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Illustrator: Chocoan

# The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases





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## The Adventurers

### Allen Westfeldt

Former heir to the Duchy of Westfeldt. When he didn't receive the divine blessing of a Gift, Allen was labeled a good-for-nothing and eventually banished from his family home. In his past life, he was actually the hero of another world, but in this one, he only seeks a peaceful life.

### Riese Westfeldt

Former first princess of the Kingdom of Adastera and Allen's former betrothed. She gave up her inheritance to become the current Duchess of Westfeldt. The public call her the Saint due to her ability to heal wounds using her Gift of Star Maiden.



## Viktor Empire



The Black Wolf Knights

### Lisette Belwaldt

Captain of the Black Wolf Knights. Lisette is known as the "Death Defier."



### Oswald Hyurandell

The Black Wolf Knights' second-in-command. A bloodthirsty maniac who has been condemned to death.



### Curtis Linkvist

Anriette's cousin and the adopted son of the House of Linkvist. He implored Allen and his friends to rescue Anriette.



## Anriette Linkvist

Nominal head of the Marquis of Linkvist, but practically exiled to a small border town. She seems to know about Allen's past life.



## Noel Leonhart

An elite elven blacksmith from the Frontier. Her dwarven adoptive mother was killed by a Fenrir. She and Riese are best friends.



## Mylène Hagestadt

An Amazon whom Allen freed from her enslavement by a demon. She now accompanies Noel wherever she goes.



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# The Boy and His Sister

“Please! My sister! Please help her!”

The group had just finished preparing to depart from Laurus, the Viktor Empire city that bordered the Kingdom of Adastera, when a boy—or perhaps “young man” was more accurate—called out to them. Allen was bewildered. He was sure he’d never seen this person before. And yet the young man was looking at him far too intensely for it to be a mere case of mistaken identity. Allen was half ready to keep on walking as if he hadn’t noticed anything. It was too dangerous to hang around here, regardless of what trouble the boy needed help with. In fact, that was all the more reason to make a hasty exit—why stick his neck out now, when he was all set to get the hell out of the empire? And yet...

“Hmm. What do you think?” he asked.

“Beats me,” said Noel. “It’s clear *you’re* the one he’s asking for help. It’s all up to you.”

“Agreed,” said Mylène.

An observer might have interpreted these as casual, almost meaningless remarks. But from the looks the pair gave him, Allen knew they were anything but. They had chosen their words carefully and meant exactly what they said.

“There’s no need to worry about us,” said Riese. “We chose to be here. Whatever happens now won’t change that fact.”

Allen looked at her, then Noel, then Mylène in turn. He sighed with exasperation.

“Kinda rude to sigh at us like that,” said Mylène.

“Seriously. A little much, even for you,” said Noel.

“Anyone in my position would do the same thing,” said Allen. “I mean, there’s no chance of you three agreeing to go ahead without me, is there?”



The trio broke out in smiles—a clearer answer than any words.

“Hey, I haven’t heard the guy out yet. I haven’t even decided if I’m *going* to,” said Allen.

“It’s not hard to guess the course of action you’ll take in situations like this,” said Riese.

Allen sighed again. Apparently it was a foregone conclusion that he’d help the guy. If anything was “a little much,” it was the faith they had in him. Noel’s and Mylène’s expressions betrayed their total agreement with Riese’s words. What bothered him most was that after all this flattery, he didn’t even have the *option* of turning his back on the boy anymore. He looked away from them and toward the young man, who stared at him expectantly.

“I guess I’ll hear you out, at least. You’ve got me curious.”

The boy’s eyes lit up with a look that said, *I knew it!* Of course, whatever trouble was afoot couldn’t be discussed in public, so Allen and the others returned to the inn they had just left.

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Back inside their room at the inn, everyone introduced themselves. Allen didn’t even know what he should *call* the boy.

“I’m Curtis. Curtis Rouxbrandt.”

Allen’s eyes glinted with recognition at the sound of the boy’s family name. “Rouxbrandt?” It was a name he’d heard only recently...but surely there couldn’t be any connection? In truth, he wasn’t *that* surprised—or at least, even if he was, he understood. He’d already realized that the reason the boy seemed familiar was his face’s resemblance to *her*. The others, however, wore looks of utter astonishment.

Noel was the first to speak. “Umm...Rouxbrandt? Isn’t that...”

“Yes,” replied the boy. “I believe I know what you’re thinking. I am a relative of the marquisate, though not an heir.”

“Oh, shouldn’t we be treating you with a little more respect?” said Noel. “Manners aren’t exactly my forte, but...”



“Don’t worry—I mean, there is no need to worry about that,” said the boy. “You don’t seem to be from the empire, after all.”

“If you insist,” said Allen. “Anyway, can I ask you something? The sister you mentioned. Are you talking about...”

“Yes, I believe we are thinking of the same person. She’s not *actually* my sister.”

The “sister” of whom he spoke was Anriette. This was the son of the aunt and uncle she had mentioned. In which case, what could he mean by asking them to help her? Allen tried to collect himself. There was no point in getting worked up; everything would be revealed shortly.

“So, you know that we’re acquaintances of Anriette?” asked Mylène.

“Sounds like it,” said Noel. “But when and where did you hear about us?”

“It must have been when Lady Anriette returned to her manor, I suppose?” said Riese.

“But then he would’ve been there when we went back,” said Noel. “Surely she would’ve at least introduced him?”

“That would’ve been the natural thing to do,” said Mylène.

“Quite right,” said Riese.

The three almost seemed to be conversing among themselves, but their attention never left Curtis. It was more like a roundabout interrogation, an approach chosen because their subject *did* claim to belong to the marquise, though his allegiances weren’t clear. They had heard how Anriette had been treated by her aunt and uncle; it was only natural to be suspicious of their son.

“I get why—I mean, I *understand* why you doubt my words,” said Curtis. “In truth, I didn’t hear about you from my sister. I’ve been watching you from afar.”

“Oh?” said Allen.

“Yes. By chance, I saw you part ways with her.”

“So you were in town at that time?”

They hadn’t been sneaking around or anything. It wouldn’t be too strange if



this young man had happened to see them. But why had he been there in the first place?

“It kinda sounds like you were spying on us,” said Allen.

“Yes, I guess—I *suppose*—that’s how it turned out. But if I hadn’t, I never would have seen my sister being arrested!”

“What?! Arrested?!” said Mylène.

“Why?” said Noel.

“Let me tell you,” said Curtis. “It’s exactly why I’m seeking your help.” He looked into Allen’s eyes with a steely gaze. “The Black Wolf Knights have arrested Anriette on suspicion of being the ringleader in the assassination of the emperor.”

## Decision and Determination

The room fell silent. No one had a word to say; each was too busy sizing up the situation in their head, careful not to utter a wrong word or make an ill-advised move. After explaining what he knew, Curtis had left the inn to allow the others to get their thoughts in order and talk things over. They would meet again once the group had made their decision.

Of course, Allen's mind was already made up. But they—especially the others—still needed time to think. He wasn't particularly surprised by this turn of events; he took the news as if he'd been expecting it. Allen was still eager to learn more, but considering the situation in the empire, the arrest itself had seemed almost inevitable; it seemed overwhelmingly likely that the emperor had been killed by a demon, and Anriette was harboring the demon children. If that fact was discovered, it was inevitable she'd be arrested—at least as a person of interest, if not a suspect.

She didn't even have to have been found out; it wouldn't be surprising if word had gotten out that the Elven Forest was home to non-elf children. The elves often left the forest to visit the nearby town. Someone could have overheard the elves talking, or it could have come up in conversation. After all, to the elves, those children were outsiders. It must have been impossible for them to keep completely quiet about it.

From there, it was understandable that some might speculate that the children were demons. It didn't even have to be true. Even if someone took the children away, there'd be no way of knowing one way or another until they were of Gift-receiving age. Yet evidently they had decided that the children were demons regardless.

Ordinarily, this would be far too much of a leap in logic, especially when it meant making accusations against a member of the marquisate. The Black Wolf Knights might have had a lot of leeway to throw their weight around, but even then there were limits.



In Anriette's case, however, Allen had already surmised that she had been ostracized by not only her aunt and uncle, but the empire itself. If not, her relatives could not have so easily prevented her from taking her rightful place as marquise. That they had done so was proof that they acted with the endorsement of the empire, which, for some reason, had a low opinion of Anriette. With the empire in a situation that demanded they present a scapegoat to quell the mounting turmoil, she was the perfect choice.

"I suppose with the emperor gone, the empire is free to conduct itself in a most unimperial manner," said Riese.

Allen looked over and saw her gazing out of the window at something far away. He understood why that was her primary concern. She'd joined him on this journey to gather information about the emperor's assassination, after all. For it to have fallen into their laps in such an unexpected place must have been bewildering.

Allen could have stayed silent but chose not to. "Uh...I'm sorry, Riese."

"Hm? For what? Oh, I see. You already knew, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Anriette told me." He hadn't been free to disclose the details of their private conversation, but that didn't change the fact that he'd kept something from Riese.

Still, he hadn't expected Riese to hold it against him, so he was surprised when she responded with a pout and a furrowed brow.

"I know you probably had no choice, and I shan't get too upset about it, but I *am* curious about why Lady Anriette decided to share that information with you."

"Me too," Noel said emphatically. "That's *seriously* sensitive information. What kind of relationship do you two have, exactly?"

"A pretty close one, I guess," said Mylène.

Both she and Noel stared at Allen with prying eyes. This wasn't a serious interrogation, though. They were more amused than anything.

"We have a complicated history," Allen shrugged. He looked at each girl in

turn, then sighed. “I take it there’s no need to ask what you all want to do about this, then?”

“I already made up my mind hours ago,” said Riese.

“Yeah,” said Noel. “I couldn’t ignore a friend in trouble. And I need to know what’s become of the Elven Forest while all this is going on.”

She was right—that was where the demon children had been taking shelter. The elves would likely have to shoulder some of the blame.

“I’m still undecided on the whole queen thing,” Noel continued. “But that’s all the more reason to be worried about this.”

Allen smiled wryly at her attempts to explain away her concern. No one would’ve taken it to mean anything, but it was clearly a sensitive subject for her. Finally, he looked at Mylène. “And you?”

“Fine by me. I’d already made up my mind,” she replied. As ever, though she was short on words, a fierce light shone in her eyes. It seemed she had her own private thoughts, backed by a will that could be even stronger and more stubborn than the others’.

Taking one last look at all three, Allen sighed again. “Ugh, what a bunch of freewheelers. You know, if things go poorly—no, even if things go *well*, we’re probably gonna end up picking a fight with the empire.”

“I have been tasked with investigating what is going on in the empire,” said Riese. “Having discovered that the emperor was assassinated, it is my duty to learn more, even if that means coming into conflict with the empire itself. Besides, what’s one more point of contention between them and us?”

That clearly wasn’t her real reason. It *did* make some amount of sense, but no one would really expect her to go to such lengths. Only in this exact situation would such a justification hold any water, fortunately for her. Allen knew it was just a front, but he saw no reason to challenge her.

“Technically, I don’t belong to the kingdom anyway,” said Noel. “I can always set up shop in the Elven Forest or wherever else I choose. A smith of my caliber would be welcome anywhere in the world.”



She sounded incredibly self-assured, and she wasn't wrong. Even if she wasn't yet satisfied with her skills, there was no doubt she was a first-rate smith. There wasn't a country in the world that wouldn't relish the opportunity to outfit its army with her swords. That might invite hostility from the empire, but there was nothing new about the empire being hostile toward its neighbors.

"But you don't have any need to leave the kingdom," said Allen.

"I feel the same way," Noel replied. "And even then, I could still live in the Frontier."

"Yeah, I guess it *is* home to those sorts of people."

The three stared at him, as if to say, *And what about you?*

Allen shrugged. He'd been thinking the same thing as Noel. Between the Frontier and fleeing to another country, he had plenty of options in the event that he had a falling out with the empire. It was Anriette he was unsure about and would be until he learned more. But even then, he was confident things would work out somehow. He would make sure of it. Doing *something* beat living with the regret of doing nothing, anyway.

In fact, it seemed likely that Anriette would have a lot of useful information to share with them. According to Curtis, she'd been arrested the moment they'd parted ways. She had probably known she was about to be arrested, and Allen had failed to figure out that she'd been hiding it from him. In his past life, Anriette had helped him out of countless binds. Now it was his turn.

*"This time I'll save you. Even if you don't want me to,"* he thought.

He faced the other three. With a nod and something like a smile, he signaled for all of them to leave the inn and discuss their next move with Curtis.





## Departure

The group met with Curtis beyond the city's westernmost point, well outside of the city itself, far enough that there was no risk of anyone overhearing their conversation. That the location would also allow them to make the fastest exit from the city was so much the better.

They spotted Curtis as soon as they left the city itself. He was a young man loitering around the borders, his hair a similar color to Anriette's, though a deeper shade. Nearby was a carriage and a person wearing a full suit of armor, presumably a guard, with whom Curtis was conversing.

Allen and the others drew closer, but Curtis noticed them first, breaking out in a smile as he recognized them. "You came!" he exclaimed. "And rather early at that!" he continued with a puzzled look.

Indeed, it was still before noon. Curtis had told them he would wait for them until sundown, at which point he would take their failure to arrive as a refusal of his request for help. From the amount of time he'd intended to afford them, it was clear he'd assumed that reaching a decision would require much discussion. But barely any time had passed since they'd last seen each other.

Allen understood his confusion but offered only a shrug. "We pretty much made up our minds from the start."

"That's right," said Riese. "We didn't really need time to decide what to do, only to collect our thoughts."

"Oh yeah?" said Curtis. "Er, I mean, is that right? Well, thank you very much. That is most reassuring."

"No need to thank us," said Noel. "We all have our own reasons for doing this." She looked at the man in armor. "Anyway, who's that guy?"

"Oh, that is my guard and driver. A most trustworthy and tight-lipped fellow. You needn't worry about him breathing a word about this to anyone."

Allen looked at the man. It was no surprise for the family of the marquise to

travel with protection, but this guy didn't quite look the part.

"There're no other guards with you?" asked Noel.

"Just the one," Curtis replied. "Usually, that would be unthinkable, but I was forced to come here in secret. I couldn't bring anyone else."

"In secret?" said Mylène. "Why?"

"Ah...that is a long story. How about—I mean, would you mind if I tell it while we travel? Since you arrived so early, I would like to follow my sister's trail as soon as possible."

"Makes sense," said Noel. "That's why we decided to meet here, after all. Oh, but what about food? We have about two weeks' worth stocked up ourselves, but..."

Curtis had already explained his plan of action, if the others agreed. Since it was likely that Anriette had been taken somewhere in the imperial capital, they would travel in Curtis's carriage. He had told them it was spacious enough for everyone, and Allen now saw that it was large indeed. There was no need to worry about comfort on their journey. However, they had only procured enough food to comfortably get to the next town and planned to buy more if Curtis told them that would not be enough.

"Two weeks?" said Curtis. "I think that should just about cover it. We should make it to the capital before we run out of food."

"The capital's that close?" said Noel. With all the territory it had captured, the empire was a vast and sprawling land. The group had expected a long journey to their destination from here at its easternmost point.

"Oh, the journey would usually take longer, but I intend to travel straight there, a brief stop at one particular city aside. That itself will be a challenging journey, though." Curtis looked at the others, seeking their approval.

"I have no problem with that," said Riese. "But it still seems awfully fast."

"I'll explain *that* on the move too. It will be much clearer that way."

It was all quite mysterious, but so long as it meant getting there sooner, Allen had no complaints. It seemed they'd have enough food, and even if not, they



were stopping at a city on the way.

Allen's only remaining doubts concerned traveling with these unfamiliar people, but if there was any trouble, he was confident he could handle it. The guard looked fairly capable, but however tough he was, his liege had to be less so. Then there were their Gifts. Curtis had said he was a year younger than Anriette, but Allen had already inspected him with Boundless Knowledge, just in case. He'd found that Curtis still had no Gift. Only the guard did. If either of them had any malicious intent, he could deal with it.

Allen didn't entirely trust Curtis. He didn't doubt that Anriette had been arrested, but she'd told him about her aunt and uncle. He couldn't help being suspicious of their son. If his doubts were misplaced, he'd just have to apologize for them later. He'd rather be excessively cautious than let his guard down and get blindsided. With a look, he signaled as much to Riese, Noel, and Mylène. Each nodded subtly in response. As long as each of them remained alert, there should be no problems.

Allen began to walk toward the carriage when he felt eyes on him. He stopped in his tracks.

"Something wrong?" asked Curtis with a sideways glance.

"Nope." Allen continued walking. Saying "I thought your guard was looking at me" would've made him sound far too self-conscious. It only made sense that the man responsible for Curtis's safety would be just as cautious as Allen and the others. There was no need to complain about it, but Allen stole a brief glance at the guard regardless. His face was covered by his helm, but Allen felt like he'd seen the man somewhere before. Quickly, he set that thought aside. It wasn't polite to have such doubts about someone who was about to help them. A basic level of caution would be enough.

Having decided as much, Allen hurried to the carriage.

## Curtis's Circumstances

As soon as they boarded the carriage, the group understood how they were going to make it to the imperial capital in only two weeks. The carriage began moving several times faster than normal. The view out the window flew by at incredible speed, and any scenery they saw was soon behind them. This was no mere matter of a particularly speedy horse; even the swiftest steed could never achieve such speeds.

Allen soon figured it out. "You're using a magical artifact, huh?"

"You got it. I mean, well observed," said Curtis. "This allows us to drive the horse many times faster than normal without it tiring. It is one of the prized artifacts of our empire."

"Such things aren't *that* rare, are they?" asked Riese.

"True," Curtis replied. "Though one could hardly say they are widespread, I suppose most people of a certain standing have one in their possession. Traveling across the empire would be most time-consuming otherwise."

"Makes sense," said Mylène. "So *they*ll have one too?"

"I imagine so. One just as effective as ours."

"So we can't hope to catch up with them," said Noel. "Anyway, if this is the speed you move at, how come you only made it here today?"

Allen had been wondering that too. If what Curtis had told them was true, Anriette had been arrested three days ago. Even a regular horse could make the journey to Laurus in less than a day. Something didn't add up. It couldn't have taken him *that* long to find them. If Allen and the others hadn't wasted so much time running around town procuring supplies, he could have missed them completely. Allen looked at Curtis questioningly.

Curtis cast his gaze downward for a second before answering. "I'm afraid that is because I prioritized my own safety."

“You mean acting faster could’ve put you in danger?” said Allen.

“Yes. Until yesterday, the Black Wolf Knights remained in town, searching for evidence. I shouldn’t even have been there. I don’t know what might have happened if they had found me. I had no choice but to hide. I departed only this morning. I do hope you can forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” said Riese. “Nobody can blame you for ensuring your own safety first. If you’d rushed things and been arrested yourself, we would have no idea that Lady Anriette was arrested. I think you did the right thing. Don’t we all agree?”

“Yeah,” said Noel. “Don’t blame yourself for something as simple as looking out for number one. Actually...*I’m* sorry for being so suspicious.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” said Curtis, “but I still feel it was the height of cowardice not to take a more courageous approach.”

“I think you made the right move,” said Mylène. “That wasn’t the time for courage.”

Allen had to agree. Leaping headfirst into an honorable death was nothing more than foolhardiness and deserving of no praise.

“I guess if you hadn’t found us in time, *then* you’d have reason to blame yourself,” said Noel. “And why us, anyway?”

“Hm?” said Curtis. “What do you mean?”

“Now that you mention it, I’m curious too,” said Riese. “All you ought to have known is that we were probably acquaintances of Lady Anriette. And after three days, there was little chance we’d still be in Laurus.”

“Coming to Laurus in search of us *was* a strange choice,” Mylène agreed.

The group had told him their names but little about who they were. Curtis had insisted that such knowledge could only cause all of them more trouble, which meant he had to have *some* idea of who they were. Even if he’d therefore been able to surmise that they would come to Laurus in order to cross the border, had he really come to the city on the off chance that they were still there three days later? Something seriously didn’t add up.



Pressured by the suspicious looks of the others, Curtis averted his eyes.  
“Well...the thing is...”

“There’s a reason you can’t say, right?” said Noel.

“It’s not that I can’t say it, exactly...”

“So you *can* say it?” asked Mylène.

“I suppose so. You see...I don’t have a single friend I can trust.”

The others glanced awkwardly at each other, unsure how to respond to the lonely confession they’d just wrung out of the young man. Noticing this, Curtis hastened to add, “Oh, not *personally*, you understand. I mean as it concerns Anriette. None of my friends would have agreed to rescue her.”

“Hmm,” said Allen. “I’m not sure Anriette would appreciate you revealing that nobody likes her.”

“Oh, well, I mean...” Curtis sputtered before falling silent.

Allen smirked. This was of some interest, but there was another matter that concerned him more. “Why do you say your friends wouldn’t agree to help Anriette? Could it be related to why you had to sneak into town in the first place?”

“That’s right. I’m not sure how much you know, but...Anriette has a poor relationship with my mother and father. Well, to be quite honest, they have ostracized her, and as a result, so have most others. But as far as I’m concerned, she is still my sister. We played together as children, and to this day I love her dearly.”

“So that’s why you had to travel to see her in secret,” said Noel.

“Yes, it must be difficult to visit her openly under such circumstances,” said Riese.

“I find the whole thing ridiculous,” said Curtis. “But I still represent the marquisate. I cannot afford to ignore public perception.”

“I guess it’s to be expected,” said Mylène.

“Yeah,” said Noel. “I’m sorry for doubting you...again.” She smiled.

“That, too, is to be expected,” said Curtis, offering a wry smile in return. “We know nothing of each other, after all.”

It was only natural for both parties to be suspicious of the other. That such suspicion hadn’t resulted in a hostile atmosphere meant things were going well.

“So long as we all know where we stand,” said Allen. “Although on that front, maybe you should start by fixing how you talk.”

“Hm?”

“You’re clearly not used to talking like a noble.”

“Ah, forgive me. I’m so used to speaking casually that the habit has been hard to break, no matter how much my parents rebuke me.”

“I don’t think that’s what Allen means,” said Riese. “It’s fine for you to speak casually with us.”

“Yeah,” said Noel. “This isn’t a formal situation.”

“We don’t mind,” said Mylène.

“Um...are you quite sure?” Curtis replied in confusion.

“I think it would put all of us at ease.” Allen never would’ve mentioned it otherwise.

“Oh? Got it. Then that’s how I’ll talk in front of you.” Curtis smiled.

The others smiled back. Allen looked out of the window, where the scenery continued to fly by. At this rate, they really would make it in two weeks. This was shaping up to be a pleasant journey, though he couldn’t help but continue to harbor doubts. He sighed as he watched the landscape pass by.

## A Break and a Conversation

A giant rumble resounded, interrupting the conversation. Each member of the group surreptitiously glanced at the others.

“I-It wasn’t me!” said Noel.

“M-Me neither!” said Riese.

“Wasn’t me,” said Mylène.

Following their swift denials, all looked accusingly toward Allen.

He shrugged. “Wasn’t me either.”

Only one person remained. The other four looked at Curtis, who smiled. “Sorry. I understand how you’d get the wrong idea, but that wasn’t the sound of a stomach rumbling.”

“What?” said Noel. “It had to be. I guess it *was* a pretty big one, though...”

Indeed, it had been big enough to stop the conversation in its tracks, louder than any of their voices. That was why the girls had been so quick to claim their innocence.

“Then what was it?” said Mylène.

“A signal that it’s time for a break,” said Curtis. “Specifically, that it’s time to refuel the magical artifact.”

“Refuel?”

“Yes. The carriage itself is actually the artifact. That’s why it’s so comfortable to ride in despite the speed we’re moving at.”

“Makes sense.”

The carriage swayed surprisingly little considering the rate at which the scenery outside the window passed by. Allen had assumed it was just a particularly well-made carriage.

“But to achieve that, it uses a lot of magical energy. Versions where the



passengers provide that energy themselves were considered, but that causes problems when there aren't enough passengers or if some of them are children. So we ended up with this chargeable version."

There were two ways that magical artifacts could work: by consuming the user's magical energy or by consuming their own store of magical energy like fuel. The latter were known as chargeable artifacts. These were very difficult to use when powered by the user's magical energy, and such attempts often caused a range of complex problems. The communications device Riese had previously used was also of this type and as such occasionally became unusable.

"And it's not just a matter of the magic no longer working," Curtis continued. "This carriage is three times heavier than a normal one. The magical effect makes it lighter and strengthens it even further, allowing the horse to pull it at such great speeds. But..."

"When the magic runs out, a lot could go wrong, huh?" said Allen.

"So that's why there's a signal," said Riese.

"Right," Curtis replied. "A really obvious one. And it can also be charged more according to how long you expect it'll be until you can take a break."

"So it's time to take a breather?" Mylène asked.

"Exactly," said Curtis. "Why don't we enjoy a late lunch while we wait for the carriage to recharge?"

Everyone exchanged glances. It was well past lunchtime. Even if their stomachs weren't rumbling, they *were* pretty hungry. They nodded. Curtis smiled, then knocked three times on the hatch to the driver's seat. The carriage began to slow, finally coming to a gentle stop next to a large tree. It looked like a fine spot to enjoy a meal.

"You all go ahead and eat without me. I'll finish recharging the carriage, then eat with my guard."

Curtis watched Allen and the others disembark before heading to meet his guard—half out of care and half out of caution, it seemed to Allen. After sleeping, meals were the time when people let their guard down the most. If either of their parties had prepared food for the other, the recipients would

have to look out for poison. Both parties understood that eating separately was simply the sensible thing to do and had communicated as much to each other in order to avoid any awkwardness. Therefore, no one objected to Curtis's statement. They watched him leave and prepared to eat.

However, there was little preparation to do. The party had thought they'd be pressed for time; they'd planned on eating on the move. Accordingly, they'd stocked up on food that could be eaten as is. It wasn't long before they were tucking into a meal.

"So, what do you think?" said Allen.

Despite the suddenness of his statement, no one was confused about what he meant. No one even stopped eating.

"Hmm," said Riese. "I'm about fifty-fifty, I suppose."

Noel nodded at the vague statement. "Same here."

"I have nothing to add," said Mylène.

Allen smirked. He'd figured as much. He was asking what they thought of Curtis. If they avoided going into specifics, it didn't matter who might be listening. He was sure Curtis knew that they'd be talking about him, but that didn't mean he'd be particularly happy if he happened to overhear them. They *could* have avoided the subject entirely, but it had to be discussed, and they had only planned for one stop along the way. This could be the only chance they had to discuss their thoughts on their new acquaintance. Yet, at that moment in time, no one had much to say.

"Figures," said Allen. "I feel the same way. At this point, at least."

"It sounds like you think something's odd," said Riese.

Riese was right; it was all *very* odd. After they'd been stuck spinning their wheels for two days, this guy had shown up with a story they couldn't ignore—*just* as they were about to leave. Who wouldn't be suspicious? But at this point, that was all he could say. The fact that it was suspicious didn't prove anything. On the other hand, he hadn't seen a shred of evidence that would make it all seem less so. And he was in a hostile country to boot. If he'd been here alone, he wouldn't have felt so tense, but with Riese, Noel, and Mylène

with him, he had to be cautious. He couldn't let his guard down until the very end—only then, when this was all over without incident, could he assume that this was all just a string of coincidences. At that point, he'd owe Curtis an apology. He hoped with all his heart that would turn out to be the case, and yet...

"I guess we should just stay vigilant for now."

"Agreed," said Riese. "Though I can't say I like doing this."

"That goes without saying," said Noel.

"But it has to be done," added Mylène.

Allen was reluctant too. They all were. They'd much rather place absolute trust in Curtis, but reality was rarely so kind. Allen glanced briefly in Curtis's direction.

"That's how it goes," he muttered, tossing the last morsel into his mouth.



# The Knights of Death

After eating, the group was soon on their way again. Curtis had said their carriage was no worse than those used by the Black Wolf Knights, but the knights still had a two-day head start. They had no time to waste.

Inside the carriage, Allen pondered the situation. “You said Anriette was arrested for being the ringleader of the assassination plot, but how serious a crime is that, exactly? What we actually have to do to help her could change a lot depending on that.”

“I’m not too clear on it either,” said Curtis. “I only saw her being apprehended by the Black Wolf Knights. Even *what* she was arrested for is just a guess, but considering that’s what the knights have been mobilized for, it *has* to be that.”

“You think so?” said Noel.

Allen had assumed Curtis knew at least that much if he’d gone so far as to seek their help. Apparently not. Why had he been so desperate? Without more information, how could they know if it was worth it for them—and, for that matter, Anriette—to take great risk to win her freedom? True, Anriette being arrested was of grave importance, but some crimes would only lead to a year’s imprisonment or even less. Was avoiding that worth having to flee the empire never to return? Of course, if Curtis was right, then such a light punishment was inconceivable.

“Yes,” said Curtis. “There’s a chance that we might all be better off if we *don’t* help her.”

“You say that, but you don’t look like you think it’s too likely,” said Noel.

“You’re quite right,” Curtis confessed.

“And why is that?” asked Riese.

“Because it was the Black Wolf Knights who arrested her.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, amid all these concerns, I suppose that’s the biggest one of all.

They call them the Knights of Death, don't they?"

Now *that* was unsettling. Anriette had never told Allen that part. He quickly surmised how they'd acquired the name.

"Yes," said Curtis. "On the surface, they're simply an elite fighting force, but the members are selected from people sentenced to death."

"Oh?" said Riese. "I feel like an order composed entirely of condemned knights wouldn't hold together too well."

"It doesn't seem like they do," said Allen.

"It sounds like you've had a run-in with them before," Curtis observed.

"Just a bit."

"I see. My apologies, on behalf of the empire. I assure you that our other knightly orders are all fine, upstanding citizens."

The others couldn't help but react with dubious expressions; regardless of what they thought of Curtis, he was still talking about the soldiers of an enemy nation. Realizing this, Curtis smiled awkwardly and nodded slightly in apology.

"Um, anyway. Yes, regarding how effective the Black Wolf Knights are... My understanding is that they function rather well. After all, they don't simply send *every* condemned prisoner off to join their ranks."

"The one I encountered didn't seem to conduct himself like a knight," said Allen.

"Well, I'm sure he had his reasons. Given the sorts of duties the knights tend to be assigned, they are expected to uphold only the most basic of standards. If you'll forgive me for saying, I think you might have been unlucky to have come across one of them."

"I don't think it's fair to blame the people who get mixed up with them," said Noel. "But I suppose *we* didn't really, so I can't object too much."

"Yes," said Riese. "They're the only ones who'd have the right to complain."

"Anyway," Curtis continued, "they're not only called the Knights of Death because they've been sentenced to death. In fact, that's only a happy—if you

can call it that—accident.”

“Really?” said Allen.

“Yes,” said Curtis. “As a rule, their duties are not just dangerous, but almost sure to result in death—whether during the mission itself or as penitence for the horrific deeds they had to commit to succeed. The death rate per mission is said to be somewhere around eighty or ninety percent. Their elite status, too, is because only the best of the best survive. Even then, it’s said that there are only two current knights who have served for longer than a year.”

That explained why Allen had never heard the phrase “Knights of Death” before. Anriette hadn’t given him that many details. Sharing the bombastic nickname wouldn’t have been high on her list of priorities, given what Allen needed to know. Now, however, it *was* important that he knew.

“There’s one other reason for the name,” said Curtis. “They deliver death.”

“What do you mean?” asked Riese.

“Everyone they arrest meets their end by some means or other, whether condemned to death or simply in strange circumstances during their imprisonment. That’s one reason they’re so feared.”

“I see,” said Noel. “So that’s why you sought our help despite not knowing exactly what was happening.”

“No matter why she was arrested, the end result would be the same,” Mylène noted.

Curtis nodded. Allen peered at him. So far, his story all made sense. There were no inconsistencies. Any slight points of concern had been quickly dispelled. For now, he’d just have to keep the conversation going.

“I understand why we need to save Anriette. No objections there. But have you figured out exactly what we’re going to do?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Curtis replied. “I thought we could figure that out once we’ve gathered some information in the capital.”

“Gotcha. Well, I think we’d better talk about it now. Don’t expect too much from me when it comes to fighting. I’m only Level 1.”



The others peered at him, befuddled. Still, he hadn't told a lie. Given the uncertainty of the situation and the benefits of avoiding further attention, Allen decided to play his cards close to his chest. Nothing stopped him from revealing his true ability if the need arose.

"That goes for me too," said Noel. "I'm confident about fighting inside the forest, but the imperial capital's a different story."

"I'm not too adept at fighting either," said Riese.

"Same here," added Mylène.

Each of them seemed like they had some objection to raise but said nothing. Noel *was* a competent fighter but had deftly skirted the issue by comparing herself to her abilities inside the forest. The other two were simply telling the truth, although Mylène certainly had ways of handling combat even if she wasn't a great fighter.

"I see," said Curtis hesitantly. "Well...that's no problem. I'm no fighter either. I never planned on kicking the doors down. Simply having your help is reassuring enough."

His stern expression belied his words. Perhaps he was merely thinking hard, but to Allen it seemed like something more. Trying his best to act as though he hadn't noticed, Allen continued the conversation.

# In the Dead of Night

The horses drew the carriage for the rest of the day. As the sun began to set, the group stopped again for supper and to allow the carriage to recharge. Normally they would also prepare to sleep outdoors since there were certainly no towns nearby in which to spend the night, but this time was different.

“I never even thought about doing this,” said Allen, “but I guess this thing really doesn’t rock around, does it? It’s totally possible.”

“Even then, I’d never usually do this,” said Riese. “But when in Viktor, do as the Victorians do, I suppose.”

“There’s no doubt we’ll arrive faster this way, at least,” said Noel. “Especially considering the speed we’re moving at.”

“Hey, gimme a little more space,” said Mylène.

They were inside the carriage. Had the darkness not made it impossible, they would still have been able to see the scenery passing by at an alarming rate out the window as they continued to move toward their destination.

“Seems like the magic allows the driver to see just fine even in darkness,” Allen remarked. “Wards off monsters too, *and* stops the driver from getting tired.”

When Curtis had told them he intended to travel all day, he had meant *all* day. It was a little scary to know the empire had access to such magic.

“I’d heard that the empire had next-generation technology, but seeing it in action is another thing entirely,” said Riese.

“I’m surprised the kingdom’s managed to stave them off,” Mylène agreed.

It was often said that the empire’s technology outstripped that of the kingdom—and *all* other countries. They now saw proof of that claim. Yet the Kingdom of Adastera was able to compete with a seemingly insuperable foe thanks to the military prowess of certain individuals. The General had further

strengthened their advantage in that regard and brokered an uneasy peace, but there could be no doubt that it was only through the kingdom's continued might that the peace was preserved.

"Even with the General gone, we have someone even more incredible at our disposal," said Noel. "Even if he *does* say ridiculous things from time to time."

"I dunno who you're talking about," said Allen with a shrug, "But it sounds to me like the things he says are sage advice."

Noel shot him a doubtful look.

"Guess we'd better get some shut-eye," Allen added.

"Yes," said Riese. "I'm quite tired, even if I *have* been sitting down all day. We should sleep while we can. After all, we don't know when we might be awoken."

"Funny you should say that, 'cause you're the one who seems the least comfortable with this arrangement."

"I can't *imagine* why," said Noel. "You're not wrong, though. I think I'll be able to fall asleep easily."

"Me too," said Mylène.

Even after so many travels, and even living in the Frontier for half a year, Riese's nature was still that of a princess. "I hate to admit it, but I know what you're saying. But that's exactly why I must grit my teeth and insist that there's no problem."

"I dunno if that's something you should have to endure," Allen answered. At least, it wasn't for a noble. But if Riese insisted it was fine, he could only respect her claims. They'd find out soon enough if she really could handle sleeping like this or not.

"Is it safe for all of us to sleep at once?" asked Mylène. "Shouldn't one of us stand guard?"

"I dunno if we have to go that far," Allen replied. "It'd be kinda rude."

"Quite," said Riese. "Since Curtis has been so kind as to leave us alone, we should all sleep."

Only the four of them were inside the carriage. Curtis, presumably knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep alongside them, had retreated to the driver's seat. Allen had thought he wouldn't be able to sleep there, but since that area was also under the effects of the magic, it was possible. The magic protected him from the wind and regulated the temperature, features designed for the driver's comfort that served a sleeping passenger just as well. He even had his guard present to ensure he didn't fall.

Given Curtis's higher status, Allen hadn't expected him to go to such lengths, but him sleeping with the others would have caused problems—as a young man of noble standing, he couldn't sleep alongside three young ladies. Allen knew they couldn't appear too cautious after he'd shown them the courtesy of recusing himself.

"If anything happens, Allen will handle it," said Mylène.

"I dunno if I trust him to be capable of doing that while he's asleep," said Noel.

Allen shrugged. "I'm not superhuman, you know."

"But you're not saying you can't do it?" asked Riese.

"I guess I won't know unless something happens."

It would depend on what and who was responsible. The carriage's magic was warding off monsters, and given the speed at which they were moving, bandits would be no threat either. But he couldn't say they were perfectly safe. Most importantly, he couldn't discount Curtis and his guard as a threat.

"I think you can all sleep without worrying about that. I can't promise I'll handle *anything* that happens, but I can promise I'll protect all of you, at least."

"You know, sometimes I get the feeling you're buttering us up," said Riese.

"No kidding," said Noel. "Not just sometimes either."

"He's a sneaky one," Mylène agreed.

"Hey, what's with all this bad press?" Allen waved off the defamation.

"Anyway," said Riese, "if that's what you think, then I suppose we'll all go to sleep now."

“Fine by me,” said Noel. “There’s just one problem. I’ve told you I’m a delicate girl who can’t sleep on a different pillow, haven’t I? Well, there are no pillows here at all. So I wonder if there’s anything I can use instead?”

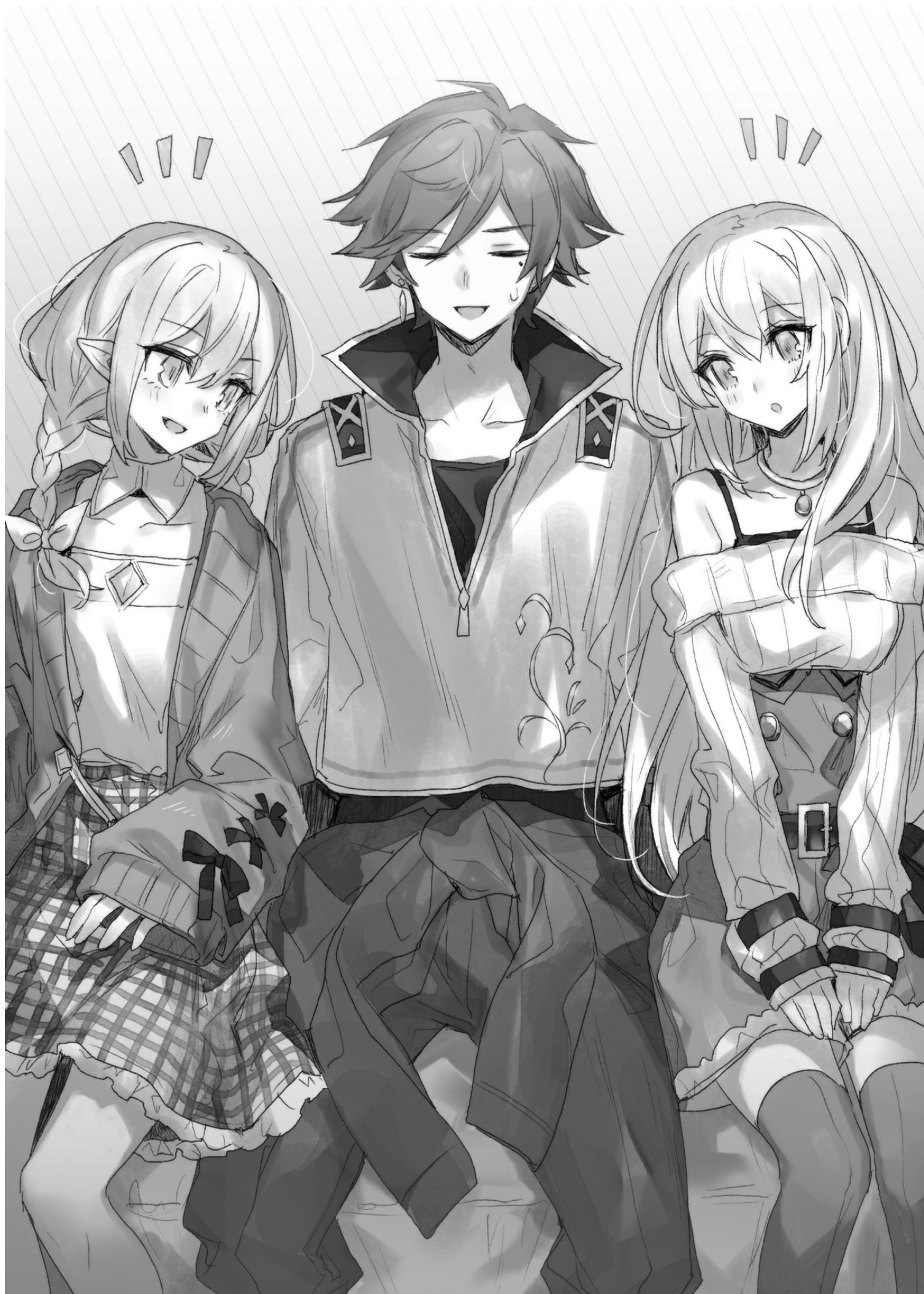
“That would be nice, wouldn’t it? Let’s see...”

“Hmm,” said Mylène.

“Uh, why are you all staring at my lap?” Allen asked.

He didn’t really mind, only he couldn’t promise he’d make for a comfortable pillow. He wished they’d figured out a solution for this back in town.





With a smile, Allen looked out of the window. All he could see was darkness. He squinted, trying to make out anything he could, but failed. He thought of the girl he expected to find at their destination.

*I wonder what she's thinking right now?* he thought with a sigh.

# The Prisoner's Journey

Anriette suddenly realized that this was just about the worst she'd ever felt. Of course, it was ridiculous to expect a comfortable journey as a prisoner, but even so...

"I know I'm under arrest, but I really thought you'd treat me better than this," she complained. She looked at her hands and feet—they were bound with rope. "Could you untie these already? I'm not gonna run away, you know."

It wasn't the lack of freedom she resented, and she didn't plan on trying to escape. She just hated that she couldn't do anything for herself. Eating and even going to the bathroom required assistance. It felt like a new form of torture. She didn't mean to imply that her captors were guilty of mistreating their prisoners. When she considered what she was accused of, she realized she had no room to complain; in fact, she should've expected even harsher treatment. But until now she'd been a compliant prisoner, and she didn't have any intention of escaping. What chance would she have of success if she made a break for it, anyway? What would be the harm in untying the ropes?

"No can do," said Lisette. "This is how we're supposed to handle all our suspects."

It was hopeless. Anriette could only sigh. She didn't expect her guard to be all smiles, but the way Lisette refused to even *look* at her felt unnecessary. If this was how knightly orders conducted themselves, they couldn't be much fun to be part of. But these were the *Black Wolf Knights*. She'd gotten a look at them at mealtimes, and most of them seemed positively laid-back. She'd concluded that Lisette alone was a stickler for the rules—a fact that had become abundantly clear over the previous three days.

Giving up, Anriette flopped down on her back. "It's gonna be tough to sleep like this," she sighed. "I'm afraid I'll fall. Couldn't you at least untie me to eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom?"

"No can do," said Lisette. "Them's the rules."

Anriette had already given up, but she grumbled regardless, rolling onto her side to turn her back to Lisette and sighing aggressively at the predictable response. “A real stickler, ain’tcha? Even though I’m showing you such a vulnerable, defenseless side of myself.”

“That position is supposed to make it easier to sleep,” said Lisette. “Don’t think you can pull one over on me by appealing to my better nature.”

Anriette offered only a faint snort in response. She knew Lisette was right. She *was* showing vulnerability, but only because her hands and feet were bound. At that point, she could hardly do anything else. Still, she was genuinely scared, and she wished Lisette would be at least a little moved by that.

“You’re already getting a lot of leeway,” said Lisette. “Normally you wouldn’t be able to sleep lying down.”

“Come to think of it, this is a pretty cushy job for you, isn’t it?” said Anriette. She was sure her captor had arranged things so that they would be the only two in the carriage, which would usually carry ten people. Both of them were reaping the benefits of that.

“I won’t deny it,” said Lisette. “But it only goes to show the importance of my duties.”

“Keeping an eye on a good girl like me? You couldn’t ask for an easier time.”

“Gimme a break. I can’t sleep peacefully knowing you might run for it at any time.”

Lisette knew there was no chance of that happening. Maybe she wasn’t just a stickler for the rules—maybe she actually cared.

“Wouldn’t your friends be angry if they heard you say that?” said Anriette. “It’s not like you’re driving the carriage or anything.”

“They know the score. Besides, driving this thing isn’t that hard. Not even solo, in theory. And we’re using a rotation, two drivers per day. Each of them only has to drive once every five days.”

“It’s possible solo? Only in theory, surely?” said Anriette. She’d heard it was doable, but usually a single driver wouldn’t even go all night. Outside of

wartime or other emergencies, there were always three or four drivers, allowing everyone else to rest at night. Even half a day was pretty tough going, even if it was only once every five days. Who would drive a carriage all day except as a punishment?

“Oh, speaking of punishment, remember the man I handed over to you?” Anriette asked.

“Hm? Yeah. What about him?”

“Nothing really. It’s just...you said he’d be punished. I haven’t seen him since, so I was wondering what happened to him.”

“I see. Well, that makes sense. I left him behind to receive his punishment.”

“Oh really?”

When the man had been arrested, Anriette hadn’t been able to make much use of her captive and had obediently handed him over to Lisette. But she was surprised to learn that he hadn’t been brought along with them. After all, he was a Black Wolf Knight, a condemned criminal. The Black Wolf Knights were not conscripted in lieu of execution; the fulfillment of their knightly duties only granted them a temporary stay on their inevitable fate. Their lives being of such little value, the only conceivable punishment for any transgression or failure was death. Anriette could only conclude that the man had been left behind for exactly that reason.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Lisette, “but trust me, you’re mistaken.”

“Wait, really?” said Anriette. “I thought they killed you guys the moment you made the slightest mistake.”

That was, after all, how this group of thugs could be encouraged to maintain the slightest veneer of knightly respectability. Even the likes of them weren’t foolhardy enough to so cavalierly throw away the chance at life they’d been granted, having been lucky enough to be assigned to the order in the first place. On the whole, the group took their duties seriously and upheld the rules they were required to uphold. At present, it seemed the mission’s success had given them cause to relax, but even now they could not afford any slipups. At least, that was what Anriette had thought.



“That’s true, as a rule. But the mission was a success,” Lisette replied.

“So you took pity on him because you managed to arrest me?”

“If you insist on putting it like that. If we’d failed to capture you, I would have slit his throat myself.”

She said it as casually as if she were talking about what she’d eaten for dinner the previous night. But knowing Lisette, Anriette thought she meant it. She couldn’t see the look on Lisette’s face but imagined it was one of utmost calm. It was proof of the kind of life she had endured. Anriette couldn’t even imagine what it must be like always living one step away from death, let alone attempt to put it into words. Of course, Lisette had to be some three years older than her. Perhaps that was why she always seemed so composed.

*“The Death Defier, huh?”*

The name seemed as wretched now as it had when she’d first heard it, but given her present situation, she couldn’t sympathize with her captor. Besides, she was more interested in what Lisette had just said. The man was still alive—probably, anyway. But that was bizarre. The Black Wolf Knights weren’t the type to forgive a failure simply because they’d accomplished their main goal. They were more inclined to let several heads roll in order to tie up any inconvenient loose ends. Anriette couldn’t imagine any punishment short of death that would satisfy their leadership. And the man had *really* screwed up. Yes, he had managed to produce “evidence” of Anriette’s guilt, but he had done so by attacking the Elven Forest, a prohibited act. If that didn’t qualify as an inconvenient truth to be dealt with, what did?

There were other things Anriette was curious about too. How had the man gotten inside the Elven Forest? Percival was wrong; he hadn’t had the right to enter. Even after following someone inside, he should have been repelled by the forest. The only exceptions were those who had been granted permission as Anriette had done for Allen and the others. But who had granted *him* permission? To her knowledge, no person capable of that had been in the area at the time.

For now, all she could conclude was that the man was extremely suspicious and clearly had the backing of a powerful person. It had to be someone who

had influence over the Black Wolf Knights, but narrowing it down to an individual was difficult. With the state the empire was in, the candidates were far too numerous. Any of the many would-be emperors or their hangers-on could be behind it. All of them would stand to gain from unleashing that man and producing a scapegoat for the killing of the emperor.

Anriette wasn't too concerned about that part, though. Yes, she had been railroaded, but at the same time she'd gotten herself into this mess. She couldn't complain too much. What interested her was whether word of this event would reach Allen. There was no point even wondering about anything else.

By now, Allen should have been out of the country. By the time he learned of her arrest, it would all be over and it would be too late. There shouldn't have been any need to worry, but, knowing him, she couldn't help doing so. There was nothing she could put past his abilities.

"Ugh, I'm such a fangirl," she thought out loud.

"You say something?"

"Oh, just talking to myself. I'm going to sleep now. Being stuck like this really takes it out of me."

"Oh, yeah? Good night, then. I'll be hitting the sack soon enough myself."

*Aren't you supposed to be watching me?* Anriette thought to herself with a smirk as she closed her eyes.

Of course, there wasn't much she could do now anyway. She only hoped she could avoid disrupting the future that Allen wanted for himself. She prayed that word of her situation wouldn't reach him—or that if it did, that it wouldn't cause him the slightest trouble.

These were the hollow thoughts she occupied herself with while she pushed her true feelings deep below the surface. She eventually allowed herself to drift into sleep, where she could be free from unwanted thoughts.

## The Empire's Second City

The ground fissured with a dull thud, rocks rolling into the cavern that formed in a symbol of the man's anger. Still unsatisfied, he clenched his fist once again. "Ruptu—"

"That's enough. You're about to do us more harm than good."

The man, Oswald Hyurandell, immediately retracted his arm in response to the interruption. Turning toward the voice, he grumbled at the sight of the person responsible for the ongoing proceedings.

"What the hell're *you* doing here?"

"Hey now, is that any way to talk to the gentlema— I mean, the fella who hired you? It's thanks to me that you're enjoying being alive right now. Show some respect."

Oswald couldn't deny that he was right on both counts. On the latter, however—the fact that he hadn't been executed—the man was no less responsible for getting him into the mess in the first place. The fact that Oswald had been told he was free to do whatever he pleased to the elves, and that acting accordingly had almost gotten him killed... That part he wasn't even mad about. It was his own fault for being stupid enough to believe what he'd been told. But demanding Oswald's gratitude for extricating him from the situation *he'd* created? That he couldn't stand.

"It's your fault I'm stuck doin' this stupid grunt work!" said Oswald. "This isn't s'posed to be my job!"

"What do you expect? It's supposed to be a punishment."

Oswald snorted. He understood that the choice of punishment showed that the man recognized his capabilities. But when it came down to it, he just didn't like the guy with his contemptuous looks and smart-aleck smirk.

"You're not the only one being put to work here, anyway. What about me?"

“Work?” said Oswald. “Look’s like you’re just screwin’ around to me.”

“Want to trade places? You’ll soon see how hard it is.”

“Is that a serious offer? Trust me, I’ll gladly go beat some ass if you’ll let me!”

The man shook his head. He knew all about Oswald’s unruly nature. Oswald grunted with irritation.

“Tch. Still not allowed, huh?”

“It’s not the right time. Trust me, you’ll get your wish soon enough. As promised.”

“Hmph.”

That promise was the reason Oswald had so willingly accepted this punishment, and the reason he endeavored to contain himself. He knew his irritation would soon give way to the exhilarating thrill of what was to come.

Even so, he didn’t like the guy. True, things so far had played out exactly as the man had described, but Oswald’s intuition still whispered that he wasn’t to be trusted. Those eyes and that smile didn’t inspire an iota of trust. But that was as far as his read on the man went; Oswald had no insight into his intentions. As far as he was concerned, the man was welcome to go ahead and try whatever nefarious ideas he had in mind. This time, Oswald would beat him to a pulp.

“Good,” he told the man. “Soon, huh? Don’t screw me around. Keep me waitin’ too long and I’ll go beat some ass by myself.”

“Go ahead, throw away your second chance at life. See if I care.”

Oswald snorted. If the man was willing to go that far, he’d play along for the time being. Much as he wanted to dispose of him, that would present its own problems. Still, he couldn’t help but smile as he thought about how nice it would be to take out all his resentment in one fell swoop.

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It was a week before Allen and the others arrived in the city of Finis, Duchy of Lagergren. This was supposedly the second-largest city in the empire after the capital, and from the bustling streets, Allen could easily believe it. According to

Curtis, this would be their only real stop on their journey.

“Sure is busy,” said Allen. “Is it like this everywhere in the empire?”

“Oh, not at all. This place and Laurus are some of the most populous in the empire. The other towns are...varied. Some are lonely places, barely more than villages, while others are fairly lively. You can count the number of imperial cities this busy on one hand.”

“No different from any other country, I suppose,” Riese observed. “In fact, it’s impressive that the empire has more than one city like this.”

The group walked the streets as they talked. They weren’t there to see the sights, but to stock up on supplies. However, Curtis had told Allen’s party that if they maintained their current pace, they still had plenty of supplies remaining. This seemed true for Curtis and his guard too, with one essential exception: fuel to drive the carriage. There were actually *two* types of rechargeable magical artifacts.



# The Blockaded City

The notion of “power words”—certain phrases with the ability to influence reality—could not be dismissed as mere idle fantasy. After all, people were well aware of the existence of magic and sorceries that could transform words into power. And furthermore, they sometimes witnessed the phenomenon occur in real life.

“I’m sorry,” said Riese. “We shouldn’t have spoken this into reality.”

“Not at all,” said Curtis with a smile. “A harmless joke didn’t make this happen. No need to feel guilty.”

Riese nevertheless bowed her head, wearing a grave expression. The current situation was, after all, grave.

Allen peered out of the window. What were they going to do now? The town was blockaded. They couldn’t leave.

It had happened that morning. After procuring replacement magic crystals and getting a good night’s rest, the group had talked over breakfast as they prepared to continue on their journey with renewed energy. It was then that a sudden announcement had notified them that the town had been locked down and no one was permitted to leave. No indication of how long the blockade would continue had been given, nor had any reason been offered. But to take such drastic action, there had to be serious grounds.

“I dunno what’s going on, but if it comes to it, we could always force our way out,” said Noel.

“Hopefully it doesn’t come to that,” Allen replied. “Who knows what ripple effects that could have. Besides, we told Curtis that we’re not fighters.”

“I doubt he’d be too surprised if *you* turned out to be one,” Mylène noted.

“Indeed. You’ve already shown off a lot of your skills,” Riese agreed.

Allen wasn’t convinced that the ability to purify water and draw a bath out on

the plains amounted to much. Curtis *had* been surprised by the storage artifact they possessed, but that belonged to Riese, not Allen.

“I think you’re the only one who doesn’t see it,” Noel added. “Anyway, we need to find out more before we do anything.”

“Right,” said Riese. “Perhaps there’s some way out of this.”

“That’ll depend on Curtis,” said Mylène.

“Yup,” Allen answered.

The party was gathered in their room at the inn. With no idea what was going on, they had elected to stay inside for the time being. The day prior, Allen had used a separate room from the others, but now they shared the same one, both to discuss what was going on and in case of any unwanted visitors.

Curtis and his guard had ventured outside to take stock of the situation and, depending on what they discovered, attempt to negotiate permission to leave the city. Regardless of what was going on outside, as a citizen of the empire, not to mention a member of the marquisate, the danger to Curtis should have been minimal. Of course, it was still a risky move, but the group was in a hurry—they had to reach the imperial capital soon. They—or rather, Curtis, had chosen to expose himself to that risk in order to expedite their departure.

The others were busy discussing this when they heard a knock at the door. Allen already knew who it was.

“Come in,” he said blithely.

The door opened and Curtis walked through, wearing a sunken expression.

“Welcome back,” said Allen. “Looks like there’s no need to ask how that went.”

“No need to ask for the gory details either,” said Riese. It was easy enough to surmise that not only had they been unable to leave the city, but the situation outside was not favorable.

Curtis sighed as if to confirm their suspicions. “Right. In fact, it’s about as bad as I could imagine.”

“Really?” said Noel. “What the heck happened?”

“So you have some information?” Mylène asked.

“Yes. I *was* able to find out what’s going on, at least. I’ll get straight to the point. The Black Wolf Knights are behind the blockade.”

“Yup, that *is* about the worst thing possible,” Allen agreed.

Given the complex and challenging nature of the duties assigned to the Black Wolf Knights, they tended to operate as a single unit. Though their individual tasks sometimes separated them, they were always working toward the completion of the same mission. Furthermore, even though the knights had a three-day lead on Allen’s party, the imperial capital was even farther ahead than that, meaning the transport of Anriette was still underway. What was the significance of running into them here?

“According to my findings, they’ve blockaded the city in order to search for someone or something,” said Curtis. “There are only a few things that could be.”

“Something connected to the assassination of the emperor,” said Allen. “Or else...”

“Us,” said Riese.

“Indeed,” said Curtis. “And as much as I hope it’s the former...”

“It would be pretty convenient, considering the timing, right?” Allen finished.

“So we’re busted?” asked Mylène.

“Best to assume that’s the case,” said Curtis.

All of them understood how the Black Wolf Knights operated. There was a chance they had been keeping tabs on Curtis’s movements all this time. In fact, Curtis had been hiding for the past two days specifically to avoid attracting suspicion. But if he’d already been found out, how had he managed to slip by the guards just now?

They had to be monitoring him while pretending not to, in which case he had already been ensnared by their trap. He’d sought out Allen’s party to ask them for help, and then they’d all headed for the imperial capital. It wouldn’t have been hard for the Black Wolf Knights to conclude that they were rushing to

Anriette's rescue—and thus that Allen and the others were her collaborators. It didn't have to be true, only arguable. To have arrested Anriette, the empire already had to be at its wits' end. Its failure to find the emperor's killer had to be causing problems on many fronts. At this point, a scapegoat would do just fine, and if they were a convincing one, so much the better.

Allen and the others' actions would serve as valuable corroborating evidence for the argument that Anriette was the mastermind behind the assassination. Why *not* apprehend them? That the door to their room hadn't been knocked down yet was probably a matter of numbers. With only a handful of knights, they had easily been able to hide their presence, but that also limited their ability to make arrests without the risk of at least some of the party escaping.

That was where this city came in. Curtis had been clear that it would be their one stop at a populated area along the way. That made it the perfect place for the Black Wolf Knights to ensnare them by blockading the exits.

Of course, they could have been overthinking it all. But it made too much sense, and besides, nothing bad would come of being wrong. They could laugh about it in relief later. If they were right, though, they were in serious trouble. They had to assume the worst, and in that regard, their options were limited. There was almost no chance of a peaceful resolution.

"Yup, we're in quite the bind," Allen said with a sigh.

## Circumstances and Strategies

For starters, no matter what the plan was, they needed more information. Curtis had returned the moment he'd discovered that the Black Wolf Knights had blockaded the city. He'd had no chance to learn anything further, not even whether it was possible for them to leave the city. It was clearly a grave situation, though. One wrong move and they might even be arrested on the spot. And Curtis, at least, whose face was already familiar to them, shouldn't take any further action at all.

"Wait, where is your guard?" asked Noel.

"Oh, he's continuing to gather information in my stead. He shouldn't run any risk of being recognized."

"If you say so," said Allen. "That'll really help us out."

If Curtis couldn't show his face outside, Allen and the others would have to gather information themselves. But this town was unfamiliar to all of them; it might as well have been enemy territory. Any relief from that burden by Curtis and his guard was welcome.

"Do you have any idea where we should start looking for information?" Allen continued.

"Let's see... My contacts are likely to have the most accurate information, but there's a good chance they're already being monitored. Probably best to avoid them."

"The Black Wolf Knights are *that* well-informed?" asked Noel.

"They certainly do their research. They've had a week to find out who I know in this city. With the communication artifacts they have at their disposal, it's more than possible."

"Make sense when you put it that way..."

The knights knew *this* was where they would lay their trap, and it was easy to



predict that Curtis might seek outside help. Given the importance of their duties, they probably had access to communication artifacts superior to Riese's, which sometimes became unusable. The party really was in a tight spot.

"So where *should* we try to gather information?" Riese asked. "We ought to avoid your usual hangouts, correct? Where else can we hope to learn anything?"

"The Adventurer's Guild?" Mylène suggested.

"That's a safe bet," said Allen, "and it's a place where strangers like us won't stand out too much. Given what's going on in the city, looking for more information isn't exactly suspicious anyway. We won't be the only ones."

"The Adventurer's Guild?" said Curtis. "True, there is one in this town. That's a little out of my wheelhouse, though."

"Elaborate," said Noel. "Is there a problem?"

"In this situation, *they're* likely to be on tenterhooks too. I can't recommend it."

"I guess that makes sense," said Mylène.

Adventurers were volatile at the best of times. Wandering into a place filled with them while they were trapped inside the city for an unknown reason presented obvious dangers.

"I'm sure we'll be fine," said Allen. "But we're pressed for time. I think we should be more worried about how much we'll actually find out if we go there."

There was no doubt the guild would be a major gathering place and a clearinghouse for information, but actually *getting* that intel required time and good fortune. It hadn't been long since the announcement of the blockade—how much information could anyone have at this point? Still, it wasn't like any of them had any better ideas.

"No, I suppose we don't have the luxury of that level of caution," said Curtis. He looked at Mylène and Noel. "But I think you two, at least, should avoid the place."

The pair reacted with conflicted expressions. Clearly they understood what

Curtis was getting at.

Allen did too, but he still had questions. “Because she’s an elf and she’s an Amazon? I get that they might be uncommon here, but do we have to go that far?”

With the empire’s history, contact between diverse races was commonplace. Curtis had shown no surprise or reservations about dealing with Noel and Mylène, and Allen hadn’t noticed any signs of intolerance from the other inhabitants of the empire whom he’d encountered.

“Oh, it would normally be no problem at all,” Curtis answered. “But the information that the Black Wolf Knights have blockaded the town and that they’re searching for something was relatively easy to come across. In fact, it seems like they spread it intentionally to rile the people up.”

“And in such circumstances, even the sight of a less common race, even if it’s not *that* rare a sight, might have unforeseen consequences?” Riese suggested.

“Not to mention unfamiliar faces who seem eager to gather information,” said Noel. “Yeah, we better keep quiet.”

“We’ll hold down the fort here,” said Mylène.

It was clear both were reluctant, but they knew they had no choice. Allen knew *he’d* hate being told to sit tight, cooped up in a room with nothing to do too, but they couldn’t afford to take any unnecessary risks. On the other hand, it wasn’t clear that leaving them here unaccompanied was any safer.

“I guess we’ll just have to hope this is the most secure place for you to be,” said Allen.

“Now that you mention it, I suppose there’s no guarantee of that, is there?” said Riese.

“Yeah,” said Noel. “If they pay the inn a visit, we’re done for. Playing dumb won’t work with those guys.”

“I guess we’ll just have to run for it, if it comes to that,” Mylène added.

“That’s probably the best option,” said Curtis. “You can’t talk your way out of trouble with them.” He shot a knowing glance at Allen. “If you could, Anriette

wouldn't have been arrested."

That reminded Allen of something. "You know...sorry for even asking, but you don't think that Anriette *was* involved in the assassination, do you?"

"Hm? Oh, of course not," said Curtis. "My sister would never lend her assistance to demons."

"I see."

"I haven't *confirmed* that, of course, but...I take it you don't think so either?"

"No, Anriette would never do something like that." Allen was sure of it. Even if killing the emperor was the only way to achieve her goals, she would continue to search for an alternative. Otherwise she would have never become a disciple. He never would have been able to believe in her.

"I see," Curtis replied. "Well, now that we've established we both trust her, let's consider our next move. I might not be able to gather much information, but I think I still have something to contribute."

"Sure. We're not much help to Anriette as long as we're stuck here."

The pair continued to make plans.

# Reconnaissance

Riese and Allen walked the streets. It seemed like a different city from the one they had explored the day prior. The energetic atmosphere was gone. People went about their days, but the street traffic was nothing compared to the bustling crowds of the day prior, and on their faces were expressions of confusion, anxiety, and even fear.

The pair spoke to each other in whispers.

“I feel a little guilty,” said Allen.

“If it *is* us they’re looking for, then I suppose this *is* sort of our fault,” Riese agreed.

“Maybe we should try something a little more drastic, then.”

“And if it turns out we’re not what they’re looking for, we’ll have just caused everyone even more trouble.”

“Good point. Let’s just find out what we can for now.”

While the main reconnaissance point was the Adventurer’s Guild, a lot could be learned simply by observing the city streets. Allen quickly noticed something.

“Nobody’s paying us much attention, are they? They’re all walking around, eyes down.”

“Curtis said that word of the Black Wolf Knights searching for something spread unusually fast. I imagine nobody wants to attract attention.”

“I guess dressing like this was the right move.”

Both were wearing robes with hoods that covered most of their faces. Allen had been concerned that the disguises would only make them more suspicious, but it seemed much of the city’s population had the same idea. With so many travelers there, the sight of a cowled figure was probably commonplace anyway, but he had no doubt that the presence of the Black Wolf Knights was responsible for the abundance of such coverings today. Openly showing their

faces would have made them more conspicuous.

Besides, they had intended to cover their faces regardless of the current situation. As a princess, Riese had appeared at countless parties—even some within the empire. In order to avoid bringing attention to her, Allen had worn a similar garment. Knowing that they might need them in the empire, they had made sure to pack several, though they'd never anticipated needing them for this reason.

"Never hurts to plan ahead, does it?" said Allen.

"It certainly doesn't...although things could still go wrong shortly."

"No kidding."

Allen nodded, as both laid eyes upon a building much larger than those that surrounded it. Though built in a slightly different style than the one they'd visited in the Frontier, it was unmistakably the local Adventurer's Guild.

Allen had never registered as an adventurer, so they would essentially have to visit as window-shoppers. Since they were only looking for information rather than to use the services, he hoped that wouldn't be a problem. He couldn't deny that other difficulties might arise, but they'd have to deal with those one at a time.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered. He and Riese nodded at each other and opened the door. For a moment, all eyes were on them.

"Tch. Who the hell? For a moment I thought..."

"More outsiders, it looks like."

"They won't know anythin'."

"This ain't a tavern, ya know."

Having made their comments, the regulars soon lost interest in them. As expected, they were there for the same reason: information. From the sounds of it, though, they were expecting a visit from the Black Wolf Knights to clear up exactly what their goals were.

"Sounds like none of these folks know if it's possible to leave the city either," said Allen. He was only thinking out loud, but he got a response regardless.

“Zactly what we wanna know,” came the reply from an bored man who looked as much like a common thug as an adventurer. From the look on his face, he’d chosen to kill time by engaging Allen in conversation. “You got any information? You’ll have no shortage of buyers right now.”

“Only that the Black Wolf Knights have blockaded the city while they search for something,”

“Same as the rest of us, then. I thought the guild was s’posed to be the place to find out what’s goin’ on?”

“I’m afraid that isn’t the role of the guild,” said the receptionist. “It is most unreasonable to expect to be able to acquire information that likely only the lords of this territory possess. We would not dispense such information to the likes of you even if we had it.”

“Well, I’ve been charged with getting information out of those lousy bastards,” said the adventurer.

“Funny, I barely see any difference between them and yourself.”

“Huh? Try saying that again!”

Two things had become clear to Allen. One, this wasn’t the place to discover anything important, and two, the receptionists enjoyed a jocular relationship with the clientele. It had been similar in the Frontier; it was probably the same wherever one went. That knowledge did nothing to help break the current standstill, though.

Allen looked to his side. “Well? Wanna stay here a while?”

“I wonder,” Riese replied. “What’s the best course of action?”

In truth, the chance of learning anything new by sticking around was extremely low. Anyone who possessed any unique knowledge would have to be a Black Wolf Knight, or at least someone with a close connection to either the knights or the incident itself. In either case, they’d have no reason to enter the guild.

Still, wandering the streets aimlessly was no more likely to result in success. In fact, it increased the chance of encountering the Black Wolf Knights themselves,

which was likely to present its own set of problems. Gathering information without being hauled off by the knights in the process would be difficult, and if they were willing to take that risk, allowing themselves to be captured and interrogated would be more effective. Not that Allen was considering such a bold course of action, exactly, but if the deadlock continued, it had to at least be on the table. For now, though, they just had to decide what to do next.

“Hmm. Wait, head outside, go back to the inn?” said Allen. “I don’t wanna head home empty-handed, but at this point it looks like nothing’s gonna happen. Maybe we should ju—”

The door swung open violently. Allen spun around to see someone clad entirely in black armor.

“It appears that something just happened,” Riese commented.

“I’m not sure that’s for the better.” Allen didn’t recognize the figure, but he had a pretty good guess who he was looking at.

“Black Wolf Knights. Would you be willing to answer some questions?” asked the figure, causing the adventurers to tense up as they glanced around the room.

Allen sighed. It was clear there was only one acceptable response to the question.



## Questions and Confusion

This was a softer approach than anyone had ever expected from the Black Wolf Knights. The adventurers stared, mouths agape, disarmed by the surprisingly diplomatic appeal.

“I cannot share too many details,” the knight continued, “but I can tell you that we are searching for a party of six. This is a matter of grave importance for the empire. Do any of you know anything at all?”

The adventurers exchanged glances and deliberated among themselves.

“Hey, what the hell is this?!” one asked. “Don’t tell me that’s one of the big bad Black Wolf Knights.”

“The hell should I know?” responded another. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“We at the guild don’t have anything to do with them,” said the receptionist.

“Tch. The damn guild never has anything to say when it actually matters.”

Their voices had been whispers at first, but frustration caused the volume to increase until their conversation was clearly audible. It wasn’t in their nature to be wary, but considering their audience, Allen wished the adventurers would practice some discretion before they ended up losing their heads.

Looking at the knight, however, he somehow felt that they were observing the proceedings with amusement, even though their face was entirely covered by a helmet.

“I understand the response,” said the knight. “And I cannot disagree. Some—no, most of our ranks do as they please without regard for the consequences. I, however, will not behave that way. I may, like my comrades, be a condemned criminal, but I still intend to conduct myself as a knight.”

The statement *should* have been redundant. The Black Wolf Knights *were* a knightly order, after all. But Allen knew exactly what she meant. He got the

impression that she must have been a member of some other knightly order before whatever event had caused her to end up with the Black Wolf Knights. She had an air of refinement about her, though without being able to see her face, there was a good chance he was just imagining things.

Allen was surprised to hear her speak so openly about being a condemned criminal. He'd thought that was officially a secret, though an open one in reality. But the knight hadn't tried to hide it at all. It made sense, he supposed; he'd thought the city streets had become a little *too* quiet, but it was only natural for people to be scared of a roving group of condemned criminals. Likewise, the adventurers had been expecting someone who raised hell wherever they went. After all, the receptionist had said that the adventurers themselves were barely any different from the Black Wolf Knights.

"So, do you have any information for us?" asked the knight. "It could help us in our investigation."

The adventurers didn't care one bit about the Black Wolf Knights' investigation. An air of disappointment and dissatisfaction hung over the room.

"What would we get out of that?" one of them snorted.

"And don't give us some bull like we'll be able to leave the city," said another. "We're adventurers. We don't hand out information for free." It was clear from his delivery that he was itching for a fight, but nothing he'd said was untrue. He would've said the same thing to anyone who'd come through the door.

This particular knight had probably been assigned the task due to her ability to overlook such slights. "I don't expect you to, of course," she replied. "I have here a reward of one hundred gold for any information that leads us to our target."

"One hundred gold?!"

That changed their tune in an instant. A murmur began to rise in the hall as each adventurer's eyes, twinkling with greed, settled on the bag tied around the knight's waist. The knight paid them no heed, merely walking over to a nearby table and tossing the bag onto it with a dull thud. A few gold coins jangled and fell onto the table, further lighting up the adventurers' eyes.

“Whoever provides us with useful information can have this right away,” she announced. “Any more problems?”

For the first time in this exchange, no one had a single complaint. Their minds were occupied by thoughts of how they could get their hands on the contents of the bag. All except for two people, who discussed their next move in hushed tones.

“This is even worse than I expected,” said Allen.

“The gentle approach is certainly surprising,” said Riese. “Curtis gave me the impression that this isn’t how the Black Wolf Knights tend to conduct themselves. It *does* seem likely to get them their information, though.”

“But what do we do about it?”

Leaving was out of the question. In addition to the suspicion it would attract, they had to stay to find out what information the others possessed. On the other hand, perhaps even *that* depended on exactly what the information was. The knights taking this tack indicated a lack of strong information, such as the inn at which Allen and the others were staying. But if that information surfaced during the proceedings, they’d have to leave at once, even knowing how suspicious that would make them look.

Offering no information of their own would also make them look suspicious, but so would offering nonsense—at least at the point that the knights realized it was nonsense. For now, the best approach seemed to be to wait and see how things played out.

“I don’t mind talkin’ if there’s money in it, but can you be more specific about what you want?” an adventurer asked. “There’s a lot of six-person parties around, you know. Hell, there’s even some in here.”

“Seriously,” said another. “No identifying details? Their races? What they look like? One of their names? Is that too much to ask?”

Allen gulped. The knights *had* to know about Curtis, at least. He wasn’t sure if that would be enough for anyone to identify them, but it was a good start.

“I’m afraid I have no details other than that they are a party of six,” said the knight.

“What?! An’ you expect any useful information from that? Get real!”

Allen felt like shouting at the knight too. He looked at Riese. Her eyes were wide with shock.

“They don’t know about Curtis?” Allen murmured. “Or they’re hiding it? I guess word getting out that the Black Wolf Knights are hunting a member of the marquise could be bad...but they didn’t seem to care when they arrested Anriette.”

“Even if they don’t know, it’s only a matter of time at this point,” said Riese. “But maybe they really don’t?”

“Why else would they be searching for us?” said Allen. “Or...wait, maybe they *aren’t* searching for us? Maybe it’s just a coincidence?”

“That seems too good to be true, but why would they be searching for a party of six without any details? Even if they’re just following orders... Wait, maybe they received a revelation?”

“But why would God help them falsely accuse someone? I dunno. This is all too weird.” The information left Allen with more questions than answers. He couldn’t even say if it was good or bad for them.

“Based on the routes they’ve taken and the tools they have access to, we surmise that a citizen of the empire is either with them or lending them assistance,” said the knight.

“That ain’t much use,” said an adventurer. “But do you mean that they’re foreigners? How can you know that but not any other details?”

“Well...you see... I’m sorry. I only know what I’ve been told.”

The adventurer scoffed. “You can’t expect any useful information from that. You were just gonna tell us our info was no use no matter what we said, weren’t ya? That way you’ll never have to hand over the gold.”

A sense that the paucity of information was by design spread among the adventurers. Even through her armor, it was clear that the knight had braced in response to the adventurers’ accusations, as if she’d just realized how little sense the story made.

Allen had more questions. If the knights' knowledge of the route their quarry had taken meant they had pursued them here, then the odds that they were talking about his group was high. But in that case, how could this woman not know that Curtis was among them?

"Maybe only the higher-ups know?" Riese suggested. "Maybe they've kept her in the dark."

"But telling them to go and gather information with so little background is just as unreasonable as these guys are saying," said Allen. "Unless they just planned to take note of anything that seemed the slightest bit relevant and take it all back for their bosses to look over?"

"It doesn't seem like they're going to get any information at all, though."

"Sure seems that way."

The adventurers seemed like all the energy had been sapped out of them. They no longer had any interest in offering what they knew. Allen couldn't blame them. How could they possibly know if their information would be deemed useful? At the very least, it would be impossible to judge that on the spot. And what right-minded person would have any faith in the notorious Black Wolf Knights to pay up after the fact?

"I think they might have saved our asses," said Allen. "Nobody's gonna share anything they know anymore, and it won't seem strange if we up and leave."

"Good point," said Riese. "Shall we return to the inn?"

Allen glanced around the room. The adventurers were loitering around with discontented looks on their faces. The knight seemed incredibly uncomfortable. If the situation was unlikely to develop further, their time would be better spent debriefing the rest of the party.

Allen was about to assent to Riese's proposal when he heard a noise. Riese gasped. He looked out of the open front door but saw nothing in particular.

"Allen, was that..."

"Yeah," said Allen, peering out of the door, searching for the source of the explosive roar he had just heard. "Sounds like our relaxing little reconnaissance

mission is over.”

# The Source of the Sound

The languid atmosphere inside the guild was suddenly turned on its head as a roar of voices erupted. The adventurers cast accusatory glances at the person most likely to be responsible for whatever had just happened.

“Hey, what the hell was that sound? Don’t tell me that was your work?!”

Despite the questioning tone, they wore malicious smiles. The earlier events had only added to their irritation. Now they were eager for any excuse to attack the knight.

But the knight seemed used to such hostility. She stood resolute in her jet-black armor, showing no sign of her earlier discomfort. Without taking so much as a step back, she spoke. “I’m afraid I don’t know what caused that noise. I must go and investigate.”

“Huh? You’re goin’ alone?”

“Come on. We’re all standing around with nothing to do! Something interesting finally happens and you think we’re not gonna check it out?”

“I must ask all you adventurers to wait here. Whatever caused that noise could be dangerous.”

“God damn it!”

The adventurers shot murderous glances at the knight, but none of them made a move. They might not have been happy about the blockade, but they still seemed to accept that the Black Wolf Knights’ power outstripped their own. Adventurer’s guilds weren’t supposed to be bound by national authority, but the adventurers were still imperial citizens and could be pressured accordingly by imperial forces.

“Riese,” said Allen.

Riese blinked. “Hm? Should we...”

Allen nodded, and she responded with a small nod of her own, then visibly



steeled herself.

The knight prepared to leave. "I'll be on my way, th—"

She stopped mid-sentence as Allen and Riese moved toward the door. "What are you two doing?!" Her shock was evident.

Allen smirked, amused by how clearly the knight's emotions showed through her armor. He shrugged. "So, the thing is, we're not actually adventurers, which means your orders don't apply to us."

"What?!"

In fact, as a noncitizen, Allen didn't have to observe the words of the Black Wolf Knights at all, but that would have been stupid to mention. Whatever would get him and Riese out of there was enough.

Moments later, Allen and Riese were chatting jovially as they walked away from the guild.

"Was that really a valid reason?" Riese asked.

"Of course. We didn't disobey a word she said."

"I still think it was rather disingenuous. It's clear what she meant."

"I guess. But she *did* say 'you adventurers.' Legally, we're in the clear. It's her fault for misspeaking."

"You're a real villain, Allen."

"I guess that makes you my partner in crime."

"You tricked me. I had no idea you'd use such underhanded tactics."

They didn't have the privilege of enjoying a casual chat for long. They still had no idea what had happened to cause the sound of the explosion.

"I'm sure that knight will be right behind us before long," said Riese. "Maybe we should let her handle it?"

"I'd agree with you if this were just about the explosion," Allen replied. "In that case, I doubt she'd even remember us."

"Worried about something?"

“Well, the direction the sound came from.”

“The direction?” Riese’s eyes grew wide. “Wait, you mean...”

Allen affirmed her suspicions with a sigh. Riese looked toward what had been their intended destination: the inn where Noel and Mylène were waiting.

“Let’s hope I’m fretting over nothing. I don’t even know for sure that the sound did come from over there.”

“We really can’t afford to wait for that knight,” said Riese.

“Nope.”

The only reason he hadn’t immediately rushed off when he’d heard the explosion was so that he could gauge how the knight was going to respond. If the inn was being attacked, the Black Wolf Knights were almost certainly responsible. Had they done it because they were on to Allen’s party or for some other reason? In the end, though, the knight’s response hadn’t given away much.

“If they have attacked the inn, that knight heading over there could only mean bad things for us,” he noted.

“We’d better get there first, then.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Hm? What do you—?” Before she could finish the question, Riese got her answer from the muffled voice behind her.

“You two! Wait!”

Allen shrugged. “I guess she followed us.”

“Sorry for slowing you down so much,” said Riese.

“Hey, it’s not like you can help it.”

Had he been alone, he could have already been at the inn, but he couldn’t abandon Riese. Carrying her had been an option, but he wanted to keep his hands free in case he ended up running headlong into a situation where he needed them. He’d assessed all the options and chosen this one, so there was no need for her to feel responsible.

“Besides, it doesn’t look like she can move too fast in that armor. I bet we’ll get there faster than she can follow us.”

The knight yelled as she chased them. “You two! Wait! I said stop!”

“She’s telling us to stop, though,” said Riese.

“Maybe she means someone else. How can we know who she’s talking about? Maybe we just happened to be going for a run together.”

“Now you’ve gone beyond disingenuous into plain lying.”

“Lying to who? I haven’t said anything to her. And nobody can say it isn’t perfectly conceivable anyway.”

Riese looked at him in disbelief. It was true that the people around them were running in the opposite direction, away from the explosion. Allen saw shock and fear on the faces of those he ran past—a sign that he was indeed heading toward the Black Wolf Knights.

They drew close to the inn. It stood at the end of a long main street...or at least, it used to. Allen had already confirmed that his intuition was correct before he even turned onto the street. Controlling his urge to rush headfirst into whatever awaited him, he looked at the place where the inn used to be.

“Huh? Hey, you showed up earlier’n I expected.” A familiar man stood atop a pile of rubble. It was the man from the Elven Forest one week prior. But Allen was less concerned about him than what he held in his hands.

“Makes it easier for me, at least!” the man continued. “Now it’s payback time!”

In his hands, he held the limp bodies of Noel and Mylène by their necks.



## Strange Circumstances

Allen remained calm. He knew no good would come of getting heated. He simply trained his eyes on the man's face and smiled.

The man seemed surprised. "Wow, you sure play it cool, don'tcha? I expected you to be furious. Guess these two don't mean much to you, huh?"

"I'm not the overprotective type," Allen replied. "You never know what might happen when you embark on a journey. Sometimes you get hurt. So long as their lives aren't in danger, there's no need for me to fret." Allen had known at a glance that his friends weren't seriously hurt.

"Still as irritating as ever, I see. You sure there's no reason to fret? I'm holding these two by their throats. If I just...squeeze a little..."

Even from a distance, it was clear the man was really doing it. Watching from behind Allen, Riese gulped. But before she could do anything, she heard a cry from even farther behind.

"What are you doing?!"

It was the knight who had been pursuing them. Allen was confused, as her question was clearly directed not at him and Riese, but the man. She had seemed like a fairly upstanding person, but he hadn't expected *this*.

"Huh?" said the man. "Did you just ask what I'm doing?"

"Who the hell else would I be asking?!"

"These couple of punks, of course! 'Sides, ain't it obvious what I'm doing? Capturing our targets."

The knight looked at Allen and Riese. "What? Why are you two... Forget it." She returned her attention to the man. Allen couldn't see her, but he could hear the rage in her voice as she spoke. "How do you know they're the ones? How could you tell? And anyway, what was that explosion? What's that pile of rubble you're standing on? Don't tell me you hurt a bunch of innocent people just to

capture them!”

The man scoffed. “What are you talking about? How could I *tell*? I say they’re the ones, so they’re the ones! Innocent people? Who cares? I’m a Black Wolf Knight, for God’s sake. What I say goes. I shouldn’t have to tell you that!”

“What nonsense! Yes, we have extraordinary powers at our disposal, but that doesn’t mean... That’s precisely why we must—”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you!”

“What?!”

“You ended up in this position because you did every dirty job they forced on you back when you were a *real* knight, didn’t you?”

“I...”

“I don’t give a single crap what you think, but I’m right, aren’t I?”

The knight offered no response. It seemed the man was telling the truth. Allen could sense her anger rising behind him. Suddenly, he understood. Both Anriette and Curtis had told him that the Black Wolf Knights were all like the man who stood before him. And yet the lady seemed like an exception. She must have ended up as a Black Wolf Knight under most unusual circumstances. If everything the man had said was true, that explained it. For the moment, however, Allen’s concerns lay elsewhere.

The man scoffed and smiled condescendingly, then turned his scornful gaze upon Allen. “Does that help you get it too? *I’m* the boss here. *I* make the rules.”

“Oh yeah? What’s your point?”

“You still don’t understand how bad a position you’re in, do ya?” he replied, clearly trying to control his anger.

Allen shrugged. Of course he did. “You’re the boss here, so if we go against you, you won’t be responsible for whatever you do next, right?”

The man chuckled. “So you *do* understand. Well, in that case—”

“Just one question.”

The man offered a perturbed grunt in response to the interruption.

Allen continued. “Could you do whatever it is you’re planning before I take your head off?”

“What are you—”

“Just wondering. It’s not a trick question.” He meant it. For now it was all hypothetical.

“Don’t you care what happens to these two, you punk?!”

“If you squeeze any harder, I’m gonna cut your head off. So I’ve gotta ask you again: Who do you think’ll be faster?”

Even now, this was still mostly hypothetical to Allen, but the man responded—his hands suddenly froze. That gave Allen the answer he needed.

“Allen?” said Riese.

He glanced in her direction. She seemed dissatisfied. She clearly knew Allen could easily cut the man’s head clean off. But it wasn’t pity that had caused Allen to hesitate.

“I know. You don’t think I thought about finishing this quickly too? But there’s some things I wanna know.”

“Oh?”

“Yup. Aren’t you curious too? Like...how did they know we were staying here? Whatever that blowhard says, he had to be pretty sure to go this far. But the other knight had no idea. There’s gotta be *something* going on here.”

“You’re right. These circumstances already seemed strange enough, but even more so now. Right, so you want to clear that up first.” Riese’s expression belied her claims of understanding.

“You see, huh? You don’t look too happy about it.”

“Of course not. Does finding the truth require leaving Noel and Mylène in that position?”

“I guess it doesn’t.” Still, he didn’t think the man would be too receptive to any commands to unhand his friends. “But I guess it’s not too nice to leave them like that, is it? I’m sure I can handle whatever this guy tries anyway.”

“You little punk!” said the man. His eyes shot daggers at Allen, but he didn’t make a move. He clearly knew how much stronger Allen was than he. That was probably why he had targeted Noel and Mylène to begin with.

But then...how had he ever hoped to get away with it? Only a week had passed since the incident in the Elven Forest, and he’d gotten a clear impression of the gulf between Allen and himself back then. He couldn’t have gotten any stronger since. As for the lady behind them, she seemed frustrated by the whole thing. There was clearly no love lost between the two. What did the man stand to gain, and why was he so brimming with confidence?

Allen reconsidered. Was it worth seeking answers to those questions or even pondering them? Cautiously, he reexamined the man, confirming to himself that he was capable of responding quickly to any move he made.

He signaled to the man to let go of his two friends. Then, suddenly, a scream rang out.



## A Second Ending

The sound didn't come from anyone standing there. The muffled, childlike cry came from beneath the pile of rubble. "Mommy!" it cried.

Allen couldn't say whether the cry was in pain or loneliness. Was the child's mother elsewhere? Or had something happened to her? It had to be one of the two. For a brief moment, he was distracted.

*Sword of Cataclysm: Final Flash.*

A hoarse cry interrupted the child's wailing. Allen let out a deep, pointed sigh. "I told you what would happen if you tried anything, didn't I? Well, maybe I didn't exactly, but I'm pretty sure you got the idea."

He looked at the man, whose right arm had been severed at the elbow. The knight desperately tried to stop the bleeding with his left hand. Allen wasn't sure if the fellow could even hear what he was saying, nor did he particularly care. It wasn't out of mercy that he'd cut off the man's arm instead of his head—he still had questions he wanted answered. Allen had long since lost any kind sense of mercy for the man, who he knew was worse than a monster. Once the knight had responded to Allen's initial restraint with brutality, Allen was no longer willing to show him any compassion. All he cared about now was getting him to talk as quickly as possible.

"M-M-My aaarm!"

"Maybe you'll listen to me now? I guess I should stop that bleeding first, though."

If he didn't, the man would bleed to death soon enough, or at least be in no position to share any useful information. Allen also realized that he should remove his two collapsed friends from the pile of rubble and at least lay them on the ground. But it seemed the shock of being dropped had stirred them. They might wake up before he had the chance.

Regardless, dealing with the man was a bigger priority. Allen didn't know

exactly what the knight had been about to do—Allen had cut off his arm before he'd gotten the chance to find out—but he knew it wouldn't have been anything good. He had to remain on his guard.

He couldn't ignore the child's cries either. After he dealt with the man, he'd have to find out what had happened to them. Judging by what the man had said, there were probably others in need of help too. Allen didn't know exactly how the attack had played out, how many guests and workers had been inside the inn when it was destroyed, but there was at least one child who needed saving.

Allen was drawing closer to the man when he heard another cry from beneath the rubble, this time muffled even further by the knight's cries of pain.

"Mommyyy!"

Allen involuntarily clicked his tongue as he looked in the direction of the sounds. Then he quickly returned his attention to the man.

"Hah! Ggh... So you...ugh...finally noticed, huh? You...hngh...really are...ggh...somethin' else!" He was sweating madly from the pain but nevertheless smiled with amusement. "Did you think...ugh...I'd wait for you...and not have...ggh...some fun first? I knew...aaagh...I was no match...for you! But...urrgh...I could at least...get some payback! Even if...ghk...I can't handle you lot...I could at least...make you weep!"

"Allen?" came Riese's worried voice.

He was unable to respond. Only one thought ran through his mind: whether or not to decapitate the knight on the spot. He was stopped only by his uncertainty regarding the fuse wire he had just realized connected the man to the child.

The knight had set up this whole thing before Allen had even arrived, purely out of hatred for him. Even if Allen cut the man's head off, the knight might have been able to light the fuse in time. And there were probably more fuses attached to other people.

Allen didn't need to save a group of strangers who had simply been unlucky enough to be chosen as victims. But if it hadn't been for him, he felt this would

never have happened in the first place. The knight had done it to exact revenge on him personally. Even if he had no *need* to do it, he felt he had a duty to.

*Parallel Paradox: Domain Knowledge—Swiftiness.*

*Eyes of Akasha: Allsight.*

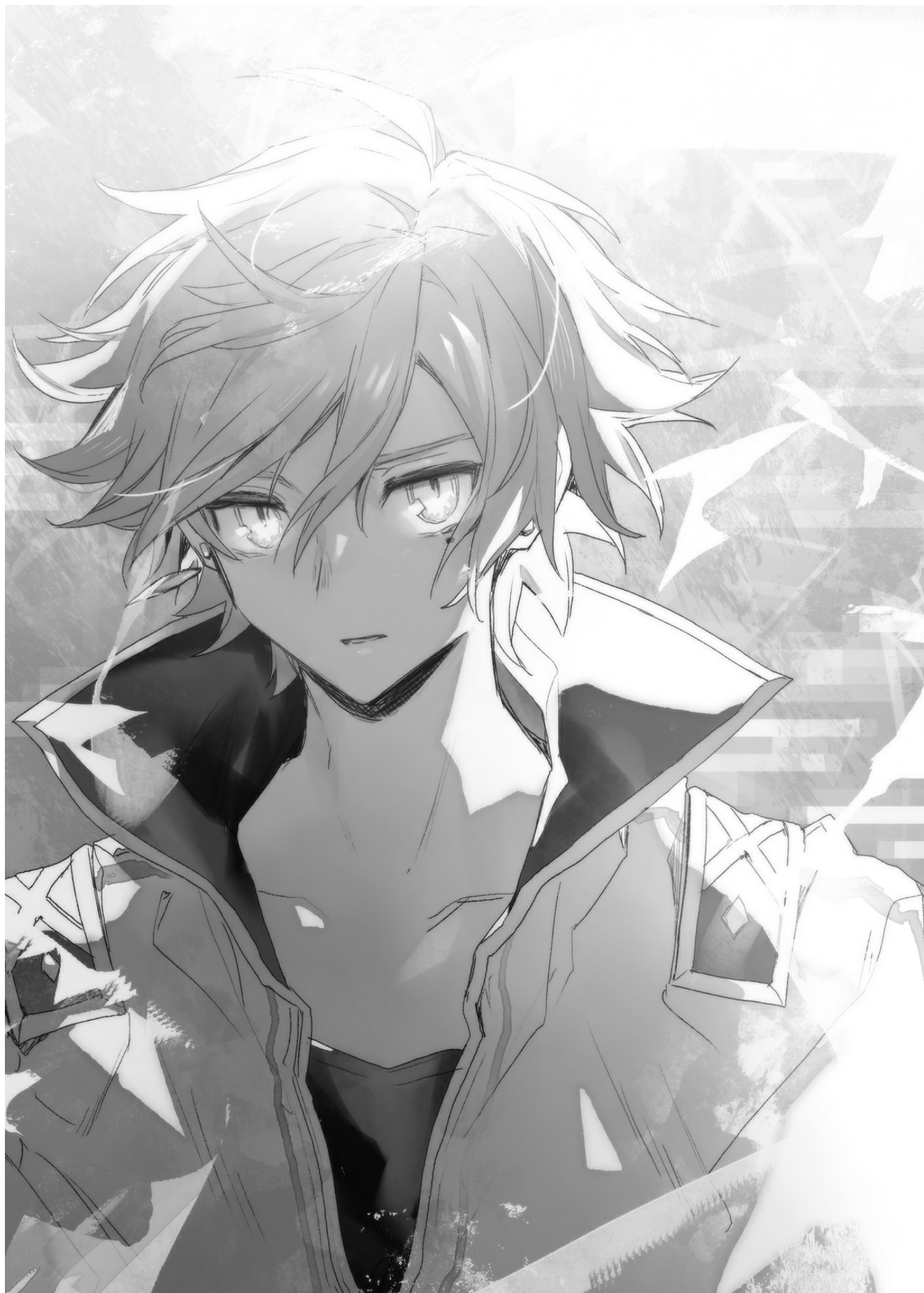
All color drained from Allen's vision. All unnecessary information was discarded, and his mind raced faster than any normal mind could. Time, and therefore everything around him, slowed to a crawl. He noticed that the man was attempting something, but for now he ignored the slow movements of his fingers and expanded his consciousness to encompass the entire town.

Here, too, he discarded all unneeded information, searching only for the fuses laid by the man. Searching, finding, understanding... There were sixty-eight in total, attached to fifteen people. Normally, cutting all of them would be impossible, but with the powers of a god, sometimes such feats were made possible.

*Sword of Cataclysm: Demon Cleaver.*

*Sword of Cataclysm: Hundredblade Bloom.*

It barely took an instant.



The recoil as colors bounced back into his vision made Allen gasp. His entire body produced a horrible creaking sound, but at least he could move. He still had more to do.

The man laughed uproariously in disbelief. “You... You just dealt with...*all* of them...just like that? You...hngh...you’re incredible! But...hahh...did you see *this* coming?” The man swung his left arm against the pile of rubble, causing a small explosion but nothing more. For a moment, it didn’t seem like anything to worry about.

“Wait, the rubble!” Allen cried.

“Hah... That kid...aaagh...won’t stand a chance...of surviving all this...ggh...falling on them!”

The explosion had unbalanced the rubble, sending it tumbling down onto the child. But even such a large quantity was nothing Allen couldn’t deal with.

*Sword of Cataclysm: Final Flash.*

“Aaaaaaagh!” the man cried as he raised his right arm to the sky.

A figure suddenly flew into Allen’s field of view, briefly meeting eyes with him as it leaped to save the child.

“Leave this to me.”

It was Curtis. He grabbed the child and jumped backward, tumbling onto the ground just before the rubble came crashing down. For a moment, the child in his arms seemed to have no idea what had just happened but soon realized they had escaped being crushed. They erupted into tears and again cried for their mother but seemed to have nary a scratch on them. How was that possible when they looked like nothing more than a normal child?

Allen set that thought aside and turned once again to the man, pointing his sword at him. “Any last words? Actually, I don’t really feel like hearing them.”

The knight laughed derisively as Allen raised his sword. Without hesitation, he swung the blade down.

## An Unsatisfying Outcome

Allen sighed as he looked out the window. He wore a muted, gloomy expression.

“Looks like you weren’t satisfied with the outcome. Or maybe you can’t accept it.” It was Riese, standing beside him. She must have finished healing everyone.

He turned toward her. “Maybe. Who could?”

“I suppose you’re right. We can’t. The townspeople and adventurers can’t. Maybe even the Black Wolf Knights can’t. It was all over before anyone was able to understand exactly what happened.”

The blockade had been lifted, and the Black Wolf Knights had withdrawn. Those facts had been announced to the whole town. The reasons remained unclear; no word of explanation was offered. The people were relieved to be able to leave the city again, and those with business to take care of quickly departed despite their dissatisfaction with the lack of details.

Allen’s group hadn’t left yet. They had to make sure that everyone was healed first. Mylène and Noel didn’t have any life-threatening injuries, but they were still wounded. It was Curtis who really needed healing, though.

“How’s Curtis, anyway?” Allen asked.

“He’s sleeping. I don’t think he’s in any serious danger, but maybe you should give him a look, just in case?”

“Hey, I’m not a doctor,” he protested, but he quickly gave in and smiled. “Sure.” He looked toward the wall that joined their room of the inn with the one where Curtis was sleeping. The man’s wounds were too severe to be quickly healed, so Allen had carried him there.

With Allen and Riese to care for him, there was no need to take him to a hospital. Besides, any hospital would have struggled to do much for someone with a hole blasted through his abdomen, which was what the Black Wolf

Knight had done to Curtis. Outside of magic, only a potion could heal such an injury, and those were magic items, not medicine. If they truly needed a potion, they'd be more likely to find one at an apothecary, and even then it would be pricey.

"To be honest, I feel the same as you," said Riese.

"Oh?"

"You stopped that man from doing whatever he'd planned to do to Noel, to Mylène, to Curtis and all those people at the inn. But I can't help but feel like..."

"We let him get away?"

"Yes. I can't be satisfied with that."

Allen hadn't killed the man. He'd been stopped just before delivering the final blow. It wasn't that he had any qualms about killing. In fact, he hadn't given it a second thought, but in the end, it wouldn't have been the right thing to do.

"It is what it is," he replied. "What she said was true."

It wasn't force but the female knight's appeal to his sense of law and reason that had stopped him. She'd warned him that, though she understood his feelings, as a condemned criminal the man was effectively a ward of the empire. Killing him could have brought all kinds of trouble down upon Allen's head—or at least provide a valid excuse for doing so. But that wasn't the argument that had convinced him. It was something else she had said.

"He'll be executed anyway, right? If anything, they saved me the trouble, as terrible as that might be to say."

The female knight certainly wasn't trying to save the male one by preventing Allen from killing him. The man was already being punished for his failure a week earlier. Black Wolf Knights were permitted to act with impunity, but only so long as they could justify their actions with results. The man had destroyed an inn, injuring countless people, and still failed to apprehend the target, so an execution seemed the likely outcome of two back-to-back blunders.

Nevertheless, it wasn't guaranteed. Thus, Allen had two conditions: First, that if the man *did* somehow manage to live, he would never be allowed to cross

paths with Allen and his friends again. If Allen so much as saw him, he wouldn't hesitate to kill him. Second, that the female knight would never allow him to do something like this again. If Allen heard word of the man committing such a deed, he would destroy him along with the rest of the Black Wolf Knights, without regard for whatever conflict that might cause with the empire.

The knight had sworn to uphold those conditions. If she had said otherwise, Allen had been prepared to kill her comrade on the spot.

"I suppose that's true," said Riese, "but he already resurfaced once just days after attacking the Elven Forest. How can we be sure there won't be a third time?"

"In that case, I'll deal with him like I promised I would. But don't you trust her?"

"I trust *you*, and I suppose she *did* seem trustworthy, but someone of my standing gets to hear a lot about the Black Wolf Knights..."

"Ahh. I see." It was unusual to hear the good-natured and trusting Riese harbor doubts about anyone, but in this situation he could understand it. He'd only heard brief whispers about the Black Wolf Knights from Anriette and Curtis, and even that had been enough to sour him on the group. It made sense that Riese would know much more about them and trust them even less.

Allen didn't care too much about all of that, though. It wasn't that he didn't trust the woman, but in the end, he didn't really care *what* happened to the man. Of course, what the man had done was unforgivable, but it was more important to Allen that Riese not be subjected to the sight of him killing. Though Riese was by no means fragile, he knew she couldn't take seeing too many people die before her eyes, and he'd already been responsible for exposing her to that sight more times than he cared for. If he could ensure the man would meet his end out of her sight, so much the better.

But...perhaps he had another reason for that decision too.

"Why do *you* seem so unsatisfied by all this, Allen?" Riese asked.

"Well, the way the Black Wolf Knights just withdrew..."

He had never expected the situation to end so abruptly. Although the male



knight hadn't offered any evidence, he'd deduced that Allen and his friends were whom the Black Wolf Knights were looking for. Why would the entire order retreat just because one among them had? Allen had expected an attack from the rest of the order before long—one that he'd have to repel in order to escape the city. And yet the knights had lifted the blockade and headed off somewhere instead. It didn't make any sense.

"It feels like we're still in the dark about what their goal actually was," Allen continued.

"Wasn't it us? I assumed they accepted defeat after you so easily dealt with that one."

"That would make sense if they hadn't blockaded the city. Sure, the Black Wolf Knights like to throw their weight around, but they still wouldn't be allowed to go to such lengths without a good reason. I could understand if we'd managed to repel the lot of them, but..."

"I see. Perhaps they *were* looking for us, but it was also just about buying them time?"

"Hmm. Well, they sure succeeded in doing that."

Healing Curtis and rescuing the survivors stuck in the rubble was taking a significant amount of time. Allen expected they'd be able to leave the following day after Curtis had awoken, but that still meant the knights had cost them at least a day, which could make all the difference when moving as fast as possible was a matter of life and death.

"There are a lot of things that seem fishy, but there's no point sitting around trying to puzzle it out. Let's do something else... Maybe take a look at Curtis. Actually, how are Noel and Mylène doing?"

"I told them they should behave themselves and rest a little, but they insisted there's no need, of course."

"Maybe I'll drop in on those two too, then." Allen smiled as he got to his feet.

As he left the room with Riese, something occurred to him: Though it hadn't been his intention, he'd shown the man mercy on their first encounter. Of course, he'd had good reason to leave him for Anriette to deal with, but that

didn't change the outcome.

“Well, no good deed goes unpunished, right?” He sighed to himself as he thought about how his efforts had come to naught once more and felt like he finally understood the meaning of those words.

# Fear of the Condemned

Staring at the sight before her, Celia Bartels let out a sigh. Her eyes betrayed her utter exasperation, even contempt, at the muttering man before her.

“That little punk got the better of me...but he’s still just a stupid kid. He’s gonna regret letting me live. So, he doesn’t wanna see me again, huh? Fine. Next time, he won’t see me comin’.”

The man—Oswald—really seemed to think there’d be a next time. To Celia, that seemed unlikely. As the only other member of the Black Wolf Knights who had managed to survive longer than a year, she knew that in terms of raw power alone, her companion was a match for any real knight. But that was as far as it went—he certainly wasn’t special enough to warrant preferential treatment. Privileges like that should be reserved for people who conducted themselves like captains. People like herself. In that regard, Oswald didn’t measure up, but on the other hand, she knew how tenacious he was. She couldn’t wrap her mind around how casually the young man had repelled him.

Suddenly, she heard a slightly high-pitched, boyish voice. “Sorry I’m late.”

She turned. It was their liege—the young man who had assigned their current mission.

“The hell took you so long?” said Oswald in his characteristic manner, less a sign of deliberate disrespect than a failure to show proper deference. The Black Wolf Knights were unique among knightly orders in that only those of imperial blood could command them.

Despite his status, however, the young man before them paid no mind to Oswald’s uncouth manner. Oswald seemed to be under the impression that this was another manifestation of his special privilege, but now, seeing it up close, Celia realized the truth: The young man only sneered nonchalantly in response to Oswald’s impertinence because he barely considered the knight a person at all. His narrowed eyes were completely blank, holding his vassal in no greater regard than a pebble on the side of the road. Oswald’s impudence carried no

more weight than the grunting of pigs. Celia felt ever more sure that Oswald was out of chances.

“Indeed, my apologies,” said the young man. “I have been no less busy than you. Now...is everyone present?”

“Yes, sir!”

All thirty Black Wolf Knights took a knee—all except Oswald, who, with no arms, could do little but lie on the ground, an indignity that seemed to have only deepened his hatred for the boy who had so disgraced him.

Celia cared not. She felt no need to justify the agreement she had made with the stranger. It wasn’t necessary. Besides, Oswald was the least of her concerns at the moment. The gaze of their liege made her acutely aware of that. She broke out in a cold sweat as his voice drifted down from above.

“Good work today, Celia. Without being asked, you safely returned Oswald to us.”

“You flatter me, my liege. But I am honored if my efforts were of use to you, however serendipitous the outcome might have been.”

This was no false modesty; it was indeed only luck that had led to her saving Oswald. She hadn’t even known he was in the city, let alone attacking the inn. Of the other twenty-nine Black Wolf Knights who had joined this campaign, five had remained in Laurus for security’s sake and the remaining twenty-four had responded to a request for assistance, waiting in Phinis for the past three days.

“Don’t be modest,” said the young man. “You were the only one who came to his aid. The rest of you conducted yourselves appropriately, given the bewildering circumstances. You need not blame yourselves either. I certainly don’t care. Having failed to communicate many things to you, I must shoulder some responsibility.”

“Much obliged, my liege,” came the response from the knights who had not been present at the crucial moment. They trembled in fear—not a fear of execution, but one induced by being regarded as less than human. Their liege meant it when he said he didn’t care, as he had never expected anything of them to begin with. The look in his eyes and the coldness of his countenance

made that chillingly clear. They had just heard how he had spoken of Oswald—that he had been “safely returned.” The fact that the knight had lost both arms was obviously immaterial.

The young man’s attitude was consistent with the official stance: The Black Wolf Knights were regarded as nothing more than assets to be used up and discarded at will, without hesitation, and forgotten about a moment later. They were condemned criminals, and though each was aware of what they had done—or, in Celia’s case, been made to do—to warrant that status, they were not so inhuman that they could easily endure a life of knowing they could be discarded at any moment. In that sense, Celia envied Oswald, who was unperturbed by their liege’s demeanor toward him.

“Now, Oswald,” the young man continued.

“Finally. Would you do something about this? I can’t do squat in this state. It’s humiliating. This is nothin’ for someone like you, right?”

Celia let out an involuntary gasp of surprise. Surely that was impossible? Even a potion couldn’t restore severed limbs, and there was no other way to heal such wounds, tales from Adastera about a “saint” aside. Their liege couldn’t possibly have such a Gift; he hadn’t yet received his to begin with.

But the young man drew closer to Oswald with a clear sense of purpose. He stopped and knelt down next to the wounded knight. “Of course. I promised that so long as you returned alive, I would see to it that any indignity you suffered was avenged.”

“Then hurry up!”

“But...”

“*What?* Don’t tell me you’re addin’ conditions now! I don’t remember you sayin’ anything about that!”

“It is only a trifling thing. *You* will not be the one to avenge that indignity.”

Celia watched as the young man thrust his hand clean into Oswald’s body with a dull squelch.

“Ugh... What the hell did you—”

“Good work, Oswald. I will avenge you. Now allow me to consume you.”

The knight was enveloped in a darkness that flowed out from his body. It soon condensed into an area no larger than a fist. The young man clutched the darkness in his grip and squeezed tightly. It seemed as though he had absorbed the darkness into himself, but Celia couldn't be sure if that was just her fear talking.

Then the young man slowly stood up, seeming more unsettling and repulsive than ever. “That concludes my business here. Wait...no, there is one more thing.”

He scanned the crowd. Celia lowered her eyes, as fruitless as she knew it would be.

“Celia.”

“Yes, sir?” she quickly responded, raising her head. She was met by his cold gaze.

“As a reward for successfully fulfilling your duties, I will assign you a special task.”

“I humbly accept, sir.” She didn't need to ask what it was; she didn't have the right to refuse.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that, just like Oswald, she'd heard no word that her liege was in the city. What had brought him here? Plagued by doubts she could not speak, she awaited her new orders.



# The Imperial Family and the Black Wolf Knights

The group ended up leaving Phinis the following day. Inside the carriage, Curtis hung his head guiltily. “Forgive me for delaying our departure.”

“Come on,” Allen replied. “We don’t blame you for being hurt.”

“Well, it’s not just that, but the fact that you were even able to heal me...” He looked at Riese. He had remained conscious, though barely, while convalescing. He knew who had healed him. “Riese, are you... No, never mind.”

“Hm?” said Riese.

Noel spoke up, trying to cut through the awkward atmosphere that had suddenly developed. “So...the Black Wolf Knights? They lifted the blockade on *that* town, but can we be sure they aren’t lying in wait for us up ahead?”

For a moment, the change of subject made Curtis smile slightly with relief, but he quickly realized it was not an easy question to answer. “That seems unlikely. What would be the point?”

“It would be logical,” said Mylène.

“If it was anyone else, that would make sense, but they’ve never been concerned about needing to get the jump on their enemies,” Curtis replied.

“They have the power to put a plan like that in place, though, don’t they?” asked Riese. “Of course, having the power and actually being able to use it are two different things.”

“They’re Black Wolf Knights *because* they’re able to put their plans into practice. They wouldn’t be of much use otherwise.”

“So you’re saying we don’t have to worry about being ambushed on the road?” Allen asked.

“That’s right. We can’t afford to completely let our guard down, but there’s no need to be unduly cautious.”

That seemed to assuage their concerns. After seeing Curtis’s heroism the



previous day, they more readily accepted his explanations. Riese had seen with her own eyes how, despite his injuries, he had rushed to the child's rescue, and the others had heard about it from her.

They didn't seem to have noticed how much more trusting they'd become, but Allen didn't feel the need to point it out, as it was likely to cause more problems than it solved. Besides, even he had to agree that there was little need to continue being so wary of Curtis. Staying vigilant had been surprisingly tiring, so if the other three could relax a little, it was for the best.

"But doesn't that mean they're heading for the capital ahead of us?" asked Noel.

"I imagine so," Curtis answered. "Only a portion of the Black Wolf Knights were in the last town, of course. Once we reach the capital, we'll encounter the whole group. Well, actually, we can't be sure that's how it will play out."

"What do you mean?" asked Riese. "We might encounter others too? A *real* knightly order?"

"Not exactly. Whatever those Black Wolf Knights in Phinis were after, it must have had something to do with my sister."

"That makes sense," said Allen.

"Right. But now we have to wonder what their true goal is."

"Isn't it just to get Anriette to the capital?"

"Possibly. And if their duties end there, so will their right to move against us."

In other words, the Black Wolf Knights might end up losing their authority without Allen's group having to do anything. It wasn't a given that they'd end up facing a reinforced unit in the capital.

"But we have to assume they know we're coming for Anriette, right?" said Noel. "So shouldn't we prepare for the worst?"

"It doesn't matter what they know," said Curtis. "Once they've completed the mission, they'll have no more authority than any other condemned criminal. They won't even have a chance to report to their superiors."

"You mean they won't be able to tell anyone what we're up to?"

“I suppose that would be a good thing,” Riese said dubiously, “but surely it’s not possible. If that’s really how it works, it would be a huge help to us, of course, but...”

“So we could move right on to pulling off our devious scheme to free Anriette?” Mylène asked.

“Hey, watch who you’re calling ‘devious,’” Allen interjected. “I guess it *is* pretty devious, though.”

Of course, it all depended on Curtis being correct. He gulped as all eyes turned to him.

“It’s all just a theory, I admit. However, the Black Wolf Knights are usually not trusted to do anything *too* sensitive. It’s entirely conceivable that their duties extend no further than getting my sister to the capital. On the other hand, it all depends on exactly who has retained their services.”

“Retained their services?” said Allen. “Sounds like you’re describing more than just whoever gives them their marching orders.”

“Oh, didn’t I explain that?” Curtis replied. “It’s more than just their station and duties that make the Black Wolf Knights unique. Even in times of emergency, only those of imperial blood can command them—or rather, take ownership of them.”

“*Ownership?*” said Riese. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s the only word that fits. By imperial law, the Black Wolf Knights are nothing more than property.”

“*Property?*” said Mylène. “I know they’re condemned criminals, but they’re still members of a knightly order.”

“A person condemned to death under imperial law is almost always executed,” Curtis explained. “Only in extreme circumstances is a sentence ever overturned. As a result, the empire doesn’t hand down such sentences lightly. It’s reserved only for those deemed truly deserving of it. Condemned criminals are marked for death. That’s why they’re treated like property.”

“Whatever the empire’s attitude is, it doesn’t affect us much,” Noel mused.

“But what do you mean when you say it depends on who their owner is?”

“Exactly that,” Curtis replied. “People can be wildly different, even within the imperial family. Not just in terms of personality, but age too. The family consists of five people at present, the oldest being in their fifties, the youngest not yet an adult.”

“Just five of them?” said Allen. “There can’t be *that* much variation in age with so few.”

“Well, there used to be many more.”

“You mean...”

“Oh, no. They didn’t die, nor were they killed. They abdicated. There were many such cases within the past year. Some stepped down to marry commoners, some to pursue other avenues in life, some to become adventurers.”

“I take it that’s no coincidence.”

“I believe not. Someone—or perhaps more than one—among the remaining five was somehow able to...*encourage* the others to step down. What’s more...”

“The emperor’s killer is one of those five?” Mylène guessed.

“What sense would that make?” asked Noel. “Why would the Black Wolf Knights arrest Anriette if they already have an idea of who did it?”

“Because that person could well become the next emperor,” said Curtis. “Everyone knows the culprit has to be associated with the imperial family. That’s been clear ever since they failed to turn up a shred of evidence that any neighboring country was responsible.”

“So Anriette is the scapegoat,” Allen concluded. It was dirty business, but that had been obvious ever since Anriette had first explained the situation. His concerns lay elsewhere. “Then there’s no guarantee that the Black Wolf Knights will be there to greet us when we arrive in the capital?”

“Right. It’s always possible, but I think we should bear in mind that worrying too much about what they’re up to might turn out to be a big waste of time.”

“I mean, we should probably be on our guard for everything under the sun

when we get there.”

“Right. I know it’s easier said than done, but we’ll find a way. We must.”

“With Allen with us, I’m sure we’ll be fine,” said Mylène.

“Don’t expect too much of me...but I’ll do what I can.” Allen shrugged. He had no idea how things would play out in the capital or who he’d come up against there, or even what the place itself was like, but he had to throw himself into it wholeheartedly. It was the only way to save Anriette. In preparation, he began to question Curtis about more details that would help him understand what he should do next.

## Toward the Capital

After leaving Phinis behind, it was another week before the group arrived at Kelsas, capital of the Viktor Empire. They still hadn't set foot in the city proper, as casually wandering in would be tantamount to marching into the city square and announcing that they were up to no good. The populace would become aware of Curtis's arrival so soon after Anriette's, and it wouldn't be hard to conclude what that meant.

Of course, that depended on Anriette's presence being public knowledge to begin with. It was entirely possible that the city guards were ignorant of the whole affair. But the higher-ups, at least, had to know. An abundance of caution wouldn't hurt. Instead, the group decided to disembark from the carriage some distance from the city and walk the rest of the way.

Noel had her doubts. "I know we agreed to split into two groups and join up in the city, but I dunno..."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" Riese asked. "Security must be tight in the capital."

Curtis smiled in response to their looks of concern. "I assure you I will be. The marquise has plenty of contacts. Not to mention, I have access to exclusive information."

Allen had assumed as much and hadn't been worried in the first place. In fact, he was sure Curtis would have fared just fine if he'd waltzed right into the city that day.

They had agreed that Curtis and his guard would separate from the others and that both groups would enter the city separately before meeting up later. But since Curtis and his guard couldn't just walk in through the main entrance, they would have to use some alternative approach. Riese, Noel, and Mylène had been worried, but it was true that he knew the city better than any of them, and he seemed to be familiar with the hidden passages and backstreets too.

“If you insist there’s no need to worry, I guess I’ll have to believe you,” said Allen. “I’m actually more concerned about *us* getting into the city safely.”

“Oh yeah,” said Noel. “I have my doubts about that too.”

As a border town, Laurus was host to guests from a variety of countries and easy to enter. That was why it was so tough to advance any farther into the empire from there. Their entry into Phinis had only been so simple because of Curtis’s presence. Now, they would have to act alone for a while, and in the *capital*, where, as Riese had pointed out, security was sure to be high.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have any problems,” said Curtis. “True, security in the capital is tight, but merely getting in and out is no great challenge provided you’re not a wanted criminal.”

“So everyone else can enter easily?” Mylène asked.

“They don’t worry about intruders much here. Any foreigners are usually apprehended long before they reach the capital.”

“Ah...that makes sense,” said Noel.

The capital was almost exactly in the middle of the empire’s sprawling territory. Allen’s party had only been able to make it there in two weeks because they had an empire-made carriage, which made the journey several times faster, and even then they’d had to stop along the way. The logic, Curtis explained, was that any suspicious person would be apprehended in other towns, and that information could be shared with the guards in the capital. Since their group had already made it through a prior town without arousing suspicion, they were unlikely to run into trouble now.

“I guess we can’t be certain, though,” said Allen.

“True. For example, if the Black Wolf Knights managed to relay information about you... Actually, no, in that case they’d let you straight through.”

“What?” said Riese, puzzled. “Why?”

“If they received accurate information, the guards at the gate would know they were no match for you. Security here may be tight, but they can’t be perfectly prepared for any attack. Better to let you pass and allow the city

guards inside to handle it. I've known it to happen in the case of particularly vicious criminals."

"So we can't rest easy even if they wave us on through," said Noel.

"Surely Allen can handle getting past them?" Mylène added.

"I dunno about that," said Allen. "They normally use Gifts for those sorts of inspections."

Fooling an inspector who used a Gift was difficult, but with Allen's Boundless Knowledge, it wasn't necessarily impossible. The others understood that and didn't seem particularly worried.

As though representing the feelings of the group, Noel shrugged. "At any rate, I guess there'll be no problems right away. We'll just have to be on our guard."

"Yes," said Riese. "If it comes to that, I imagine Curtis will have the most difficulty. Speaking of which, are you sure you want to take the carriage with you?"

"Well, I can't just leave it here," he answered. "It's my property and quite valuable. Don't worry; I've thought it all through. Besides, if push comes to shove, we can use it to escape."

With that, he looked at his guard, who returned the glance with an expression that said, *Leave it to me*.

Riese narrowed her eyes. "Hm..."

"Something wrong?" Curtis asked.

"I just thought your guard gave you some sort of look. But I've seen so little of him, perhaps I'm imagining things."

"I suppose we didn't see much of each other in Phinis either, did we? It's all right, I assure you there's nothing to worry about."

"Now that you mention it, I guess your guard didn't really do his job, did he?" said Allen.

"Because Curtis got injured?" said Mylène.

"Only because he was so hard at work," Curtis replied. "I'd even say it was for

the best. After all, the capital is likely to be much more difficult than Phinis.”

“I’ll say,” said Allen. “We haven’t even worked out how we’re gonna play this.”

Despite the many conversations the journey had allowed time for, the group still hadn’t decided on a plan. They agreed that they couldn’t know for sure how to proceed until they determined the situation in the capital. They would do so after they reconvened inside the city—if they were able to.

“I think that’s enough for now,” said Curtis. “Perhaps we should get moving.”

“Got it,” said Allen. “Let’s hope everything goes as expected.”

“Indeed. If we don’t resurface today, I’ll leave things to you.”

“Hey, I was gonna say that.”

They all understood that they might not be reunited, in which case the remaining group members would have to think and act independently. Considering how little he knew about the capital despite Curtis’s explanations, Allen didn’t even want to consider that possibility, but if it came to it, he’d have to figure something out.

Allen, Riese, Noel, and Mylène exchanged glances, wordlessly wishing for the best outcome, and then set off toward the imperial capital.

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Entry into the imperial capital was as easy as Curtis had insisted it would be. In fact, it almost seemed *too* easy, but Allen dispelled his anxiety by using Boundless Knowledge, confirming that the guards weren’t paying them any special attention.

“I can’t say there’s nothing bothering me,” said Allen, “but hey, can’t complain about getting inside without incident.”

“Indeed,” said Riese. “Besides...”

She observed their surroundings, prompting Allen to do the same. If his group were obvious out-of-towners, he realized that was no less true of everyone else in the area. There was no need to worry about seeming overly cautious—they wouldn’t stand out at all.



“I always heard this city was very neatly laid out,” said Riese. “Now I see how true that is.”

“No kidding,” said Noel. “The roads are perfectly laid, and the buildings are completely uniform. Honestly, it’s almost a little creepy.”

“I guess that’s what makes this place what it is,” said Mylène.

“They must’ve decided it was more secure this way,” said Allen. “Makes sense if you think about it.”

Most cities, even the royal capital, were to some degree messes of buildings of different sizes and roads with twists and turns. For the most part, that was because they had evolved from small villages, but even cities built from the ground up to serve as the centerpieces of nations were no exception. Even in those cases, buildings were built according to the whims of individuals, with roads built as necessary to connect them. The imperial capital was a rare exception.

“Every time the empire expands its territory, the capital is rebuilt,” said Riese. “They say it’s a symbol of the empire’s power, and seeing it with my own eyes, I understand.”

“Seems like a huge pain to me,” said Noel. “Is it really worth the effort?”

“I guess a smith *would* say that,” Mylène quipped.

“Maybe it’s an unusual opinion, but I kinda feel the same,” said Allen.

Whenever the empire conquered some other nation, the capital was rebuilt, ensuring it was always in the center of the empire’s territory. It was said to represent both the empire’s power and impartiality, though Allen wondered what the real reason was.

Whatever the case, it explained the unusual uniformity of the city. The empire regularly made war with neighboring kingdoms, leading to its frequent rebuilding, sometimes multiple times in a single year. Of course, even a small village was not trivial to rebuild, let alone an imperial city. Hence a set of uniform standards had been established to expedite the building process.

What tended to take the most time was individual specialists trying to do the

best job they could. Thus, while the capital was built to a high standard, the priority was speed. Without their all-important capital, the empire would hardly appear effective, let alone powerful. So the city was always built from the same materials, in the same form, expediting the process. This allowed a huge number of people to be enlisted to participate in the process, which was a driving factor in the empire's technological advancement.

As a result, the city was host to rows of regularly placed, identical buildings on perfectly spaced, perfectly straight, identical roads.

"Considering how hastily this place must've been made, it looks really solid," Allen remarked. "Seems better built than the new places back in the Frontier."

Both as buildings and as homes, the city's structures seemed more complete than anything in the Frontier despite their mass-produced nature. Allen was once again impressed by the empire's technological advancement.

"Guess it makes things easier for us, though," he continued.

"Cause it's easy to tell where to go?" asked Mylène.

He nodded. Curtis had told them where to meet him, but they had no knowledge of the city's layout. He hadn't been sure he'd be able to find the place.

"If worst comes to worst, we can check every street until we find the right place. There's no chance we'll get lost."

"The residents were all moved in at once too. Maybe they'll come in useful," said Noel.

"Yeah. They're probably already familiar with the place."

"Is the emperor a good ruler?" asked Mylène.

"What?" said Allen. "Why are you asking that now?"

Whatever she was getting at, there was no doubt that the emperor had been an effective ruler. Otherwise the empire wouldn't have grown as large as it had. On the other hand, he'd been assassinated, so perhaps he'd been *too* effective.

Whatever the case, all that mattered to Allen was that Anriette had been arrested as a result, and now they were finally here to rescue her. But the true

trouble was yet to come. They didn't know where Anriette was being kept or what was happening to her. They didn't even know if they *could* rescue her. But at least they had arrived.

"Well, should we head to the meeting place?" asked Allen.

"Yes," said Riese. "We didn't come here to see the sights. The inn where we're meeting Curtis is in the center of the city, isn't it?"

"That's right," said Noel, looking off into the distance. "An inn that you can see the imperial castle from."

Allen followed her gaze to the end of the city's main street. It extended far ahead, terminating in a huge castle.

"Do they always rebuild that too?" asked Mylène.

"You know, I wonder..." Allen replied. "They say it's moved along with the city, but I find that hard to believe." Any building standard that included the castle wouldn't be useful for any other building. Allen assumed the empire had some means of moving it around. Considering the technology they clearly had access to, it wasn't out of the question. "I guess we'll just have to ask about it later," he mused.

They didn't have time for such questions right now. Any other business had to wait until all of this was over. Riese and the others looked at him with serious expressions and nodded. They understood.

Allen smiled and began to walk toward the meeting place.

# The Holding Zone

The meeting point wasn't hard to find. Since all the buildings were the same height, only those on the main road could possibly have a view of the castle, and there was only one inn around there.

"Now I understand why Curtis said we couldn't miss it," Allen commented.

"True," said Riese, "although I still don't understand why he had to describe it in such a roundabout way."

"There must be some reason," said Mylène.

"Let's just get inside for now," Allen suggested.

The group made their way into the building. If not for the sign outside, they would have had no idea it was an inn, so identical was it to the surrounding buildings. As soon as they opened the door, however, any uncertainty was quickly dispelled by the sight of a distinctly inn-like reception desk.

Allen gave Curtis's name and was surprised to hear that his companions had already arrived and were waiting for him. They had come straight to the inn after entering the city. How could Curtis be there already?

With some trepidation he allowed the receptionist to show them to their room—and indeed, Curtis and his guard were there waiting for them. The guard offered a slight nod, and Curtis greeted them with a smile.

"Thank goodness you made it here safely. And surprisingly fast too."

"Shouldn't that be *our* line?" said Allen.

"Seriously," said Noel. "It's not like we were gonna take the scenic route."

"Well, we came by carriage," said Curtis. "Of course we'd arrive first."

Allen had seen Curtis and his guard board the carriage out of the corner of his eyes as they'd headed toward the city, but he'd also watched them go in the opposite direction. He couldn't shake the sense that Curtis was hiding something, but perhaps it was just the fact that they'd used a hidden

passageway.

Curtis was right, though; what mattered was that they'd all gotten there in one piece. They didn't have time to waste on petty details.

"Sure, I guess," said Allen. "We've got bigger fish to fry right now. Oh, by the way, are you sure it's okay for us to give your name at reception like that?"

"I was worried about that too," said Riese. "I know nothing is likely to come of a reservation at the inn, but it's best to be safe."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Curtis replied. "The inn's location makes it a popular meeting place. There's a rule recognized by the emperor himself that they are to keep quiet about anything they see or hear. Anyone can visit with complete confidence that their location will not be exposed."

"Huh, interesting," said Allen. "I can see how that would be useful."

"Is that unique to the empire?" asked Mylène.

"I imagine so," said Curtis. "Many things are, as a result of its continuous absorption of other races and countries...whatever everyone else might think of us."

"Uh, what was that?" Allen asked.

"Oh, nothing. Anyway, I have something to announce." Curtis was suddenly beaming with pride.

"You figured out where they're holding Anriette?"

"Hm? How did you know?"

"What else would you have to announce right now?"

"And you looked so happy about it," said Mylène.

"Ah, forgive me. I simply couldn't contain my glee."

"Glee?" Riese said dubiously.

Knowing where Anriette was being held was a good thing, but it hardly seemed like something to be happy about. She'd still been arrested.

"I know it might seem inappropriate under these circumstances, but it's a

matter of *where* she's being held."

"You mean she's not being treated badly?" asked Allen.

"Just the opposite. I've heard that right now she's being kept in the imperial castle!"

"Really?" said Mylène. She looked out of the window at the majestic building that stood in the distance. "Over there?"

"That's the one."

"I take it you don't mean in the dungeon," Riese clarified.

"The castle doesn't *have* a dungeon. They don't want to keep criminals anywhere near the emperor."

"Then why would they keep Anriette there?" Allen wondered. She'd been brought to the city as a criminal, after all.

"Oh, that's not so strange. They suspect her of having masterminded the emperor's assassination, but she's still only a suspect. And she *is* still head of the marquise, even if only in name."

"So they couldn't just throw her in jail?" said Mylène.

"Exactly, though I don't know *who* actually made that call."

"What do you mean by that?" said Allen.

"Usually it would be up to the emperor."

"Ah, I see."

"Indeed. Instead, the decision falls to the five members of the imperial family and the heads of the territories. But which one?"

The members of the imperial family had the *right*, but not the experience to make such a call. Whenever their seat of power was vacant for any reason, decisions had to be made by consensus, with each member of the imperial family weighing in. However, the proposals for action usually came from the heads of the territories.

"I guess it doesn't matter much anyway," said Allen.

Curtis concurred. “Not really. It’s not clear who I’ll have to thank later, but we have more pressing concerns right now. The important point is that Anriette is under house arrest in the castle.”

“House arrest? I guess that’s about the best treatment she could expect in this situation.”

“True, but it *does* make things difficult for us.”

“No kidding. It means we’ve gotta sneak into the castle.”

“Ah,” Riese interjected, “what do you know about the castle security?”

“It’s always been of the finest quality. They were able to determine that a demon was responsible for the assassination, and I hear that since then, it has only gotten stronger. They don’t want another such incident.”

“Sounds impenetrable,” said Mylène.

“It will certainly be very hard.”

It seemed to Allen that Curtis was speaking of the castle as if it were a uniform whole. He had no doubt that the area would have even tighter security if the emperor was there, but he doubted that was true of wherever Anriette was being held. He had a feeling he’d be able to find a way inside.

“So, Anriette’s somewhere in there...” he mused, peering out of the window at the imperial castle. Slowly but surely, they were getting closer.

## Present and Future

The task at hand was slowly becoming clear. But despite its virtuous nature, the group still harbored doubts.

Noel was the first to give voice to their anxieties. “You sure are well-informed, aren’t you?”

The knowledge Curtis had brought with him was one thing, but now he had information he could only have learned since arriving in the city. Even having arrived before them, he couldn’t have had *that* much time. It all seemed too convenient.

“As I said before, I have a lot of contacts,” he explained. “Although, to be honest, even *I* am surprised by how much I’ve been able to find out. But it’s not like I know everything.”

“Is that so?” said Riese. “You seem to have discovered everything we need to know.”

“I still don’t know how Anriette is to be punished. In some ways, that’s the most important information of all.”

“She’s accused of killing the emperor,” said Mylène. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“That’s exactly why it *isn’t*,” said Curtis. “Someone may be taking advantage of her status as a suspect to use her as a scapegoat for their own crimes.”

“It sounds like you’ve heard of this kind of thing happening before, either recently or further in the past,” said Noel.

“Indeed,” said Curtis. “I know of a knight who was sentenced to death for the crimes of an entire order.”

Something flickered in Riese’s eyes. She hesitated before speaking. “And was that person so bad?”

“No,” Curtis replied. “The opposite, if anything. I don’t know all the details, but I’ve been told they were a valiant knight. But they were inflexible and



ended up being ostracized.”

“They were interfering with the others’ schemes, you mean?” said Mylène.

“I don’t have any proof, but it seems likely. At least, that’s what everyone familiar with the matter seems to believe.”

“I guess it’s none of my business, but I wonder why the empire tolerates a knightly order that operates that way,” said Allen. “Anyway, you’re saying Anriette’s in the same situation?”

“Knights can get away with a lot so long as they do a good job,” said Curtis, with a sorrowful expression. “But yes, Anriette has also been ostracized.”

Allen had already suspected as much. He was curious about what she had done to warrant such treatment, but it wasn’t important right now. “Any idea who could be pointing the finger at her and what they’re accusing her of?”

“There’s no shortage of people with skeletons in their closet,” said Curtis. “And if I knew the details, they’d already be in prison.”

“What’s going on in this place? I know you can’t expect *every* higher-up to have a lily-white past, but still.”

“If the empire wasn’t rotten, Anriette wouldn’t have been arrested,” said Curtis.

“Is it going to be bad if they don’t arrest whoever killed the emperor?” asked Mylène.

“Most of the crimes Anriette could be accused of were committed in the past year,” said Curtis. “When it comes down to it, this country is nothing more than a collection of strangers who have gathered—who have *been* gathered together. This is the sort of thing that happens when they’re left without a leader. I’d already seen the signs long before this.”

His sorrowful expression changed to one of resentment. He turned his gaze downward and gritted his teeth as if enduring something. But he soon restored his composure and continued to speak as he glared out of the window toward the castle.

“Whoever accused her, if anyone, would have to be at least a marquis.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Anyone of lower status would never know that Anriette had been accused of killing the emperor. Nobody else would be told—they won’t make an announcement until her punishment is decided.”

“And by then it would be too late to blame them for something else, would it?” said Riese. “I suppose we can’t exactly say that’s fortunate. It cuts down on potential culprits, but any crime committed by a marquis must be rather serious. And when you say ‘at least a marquis,’ does that mean...”

Curtis smiled, dismissing her concern with a wave of his hand. “Oh, her aunt and uncle? Don’t worry about them. I had my suspicions too, but strangely, they haven’t even been informed.”

“What? Why?” said Noel. “Aren’t they the ones with the most invested in this? Unless that’s exactly why they haven’t been told?”

“I think you’re right,” said Curtis. “It’s not clear what might come of it.”

“Don’t they already hold all the power, though?” said Allen.

“True, but that’s also thanks to Anriette. Their words hold sway because they act as her representatives. With Anriette out of the picture, they’d lose that influence over most.”

“But hasn’t she been ostracized?”

“That’s a completely separate issue. Most of that house’s followers were indebted to its previous head, and that obligation remains regardless of Anriette’s status. Provided the direct line of descent continues, that is.”

“Ugh, I’m tired of hearing about it already. But doesn’t that mean nothing would change even if Anriette is found guilty of a crime?”

“No, in that case her aunt and uncle would surely become true rulers in their own right.”

“And that would be convenient for the empire. Or at least, it *not* happening would be inconvenient. So that’s why they haven’t told them what’s going on, huh? Makes sense. Can you think of any other houses that would benefit from destroying the House of Linkvist?”

“Certainly among the countships and lesser families. But even marquises have their hands full with their own affairs. No great house seeks unnecessary conflict.”

While there were benefits to bordering so many other nations, it was clear that the disadvantages were perhaps even greater. Fortunately for them, it seemed that there were no marquises or greater territories foolish enough to make an avaricious play for more power—with, evidently, one exception.

“Anyway, in summary, I’ve learned where Anriette is being held, but not what punishment she is to receive,” Curtis continued.

“What if it hasn’t even been decided yet?” asked Noel. “It could take some time. Do we just wait to find out?”

“Maybe that’s our chance,” said Mylène.

“Let’s forget saving her for a moment,” said Allen. “Just being able to *meet* with her would be huge right now.”

“With security the way it is in the castle, there’s no ‘just’ about it,” Curtis replied. “Even *that* will be incredibly difficult.”

“Nah, I think just meeting her is pretty simple. Hell, even busting her out of there won’t be that hard. It’s what would come *after* that gives me pause about even attempting that part.”

“What?! But how?!”

Allen had already come up with a plan that seemed simple enough to execute. All he had to do was review it for any oversights. Then meeting Anriette would be easy. And as he’d said, taking her with them as they escaped the castle would be easy too, although there *was* the matter of whether Anriette would even agree to go with them. If she had been the type of person who was only concerned about herself, she never would’ve ended up in this position to begin with.

Allen shrugged at the dumbfounded Curtis, then glanced at the imperial castle and sighed.

## A Sudden Reunion

Anriette stared into space in the middle of the needlessly large room. The problem wasn't that she'd been deprived of her freedom or anything they'd done to her. It was just that she had nothing to do. Stuck in this windowless place, she couldn't even watch the scenery outside.

She was in a room of the imperial castle. Technically, she was under house arrest, but this elegant room wasn't intended for that purpose—it had been chosen because it had no windows. Her captors weren't concerned that she might try anything, but they *were* concerned that others might try to recover her. Coincidentally, it also turned out to be a perfect place to deprive her of anything to do.

The fact that she was still here meant that her guilt had not yet been established. The empire was no stranger to excessive punishment, but outside of that, it was a fairly tolerant and magnanimous place, including in its treatment of those accused who had not yet been found guilty.

But it was all for show. What would come after she had been found guilty reflected the empire's *true* nature. Her current benevolent treatment was simply a warning not to do or say anything stupid. Anriette didn't have any intention of doing so regardless of her treatment, but she wasn't about to make life harder for herself by announcing that fact to her captors.

"Wouldn't change anything anyway," she muttered to herself. A lesser room would only make her less comfortable. "I suppose that *is* important, though. If I was less comfortable I might feel compelled to make something happen."

It wasn't like the room was totally bare—in fact, as if to prove that she was being treated fairly, it had been furnished with a number of extravagant articles. The place in which she currently sat could have provided for a normal family for an entire year. But the quality of the room didn't change the fact that she was stuck in a single room of the castle.

"Isn't there anything I can do to pass the time but talk to myself?" she

muttered. She wondered if her captors might provide her with something, anything, to ease her boredom, but realized what an absurd request that would be under the circumstances. Perhaps this was the most fitting way to spend these moments.

“Good to know you’re feeling bored. I was worried we’d be interrupting something.”

Anriette tensed herself. She hadn’t let her guard down for a second during her imprisonment. However slim the chance, she knew an attacker could come for her at any moment. And yet until the voice called out to her, she hadn’t sensed anyone else’s presence. She looked toward the door and involuntarily yelped.

“Allen?!”

“Nice to see you after... Actually, I guess it hasn’t been that long. Well, nice to see you anyway. You look healthy.”



Thoughts ran through her mind. How had he gotten in? What had he come here to do? And why? Her mouth opened in surprise, but she was unable to produce a sound. And yet, at the same time, she realized that she wasn't surprised at all. No—she was surprised by the *suddenness* of Allen's arrival, but not by the fact that he'd come. With a wry smile, she realized that, no matter how she'd tried to convince herself otherwise, deep down she'd always known he would come.

"How did you get in here?" she said. "I suppose there's no need to ask. Your powers are strong enough to even fool *me*, huh?"

"I wanted to surprise you," said Allen. "But seriously, I heard the security here was tight, so I took every precaution. And it really *is* impressive security."

"I'm sure they'll be delighted to hear that from someone who easily snuck past it." Anriette sighed and tried to quell her curiosity. She didn't want to stick her nose where it might cause her even more trouble. Even if she'd known in the back of her mind that Allen would eventually come for her, she couldn't understand why he'd chosen to sneak into the imperial castle like this. Was it purely a display of bravado? Had he just wanted to see her?

"What on earth are you doing here, Allen?"

"I came to see you, of course. The Black Wolf Knights arrested you on suspicion of plotting to kill the emperor, right? You didn't think I was gonna come find out what happened?"

Unfortunately, for someone with Allen's skills, his actions were as obvious as he made out. But she still had one question: How had he known? True, the fact that the Black Wolf Knights were searching for the emperor's assassin had been a secret in name only for some time now—that was why there'd been such a pressing need to arrest *someone* for the crime. But that *she'd* been arrested was supposed to remain a secret until the end.

Even now, she *was* officially a marquis. The news that someone of such stature had been involved in the emperor's killing could lead to unrest. It would be a major blunder if the Black Wolf Knights had let the word get out; they had to have done everything they could to keep it under wraps. Or rather, they *were* doing everything. She knew they'd used the Gift of Binding Contract on that

town, preventing its inhabitants from breathing a word about her arrest to anyone, even if they knew of it.

Allen shouldn't have known, but on the other hand, it *was* Allen. She could never discount the possibility that some confluence of circumstances would allow him to learn about anything. She had further questions about how, even armed with that knowledge, he'd managed to get to the capital, but again, it was Allen.

One thing concerned her most of all. Why had he chosen to sneak into the castle? She couldn't see a good reason to do so.

"Why was coming to see me so important that you had to take such a risk?" she asked. "I suppose for you, maybe it wasn't that risky, but there's always *some* risk in sneaking into the imperial castle. Couldn't you simply have waited to meet me in more normal circumstances?"

"Huh? What do you mean, normal circumstances?"

"Is that really so confusing?"

"What? You were arrested for killing the emperor, weren't you? That's gonna earn you a serious punishment. Maybe even execution."

"Oh, that's not gonna happen. I mean, you know this is a false charge, right?" Of course he did. As did most people. This entire affair was for show. "The higher-ups are discussing it now, trying to figure out how to give me a soft landing," she continued with a shrug. "It'll take a while for them to arrive at a decision, but I'm guessing I'll be set free within two or three days."



## Reasoning and Circumstance

“Besides,” Anriette continued, “my rank presents a problem.”

“Oh, really?”

“Someone who’s committed such a crime can’t possibly be a marquis. And since it can’t be covered up, I’m probably going to be stripped of the title.”

“Oh, I get *that*. I just mean, what’s the problem? I get that it’s probably important to you *personally*, but it sounds like you mean it matters to *them*. That’s why they’re treating you so kindly, right?”

“That’s right. I guess it’ll be hard for you to understand without knowing the circumstances here in the empire. In short, if I’m stripped of my title, my aunt and uncle will inherit the rights afforded to me. And the destruction of the House of Linkvist would be preferable to those fools taking control.” Anriette sighed.

Allen blinked in confusion. It seemed he still didn’t understand. “I know you’re not fond of them, but are they really *that* bad?”

“It would be one thing if they’d just go up in smoke themselves, but there’s no doubt they’ll ruin the lives of many who surround them too. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if they did something as stupid as declaring their own war on Adastera.”

“If they’re that incompetent, how did they even manage to come to power?”

“Two reasons... Well, one, really. When it comes down to it, it’s because I was cast out.”

“I figured as much. They’re a ruthless pair, huh? But what the hell did you do that meant *they* ended up getting the power?”

“Nothing, really.” Anriette shrugged.

Allen shot her a dubious glance. It was true, though; she hadn’t done much of anything. But there was a fact the empire couldn’t ignore: Anriette’s relatives

were easier to deceive and manipulate than Anriette herself was. The empire prioritized its own benefit above all else and had determined that her relatives were more beneficial candidates for the role. They more readily conformed and would facilitate smoother operations.

Ironically, due to past blunders by her relatives, the empire also felt that Anriette being the marquis was not the worst state of affairs. Thus she was allowed to keep the title. If it became necessary, she could always use her right to shut down whatever moves her relatives were making. And knowing this, her relatives avoided making any rash moves.

“But they need me as the figurehead for this state of affairs to continue. They’re racking their brains for a way to avoid stripping me of my title.”

“How can they possibly do that for someone found guilty of killing the emperor?”

“It’s all a sham, so there are plenty of reasons they can find. They’ll probably say I did it for the sake of the empire or something like that. Given how the last emperor was, that might work.”

“Was he unpopular?”

“Not exactly, but there *were* things about him that people didn’t care for.”

The last emperor was known for his impatience. The empire’s main goal was to unify the continent, but he had tried to advance those goals too quickly. Though no one would criticize him openly, it was easy to imagine that a plot to assassinate him for the sake of the empire’s future could have formed among the people.

“And we nobles are the bellwethers,” Anriette continued. “If we say that we felt the empire couldn’t go on like this, it will be easy to convince others that it was true. But they can’t just acquit me. Maybe they’ll banish me to that town instead of stripping me of my rank.”

“So nothing will change, either in appearance or practice.”

“Exactly.”

Even the concern that news of Anriette’s arrest would cause unrest was only

based on the likelihood of it causing undue speculation. If the empire announced exactly what had happened—in its fiction, at least—then even that could be kept to a minimum.

Perhaps that had something to do with why Anriette had been chosen to shoulder the blame. Given the circumstances, she was the choice that would enable the entire situation to be brought to a close most peacefully.

And *that* had to be why she'd been arrested by the Black Wolf Knights. It wasn't clear how much the knights knew, but it was the only reason they would have to be in Linkvist territory. The empire had already concluded that the killing of the emperor was an internal affair, so the mere fact that Linkvist had the most contact with other countries was of no relevance.

Of course, despite how obvious it seemed now, Anriette had only figured all of this out *after* being brought there. If she'd been quicker on the uptake, she probably wouldn't have been in this mess. Still, it wasn't as though any harm had come to her. If she just thought of it as a short trip to the capital, it was perfectly fine. True, she'd been stuck in a single room for the duration of her visit, but in some ways that too was a valuable experience.

"The point is, it's nothing you have to worry about," she insisted. "All this is just about taking the proper precautions to minimize unrest. I guess they're probably discussing what's to happen next too."

"You mean the next emperor?" said Allen. "Remind me, it's not just a matter of picking the longest-serving member of the family, right?"

"The problem is the remaining members of the imperial family. They're all women, and there's never been a female emperor in the long history of the empire. That's *our* problem, though. Like I said, nothing you have to worry about."

"I see. Now I understand why you asked what I was doing here."

"Exactly. I wouldn't say there was *no* reason for you to come, but it wasn't worth the risk."

Allen smiled. "Yeah, I guess I jumped to the wrong conclusion, didn't I?" He shrugged, seeming relieved. He'd come more because he was worried about

Anriette than because he had any particular idea in mind.

“This isn’t like you, you know,” said Anriette. “Were you really *that* worried about me?”

“Of course I was! I heard you were about to be imprisoned on suspicion of one of the worst crimes possible!”

Anriette paused, flustered. She’d been half joking, but Allen had responded with utter sincerity. She averted her gaze from his earnest expression as she sputtered a response. “Don’t you know I don’t need you worrying about me? If anyone finds out you’re here, we’ll both be in real trouble. I don’t know how you got inside, but *this* time will you listen to me and *leave*?”

“Yeah. I’m about to. Oh, can I just ask you one more thing?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“It’s about your aunt and uncle. Do they have a child?”

Anriette stood with eyes wide, blindsided by the unexpected question. She had no idea why that would be of any interest to him, but it had to have something to do with why he was here to begin with.

“A child? No way. They’re both only a year older than me, although I guess that would hardly be unheard of.”

Though they had been betrothed so long that it was easy to forget they hadn’t been married, it was only recently that her aunt and uncle had actually tied the knot. Her uncle was a blood relative, but her aunt had only become her aunt the year prior. While their seniority—though it was only by a year—had allowed them to take provisional power, in reality they were closer to puppets of their retinue. That said, they themselves had developed rather disagreeable natures, perhaps due to the negative influence of their circle.

“No adopted children or anything either, then?”

“They only just got married, is the thing. It’s not like they *can’t* have children, but I doubt there’s any pressing need for an heir.” Anriette paused. “Wait. Actually, I *do* remember hearing something about them having some cause to take in an adopted child. But I never heard any details.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, I guess. I have no clue what you’re getting at.”

Anriette still wondered how Allen had gotten into the castle, not to mention how he’d learned about what had happened to her to begin with, but she couldn’t see how the answers would be of any use to her. Asking would only serve to satisfy her curiosity, and in the current situation, her priority was encouraging Allen to leave the castle as soon as possible. Idle conversation would have to wait for another time.

When that time would come was another matter entirely. She certainly wouldn’t have the chance to see him again while imprisoned here. In truth, she was never supposed to have met him in this world to begin with. He was supposed to have been forging his own path. Even if she never saw him again, that was no problem.

“I’ll be on my way, then. See you later.”

“Yeah. See you.”

She went through the conversational motions, even though she knew that time might never come. Allen suddenly disappeared as abruptly as he had arrived. *Just use the damn door*, she thought with a sigh.

Suddenly, something came to her. “Oh. Right.”

Now she understood. How he’d known. How he’d made it into the city. How he’d gotten inside the castle. Why something about him had seemed a little off. But now it was too late.

“Ugh. Why does this always happen to me?”

If only she had noticed those things sooner, she’d have had so many more options. But she was always just a little too slow on the uptake.

The door swung open violently. A familiar black-armored figure stood in the doorway.

“Is the dramatic entrance really necessary, Lisette?”

“Forgive me. I’m afraid the circumstances warrant it.”

“Is that right? I get the feeling I don’t need to ask, but I *would* like to know why you’ve brought that bunch of hoodlums along with you.”

A line of similarly black-armored figures—at least ten of them—stood behind Lisette.

“Right,” said Lisette. “Lady Anriette, you are suspected of the treasonous act of collaborating with the Kingdom of Adastera. Please come with us for interrogation.”

Anriette sighed. This was what she’d expected, but what concerned her was that she didn’t know who was pulling the strings. With the Black Wolf Knights involved, it had to be a member of the imperial family, but she had no idea who would have the motivation.

Still, she assured herself, there was no need to puzzle over it now; she’d be taken to them soon enough. She sighed, imagining it...and what was to come after.

## The Situation Worsens

Allen had only just gotten back to the inn when he heard that the situation had suddenly changed. He stood side by side with Mylène as Curtis explained.

“She’s been accused of more crimes? What do you mean?” he said, eyes wide.

“It’s exactly as it sounds,” Curtis replied, wearing a troubled expression.

After what Anriette had told him, Allen couldn’t help but be confused. Judging by Mylène’s expression, she felt the same.

“Were you able to meet with her?” Curtis asked.

“Yeah. That’s what I came back here to tell you about.”

“So you really did go,” Curtis replied. Then, in a low mumble, “How on earth did you get inside?”

Allen just shrugged. The question didn’t sound like it was directed at him anyway. As he’d said to Anriette, the castle’s security *was* impressive. Allen could never have escaped notice alone, especially not without anyone realizing that he’d been there after the fact. Mylène’s invisibility had made it all possible. It was such an advanced skill that it had been hard for Allen to even briefly imitate it. But he *had* been able to show her how to make it even more undetectable. Clearly the results had been perfect; Anriette hadn’t even noticed them. They’d been able to walk right into the castle without anyone seeing and escape just as easily.

“Any chance of you telling me?”

“No can do,” Allen replied.

“Makes sense. But if you were able to get inside, the security must still be too weak... Oh, forgive me. Now isn’t the time. So, what did you learn from Anriette?”

“Let’s see... To cut a long story short, it seems like our fears were

unwarranted. Anriette should soon be returned to her usual life without us having to do anything.”

“In fact, we’ll be getting in the way if we act,” said Mylène.

“I see. So that’s why you two seem confused by what I said.”

“Yeah. I don’t see how things could get worse now.”

“But somehow they have?” asked Mylène.

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘somehow,’” Curtis replied. “Perhaps it’s more that Anriette was altogether too naive to begin with. Or perhaps she just lied in order to put your minds at ease.”

“It’s possible,” said Allen. “What has she been charged with now, anyway?”

“Right, I didn’t tell you yet. She’s been charged with—or rather, she’s *suspected* of treason. Of collaborating with the Kingdom of Adastera.”

That accusation would be even harder to refute. It wasn’t true, but Anriette *had* invited Allen and the others to her manor. If the Black Wolf Knights had discovered that they were from the kingdom, it was only natural to harbor such suspicions. On the other hand, if they *didn’t* know where Allen’s party was from, there should be no reason for them to suspect as much, but on that front the precedent had been set by the incident in the Elven Forest. With the current state of the empire, if the Black Wolf Knights decided something was true, it *was* true.

“What are the odds that suspicion will be confirmed?” said Allen.

Curtis looked glum. “Well, since it’s the Black Wolf Knights making the accusation...”

“It’ll be accepted as truth?” Mylène finished.

“Yes. The fact that they’re still involved in all this makes it highly likely. Although in that case, it’s quite strange that we haven’t already been apprehended. Unless...assisting someone guilty of treason conveys guilt not just upon the committer of the crime, but their family and fellow travelers. If the accused are from another country, that could lead to the outbreak of war. On the other hand, that could be exactly what they seek to achieve by doing this.”



“People from another country coming to the aid of someone accused of treason would only confirm their suspicions,” said Allen.

“And the person accused of killing the emperor, at that,” said Mylène.

Coming to Anriette’s aid would therefore cause the empire to conclude that Adastera was responsible for the assassination of the emperor. And while the kingdom was no stranger to the empire’s belligerent accusations, they were not to be taken lightly, especially not when they concerned the killing of an emperor. The empire would then have the moral high ground, and the kingdom’s name would fall into disrepute.

On the other hand, if they didn’t make any move to rescue Anriette, the name of Adastera would continue to be sullied *within* the empire, but beyond its borders, the empire’s false accusations would amount to nothing more. The word of the Black Wolf Knights only held weight within the empire, as other countries didn’t respect their authority.

But as soon as Allen and the others made a move, any protests that the empire had no evidence would hold no water. In the empire’s eyes, their actions would constitute irrefutable proof. Now that it had come to this, the smartest course of action seemed to be to leave Anriette to fend for herself.

“You’re not about to tell us to forget about Anriette, are you?” said Allen.

“Part of me wants to say ‘of course not,’” Curtis replied. “But perhaps it isn’t too far from that.”

Allen peered at him. Curtis looked straight back at him. Allen nodded, encouraging him to continue.

“I will never abandon Anriette, of course. But I would like you all to leave the capital for now.”

“But we’re here to save her,” said Mylène, puzzled.

“The worst thing for her right now would be to have contact with you,” said Curtis. “I’m sure I don’t need to explain why.”

At that moment, any accusation of Anriette’s involvement with the kingdom was merely a falsehood. But if Allen and the others were found to have

associated with her and then were found to be citizens of the kingdom, Anriette would be deemed guilty and any chance of rescuing her outside of breaking her out of captivity—with all the problems that would cause after the fact—would evaporate.

“I get the feeling it wouldn’t really change much, though,” said Allen. “She’s *already* accused of a capital crime, after all.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” said Curtis. “I think the best thing for Anriette would be to leave the empire entirely, but she must choose to do so herself. I would never wish for her to have to flee from the accusation of some terrible crime and spend the rest of her life in hiding.”

“So what should we do?” asked Mylène.

“I’ll work something out. Or at least, I’ll keep trying until it’s too late. There’s still time before Anriette is found guilty. Admittedly, much less time than there would be normally; the Black Wolf Knights move quickly. But we should have a week—no, three days. Will you allow me to come up with a plan?”

He bowed deferentially. Allen sighed and glanced at Mylène.

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“I guess this is for the best?” said Mylène.

Allen shrugged as they walked through the city. “I guess.”

He could sense Mylène’s dissatisfaction but chose not to add any further thoughts. From the corner of his eyes, he saw her peering at him, further expressing her displeasure, but he had nothing to say. He kept walking toward the edge of the city.

He’d agreed to leave the capital. Curtis had already arranged a place for them to go; it would only take a day or so for them to arrive by carriage. Even transport—the same high-speed carriage in which they’d arrived—had been arranged. Curtis’s guard would serve as the driver, and contact had already been made with a stable at their destination. All Allen and the others had to do was head there.

Allen had contacted Riese and Noel, who had been waiting in a separate

location just in case anything had happened to Allen and Mylène during their incursion into the castle. He didn't have the benefit of a magical communication device like Riese, but his Parallel Wisdom was sufficient for getting across simple information like locations.

Allen and Mylène were closer and would make it to the carriage first. They'd wait there for Riese and Noel, at which point they'd all leave the city together. Their next moves would depend on how the situation developed...and on Curtis.

"What a mess this is," Allen muttered as he glanced briefly at the imperial castle before continuing to march onward.

# The Dungeon

Anriette couldn't help but sigh as she observed her surroundings. The comfortable stay she'd enjoyed until moments earlier had been turned upside down, and that warranted a sigh or two. Now, as before, she was in a windowless room. But this one lacked the tasteful carpeting of her previous lodgings, and while she at least had a chair, it hardly compared to the elegant one she'd sat in before.

Of course, it didn't make much sense to compare a room behind bars with the room in which she'd been placed under house arrest. This was a jail cell.

"So there really *is* a dungeon here, just like the rumors said," she muttered to herself. An urban legend—at least, it had seemed like one—said that the dungeon existed to house imperial family members who had made serious blunders or prisoners whose presence couldn't be revealed to the public. But now it seemed it was all true; not just the existence of the place, but its purpose too.

And yet, despite its spartan furnishing, the dungeon otherwise lacked the dark, dank quality Anriette had expected of the name. Every corner was brightly lit, and while her chair couldn't compare to her previous one, it was still of high quality by any normal person's standards. She even had a bed. She would probably enjoy a more comfortable stay here than at a lousy inn.

"I guess this must be the cell they use for distinguished guests," she snorted. It was far too comfortable for any normal jail, but imperial family members couldn't be imprisoned alongside regular prisoners. That had to be why this cell existed. "I'm not high-status enough to deserve a cell like this, though."

She was just a marquis, and in name only at that. Although it was the second-highest rank in the imperial hierarchy, hers was the least influential of all the marquisates. On a bad day, she could even lose a dispute to a count.

"No matter what crime they're accusing me of, there's something weird about giving me such nice treatment."

“Weird?! I was just trying to ensure that you enjoyed a comfortable stay.”

“What?!” Anriette yelled, suddenly directing her idly wandering eyes straight ahead.

She’d never let her guard down, but she hadn’t sensed anyone nearby. Her cell was made of a special material that made Gifts difficult—though not impossible—to use. Even though Anriette had no Gift, the cell had an effect on her too: a sensory distortion that made using the powers she had inherited from her prior life as a holy disciple more difficult than the natural ease with which she usually wielded them, though she was sure she could get used to it given enough time.

Anriette peered at the figure that had materialized. She didn’t recognize either their voice or appearance. It definitely wasn’t Lisette—it wasn’t a woman at all. On the other side of the bars stood a young man about the same age as herself. Why had he spoken to her with such familiarity? No matter how much she examined his face, it inspired no recollections. She looked at him quizzically, and he smiled.

“So you don’t remember. I’ve changed a lot since you last saw me. How about now, sister?”

Anriette was perplexed. “Sister?”

She didn’t have any siblings, nor any cousins. Her uncle was her only blood relative, at least as far as she knew. Certainly not anyone who’d have reason to call her *sister*.

Then, suddenly, she recalled that she *had* been called that once before. The memories came flooding back to her. The face in her mind didn’t match the one she saw before her, but the eyes did contain traces of the scene in her memory.

“Curtis?”

The young man beamed with delight. Anriette furrowed her brow. It couldn’t *possibly* be him.

“Curtis? Curtis Halness Viktor? What are you doing here?”

Within the Viktor Empire, the name “Viktor” denoted those of imperial blood,

and Curtis was one.

“That’s not my name anymore. I’m Curtis Linkvist now.”

“Oh? I’d heard you were put up for adoption, but why with my family?”

“Is it so strange? The imperial family’s purposes are many, but *my* value is sadly limited. I was of more use to your aunt and uncle. They desperately desire legitimacy, and I was the perfect person to satisfy those desires.”

“That’s... Well, I suppose it makes sense.”

There was truth in his words. Members of the imperial family were often married off in neighboring countries or to powerful imperial subjects in order to strengthen relations. But Curtis was not a member of the imperial family—merely a descendant of their bloodline. Such people rarely had any connections with the core family. Serving as a toy to satisfy a couple of impudent children was perhaps the best someone like him could hope for.

“Are you worried about me? Trust me, there’s no need. In fact, I’m delighted to finally share your name.”

“Yeah, I remember you saying something about that once.”

It was their similar eyes that had made Curtis call her his sister to begin with. She’d treated him kindly, and he’d grown attached to her. As he followed her around, someone had once mentioned that they looked alike. Curtis had started referring to her as his sister and mentioned that he wanted to take her name. She was surprised to discover that it was more than just a child’s whimsical ramblings.

“I’m sure it didn’t mean anything to you, but to me it was a life-changing event.”

“That’s overselling it a little, I think.”

Despite—or because of—his imperial blood, he had often been teased as a youth. All Anriette had done was intervene.

“Anyway, why are you here? Actually, how did you even know I was here? How did you get in?”

Only the Black Wolf Knights, the dukes and duchesses, and the imperial family

should have known that she was imprisoned there. She couldn't imagine any of them breathing word of it to Curtis, especially not now he was the adopted son of a marquise.

Something tugged at the back of her mind, but before the thought could fully take shape, it was superseded by her other question: How had he gotten in? Only members of the imperial family or those with their unanimous approval were allowed to enter the castle. But Curtis was especially disliked by the two most senior members of the family. He shouldn't even have made it past the gates, let alone into the dungeon.

"Oh, that was simple. I'm the one directing the Black Wolf Knights. I was informed the moment you were brought here."

"But I thought only the imperial family could instruct them."

The Gift of Contract enabled them to do so. While under the control of that Gift, the Black Wolf Knights could not act of their own will, nor should they have been able to respond to whatever orders Curtis gave them.

"Ah, that's not *quite* right. Strictly speaking, it has to be someone recognized by the emperor."

"And the emperor has recognized you?"

"Precisely. As a...safeguard, let's say."

Things were starting to add up. There was a lot Anriette still didn't understand, but one point was clear. "I get it. You've filled Allen and his friends' heads with all sorts of nonsense in the process of bringing them here."

"*That's* what you're worried about? Well, yes, that's true. And evidently he was telling the truth about meeting with you. What a mysterious fellow. Clearly I was right to keep him at arm's length."

"What have you done to him?"

"You think I could do a thing to someone like *him*? The brief look I had at his combat potential sent shivers down my spine. Still, there are always limits to what one man can do alone. In fact, I suppose that's precisely the reason I came here. No matter how much you resist, once you can *no longer* resist, it's game

over.”

“Don’t tell me—”

“I didn’t subdue him by brute force, of course. That would be contrary to everything I’ve said. But it’s true that a display of force *will* be necessary to get him to comply.”

So, Curtis had threatened him somehow. The fate of the imperial family didn’t concern Anriette too much, but if Curtis planned on doing something to Allen, that was another matter. She couldn’t imagine Allen would be swayed by threats, but at the same time, he wasn’t invincible. She shot an angry look at Curtis, who responded with a shrug and a troubled expression.

“Please don’t glare at me like that. I did this all for you.”

“*Me?* I’m stuck here because of you!”

“Oh, I know. I can’t say I did all of it *just* for you. In fact, I suppose it was mostly for my own sake. But it’s true that I *was* thinking of you.”

Anriette sensed no lie in his words, but that didn’t mean she believed him. She peered at him, trying to gauge his true intentions. “What exactly is your goal here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I want to become emperor. I *must* become emperor.”

“Why? We already have an imperial family.”

“Those useless fools? They’ll deliberate forever and never name a successor. This nation cannot be left to them.” Curtis stared at her solemnly. “So, sister...will you help deliver control of this land to me? It will be what’s best for you too, of course. No longer will you be persecuted by the empire.”





# The Disciple and the Hero

After stating that he would return to discuss the details later, Curtis departed.

Anriette sighed. The dungeon felt all the more deserted now. “What the hell was that?”

His proposal didn’t interest her in the least, nor did the fate of the empire itself, really, although she worried she’d be misunderstood if she said so out loud. But as far as she was concerned, Curtis might as well become the emperor. It didn’t matter to her. She wasn’t confident that he could actually accomplish his goals, but he was welcome to go ahead and try.

“I don’t have any reason to help him out, though.”

To some extent, he was right about her persecution. So long as she held her title, no one would do anything to her directly, but whenever she went to a party, she felt how she was snubbed and heard their malicious comments. She’d even been dragged along, without guards, to parties in foreign countries, practically inviting someone to attack her. Those incidents had ceased once it had occurred to the imperial family that her disappearance would give her aunt and uncle free rein to do as they pleased. So instead, she was banished to her little town.

Whatever the official reasons for her banishment, it was ultimately about placing her under a “pleasant” house arrest and setting her up to be sacrificed. If Laurus were to fall to an attack, her town would be next on the list. Anriette could slow them down while also serving as a warning.

It didn’t matter much to her, though. It wasn’t that she didn’t care; she was just fatigued by it all. Too fatigued to muster any resentment toward anyone. To muster any feeling other than exasperation. She thought of the empire’s actions much like a weary parent thought of the misbehavior of a problem child.

When it came down to it, she’d gotten herself into this mess. The empire

always prioritized its own interests. The merciful treatment she'd received—the flexibility with regard to her punishment—was only because it served those interests. If the empire's analysis had been different, it could have easily been much more cruel.

Fortunately, to Anriette's knowledge, there had only been one time where the empire had chosen such an approach: when it had forcibly added the elves to its fighting force. She could understand why; the spirit stones alone made them a valuable addition to the empire's military power. Worsening the elves' opinions of the nation and inviting suspicion from other races were deemed acceptable costs.

Still, while Anriette could understand the empire's choice, that didn't mean she accepted it. She had resolved to do what she could to disrupt their plans. She wasn't sure she'd even been effective, but her actions had secured the elves' current way of life and resulted in her exile. Again, she had put herself in this position. Half the reason the empire's treatment of her didn't bother her much was because she had made her own choices.

The other half was because, in the end, she was a disciple, a faithful servant of God's will. With God, she inhabited a higher plane than mankind, but God's instructions were absolute. She wasn't supposed to have a will of her own; she was merely a tool to make God's vision for the world a reality.

She didn't remember when she had come to be. Her early memories were hazy. She could only remember gazing idly upon the world below. Disciples possessed many powers, but they were prevented from using most of them so that they wouldn't abuse them. Powers that didn't interfere in the world's affairs, however, were free to be used as they pleased.

One such power was the ability to observe the "world" below. Of course, the term "world" was used only by convention, since God and the disciples lived in a separate dimension entirely. While there, like the other disciples, Anriette observed the lives of the people below.

This power was supposed to assist disciples in serving God's will. While they would sometimes descend upon the world, they did not as a rule. For high-ranking disciples, doing so could upset the balance, running contrary to their

very purpose. Thus they were granted the ability to observe and wield their powers from afar.

But the intention was not for them to use the power simply to kill time. In thought, form, and values, disciples were different from both God and mankind. Sometimes this was the cause of misunderstandings—of God’s directions producing different outcomes than what God had sought. At times, the disciples would misunderstand God’s instructions. At others, they would misunderstand the actions of mankind. Thus, when they had no other duties, they observed mankind, coming to understand them and reducing the chance of misinterpreting their behavior.

Different disciples observed mankind differently. Some would watch villages, some towns, some countries, and others less intentionally constructed places. But Anriette chose to observe a single person. Even she didn’t know why she’d chosen this approach, but she was sure the other disciples had no idea why they’d chosen theirs either. In fact, she was sure none of them had noticed that their choices demonstrated their individual personalities. Either way, it didn’t change the fact that, out of countless people, Anriette always chose one individual.

Her choice seemed almost random. At least, Anriette herself wasn’t aware of the reason she had made it at first. As far as she was concerned, she was observing mankind to benefit God, the same as her fellow disciples. She didn’t remember exactly when she had noticed, but she *did* remember the times her heart had skipped a beat whenever she witnessed the dying moments of the person she watched.

Disciples did not have a finite lifespan. From Anriette’s point of view, the life of a person, of any race, seemed to be over in a flash, and few were even lucky enough to die of old age. Anriette had never seen a single one of the people she observed do so. Each had been killed or died by their own hand, although many people in the broader world *did* die of old age.

At some point, Anriette had realized that death was why she didn’t always watch the same person. When the individual she was monitoring died, she would search for another to watch, but sometimes none would interest her and she would spend her time staring off into space. Sometimes, like in times of

peace, she would spend far more time staring off into space than observing anyone at all.

It was when she learned about books—or rather, began to truly understand their purpose though she had known of their existence for a long time—that things began to change. She developed an intense interest in reading. Although as a rule, disciples could not interact with the world without descending into it, books were easy enough for them to copy from afar. So whenever Anriette had no one to observe, she would immerse herself in reading.

As a disciple, she had limitless time to absorb all the books she could. Fortunately, the world was limitless too. The one overseen by the god she served was only one among many, and the disciples were able to watch all of them. Her fellow disciples paid no mind to other worlds. Those worlds had different values, and they could be of no service to their god there. To Anriette, though, they provided the opportunity for endless reading.

Since she could copy the books, she was also able to acquire a collection for herself, though that had its own pitfalls. The different values of different worlds were represented in their writing, and many of them didn't agree with Anriette's own values.

Fortunately, the values of one particular world very much agreed with her own. It was by reading the books of that world that she realized her feelings. It felt like fate that this was the same world Allen was born into. The feeling Anriette was carrying with her was anger—an unexplainable anger and grief. It seemed that people's lives ended utterly in vain without sufficient reward.

That was how she realized what all those she watched had in common. The people she observed were heroes. Seeing their lives—their tragic lives of conquering injustice—made her heart flutter. She didn't watch them in service of God, but because she herself loved to follow their lives. The books she loved to read were also stories of heroism. In them, the moments the heroes overcame tragedy always brought her great relief.

But there was always one thing that didn't sit right with her: the heroes' final moments. Sooner or later, they always suffered an untimely end. It seemed as though, by the laws of nature, a wretched demise was recompense for living

such a glorious life. Whether betrayed by a trusted ally or deceived by an enemy's devious scheme, each of them would experience tragic deaths.

It was one thing encountering those deaths in the pages of books, but Anriette had witnessed real heroes meet the same end. She couldn't bear to witness it, but she was a disciple—there was nothing she could do to stop it, no matter how she felt. That the idea even occurred to her was bizarre. The other disciples would never have given it the slightest thought. But just as she wondered if she was falling apart, Anriette had been instructed to guide a hero to save the world. That was how she'd finally met her hero.

"Not much I can do about all that now, though," she muttered. She still saw herself as a disciple; that was why she didn't much care what happened to her or the empire. Or rather, being conscious of her role as a supporting character in the story, she deliberately disregarded their fate. Whatever became of the empire didn't affect her.

Nonetheless, she was concerned by the misfortune of the elves. There had been no reason to treat them so poorly. True, forcibly putting them to work would make life easier for the whole empire, but it was far from crucial. Thus she had intervened, just a little. Even if she hadn't, she would have accepted whatever happened provided it was the result of someone's will. After all, she was a former disciple. She wasn't even supposed to *be* here. She'd chosen to be reborn along with Allen out of concern for him. She had to admit it was pure self-indulgence.

Allen had turned out to be the same as ever in this new world, but the world itself seemed on course to becoming a peaceful, happy place. As a result, Anriette no longer cared what happened to her. Yes, she had hoped to see things through to the end, but it wasn't a burning need. She was confident that Allen would be all right, and that was enough. Yes, he would still run into danger, but the important fact was that he was no longer alone. He no longer had to toil, grieve, and suffer alone. She didn't need to be by his side.

"I've got nothing left to do."

The only problem that remained was whatever Curtis was about to do. It seemed likely to involve Allen. She had to deal with him, but she wasn't sure

what would become of her in the process.

“Going back to being a disciple wouldn’t be so bad. If I even *can* go back.” She had made the decision to be reborn without approval. A punishment could be waiting for her when she returned. “I’ll worry about that if and when it happens, though. What becomes of me in this world won’t affect it.”

Anriette looked off into space as she talked. Just like when she’d been a disciple, powerless to help the hero she observed, she regarded her own life as though it belonged to some distant stranger.

## Curtis's Desires

She didn't know how much time had passed since Curtis's visit. She had no means of telling other than her intuition. If it was right, she'd been there about half a day.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, sister. I had some business to attend to."

"Don't worry, I wasn't exactly anxious to see you again. I *am* pretty hungry, though. If you could do something about that, that'd be great."

"I thought you'd rather eat once you got out of prison. I assume you don't *want* to be here?"

"You've got a point, I guess," said Anriette, furrowing her brow. It sounded like Curtis was talking about getting her out of there. But half a day wasn't enough time for the empire to confirm her guilt, nor would she have any hope of getting out once they did. Any crimes committed on behalf of foreign countries were considered most grave by the empire. She would only be let out of her cell to be sent to the executioner's block.

"You seem confused," said Curtis. "You don't *really* believe you're to be executed, do you? Did you forget that I am working to aid you?"

"Oh yeah, I think I remember that. But surely I've got no chance of escaping a death sentence? There's no possibility of them attributing all of this to a mistake or misunderstanding at this point."

"True, even I can't do much to help you with that. But being sentenced to death doesn't have to mean *execution*. You're well aware of that, aren't you? You were around those folks just two weeks ago."

"You're going to assign me to the Black Wolf Knights? No chance."

She didn't mean she'd refuse to be assigned—only that she'd have no chance of survival. Yes, she had the powers of a disciple, but most were only useful for supporting others. Her combat skills were no match for the array of terrible duties the Black Wolf Knights faced. Her encounter with them had ended



relatively peacefully, but that was a rare exception; most of their expeditions involved marching into situations where death was a strong possibility. Anriette knew she wouldn't last half a day in such places.

"Oh, not to worry. You'll be assigned to the Black Wolf Knights but then immediately set free."

"Come on. That's impossible. Nobody's ever set free from the Black Wolf Knights. Otherwise *she* would've been."

Anriette looked over Curtis's shoulder at the woman clad in black armor behind him—Lisette. She had survived three years of service in the Black Wolf Knights, tackling the empire's gravest challenges. In any other knightly order, she would have received at least a few medals of honor, and a pardon would not be out of the question. If even *she* couldn't be freed, what hope did Anriette have?

"She's a different matter," said Curtis. "By continuing to live, she continues to break the rules. Were she freed, she would be arrested immediately. The empire is not so foolhardy as to let *that* happen."

"You mean it *is* possible?" said Anriette.

"Precisely why such an extreme response would be required. But this doesn't concern you, sister. I will have you pardoned."

"Oh? How?"

Only the emperor had the right to pardon condemned criminals. Not even the imperial family members who currently served in his stead could wield that power.

"You really *are* forgetful, aren't you? As I already told you, I will *become* the emperor."

"Seriously? I thought you were just joking around. You've got no hope in hell of becoming emperor."

"Oh, I assure you it's possible. True, the imperial blood that flows through my veins is diluted, but if it's not enough...I will simply supplement it. With your help, I know it's possible."

“Oh yeah, you wanted me to help you. So that’s what you meant.”

“Yes. With you on my side, I can obtain the right to become emperor.”

Curtis was right. Anriette, too, was of imperial blood, not of the last emperor but one from many generations past. The matriarch of the House of Linkvist had once been the imperial princess. If Curtis married Anriette, he too would have the right to become emperor—but that was a big “if.”

“Did you forget that’s exactly why you *can’t* marry me?”

Curtis was born to a commoner mother. He had been placed under a number of restrictions in order to ensure he could never become emperor, including being forbidden from marrying. He would, perhaps, be permitted to marry a fellow commoner, but their offspring would be forbidden from marrying until the bloodline was clear of any imperial blood. Anriette had been placed under similar restrictions in order to prevent the wanton spread of imperial blood.

“That’s exactly why you were sent to be the adopted son of some useless but harmless family.”

“Oh, how cruel.” Curtis chuckled. “You’re right, though. But you might say that’s just what affords me such freedom. For example—and this is purely an example, you understand—what if every member of the imperial family were to somehow disappear?”

He grinned, and Anriette suddenly became aware of the faint scent of blood emanating from him. What exactly had he been doing for the past half day?

“What have you done to the imperial family?!”

“Now, now. That was just an example. Although, coincidentally, it *is* true that two of their members have recently...vanished.”

Anriette knew there was no point in interrogating him now. Besides, even if the entire imperial family disappeared, Curtis would never be recognized as emperor. Anriette wasn’t the only other person of imperial blood—the duchy families possessed it too. In fact, the duchies had been created to provide an imperial heir in just such a situation. Curtis might have had the strongest imperial blood, but the next emperor would come from the duchies.

“You’re not going to get rid of all the duchy families too, are you?”

“I’m not that stupid. The empire wouldn’t function without them. But there’s no need to go that far. All I need is you.”

“Oh jeez, that again?”

“Why do you think I did all this? I didn’t *want* to make you a traitor; there was just no other way. This was the only way to make you mine. Once the imperial family is out of the picture, of course.”

“Getting rid of them won’t allow you to marry me. You’ll still have to pardon me first. Wait...don’t tell me...”

She looked at Curtis in surprise, and he nodded menacingly. She hadn’t understood the need to assign her to the Black Wolf Knights. Why not just pardon her outright? But now she grasped his intentions.

“That’s right,” said Curtis. “Whoever commands the Black Wolf Knights has the right to set the entire lot of them free. While they are performing their duties, they are not officially considered condemned criminals. There’s no need for the power of the emperor. Of course, that technically means you won’t be pardoned.”

“But all the Black Wolf Knights will become regular citizens...”

“That’s what the rules say. Of course, it’s *supposed* to require the approval of the emperor. But, unfortunately, there *is* no emperor. The rules have no provision for an absent emperor. The order will simply go through uncontested.”

“So you’ll disband the entire order and I’ll become a commoner?” said Anriette. She was sure to be stripped of her rank when she was judged guilty of her supposed crimes. Then, when she was no longer a condemned criminal but still a common person, though one with imperial blood, Curtis would be free to marry her. That their children would have the strongest imperial blood possible would ensure his ability to capture the imperial throne. Anriette’s lack of rank would be irrelevant.

The imperial family would never allow it, but if they really *were* eliminated, it wasn’t so clear that the duchies would object. The ascension of a member of

the duchy families to the imperial throne was more a matter of one of them being *selected* by the imperial family. But just as the empire prioritized its own benefit, each of the great houses prioritized *its* own. If none of the houses saw Curtis's ascension as a clear disadvantage to them, it was quite possible that they would approve of it.

"I see," said Anriette. "I suppose it's possible in theory. That's probably the *only* way you could do it. I'm impressed by your tenacity."

"Is that right?" said Curtis. "Well, then..."

Anriette looked straight into his eyes. "But I'm afraid it's not gonna happen. I'll never help you."

Curtis's face twisted. "Why? Do you *want* to die here?"

"That's rich, coming from the guy who put me here. Anyway, to be honest, I don't care if I die or not."

"Then why?! Why won't you help me, my sister?!"

"Do you really have to ask? Why would I forgive you for what you had the Black Wolf Knights do back in the Elven Forest?"

It was clear that Curtis had been pulling the strings back then too. Mercifully, the losses had not been too great. But if Allen hadn't been there, the damage could have been immeasurable. Anriette would never cooperate with someone who had almost caused so much harm.

"Yes, your kindness is a virtue. But your kindness is wasted on *those* people," he insisted.

"I can't let you insult them, Curtis."

"But, sister!"

The empire was not a peaceful place. In some ways it was a meritocracy, but in others, the populations of the territories it annexed were second-class citizens. Anriette had no intention of intervening on that front; she knew that different people had different values. But she couldn't abide anyone showing contempt for her cherished friends.

Curtis scoffed. "If you won't agree, then I'll destroy the entire Elven Forest for

harboring demons! I have that power! And you still won't join me?!"

"I'd kill myself before you had the chance. It would be pointless for you to do so then. Besides, who says you wouldn't do the same thing even if I agreed to help you?"

Curtis was shocked. "Why would you do such a thing?!"

Anriette had no response. His eyes were clouded by hatred; not for her, but for the country as a whole. After all the heroes' lives that she'd followed, it was easy for her to recognize someone whose mind had been warped by resentment.

"Besides, you ought to exact your revenge yourself. There's no point in me helping you."

"But you've been walked on just as I have, sister!"

"Don't use me to justify your revenge. Do it yourself."

"Then you refuse to become mine, no matter what?" Anriette looked at Curtis, whose eyes were full of hate. "I'm not anyone's property," she said, though at the same time she remembered how she had often thought that she was little more than God's property during her time as a disciple.

*He's gonna kill me*, she thought. She didn't want to die, but she didn't have a strong desire to go on living either. She'd already achieved her goals. In a way, this seemed like a fitting death. In the end, however angry she got, however much she raged, all she could offer Allen was the same fate as every other hero. Reborn in the same world as him, she had offered her help to others to forget how little she could do for him. Curtis feeling indebted to her was not a result of her kindness, but of her attempts to find a substitute for helping Allen. And now it would lead to her end.

"Very well," said Curtis. "If you won't join me, then I'll kill you and make you mine!"

"You know, I hear that line from time to time, but I still don't get it," said a voice. "How does killing someone make them your property?"

Anriette gasped and looked toward the voice, but Curtis and Lisette blocked

her view. With her disciple's powers impaired, she couldn't see through the pair. Still, there was no doubt about who it was.

"You always show up at the perfect time. Almost as if you planned it that way," said Anriette.

"Hey, that hurts. It's just a coincidence," the newcomer protested.

"You!" said Curtis. "What are you doing here?!"

A single footstep sounded, and another figure appeared before the cell bars. It was Allen, wearing his usual disinterested expression.

## Toward an Ending

Allen took a preparatory look at his surroundings. He'd only come here to gather information but hurriedly stepped forward when he sensed an intervention was imminently necessary. He tried to give the impression that he knew exactly what was going on, but inside he was racked with uncertainty—less about how to proceed than about what was actually happening. Trying his best not to betray this, he looked at each of the people on the scene.

Curtis stood opposite. Another familiar face took a step forward as if to defend him. It was the Black Wolf Knight he'd encountered in Laurus. Lisette, wasn't it? Curtis regarded Allen with contempt, while Lisette was on guard, ready to make a move at any moment.

Allen turned away from both of them. They weren't important right now. Instead, he looked past the iron bars that extended from the floor to the ceiling of the stone passageway and at Anriette.

"You look well, at least. I guess that's kinda weird to say when it hasn't even been a day since I last saw you."

"I don't think it's that weird, considering the situation," she replied with a suspicious glance. "You don't have a clue what's going on, do you?"

Allen shrugged. She'd seen right through him. "I wouldn't go that far. I think I get the gist."

"I bet. Otherwise you wouldn't be here." She looked over his shoulder. "And neither would whoever that is behind you."

Allen sensed the person behind him flinch with surprise. This hardly seemed like the time to be needling him.

Curtis's and Lisette's eyes grew wide as they suddenly noticed there was yet another person in the room, but Curtis's expression quickly transformed into anger.

"You?! What are you doing here?!"

“What does it look like?” Allen interjected. “The fastest way to learn anything is to ask someone who knows, and the fastest way to get to an unfamiliar place is to ask someone familiar with it to guide you.”

“You’re a traitor, Celia?” said Lisette. She seemed dumbfounded, as if she couldn’t believe the other woman could be capable of such a thing.

Curtis gasped. “That’s right! The moment a Black Wolf Knight disobeys my orders, they should be racked by unbearable pain! How are you able to betray me?!”

“Oh, is that true?” said Allen. “Guess it makes sense to place those kind of restrictions on criminals.”

It might have been inhumane, but it was effective, no doubt. Few in this world cared about the rights of criminals, less still with those condemned to death. Even the situation Anriette was in hadn’t disabused Allen of that notion—he was simply prioritizing his own concerns and had no room to complain about the overall system.

“Wait!” said Curtis. “How did you manage to remove the contract? My Gift of Binding Contract can only be canceled by *me*!”

“Oh yeah?” said Allen. “It was pretty simple, actually.” It *was* a strong enchantment, but that strength made it equally brittle. It had easily been broken when prodded by his Boundless Knowledge and Parallel Wisdom skills.

Curtis seethed. “Nonsense!”

“That’s Allen for you,” said Anriette. “All in a day’s work for him.”

“As if you’re any different,” said Allen. She was the one who’d taught him how to break magical barriers and remove curses.

“Well, as you can see, I’m currently suffering here in jail. So clearly my powers can’t compare to yours.”

“I get the feeling you came quietly. And I don’t think you’re suffering much at all.”

At that, Curtis suddenly seemed to remember where he was. He studied both Allen and Anriette, then glared at the former. “However you did it, you forced



her to explain everything, no?”

“Is that what you think of me? Actually, is that how it looks?” said Allen, gesturing over his shoulder. He could sense Celia watching intently.

He’d planned to come alone, as he hadn’t wanted to risk bringing the others into an uncertain situation. Celia had offered to show him the way, though the truth was that she’d wanted to come herself to finish what she had played a role in starting.

“She told you of her own free will?” said Lisette. “Impossible. Even as a Black Wolf Knight, she has a chivalrous heart. I know that better than anyone. She would never betray her liege.”

“I think you’ve got it backward,” said Allen.

“Backward? How?”

“Is what you’re doing so chivalrous? Framing an innocent person? I don’t care if it’s for the sake of the empire. Isn’t the more chivalrous action to disobey such an order even if it means being branded a traitor?”

The speech Allen had given to Celia had been much simpler than what he’d just said to Lisette. “Are you honestly okay with this?” was all he’d asked her. Celia’s clear anguish had persuaded him to break the enchantment.

“But this doesn’t make any sense!” said Curtis.

“Which part? It’s all true,” said Allen.

“But that would mean you knew she was my guard!”

“That’s all? Yeah, I did.” Allen hadn’t had a chance to talk to Celia until after leaving the imperial capital. In fact, the reason he’d agreed to temporarily leave to begin with was because he’d known it would give him that chance.

“Everything she explained was pretty much what I figured, though. The others were shocked, of course. In fact, they’re kinda mad at me.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Anriette.

“Yeah, I know.” He shrugged. That was why he hadn’t defended himself; in fact, he’d invited them to yell at him.

“You... You *knew*?” Curtis sputtered. “Impossible! When did you realize she was my guard?”

“From the start, of course. Specifically...back in Phinis, when you swapped her in to replace that guy who attacked the Elven Forest.”

“What?! I-Impossible! You knew *he* was my guard too?!”

“Obviously.”

Allen hadn’t taken any action earlier because he hadn’t known what Curtis was trying to accomplish. He’d figured it was possible the young man really *was* doing all of this for Anriette. It wasn’t until the last moment that he’d been able to establish that he wasn’t.

“I regret how I handled that guy, though,” Allen continued. “Letting him go allowed him to put Noel and Mylène in danger.” He’d already apologized profusely to them, but he still felt they deserved more. Riese too.

“You knew everything? Ridiculous. If you’re really capable of that...” Curtis shot Allen a familiar look. It was the look that said he was a monster.

Allen couldn’t help but smile wryly. He could still hear the words, and he couldn’t say they no longer stung. The very reason he’d sought a peaceful life was so he would no longer have to endure looks like that. But he had to admit it didn’t hurt quite as much as it once had. These days, unlike back then, he knew he had friends who understood who he really was.

“Anyway, I don’t understand *exactly* what’s going on, but I know you want nothing but bad things for Anriette. And it sure looks like things’ll only get worse if I leave her here, so I’ll be taking her home.”

Curtis scoffed. “If you know so much, you should know that only *I* can help my sister!”

“Do I need to remind you what you said to her before I showed up? You think I’d leave her in the care of someone who said that? I know exactly what’ll happen if I do.”

“Jeez, what are you, my dad?” said Anriette.

“Just a friend. Can you blame me for caring?”

“Huh. I never thought of you as a friend.”

“Wow, that’s harsh. I guess we haven’t ever really hung out as friends, though, have we?”

As he bantered with Anriette, Allen kept an eye on Curtis, whose demeanor suddenly changed. He was still hateful, but now he looked at Allen as though Allen were mocking his own feelings for Anriette.

“Ah, so that’s it! It’s you! *You’re* the reason she won’t become mine! Very well! This is a fine opportunity to kill you and make her comply!”

“I’ve really gotten mixed up in something here, haven’t I?” Allen muttered.

“Yet again,” said Anriette. “You only just noticed?”

“And still you mock me,” said Curtis. “You can afford to, of course. Yes, I know how you pretend to be weaker than you really are. But can you wield that power *here*?”

“Huh?” said Allen. For some reason, Curtis seemed confident. True, Allen wouldn’t usually consider fighting in such a cramped space, but that was no advantage for Curtis. Except... “Oh. There *is* something weird about this place, isn’t there?”

“Ha! You finally notice! Indeed, the power of Gifts is suppressed here! Your power seems different from that of Gifts, but no matter! Even the powers of demons are constrained!”

“Sounds like you’ve tested that out before.”

“Ha! I’ll show you soon enough!”

“Oh yeah? I dunno what you mean by that, but it sounds like *you* can still use your powers.”

“There is, of course, a fail-safe. But without the right magical artifact, it’s hopeless!”

“Huh. Got it.”

Curtis laughed. “Understand now? It’s about time you started begging for your life. After all you’ve done, I wasn’t planning to let you leave, but perhaps

you can—”

*Sword of Cataclysm: Sundering Slice.*

“—change my... Wh-What?!”

“You’re right,” said Allen. “I *do* feel a little off. If I’m not careful, I might end up playing too rough with you. I guess that’s your problem, though.”

He had sliced the cell’s iron bars perfectly in half. He’d only intended to scratch them, but the enchantment that covered the area had significantly affected his ability to regulate his attacks. Still, there wasn’t much need to hold back against Curtis. At worst, killing him would make resolving the whole affair more difficult, but since it seemed that Anriette was destined to leave the empire anyway, he wasn’t too concerned.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we?” said Allen. “I’ve already been in this country much longer than planned. Riese and the others are gonna be really angry with me if we don’t get out of here soon.”

“How dare you!” Curtis erupted. “Whatever power you’re able to use is still nothing compared to my demons!”

Shadows gathered behind him. Allen peered at them and gasped, then faced Curtis, planting his feet firmly on the ground.

## A Fool's Finale

Curtis had known he was special from the moment he'd become aware of things around him. Not special enough, though—even with his imperial blood, it was not enough for the imperial family to accept him. Yet nor was he granted the dignity of being treated as a simple commoner. He lived a liminal existence, neither commoner nor imperial. He was an alien entity, and like all such entities, he had to be removed.

But rather than simply being eliminated, he was ostracized and oppressed. Perhaps things would have been different if he'd had a mother, but he had never seen her face. Others didn't hesitate to tell him their theories: that she had died soon after his birth, or that she'd sold him off for a huge sum and disappeared. All he knew was that she was no longer around.

The turning point in his life had come when he attended the birthday party of a woman who, at least by blood, was his aunt. Curtis was sometimes invited to such parties despite his lack of recognition by the imperial family. Even when he was a child, the reason became clear when he saw the cruel delight with which the others regarded him—he was there to provide the imperial family with a sense of relief and superiority.

There were others who served the same role. Most were children of roughly his age. Among them was a girl, Anriette Linkvist, the first daughter of the Marquis of Linkvist. She was the most talented of all the children; the adults called her a prodigy.

The empire didn't place much emphasis on one's level or Gift. Results were what mattered. Even a person of low level and with no Gift could achieve recognition through impressive feats. But Anriette showed almost *too much* promise. Even the emperor himself had to admit that she had the potential to go down in history. It was no surprise that she was shunned by the others. Even Curtis was guilty of it at first, as his jealousy readily turned into outright dislike. Of all the stories he'd heard about her, not a single one had been positive.

But that was before he finally met her on that day. She hadn't done anything particularly special—simply extended her hand and talked to him after he had long since been ostracized and mocked by the others. To be smiled at and treated kindly... To others, these actions were nothing special, but Curtis had never experienced them before. That alone was enough.

Looking back, it probably hadn't even been for very long. But it was enough for Curtis to idolize her and begin calling her his sister. The fact that they never met again was no object; he had already made up his mind back then. About *what*, exactly, he wasn't yet clear. But he'd acquired a sense that he had to do *something*.

From that point on, he had learned much about how to climb the ranks and gain power, even as an unwanted person who had no place among either the imperial family or the common people.

"Hmph! Hold still!"

He manipulated the shadows that overflowed from his own mind, attacking Allen, who frantically tried to escape. Discovering that his foe could still use his powers had flustered him at first, but the enchantment was clearly still effective. Allen dodged desperately, never even trying to attack.

Or perhaps Curtis's own attacks were simply too powerful, he considered. The shadows he controlled were just that: entities without mass or body that could pass through any physical object—unless directed to destroy it, at which point they would swirl around it and it would disappear as if swallowed. Nothing was impervious to them; they had already swallowed several jail cell bars and sections of the floor. Even Allen was powerless before them. Feeling confident, Curtis grinned.

Allen nodded in understanding. "You weren't lying when you said you have demonic powers, were you?"

"I told you," said Curtis. "You only just noticed?" He had stolen his powers from a real demon.

"They *do* seem like demonic powers, but how the hell did Curtis get them?" asked Anriette.

“I think you’ll have to ask him yourself,” said Allen. “One thing’s clear, though. It’s gotta be Curtis who killed the emperor.”

The other man laughed. “Wherever did you get that idea?”

“You’re still gonna try to deny it? At this point, it’s clear you’ve been involved in this all along.”

It was true; Curtis was the one who’d invited the demons to the capital. It was two years ago when he’d first heard their call, back when he’d first realized that all his best efforts were destined to end in failure. It was then that he had awoken, beginning to understand exactly what he had to do—and seen that it was impossible.

That was when the demons had begun to whisper to him, “*The emperor is the biggest obstacle to achieving your dreams.*”

“At this point, there’s no doubt he was *involved*,” said Anriette. “But I don’t understand his motivation. Did he want to become emperor *that* badly? Is it really all that great to be the ruler?”

“Hmm...” Allen hesitated.

“What is it, Allen? Sounds like there’s something you want to tell me.”

“I mean, killing the emperor would be pretty tough for an awkward guy like him, right?”

“What do you mean, awkward?”

“Just what I say. I mean—”

“Enough!” said Curtis, sending shadows flying toward Allen, who deftly leaped backward to avoid them.

Curtis snorted and looked at Anriette. Seeing her staring only at Allen, as if refusing to accept his proposal, he snorted again. Allen was right. He didn’t particularly care about the position of emperor; he wanted Anriette. To win her, he had to become emperor, and he’d accepted assistance from the demons in order to do so. He’d never anticipated it would involve killing the emperor, let alone what had happened after that—he’d killed the demon and absorbed its power. How had he even been capable of doing such a thing?

“Are you so sure I didn’t kill the emperor?” said Curtis. “With these powers, it would be easy for me.”

“I guess I can’t say for sure,” said Allen. “After all, I never did hear exactly how the emperor was killed. But my logic’s pretty simple. It’s clear you can’t make full use of that power.”

Curtis gasped. Allen was right; the power was too much for him. Of course it was; he had never believed himself capable of killing a demon and absorbing its power to begin with. It had only happened by sheer chance; or rather, a sudden, explosive outburst.

Curtis had brought a demon here with him before. That was how he knew that their powers were not effective here. But he’d been taking the demon to the emperor. Only by chance had he discovered this dungeon, connected to the castle’s outer walls. That had to be how Allen had found his way in here too.

Curtis had no idea how the demon had killed the emperor after he’d brought it here. Two years ago, he’d been called upon by the demons, agreed to help them, and formulated the plan, but the exact details of the killing were the knowledge of the demon alone; they’d only told him that it was nothing to them. Why hadn’t he asked? Looking back, he supposed he’d decided he was already in too deep to worry about failure. It seemed careless now, but after all, they *had* succeeded.

He’d waited in the dungeon, and the demon had returned with the emperor’s severed head. Curtis couldn’t help but ask why the demon had taken the trophy. The demon replied that it was only as proof of its success; the head had no particular use. It had also mentioned that in this place, it seemed unable to use its powers well.

That was when the idea had hit Curtis. Here, he could kill the demon and take the head. Before giving it a second thought, he had plunged his knife into the creature, slitting its throat. The demon’s eyes had grown wide with shock as it fell to the ground. Curtis had plunged the knife into its twitching body again and again. Strangely, the moment it stopped moving, the demon’s body had unraveled into threads that reformed into a bundle of shadows. The shadows had seemed to flow into Curtis and disappear. He quickly became aware that he



had absorbed its powers. But for whatever reason—perhaps because he hadn't even known it was *possible* to do such a thing—he could not fully wield them.

Worse still, he often grew faint and recalled past events whenever he tried to use them. The same thing had happened just now. Even in the midst of battle, he was beset by memories of how he had grown to desire Anriette.

“You’ve been totally swallowed by that thing, haven’t you, Curtis?” said Allen.

“What?! Ridiculous! You might be right that I cannot use these powers to their fullest potential, but *swallowed*?!”

“I bet that’s why your worldview seems so screwed up. I dunno... What do you think? Why else would you be trying to *kill* the person who means the most to you so that she can be yours?”

For a moment, Curtis was dumbfounded. He reflexively looked at Anriette, then at his own hands. For the first time, he realized how impossible what he sought was. He hadn't even *wanted* to be emperor. It was a means to an end. But at some point his goals had changed.

“I don’t know what you’ve become now,” Allen continued, “but I bet you’re turning into that thing whose powers you absorbed. Your memories too. But since you can’t use those powers to their fullest, everything’s getting all mixed up. You’d better give up before you turn into an empty shell.”

“Y-You’re just trying to talk me out of it!”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong there. Maybe I should make the decision for you, then. I think you’ve told me enough.”

“Such arrogance! What chance do you stand against—”

As Curtis gathered his shadows, a flash of light blinded him momentarily. When his vision returned, the shadows had been cut to ribbons, which quickly dissolved and disappeared.

“Against your powers, huh?” said Allen.

“I-Impossible! My powers! My demonic powers!”

“Yeah, I figured you’d been swallowed from the moment you mentioned they were a demon’s powers. But to be honest, I don’t really care what happens to

you. Can you just get out of here so I can save Anriette?”

“Enough! I will *never* let you have my sister!”

Curtis felt something snap inside him. The entire dungeon flooded with shadows. But in a moment, they had all disappeared without a trace, and before him stood a blue-haired young man wearing a smug expression.

But he would never give up. He would never hand her over. Once again, he launched his shadows forward.

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An altogether different scene now appeared before Allen’s eyes. Shadows overflowed but were immediately cut through and dispersed. They were clearly being held back, but due to the layout of the space, this still wasn’t over. The space was narrow; if Allen overdid it, his attack would extend into the cells where Anriette was. As a result, he was unable to destroy all of the shadows, and they quickly began to swell yet again. Before long, though, the blade’s gleam would extend all the way to the other side of the hall.

Celia glanced to the side. “Should you just be standing here? Your liege is in a bad position.”

Lisette scowled. She had initially moved to distance herself from Celia after they’d collided with each other but soon realized how ill-advised that would be. She shot Celia a derisive glance, then returned her attention to the battle playing out before them.

“I’m not jumping into *that*,” said Lisette. “All I’d do is get in the way.”

Celia smiled. “Makes sense. I have no room to talk anyway. I can’t do anything either, as much as I wish I could. I’d just be getting in the way too.” She shrugged, then felt Lisette’s eyes on her. Turning, she saw Lisette looking surprised. “Something wrong?”

“Did something happen to you?” asked Lisette. “You seem like you’ve changed since I last saw you.”

“Nothing in particular. Or rather, whatever happened, I’ve already put it behind me.”

“Oh, really?”

Celia looked at Allen, who was facing away from them. “Yes. Thanks to him.”

Allen would probably deny it, but Celia knew it was because of him that she hadn’t given up on being a knight. If he hadn’t asked her if she was really happy with what was going on, she would have abandoned the chivalrous path.

“I see,” said Lisette. “I’m glad.”

Celia smirked.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry. I was just thinking how cute it is when you sulk like that.”

“What?! I am *not* sulking!”

“That reaction shows that you know I’m right. I know what you’re thinking. It’s not fair that nobody’s come to your rescue after three years when I was saved in under six months.”

“What?!”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t tease you. You’re just too cute, is all.”

“Hmph!” Lisette pouted and turned away.

Celia couldn’t help but smile but soon remembered the sobering reality that had prevented her from seeing this side of Lisette—the *real* Lisette—before. By some miracle, the other woman had survived three years in the service of the Black Wolf Knights, to which she had been assigned after breaking the empire’s greatest taboo—that of dying and returning to life. She couldn’t be saved; anywhere but the empire, she would have been executed already. Even here, she would only live for as long as she could stave off the inevitable death that came to all Black Wolf Knights. She would never be free.

“Well, maybe you could talk to him once this is all over?” said Celia.

“About what?”

“Just ask him to help you. He won’t hesitate. I know it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We barely know each other, and besides, we’re enemies. Why would he help me?”

“That’s what I’m saying. It doesn’t matter.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Celia remembered what he had said when she’d asked why he was willing to go to such lengths to rescue Anriette. All this talk of rescuing people, of saving them, wasn’t it a little arrogant? He’d thought for a moment and responded with a reassuring smile that made her remember how right he was. *“You don’t need a reason to help people.”*

“That’s not much of an argument,” said Lisette. “Besides, he’ll give up once he realizes there’s nothing he can do for me. Or else he’ll just end up all the worse off for it.”

“Maybe,” said Celia. “So? You’re just going to keep going until you’re used up? Like I told you, I’d help you if I could, but I’m not strong enough.”

“I don’t expect you to. Anyway, I don’t know about the future, but it’s not like *you’ve* solved anything either.”

“You’ve got me there.” Celia sighed. She’d simply slipped away from the Black Wolf Knights, which had only added to her crimes. Execution might well be in her future. “But I believe that everything will work out somehow.”

“How can you be so optimistic? You really *have* changed. You never would have said that before.”

“I was just too pessimistic before. We should be proud of what we did.”

Lisette shot her a puzzled look. Celia shrugged; she didn’t mean anything in particular by it. In the process of patrolling and battling with and eliminating demons, they’d discovered a five-year-old child the demons had in tow. The child was terrified and powerless. It had clearly had no intention of fighting them. After some discussion, they’d decided to let it go even though that was a grave crime under the empire’s laws. The act could have meant the end of the entire knightly order, but Celia had claimed sole responsibility, a decision she didn’t regret. Her only regret was not having made the choice with more confidence.

She had wondered countless times if she’d made the wrong decision. The child surely wouldn’t forget witnessing the death of its parents. What if it grew

up to exact revenge on the people of the empire? Such concerns were precisely why her actions were a grave crime there, but Allen's words had eased her mind. Worries about the future could be dealt with when they happened. That didn't just apply to demons—*anyone* she saved could go on to hurt someone else, but that wouldn't stop her from saving them.

She didn't regret what she'd done anymore. She took pride in it. Her judgment had been correct. Based on the awkward looks of her former comrades whenever they crossed paths, they agreed with her. The next time she saw one of them, she would let them know that they hadn't done anything wrong.

"You know, there's something I've always thought," said Celia.

"Hm? What are you talking about?"

Celia smiled as Lisette leaned in. She was so predictable. Even after three years as a Black Wolf Knight, resented by others, she hadn't lost sight of who she was. It pained Celia that there was nothing she could do to save a girl who so clearly deserved saving, but she was confident that *someone* could and would.

She watched the shadows before her being cut to shreds as she spoke. "There are limits to what one person can do. Nobody can defeat a country by themselves, no matter how powerful they are. In the end, the world operates according to the will of a small group of privileged people."

"True," said Lisette. "But what's your point?"

"Well, even though I've always felt that way...lately I think I might have been wrong. That there might be people in this world capable of doing things that I thought were impossible. And we call those people..."

*Heroes.* She was too embarrassed to say it, but Lisette seemed to understand. Celia glanced sideways at Lisette with a look of vague amazement that belied the indifference of her next words.

"Well, whatever."

"Hm?"

“I dunno what’s going to happen next, but I’d like to talk to you again if I have the chance.”

Lisette turned away. Celia smiled again, then returned her attention to the battle—if you could call it that—taking place before them, which seemed to be approaching a conclusion.

Curtis grunted. “Damn you! Why?! I *will* have my sister!”

“Your persistence is admirable,” said Allen, with a look somewhere between sadness and pity. “I wonder how everything went so wrong for you?”

Curtis exploded with rage. “Enough! How dare you mock me?!”

“I’m not trying to mock you,” said Allen, his calm demeanor the complete opposite of Curtis’s. “Never mind. This is already over.”

Allen swung his arm. The blade flew at Curtis, brushing the shadows aside and piercing his body. Blood spurted from the wound.



“Nngh! Damn...you! How could I...” He was defenseless. He grasped at the air. Allen took one last step toward him.

“Allen!” Anriette cried.

Allen smirked. The blade had delivered a clean blow. The strength evaporated from Curtis’s body and he fell to the ground, arms still extended.



## Returning to the Everyday

Allen sighed as he watched the distant imperial capital from the carriage window. “I came here looking for a peaceful life. How’d it end up like this?”

After the incident six months earlier and now this, he was starting to believe he really was cursed.

“Funny of you to ask why. Isn’t it all because of you?” said Riese.

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” said Noel. “At least, if there’s some other reason, I’d love to know.”

“No argument here,” said Mylène.

“Hey!” Allen protested. This time it hadn’t been his fault. They’d *all* decided to come to the imperial capital. Allen was less than half responsible.

“True, this was a group decision,” said Riese. “But you’re responsible for us staying in the capital for two weeks.”

“Yeah, what was with that?” said Mylène.

“I don’t have any complaints about it,” said Noel. “You would’ve been worried if we’d just gone home. But it was *your* choice to pick a fight with the imperial family and the House of Linkvist, wasn’t it?”

“Hey, I didn’t pick a fight with anyone!” Allen replied. “I just warned them to stop doing things that didn’t sit right with me.”

“I think telling them that you’ll wipe out their entire family if they don’t stop counts as picking a fight,” said Mylène.

“Yeah, especially considering wiping out the imperial family pretty much means destroying the empire,” Noel agreed.

“Sounds like you see events differently from me,” Allen muttered, still staring out the window. He heard the others sigh. In truth, he couldn’t blame them for having one or two complaints. “Even so, I never wished I’d done otherwise.”

“Indeed,” said Riese. “Who knows what would’ve happened if you hadn’t come here, Allen. The rest of us didn’t have much of an impact, though.”

“I bet the empire wishes Allen never showed up,” Noel observed.

“That’s probably true for most of the people involved,” said Mylène. “Especially those related to the House of Linkvist.”

Defeating Curtis and rescuing Anriette was never likely to result in everyone living happily ever after. In real life, unlike in fairy tales, there were always consequences and loose ends. For one thing, the House of Linkvist had fallen. Allen hadn’t intended for that to happen, but the actions he’d been forced to take to draw this matter to a close had made it inevitable. Curtis had been deemed the killer of the emperor. In truth, the perpetrator had been a demon, and Curtis had killed that demon. But as a co-conspirator, the sole responsibility had fallen at his feet.

The problem now lay with Curtis’s status. He was of imperial blood but not a member of the imperial family. Furthermore, only three members of the imperial family remained. Curtis couldn’t be executed since there was a chance he might be needed someday. But *someone* had to take the blame, and the House of Linkvist—the house headed by Anriette—had been chosen. As a result, it was *Anriette* who had ultimately been deemed responsible for the emperor’s assassination. The fall of the House of Linkvist was strictly for appearances, just as Anriette’s leadership of the house had been. In lieu of putting the entire family to death, the house had simply been dissolved. The territory they had controlled would soon be claimed by some other noble house.

As for Anriette herself, she had been hurriedly executed the very next day after the situation had become clear.

“I guess the House of Linkvist *will* want to take some kind of revenge,” said Anriette. “After all, my aunt and uncle are used to their glamorous lives in the marquisate. It’s gonna be tough for them. Not that I care.”

“You make it sound like it’s not your problem.” Allen grinned as he looked at the girl who should have been dead. “It’s gonna be tough for you too.”

Anriette seemed unconcerned. Allen had to admit she had a way of making

things fall in her favor when she put her mind to it, even when it came to dying. No, she wasn't a ghost or a fake. In fact, it was the fake who had been executed. More accurately, an already dead body had been substituted for Anriette. That had constituted her execution, and she'd subsequently been banished from the empire.

There was a good reason for all of this related to the matter of who was responsible for the incident. Since Curtis was the adopted son of the House of Linkvist, Anriette, as the house's head, had to take responsibility. It seemed the empire really had intended to execute her...but then something had happened—what the others chose to interpret as Allen picking a fight with the imperial family and the House of Linkvist.

Nevertheless, she had to take *some* blame. That was why she was banished, but her aunt and uncle had no idea about that. They believed she really had been executed. Letting them know the truth would cause too much trouble. Anriette's "execution" allowed the empire to do away with her bothersome aunt and uncle and prevent any future trouble. After everything they'd brought about, it was the least they deserved. Their hangers-on would be affected too, but Allen couldn't bring himself to care.

"All it means is that I'm just plain old Anriette now. That's no skin off my nose. I'm not the only one in that position."

"Yeah, I guess I'm a person without a past too," said Allen.

"Are you hoping to ingratiate yourself to Allen by saying things like that, Lady Anriette?" asked Riese.

"Oh, you noticed? That's my plan of attack, yes. And there's no need to call me 'Lady' anymore."

"You *are* a former marquis," said Mylène.

"What do her skills as a marquis have to do with this?" asked Noel.

"Identifying and capturing a suitable partner is an essential skill for a noble to have," Anriette explained.

"Ah, noble marriages. Come to think of it, didn't Curtis say he wanted to marry you so he could become emperor? Is that sort of thing...really okay with

nobles?”

“Oh...” said Anriette. “Yeah, I’d have to say it is.”

“That’s right,” said Riese. “It isn’t that rare. In fact, it’s commonplace. If one’s blood isn’t strong enough, one can supplement it with talent, and if one isn’t talented enough, one can supplement it with blood. If both are lacking, then add even stronger blood. It’s an obvious idea for nobles, let alone royals.”

“You too, Riese?”

“Since I’m a *former* princess, I’m in a more typical situation,” said Riese. “Besides, I already have a husband lined up.”

Allen almost felt Riese looking at him, but it must have been his imagination. He was a man without a past or a nation. The current conversation couldn’t have anything to do with him. As he looked out of the window, he thought he heard someone let out an exasperated sigh, but again, it didn’t concern him.

“Being a noble sounds more stressful than I thought,” said Noel.

“There’s a lot of responsibility that comes with it, for sure,” Anriette agreed. “But if it’s *that* stressful, you can always abdicate. If you choose not to, then it’s only fair that you accept the responsibility.”

“You can really give up your title just like that?”

Allen glanced at Noel. Her distress was clear. She must have been thinking about becoming the Elven Queen.

“Even if you chose to do that, they’d still treat you as a fellow elf,” said Anriette. “They said as much, didn’t they? They understand what a huge responsibility being their monarch is...although if you ever had children, they’d probably try to encourage them to become king or queen too.”

“Children?” Noel sighed. “I guess that’s not in store for me. I can’t even imagine it.”

Silence followed. Sensing something had happened, Allen looked around and saw everyone staring at Noel suspiciously.

Noel recoiled. “What?!”

“If you’re willing to go *that* far, you’ve got this in the bag if we’re not careful,” said Anriette.

“What? What are you implying?!”

“I get it,” said Mylène.

“Oh, *this* is the one thing you’re not all vague about?!” said Noel.

“I mean, you always seem to be sitting directly opposite Allen,” said Anriette. “Just like you are now.”

Allen was settled in the carriage’s far left corner, facing the direction the carriage was traveling in. Riese sat to his right, Mylène sat opposite her, and Anriette was next to Mylène. Furthermore, this was one of the empire’s high-speed carriages. A normal one would have taken over two months to reach Laurus, so they’d borrowed this as a parting gift for Anriette. They would change carriages in Laurus, where their current ride would be recovered by someone or other. In short, there was no need for them to worry about anything; they could afford to spend their time on silly conversations.

“That’s true,” said Riese. “You *do* often sit opposite Allen. You did so when we came to the empire and when we traveled to the imperial capital...”

“Whaaat?! That’s just a coincidence!”

“Sure it is,” Mylène replied.

“Why are you agreeing with them?!”

The argument was starting to get pretty loud, but Allen couldn’t complain.

“Why do you look so pleased with yourself, Allen?” asked Anriette.

“Huh? Oh, I was thinking about what the point of all this is. I guess I *did* get something out of it after all.”

He meant it—the trip had made him remember the reason he’d tried to help people to begin with: that he didn’t need any sophisticated reasons for doing it. That thinking too hard about things only clouded his mind, and there was no need to think so hard about helping people. He did it because he wanted to, because it was the obvious thing to do. Suddenly, Allen realized that everyone was looking at him with disgust.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Noel.

“Got something out of it?” said Riese.

“You mean Anriette?” said Noel.

“What is she, property?” said Mylène.

“I don’t appreciate being talked about like I’m an object,” Anriette stated.

“What? That’s not what I meant at all,” he answered. “Anyway, after everything that’s happened, I’m exhausted. Maybe I can finally find a place I can live peacefully now.”

“To be honest, I think you’re always going to struggle with that so long as you’re the way you are,” said Riese.

“Yeah, it’s hopeless,” Noel agreed.

“Impossible,” Mylène added.

“You’ll obviously end up sticking your nose in something else before long,” Anriette told him.

“Oh, please!” said Allen. “I’ll find my promised land next time. You’ll see!”

He meant it, but the others simply looked at him patronizingly, as if to say, *Yeah, that would be nice, wouldn’t it?*

“How rude,” he muttered as he looked out of the window.

The imperial capital had disappeared from view. Now only vast empty plains could be seen. The sky was the same clear blue it had been on their journey to the empire. Allen was serious about finding a place where he could live in peace, but he still had to wonder what was coming next.

He sighed as if complaining to the sky itself.

## A Rare Break

“You really are useful to have around, you know.”

Allen was preparing supper. He already knew who the voice belonged to, but still, without stopping what he was doing, he looked over his shoulder to see Anriette standing there. He sighed at the sight of her still-damp hair.

“Out already? I swear you bathe like a bird.”

“Well, I *did* have wings once upon a time. I don’t think I ever looked like a bird, though.”

“I wasn’t talking about your appearance. I meant that you hardly spend any time in the bath.”

It had only been five minutes ago that she and the others had gone to bathe. That was fast, even for a season when it wasn’t necessary to warm up. Allen himself didn’t tend to bathe for long, but it seemed like a missed opportunity not to relax a *little* longer.

“Oh, that? What do you expect? This is all new to me. You can’t expect me to get used to it in such a short time.”

“Knowing you, I guess that makes sense.”

An eavesdropper would probably assume they didn’t bathe in the empire. But Anriette was talking about her past as a disciple, and the “short time” referred to the fifteen years she had spent in this world. Allen didn’t know how long she’d been a disciple for, but he knew it had been a long time.

“I guess you’ll have to figure out the appeal of bathing for yourself,” he replied. “I won’t bug you about it, but I think you’d enjoy staying in there a little longer. For one thing, it’s the only time you get to be alone with the other girls and talk about whatever you talk about.”

“Maybe that’s necessary sometimes, but not every day. Besides, why bring it up now after we’ve already spent so much time together? That’s another

reason it's unnecessary."

"Is that right?"

"That's right."

If she insisted, he'd have to take her word for it as the only male of the group. It *was* true that some time had passed since they'd departed the empire. They would still need double that to make it back to the kingdom, and most of that time would be spent in the narrow confines of the carriage.

"I guess I was a little late to say what I said too, though," said Anriette.

"Oh, that's what you meant about me being convenient to have around?"

"What else would I be talking about in the current situation? Trust me, I know you can do a lot of other things too. But I never knew traveling could be such a comfortable experience."

Allen shrugged. He knew what she meant. She'd gotten used to traveling with the amenities he provided, including hot baths. He didn't think it was that big of a contribution; there were other things that made the journey a comfortable one. "I think the carriage plays a big role in that," he told her.

Since the carriage could keep moving continuously, they naturally spent much more time inside it. Had the carriage been uncomfortable, the other creature comforts would have had little impact. Allen wasn't sure he could do anything that would make the journey more comfortable than the carriage already did. Since it was an imperial invention, he supposed that made the empire itself the biggest contributor to their comfortable journey.

"You think so?" said Anriette. "From what I've heard, you were traveling just as comfortably before ever coming to the empire."

"So that's what you've been talking about," said Allen.

"We talked about a lot of things. Things you're too modest to let us talk about around you."

"I don't think I'm all that modest," Allen replied. He did what he could, just like anyone else. He just didn't think it was right to boast because he happened to be able to do more than most people. "You know, no good deed goes



unrewarded. What more reason do you need to help someone than because you can?"

"Wow, you've changed a little."

"Oh? I don't think so."

"Maybe 'changed' isn't the right word. You've gone back to how you used to be."

"Oh, if that's what you mean...yeah, I guess you're right. Nothing major, though." Allen's hands stopped moving. He returned his gaze to them and thought for a second, then looked back over his shoulder. "How long do you think the others will be?"

"As long as they usually are, I guess? They seem pretty chilled out. They'll probably be chatting away for a while yet."

"As the only male here, I can't help but wonder what they're talking about. And feel kinda scared about it."

"They're just killing time like always. It's nothing serious. Well, I guess it might be, depending on who overheard them."

"Now what's *that* supposed to mean?"

Judging by Anriette's demeanor, it didn't mean much of anything. She was just saying whatever came to mind. Allen smiled as he looked in the direction of the improvised bathing area he had created. If she was right, it would be a while before the others returned; enough time to add another item to the meal. He peered toward the bath, wondering what they could be talking about.

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Riese sighed with pleasure at the soothing heat of the water, sinking down along the wall behind her as she felt the tension escape her body. This never felt any less blissful, no matter how many times she experienced it.

"Allen really can do it all, can't he?" said Noel.

Riese looked up and saw that night was falling. In her old life, she never would have imagined she could enjoy a hot bath under the open sky like this. Allen really *could* do it all.

“I almost feel like life will be harder once we get back home,” said Mylène.

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Riese nodded. They wouldn’t be able to enjoy the incredible comfort of the empire-made carriage or the freedom of outdoor bathing once they returned to city life. After such a long journey, it would probably take some time to adapt to their old lives.

“Maybe you should take after Anriette,” said Mylène.

“In what way?” asked Noel.

“More than one, I guess,” Mylène replied.

Riese smiled at the exchange. She looked behind her in the direction she imagined Allen and Anriette were. A great boulder blocked her view, but she felt like she could easily imagine the kind of conversation the two of them must have been having.

She’d be lying if she said that didn’t make her feel strange, but she set those feelings aside. Allen’s time with Anriette seemed both necessary and valuable. She wasn’t sure if he realized it himself, but whenever he talked to Anriette, all the tension seemed to vanish from him. There was something between them that made Allen let down his guard around her. Again, she couldn’t say that didn’t make her feel the slightest bit jealous, but that was her problem. For now, all she could do was keep out of it and hope that one day he would have the same reaction to her.

She tried to think about something else. “There’s something I must do before I go back to my old life, anyway. And I suspect the outcome may make things somewhat difficult.”

“Oh... Beatrice, right?” Noel smirked and shot Riese a pitying look.

“Will she be angry?” asked Mylène.

Riese thought about how long it had been since they’d left the kingdom and the situation they’d gotten wrapped up in. “Almost certainly,” she replied.

Beatrice might have granted Riese permission to go to the empire, but there was no way she’d ever expected her to be gone this long. There would be no use protesting that they’d gotten mixed up in unexpected trouble. Beatrice

would quickly go from worry to anger once she found out what had happened.

“I’ll just have to face the music,” said Riese. “I think this was worth it, anyway.”

She had to admit it hadn’t been strictly necessary. She hadn’t been much help at all; it wouldn’t have changed much if she’d just heard about it after the fact. But she felt that there was some merit to having seen everything firsthand.

“I have to report what’s happened, anyway,” Riese continued. “The kingdom must be prepared for any outcome.”

The kingdom was already on its guard, but the chance of some kind of conflict breaking out had just increased significantly. At the very least, the chance of all of this ending without a drop of blood being spilled seemed low. Although the initial confusion in the empire would make an attack unlikely, continued confusion would lead to unrest. The empire’s territory was wide and its population vast. If even some small part of its population unilaterally moved to attack the kingdom, the kingdom might not be equipped to respond. Advance preparation was a must.

“If worst comes to worst, we might have to enlist the cooperation of the Church,” said Riese.

The mention provoked an odd expression from Noel; nothing so strong as hatred, but certainly not a positive feeling. “The Church?” she asked.

“Do you have history with them?” asked Riese.

“Not exactly, but I can’t say I’m too fond of them,” Noel replied. “Maybe it’s because I haven’t had much direct contact with them, but I always got a suspicious vibe.”

“I can kinda understand,” said Mylène.

Riese didn’t quite follow what Noel was getting at, but it seemed Mylène did; though she wore the same blank expression as always, she seemed to be recalling something.

“There’s no church in the Amazon village,” she began.

“Really?” said Riese. “But you receive Gifts, don’t you? How does that work?”

“Usually we visit the churches in the nearby towns of other races, though there are some Amazons who refuse to even step inside a church.”

“And not receive a Gift?” said Noel. “Maybe this is ignorant of me, but I can’t imagine an Amazon who doesn’t fight.”

“You’re not wrong,” said Mylène. “Amazons fight whether or not they have a Gift. But apparently there’s a way of fighting with the same strength even without one. You see...”

Riese had always thought Amazons were much like humans, but as Mylène explained, she got a different impression. If what Mylène said was true, they hadn’t always had Gifts but had at some point acquired them. Yet receiving Gifts was supposed to require a church.

Even Mylène didn’t seem to understand the details of how this was possible. “Amazon tribes are divided into different villages. The other villages might be friends or enemies, depending on circumstances.”

“So it’s not just a matter of groups of them living in different places,” said Noel. “It’s more like a whole bunch of little countries.”

“Something like that,” said Mylène. “So Amazons don’t really see those from another tribe as belonging to the same race. Whenever I went to another tribe’s village, I never felt too welcome. Even in the friendly ones.”

“Ah. So that’s why,” said Noel.

Riese understood what she was alluding to—why Mylène never seemed interested in returning to her people. Having heard how different Amazon society was from those of the other races, Riese assumed that city life in all its complexity must have been uncomfortable for her. But perhaps she knew that there was no point returning to be among her fellow Amazons.

“So you don’t want to go back to where you used to live?” asked Riese.

“There’s no point even considering it,” said Mylène. “There’s nobody there anymore. I couldn’t survive by myself. I *would* like to visit the site where everyone was killed, though.”

“Their graves?” said Noel.

“Amazons don’t build graves. We offer our prayers on the spot where they died. I don’t know exactly where it happened, but I’d like to offer my prayers where the village used to be. I don’t know if they’ll be too pleased to receive the prayers of someone who couldn’t do anything to help them, though.”

Riese was surprised to hear Mylène talk at such length. She’d clearly been thinking about this a long time. She talked as though she simply hoped the opportunity would arise some day, but her desire was palpable.

“I see,” said Riese. “Well, Allen still hasn’t found the place he’s looking for. Maybe he’ll head there soon?”

“That would be nice.” Mylène nodded solemnly.

“Come to think of it,” said Riese, “have you decided what you’re going to do about becoming Elven Queen yet, Noel?”

Noel glowered. It seemed that wasn’t a topic she wanted to discuss. Riese understood, but she felt like she had a right to ask. She continued to stare into Noel’s eyes. Mylène, too, looked at her for an answer.

Noel sighed in resignation. “Yeah. I’m gonna put it off.”

“Put it off?” said Riese. She wouldn’t have been surprised by Noel either accepting or refusing the position, but stalling was the one thing she hadn’t expected.

Noel seemed to know it was unlike her too; she averted her gaze as she offered an explanation. “It’s hard to grasp this, even for me, but I *am* going to live several times longer than all of you. So there’s really no need for me to come to a decision anytime soon. I think it makes more sense to think about it after all of you are gone.”

Riese blinked with surprise several times as Noel explained, but in the end, it sounded true to who Noel was. Whatever she chose now, she would probably regret it. But by continuing with her current life, she could prepare herself until she felt she was ready to be queen.

“So after you’ve cared for us on our deathbeds, you’ll take the children you had with Allen and head to the Elven Forest?” asked Mylène.

“What makes you think *that’s* gonna happen?!” Noel replied.

From her blank expression, Riese couldn’t tell if Mylène was joking, but seeing Noel’s displeasure, she couldn’t help but twist the knife. “You know, I bet the children you two have will be amazing.”

“Yeah,” said Mylène. “You’re both so carefree.”

“Exactly!” said Riese. “They’ll be performing incredible feats constantly.”

“Things that even a monarch couldn’t do,” said Mylène.

Noel glared at Riese, and she got the sense that they’d gone too far.

“And what about *you*?” said Noel. “You think we don’t know why you took the role of duchess?”

That was a low blow. Even though she was a mere figurehead, a lot of thinking had gone into that decision. Riese had accepted because she’d thought it was the best thing for everyone. She’d left the real power to Beatrice so that she would be free to live as she pleased—and because she would likely only cause problems if she tried to rule herself.

And, no, she couldn’t deny that she had other, more personal motivations too. She didn’t want Allen to lose access to a place that held a lot of memories for him. She wanted to share the Westfeldt name with him, even if it was in a roundabout way. She thought that Allen would feel less opposed to *her* inheriting his former birthright than some other person.

Hurt, she glared at Noel. “I won’t deny it. But does that change anything?”

Noel looked guilty. “Jeez, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re going to make me feel bad. Anyway, I don’t know what else to do,” Riese sighed. Now she’d admitted it. She’d tried many approaches and had gotten nowhere with Allen. She’d love for someone, *anyone*, to tell her what to do.

“You’ve already got it in the bag,” said Mylène.

“No, that’s ridiculous...” said Riese.

“I guess it’s possible that you’d miss your chance if you dillydally too much,”

said Mylène. “Especially if he ends up getting drunk.”

“You got that right,” Noel said unthinkingly.

Riese and Mylène stared at her.

“What makes you think I meant by *me?!?*” she cried.

Riese smiled.





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Allen looked in the direction of the voices he heard from the bath. They were getting pretty rowdy, but he supposed everyone being in high spirits was a good thing.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “it’s still taking me much longer than usual to regain my power. Any idea why?”

Anriette paused in thought, then nodded in recollection. “It’s probably psychological.”

“Meaning?”

“Like I told you before, your powers are pretty much natural laws. They can’t just get weaker.”

“But I *have* gotten weaker.”

“Well, you’re still human. Your body can’t take endless abuse. Overuse your powers and they *will* get weaker for a time. It’s your body forcing you to go easy on it. But that shouldn’t be something that drags on for a long time—you just need to rest a little. So what you’re talking about must be something else. I think you’ve placed limits on yourself without realizing it.”

“Huh. I see.”

Allen had never avoided using his powers, but he couldn’t deny it had occurred to him more than once that he wouldn’t get wrapped up in so much trouble if he didn’t have them. He’d have an easier life. It didn’t seem too far-fetched that, after everything that had happened, he’d unconsciously tried to set limits on his own ability to use them.

“But they *are* coming back, just slowly,” he mused. “If I was really doing this to myself unconsciously, wouldn’t you expect them not to regenerate at all?”

“Well, God gave you the *right* to use those powers, but you’re not the *owner* of them. Maybe you just aren’t strong enough to hold them back. Or maybe your psychology is slowly changing.”

“Hmm.”

They both seemed like reasonable theories. Lately, Allen had felt like his powers were in the process of returning to normal. If that was proof of some change within him, that he'd begun to proactively wield them, that made sense.

"I guess there's no need to think about it too deeply, huh?"

"Not really. I doubt there's anyone out there who could beat you even when you're not at your best, anyway."

"I dunno. I'm not good at *everything*. It might give some enemies the edge over me. Like, demons have all sorts of strange powers, right?"

"True, the powers they use are drawn from the very potential of humans themselves. Considering that humans can sometimes perform feats that even the world itself didn't expect...yeah, a demon's powers might even outstrip yours. But no, because we have a Champion for times like that."

"Akira, you mean?" Allen wondered what exactly the Champion was, anyway. He knew it was different from being a hero, but he didn't understand how.

"Heroes and the Champion both act for the sake of mankind. But heroes are born from the wishes of the people. The Champion is created by the world itself. In the end, there's not much of a difference, but Champions *do* tend to act in the interests of the world rather than the people."

"And what does that have to do with what you were saying before?"

"The Champion's power increases when there's a threat to the world. If there were a demon whose powers outstripped yours, the Champion would destroy it with even greater power. You'd never even have to fight it. No, it's regular people you have to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"The world probably won't recognize regular people as a threat, no matter how much power they acquire. If they were planning to do evil, the world would notice in time, but it *would* take time. And there's a small chance they might run into you in that time."

"I see."

That made plenty of sense to Allen. He was no stranger to the idea that

regular people could be more fearsome than demons. Still, he didn't resent them; there were plenty of good people too. He'd long since realized that.

"That's enough serious talk for now," said Allen.

"Yeah," said Anriette. "Seems like they're done bathing. Looks like you're done too."

A rising chatter came from the direction of the bath. They would soon be back. As Anriette had observed, Allen had finished preparing their meal. This wasn't a conversation to continue in front of them. They'd only been passing the time, anyway. He prepared to greet Riese, Noel, and Mylène as they returned.

## Afterword

Hi there! This is Shin Kouduki. Whether you're back from the previous volume or joining us for the first time, I'd like to thank you for picking up this book. Fancy that, we're already on volume 4! And it's all thanks to all of your support. Thank you all so much.

By the by, the fifth volume is already set for release. I'll do my very best to make sure it's one you'll all enjoy, so I'd be delighted if you pick that one up too!

It's also thanks to all of you that the first volume of the manga was released a few weeks back. And what's more, it was almost immediately reprinted! Thank you all so much for the incredible first-day sales! I don't know how long this crazy ride will keep going, but I hope you'll keep supporting me as I do my best to entertain you!

As always, I have to extend my thanks to a number of people.

Thanks to my editors S and F, who were a tremendous help yet again. Here's to our continued relationship!

Thanks to my illustrator, Chocoan, for producing another batch of beautiful illustrations for this volume. Lately, I feel like half of the time I'm writing, it's because I want to see how you'll illustrate it! Can I convince you to draw even more illustrations for the next volume if I give you half of my royalties, or something? No? Oh well...

Thanks again to all the proofreaders, designers, management, and everyone else involved in the publication of this volume.

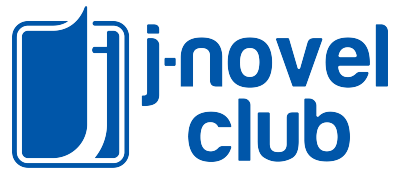
And above all, thanks to all my fans, supporters, and everyone who bought this book! I truly appreciate it.

With that, I'll take my leave! Here's hoping I see all of you again!









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The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases: Volume 4

by Shin Kouduki

Translated by bedi Edited by Tess Nanavati

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