must tidy before you return. I cannot allow Soma to see the office like this...nor can I stand to lose to you.” Hildegard smirked.

Aina shrugged back. She wasn’t about to ask what Hildegard meant by that. “So I just give this to him, right?”

“Yes. Oh, and it is not especially important, so do not feel as if you must give it to him at any cost. I shall not mind if you cannot deliver it or if it is lost on the way.”

Aina wondered why Hildegard had bothered asking her in the first place, then had the thought that maybe this was her way of showing consideration. It would at least give Aina a topic of conversation, so her reunion with her father wouldn’t be an awkward disaster and nothing else. It might even be that Hildegard had only thought of sending the letter after hearing Aina was going back, but Aina had no reason to refuse.

“Well, request accepted, I guess.”

“Much obliged.”

Aina took the paper firmly in her hand. "Is that all, then?"

"It is. I am sorry for making you go out of your way."

"As you should be."

More for the bizarre complaints and forced pretext than the request, Aina thought. But Hildegard showed no sign of being offended at that comment; she was as good-natured as ever.

Aina let out a sigh and raised one hand in a wave. "I'll be off, then. Considering when I'm leaving, I can't keep dawdling here."

"Indeed. Take care, then. Say hello to Iori on my behalf."

Dropping his first name so casually showed that Hildegard really did know her father. As Aina left the office, she wondered what the nature of their relationship was.

"Well... I guess that's another thing I can ask him," she muttered as if to encourage herself as she set forth toward the home she had once abandoned.

†

When the girl set foot in the area as she always did, she saw it was in ruins and let out a sigh.

That was nothing out of the ordinary, though. Nothing had happened to destroy the place; it had always been like this. It just seemed different to her this time because she was the only one here.

With that in mind, she sighed again. "Now that I think about it, they were useful in their own ways, huh? All they did was cause problems...but not having them around is a problem in itself. Dang troublemakers."

She meant that in multiple senses, of course, but complaining wouldn't accomplish anything. She had to start by acting within her capabilities.

"Anyways, let's see... Well, I got some info, but what am I supposed to do with it like this?"

She glanced around and saw that the rooms, as mentioned before, were in a state of disrepair. They still felt lived in, though, because people had actually

been living here.

But now she was the only one there. This place wasn't just unoccupied at the moment. For at least several days, if not multiple months, nobody had set foot inside.

"If only it was just 'cause they'd given up."

The creepy gentleman might have expressed displeasure at that comment. The shady little punk may have made some exaggerated gesture. And that rough-mannered man might have cursed in that rough tone.

"I must be beyond help if I'm remembering all that fondly."

The wise choice would probably have been to let things end here. Maybe she could still go back. Even if not, maybe she could still scrape together a living.

But that choice wouldn't be forgiven, least of all by herself. She hadn't started this, no, but she'd been elevated to the position of leader.

She wasn't going to use that as an excuse, though. Ultimately, she'd chosen this course and gone forward with it of her own free will. The others, especially those three, must have felt the same, more or less.

If none of this had happened, they would have carried a certain dissatisfaction throughout the rest of their days but been content nonetheless. She'd destroyed that and brought about this state of affairs, and she had to take responsibility for it.

Not in spite of the fact that nobody else was left.

*Because nobody was left.*

"So I really hope this is true...but can I actually trust this? The Evil Spirit, and in a place like this? Beyond fishy. I would've counted on Albert or Tobias before this."

But there was nothing else she could do. All other paths were closed off to her now except for betting on this.

She'd known from the start that there was little chance of succeeding. It was miraculous she'd even kept going this far.

So...

“How will this turn out, then? I hope I can avoid an anticlimactic ending and go out in style...”

She didn't like pain, though, she thought to herself as she took one last glance around, then left with no lingering attachment to the place.

## Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Kouduki. You have my sincere thanks for reading this work.

So, since my past few afterwords have just been marketing pitches for the manga, I was thinking I should talk about something else...but to be honest, I thought about it, and I don't have anything to talk about.

If I write negative things, nobody will benefit...

What am I supposed to write in an afterword apart from "thanks," anyway?

Not that I should be saying that in volume 5.

Oh, speaking of volume 5, I somehow managed to make it to number five. That was my initial goal, so I'm happy and relieved to have accomplished it.

It's looking like I'll make it to volume number six, and I have you all to thank for that as well. Thank you for everything.

I wrote some original material in this volume too, so I hope you enjoyed it. I'm going to try to make the next one enjoyable as well.

Also, speaking of things to be grateful for, there's one other thing I can't forget: the manga. I think I owe quite a lot to it. It's consistently been amazingly done, so whoever hasn't picked up those three acclaimed manga volumes, please do. The fourth volume, which I think covers up to the end of the second light novel volume, is going to come out soon (ED: Scheduled for Summer 2020). It makes a lot of things clear that are hard to explain in words, so I highly recommend it.

So I guess all I ended up doing was pitching the manga and expressing gratitude, but the page is full now, so I'll move on to the remaining thanks.

To my editors K. and I., thank you for continuing to take care of all the work I

make for you.

To necömi, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to create these wonderful illustrations.

To all the proofreaders, sales people, designers, and everyone else involved in the publication of this work, thank you again for all your help and support.

And most of all, to all of you who have supported me and picked up and purchased this book, you have my deepest gratitude.

Well, I hope you'll stick with me going forward. May we meet again in volume 6.

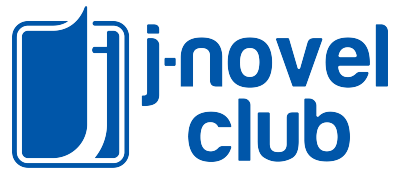












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I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 5

by Shin Kouduki

Translated by Kim Louise Davis Edited by Shakuzan

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