



Shin
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Illustrator: Chocoan

The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases



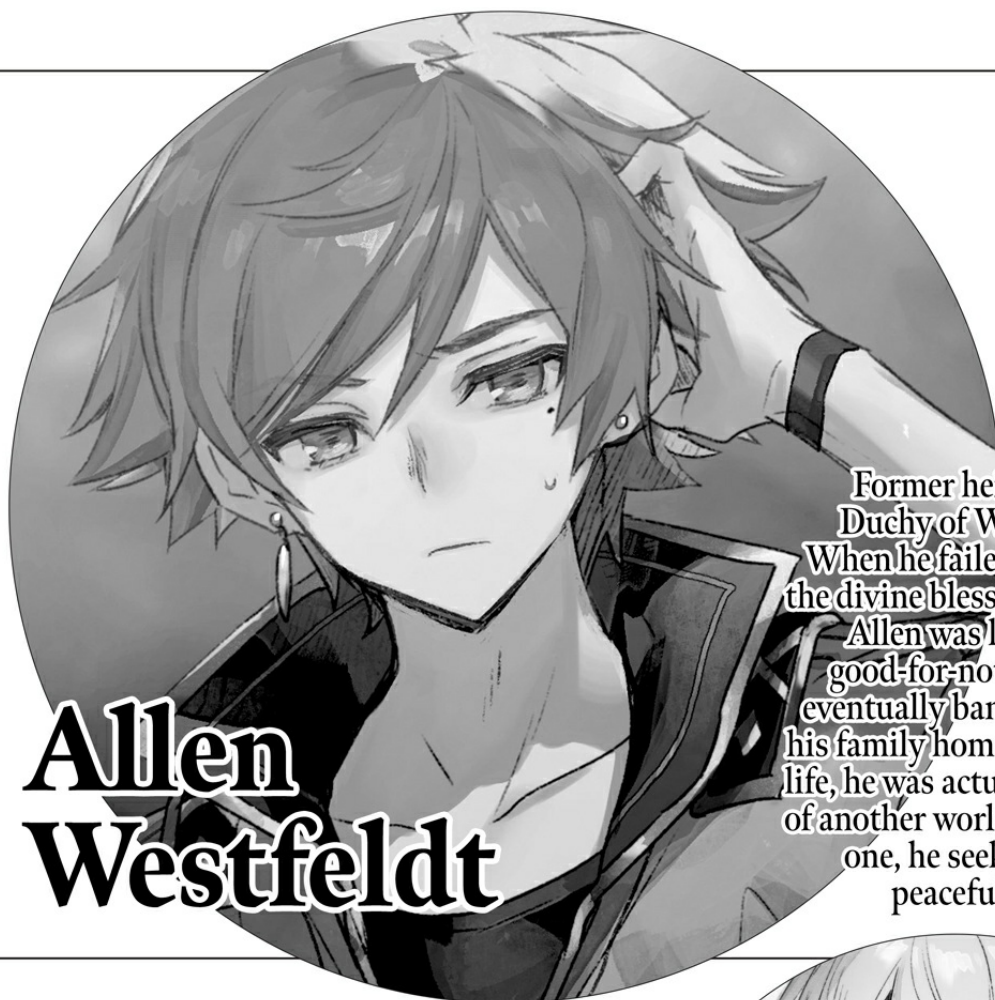
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**Allen
Westfeldt**

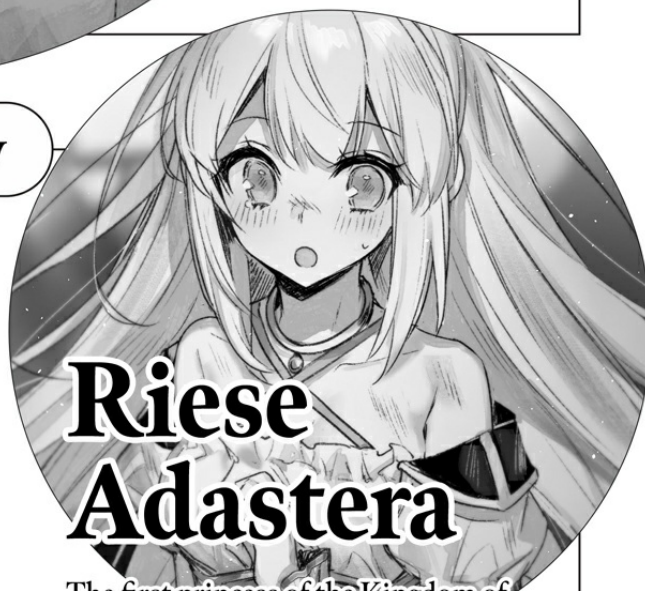
Former heir to the
Duchy of Westfeldt.
When he failed to receive
the divine blessing of a Gift,
Allen was labeled a
good-for-nothing and
eventually banished from
his family home. In his past
life, he was actually the hero
of another world, but in this
one, he seeks only a
peaceful life.

Adastera Royal Family



**Beatrice
Allereade**

Riese's personal guard and one of
the strongest warriors in the kingdom.
Her Chevalier Gift greatly strengthens
her defensive abilities. She's renowned
among adventurers as the "Silver Valkyrie."



**Riese
Adastera**

The first princess of the Kingdom of
Adastera and Allen's former betrothed.
Her Star Maiden Gift grants her a
variety of powers, including the
ability to heal wounds, for which she is
known as the saint.

Alfred Baverstam

The brother of the King of Adastera and Riese's uncle.
He renounced his birthright as second in line to the
throne, and his whereabouts are currently unknown.

House of Westfeldt



Craig Westfeldt

The Duke of Westfeldt and Allen's father. The pillar of the most warlike of the four great duchies, he rules over the land that borders the Demon Kingdom, including the lawless Frontier.



Brett Westfeldt

The heir to the Duchy of Westfeldt and Allen's younger brother. He regards all but himself and his father with contempt.



Akira Kazaragi

A girl from another world who was summoned three years ago to become this world's Champion, bearing a Gift of the same name. She lost to Allen when they battled and is currently traveling the land with a girl she rescued from a dragon.



Noel Leonhart

A first-class elf blacksmith who resides in the Frontier and Riese's friend. The dwarf who raised her was killed by a Fenrir.

Nadia Vendichs

The dog-eared beastfolk receptionist of the Adventurer's Guild. She has traveled from guild to guild for ten years.

Adventurer's Guild

Mylène Hagestat

An Amazon girl who was enslaved by a demon. After being freed by Allen, she now assists Noel at her smithy.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Prelude: The Opposite of Love Is Indifference](#)

[Busy at the Adventurer's Guild](#)

[The Former Hero Has a Realization](#)

[The Former Hero Embarks on a Carefree Journey](#)

[The Former Hero Arrives in the Peaceful Village](#)

[Meeting the Mayor](#)

[The Former Hero Explores the Outskirts](#)

[The Former Hero Observes the Festival Preparations](#)

[The Former Hero Observes the Festival of the Dead](#)

[A Reunion in the Dusk](#)

[An Exchange in the Dusk](#)

[The Former Hero Reveals the Dusk's Deception](#)

[The Former Hero Resolves the Happening in the Dusk](#)

[The Former Hero Laments His Lost Peace](#)

[Enter Madness](#)

[Rumors and Unrest](#)

[An Unforeseen Meeting](#)

[An Explosion of Malice](#)

[Echoes of Madness](#)

[Ceaseless Madness](#)

[Spreading Madness](#)

[Deepening Madness](#)

[Faltering Madness](#)

[Signs of Resistance](#)

[Will and Resolve](#)

[Depths of Darkness](#)

[Overflowing Darkness](#)

[The Depths of Hatred](#)

[The Former Hero Wishes to Live in Peace](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prelude: The Opposite of Love Is Indifference

The familiarity of the sight had told him it was a dream. The great, solemn building was so tall that even looking upward, one could not see what lay beyond it. As if swallowing them whole, it received a procession of visitors, their downturned faces betraying no hint of expression. All that could be gathered was that these people, too, were so tall that he had to crane his neck to observe them. Or rather, it wasn't that they were so large, but that he was so small.

Those were the days when the world had overflowed with happiness, and nobody had doubted that they would see the light of the following day. Brett had just turned three years old. It was the day of his mother's funeral. If he was being honest, he had to admit he had barely any memory of his mother—she had fallen ill immediately after he was born and had been bedridden ever since. Brett had mostly been cared for by wet nurses and saw his mother only a handful of times each year. In fact, it seemed that back then he had barely understood that she was his mother at all. She was simply a nameless person who lived in the manor. There was no reason he should have any reaction to the news of her death. To begin with, he still had little understanding of what death was. Thus he had little memory of the funeral.

He only had two other memories of the church—as in, the great building he watched from afar as people flowed inside rather than the institution. Strongest was the memory of seeing his father glaring resentfully at the statue of God that stood inside the holy building. He recalled that sight clearly to this day. While he hadn't understood it at the time—even now, he couldn't say he fully understood it—he knew the look on his father's face was one of unbridled anger and sadness. Even today, Brett would have been afraid to approach him in that state. Back then, he had been petrified. The last he remembered of that time was clinging to the person closest to him for support.



Though that person was barely taller than him, he stood by their father—the man nobody else dared to draw near—with a calm expression. Brett clearly remembered how he had admired that boy, his brother, who, although only a year older, had seemed more mature than even the adults. At the time, his brother was the person he was closest to in the world. The wet nurse might have cared for him, but even she never relaxed her professional demeanor; she was just another servant. He rarely saw his father around the manor, and when he did, the man gave off an aura that made him unapproachable. His brother was the only person who truly associated with him.

Still, their mother's funeral took place not long after Brett was first granted some degree of freedom to move about the estates as he pleased. While the two had not actually spent much time together, the kind and protective manner with which his older brother regarded him left a deep impression on Brett. This short time would be the first and last that they were able to spend a peaceful moment together. It was not long after the funeral that his father, in a sudden and drastic change to his personality, began to take a passionate interest in the upbringing of his older son, instructing him in strength and wisdom with the supposed goal of making him a fitting heir to the duchy. Brett's brother responded well to this tutelage.

That his father's true motives lay elsewhere was clear now, but nevertheless, that time was when his father's temperament had seemed at its best. Whenever the elder son responded to his father's instruction, the duke flashed a smile so broad that it verged on madness. This reached its peak on his brother's fifth birthday, the day of the stat appraisal, when his father discovered that his training had produced unprecedented stats in the boy. Brett remembered his father's mad, elated refrain of "That's my boy!" like it was yesterday.

Brett supposed the memory remained so clear in his mind because of his own conviction that, just one year later, he was sure to receive the same treatment. Ever since his father had begun instructing his brother, Brett had largely been left to his own devices. Although he was not completely ignored and was himself slowly instructed by a tutor, he only ever caught sight of his father through the window as he watched him training his older brother. While his

brother would pay him a visit from time to time, the severity of his father's training meant that these visits were fleeting—it was nothing like the way he had cared for Brett before. Nevertheless, Brett assumed that this, too, would only need to be endured for another year. Then it would be time for his own stat appraisal and he would surely join his brother to receive elite training.

Brett had a purehearted faith in the future he envisioned, but it was not to be. At his stat appraisal, Brett was found to be Level 0. His Luck stat was at Level 2, but all others were at Level 1. These were nothing to sniff at—based on the average person, they were worthy of praise. But Brett had not been born into an average family. In the warlike House of Westfeldt, it was expected that both Strength and Endurance would be at Level 2, and it wasn't rare for one or the other to be Level 3. This was, after all, why they were the only house trusted by the royal family to deal with demonkind.

"Hmph. I cannot say I didn't expect this, but you really *were* a good-for-nothing," his father had said as he regarded him with a cold gaze, a harsh contrast to the elation Brett had anticipated.

Indeed, it was Brett who had first been called a good-for-nothing. Regardless of how praiseworthy his stats were by any normal standard, in the House of Westfeldt, he was treated as a remedial student, and completely ignored by his father. Nevertheless, Brett refused to be dissuaded and, after a year of great effort, managed to reach Level 1—the same as his brother, though in terms of stats, his brother still outshone him. And yet, despite his father still regarding him in a manner that made it clear he saw him as nothing more than an eyesore, bit by bit, the atmosphere in the family began to change.

Brett's brother's level never increased. Even though reaching Level 2 was said to take two years, his brother was already at Level 1 at the time of his first stat appraisal, which was unprecedented, and had since been a recipient of what could be considered excessive training from his father. It was hardly unreasonable to expect correspondingly superlative results, but after one, even two years, his brother's level did not budge. The smile vanished from his father's face, only to return another year later when Brett, rather than his brother, was the first to reach Level 2. Brett clearly recalled the words his father had uttered upon learning of this—he had heard them before.

“That’s my boy!”

Brett could never forget the smile on his father’s face as he said those words. He had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. True, he had made great efforts to win his father’s favor, but it had been in the hope that all three of them—he, his brother, and his father—could enjoy their future together, to receive their father’s wisdom and training together. While it was important that he was no longer regarded as a good-for-nothing, he had never intended to force that designation on his brother or to see his father lose all interest in the older son. Nevertheless, regardless of his expectations or intentions, he could not prevent what had already come to pass—that he and his brother had switched places in their father’s eyes.

At that point, his father gave up on Brett’s brother. However, he did not simply begin to treat Brett with the same zeal once reserved for the eldest son. Looking back on it, Brett realized this was the moment when his father had given up on achieving his goals under the House of Westfeldt’s power alone. Although Brett took his brother’s place in education and training, he was unable to show results that compared to his brother’s. After all the times he had watched his brother’s training from the window, he understood that he was still inferior to his brother in many regards. Brett’s level might have exceeded his brother’s, but he was still clearly outpaced by his older sibling when it came to wisdom, strength, and overall ability. In spite of being Level 2, his stats were still inferior to the other boy’s—a fact that he brought to the attention of both his father and brother. Both refused to accept it.

When was it that he had finally given up? When had the purpose of his training—which had initially served merely to show that no matter how hard he tried, he could never surpass his brother—changed? When had he gone from frustration with his brother, who refused to refute the accusations that he was a good-for-nothing even as Brett insisted he had the strength to do so, to finally beginning to call the other boy a good-for-nothing himself? He couldn’t recall. All he remembered was the day that everything had finally ended and they had parted ways for good.

It was the day before the first princess’s tenth birthday, just before the annulment of her betrothal to his brother, when his status as a good-for-

nothing was to be made public. Brett didn't remember why he had headed to his brother's room that day. Perhaps it was simply to poke fun at him; he couldn't imagine any other reason he would visit him. However, his brother had remained as nonchalant as usual. All Brett remembered was the look of slight pity on his face.

He must have said something, and his brother had replied, "Yeah, knowing you, I'm sure you'll be fine. But...I know, just in case something goes wrong..."

Then Brett woke up.

"Tch." He clicked his tongue in response to the indescribable unease he was suddenly beset by. He felt as though something dear to him had been trampled underfoot and dirtied. Surely it was just his imagination. He clearly remembered what he had been dreaming about, but the contents of his dream now seemed like a distant concern.

In the dream, he had felt strangely positive toward that good-for-nothing; it must have been a product of his somnolent mind. While he wouldn't deny having once felt that way, it had only been because he was young and naive. His lack of understanding, his failure to even *try* to understand, had made him idolize that good-for-nothing as a brother. These days, he would never be so foolish.

"This doesn't merit another thought," he told himself. The good-for-nothing had already been banished and had likely fallen dead in a ditch somewhere. It was a waste of time to give any further consideration to the matter; he was already busy enough. "Hmph. You can't afford to disappoint father by wasting time on such trifles," he rebuked himself as he rose from his bed.

Indeed, he had already come so far. He wasn't the same person as back then. He had learned things he hadn't dreamed of knowing before, including this power...

Marionette: Funeral Procession.

A moment later, the door opened and a servant appeared.

"You called, my lord?" he said, bowing so deeply that he showed the crown of his head.

Brett snorted. "Prepare my garments. Knowing my father, he will already be awake."

"Understood, my lord," replied the servant with a nod. He immediately began changing Brett from his nightclothes into attire suitable for appearing before his father.

Next, the servant fixed Brett's hair. Again, Brett snorted. No matter how reverent the servant appeared to be, it was all a fabrication, not because he was a servant, but because he was a mere puppet produced by Brett's power. There was no real meaning behind this performance, but that didn't mean the act itself was pointless. It served as useful practice for what was to come. If all went according to plan, in the future, he would not need to use his power to be afforded the same reverence. None would ever regard him with pity or contempt again. His father would praise him from the bottom of his heart.

With a wave, Brett dismissed the servant, who had retreated to the edge of the room. He had no more need for him. After checking his appearance, he rose up. His father ought to be ready now. Going to see the duke meant heading toward the end of all this.

"No...toward a new beginning," he corrected himself.

The fruit of everything he'd accomplished thus far was itself the dawn of a new era. For the first time, his worth would be proved. Everything he'd worked for...

"I am not mistaken. I am no good-for-nothing. I support this house, this nation. *I* am the one!"

Brett walked as he muttered the same words he had uttered before, clenching his fist as usual. No, he was not mistaken. And even if he *had* erred...

"If you've erred, I will stop you."

Brett scoffed at the voice that echoed in his mind. With a heavy, trampling stride, he walked to where his father would receive him.

Busy at the Adventurer's Guild

The Adventurer's Guild—that is to say, the Rivera branch in the Duchy of Westfeldt, Kingdom of Adastera—was often a bustling place, and today more so than usual. In fact, this had been the case for the past several days. Put simply, the cause was a lack of staff. However, the solution was not as simple as merely increasing the number of employees. While hiring new workers and bringing in support from other branches had been presented as options, both were difficult at the moment.

Any appeals for support were particularly hopeless—this guild was far too physically remote from the other branches, being located as it was in a Frontier town. Officially, it wasn't recognized as a settlement, let alone a town, and didn't even have a name. The “Rivera branch of the Adventurer's Guild” was an entirely fabricated appellation—a temporary solution borne of the inconvenient reality that this town had no name for the Adventurer's Guild to take its own from, as was customary.

Besides, traveling to the next-closest guild to deliver an appeal for support would take ten days by horse-drawn carriage, and another ten for help to arrive, and that was in the best case. Considering the preparations and handovers that would have to be performed at the other guild, thirty days seemed more likely. Of course, all of this presumed that the closest guild had staff to spare. If not, the travel time would be even more of a burden.

Moreover, the other guilds were under no obligation to respond to a request for assistance, and their destination would be a Frontier town—a town that gossip had essentially branded “a penal colony.” What kind of people would happily come to help out at such a location?

The assortment of oddballs that currently staffed the Rivera Guild answered that question. What were the chances of finding such types in other towns? As a result, appeals for support were likely to result in failure, and attempts to hire new staff seemed similarly ill-fated. Any honest observer had to admit that the

local population was a motley bunch of troublemakers and rabble-rousers, each with their own complicated set of circumstances and skeletons in the closet. Hiring the best-dressed street urchin from any other town seemed preferable to employing any of these people. As overblown a statement as that may seem, the townspeople themselves would unanimously agree.

No, anyone who willingly came here would not be suitable as an Adventurer's Guild employee. Besides, the guild didn't simply hire people off the street. Its reputation was paramount, being responsible as it was for granting requests to those unpredictable rogues known as adventurers and ensuring that they were properly fulfilled. Any request granted to an adventurer who was clearly incapable of fulfilling it became the responsibility of the guild itself. As such, it had to be able to identify suitable adventurers for each job, and it was confidence in this ability that led the guild's clients to request their assistance in the first place. A guild that simply introduced clients to adventurers and refused all responsibility for what happened afterward would not be in business very long.

As a result, those who worked at the guild also had to be reliable and trustworthy. This was not to say that they had to be squeaky clean, simply that their positive traits had to outweigh whatever checkered pasts they might have. However, not only was it difficult to find such personnel, it was difficult to even properly appraise them. Until someone had actually completed the task, it was impossible to tell if they were trustworthy, and the guild could hardly afford to put people to work only to discover that they were wrong for the job.

Therefore, the guild did not hire regular people. Instead, it had a straightforward approach to increasing its staff: hiring ex-adventurers. It had enough contact with these people to judge whether they were trustworthy or not, the individuals in question were used to disputes with fellow adventurers, and if it came to it, they were capable of defending themselves, making them the perfect employees.

On the other hand, for most adventurers, retirement came in the form of death. This was a universal fact, regardless of rank. In fact, higher-ranked adventurers tended to die at greater rates, inclined as they were to take on more dangerous quests due to their talents and past achievements. Though the

guild took care to prevent this, they could never hope to avoid it entirely, as adventurers were naturally reckless. The majority were eventually killed, and those who weren't tended to be forced into retirement through the loss of limbs.

With few viable candidates, adventurer's guilds tended to be perpetually understaffed. As a result, they would sometimes employ adventurers on a temporary basis. Unfortunately, in this town, even that avenue was inaccessible since there were no trustworthy individuals to be found. Such people wouldn't even *come* to this town, let alone set up as adventurers there. This was all the more true given the reason for the staff shortage at this particular time.

"You know, I really wish you'd help us out," said Nadia as she panted, having flopped over on the receptionist desk.

"Didn't I just hear that nobody who comes to this town can be trusted?" replied an exasperated voice.

Looking up with displeasure, Nadia saw a blue-eyed, blue-haired young man wearing an expression that reflected his tone.



“Hmph. How mean. It wouldn’t hurt you any to help me out a little bit, would it?”

“Hey, you were the one complaining you’re short-staffed because there’s nobody hireable around these parts. I’m from around here, aren’t I? And I’m not even an adventurer, but I suppose in this situation you can’t afford to be too picky.”

“You’d be fine, Allen. If anyone complained, someone would be getting thrown right out of here!”

“Hey, you can’t do that. Let’s at least talk about it first.”

“I just don’t get you,” sighed Nadia.

In this situation, she was in the right. Nobody in the guild would object to Allen helping out. Even as a resident of the Frontier and nonadventurer to boot, everyone knew that Allen was trustworthy. Or rather, they knew that if the mood struck him, nobody could do much to stop him from doing anything he wanted. That he chose not to abuse that power effectively showed that he was the trustworthy sort.

“Besides, you and your friends are the reason we’re so busy to begin with,” said Nadia.

“What are you talking about? All we’ve done is exchange parts for cash and ask you to deal with the aftermath of monsters we already defeated.”

“That’s true. Or it would be if we were talking about everyday monsters,” she said with a stare that caused him to turn away self-consciously.

Allen might have been technically correct, but that was all. Any branch of the guild, even the main guild in the capital, would sympathize with Nadia’s point. After all, the materials he had brought in for trade were *dragon* parts. And from a very large dragon at that. Not just the first batch of scales, but blood, flesh, eyes, and finally talons, fangs, and even bones. Even the processing of a single scale was an ordeal, so to process everything Allen had brought would take an immeasurable length of time.

And that wasn’t even the extent of it. There was also the matter of the dragon

from which these parts had come. From the sheer quantity of parts Allen had brought along, it was easy to tell it had been a monstrously huge beast, probably some fifty meters long—a size that completely eclipsed any dragon that had been slain before. In addition, there was something in particular about the dragon that presented another problem: its red scales.

A red dragon over fifty meters in length. There was only one thing it could be. When Allen had first brought the scales, Nadia had wondered if it was possible but pretended not to notice since it could only mean trouble. But with the amount of parts Allen and his friends had now brought in, she could no longer bury her head in the sand: these parts belonged to the Crimson Dragonlord.

A legendary dragon said to be the closest to a god. Since it had not been sighted recently, it was said to have traveled to the ends of the earth, but it appeared that was not the case. Nadia was desperate to know where it had been, why they had fought it, and how they had managed to defeat it, but she couldn't ask—it was clear she would only be causing herself more trouble when she already had quite enough on her hands with what she saw before her eyes.

What made this troublesome was that she had no idea what value to assign to the materials. These were parts that had belonged to a dragon that had lived for ages. A dragon's power increased with age, and the value of materials taken from its body increased correspondingly. She had no idea how effective even its scales might be, let alone its teeth and claws. She couldn't afford to handle them poorly.

Until Nadia could understand the value of the materials, she couldn't possibly exchange money for them. While it was clear that they were easily superior to parts from the average dragon, the guild couldn't afford to overpay for them either. Still, there was no doubt that even at a minimum, these would fetch a grand sum.

She also thought she ought to reassess the scale that Allen had brought in before. Fortunately, she had not yet found a buyer for it—in fact, between appraising the parts, securing the funds to pay for them, and finding a buyer, she really had her hands full.

On top of that, Allen had also left the cleanup of another monster he had

defeated to the guild. True, this was one of the duties the guild undertook, but this particular monster posed yet another problem—nobody understood exactly what it was. At a glance, it appeared to be some kind of white wolf, but far larger and with fur of a different color. It was entirely feasible that it was some kind of subspecies.

Even appraisal-type Gifts had been unable to glean anything, which was one reason for the heightened commotion that had overtaken the guild: it demonstrated that the monster was a far more powerful being than they could have ever envisioned. Any other possibility (that it was somehow repelling their attempts at appraising it while dead, for instance) was unthinkable. Nadia wished she could interrogate Allen about how he had managed to defeat such a creature, but knew that this was exactly the kind of situation where nobody could much stop Allen from doing whatever he wanted to do—and unlike before, the entire guild now agreed on Allen’s strength.

Regardless, having been asked to clean up the monster, they had to do *something*, and that included the exchange of funds. In short, the matter demanded almost as much time and money from them as the parts believed to be from the Crimson Dragonlord, and at the very same time. It was unsurprising that the guild was so swamped, but Nadia wanted to cry out for assistance.

“And what’s with expecting me to handle my usual duties on top of being responsible for both of these other affairs? It’s like I’m being bullied!”

“Gotta be honest, I don’t have much sympathy for you there. You got yourself into this, didn’t you?”

“Ugh... I mean, you’re right, but...”

Nadia had been given the responsibility of handling all these matters as punishment for how she had conducted herself when Allen had first brought the dragon’s scale to the guild. Since reputation was paramount to the guild and their receptionist had cried out in response to the information she had received from a customer, this stood to seriously impugn their reputation. Fortunately, few people had been around at the time, but the guild couldn’t just let the matter slide.

Why hadn’t they fired Nadia outright? She assumed they must have sensed

something was up. The punishment handed down to her was halving her pay for the next half year and shouldering her with the sole responsibility for all the affairs of Allen and his party.

This meant that Nadia would deal with Allen's party every time they used the guild. At first, this hadn't seemed like a big deal. Even the garnishing of her wages could be made up for by taking a few jobs as an adventurer, and dealing with Allen's affairs each time he visited the guild wouldn't take up too much of her time. Even her coworkers had interpreted this as little more than a slap on the wrist...but now it seemed like the worst punishment possible.

Although at the time she had thought he was entirely focused on the Silver Valkyrie, she was sure now that the branch manager had known exactly what the dragon's scale was the moment he'd laid eyes on it. It seemed she still had a lot to learn—although judging by the face the manager had made when she'd reported the situation to him, he hadn't expected what Allen's party had brought in either.

"Hmph," said Nadia.

"Anyway, you're being punished, right?" said Allen. "Even if I *did* offer to help out at the guild, wouldn't I just be assigned to someone else?"

"Oh...that's right!" It seemed obvious now that she thought about it. Since she was being punished, even if they *did* add more staff, those people wouldn't be assigned to help her. Alleviating the guild's personnel deficit would likely help her indirectly, but she would still be tasked with handling everything related to the monster parts.

Realizing there was nothing she could do, Nadia hung her head. "Ugh...I understand. I guess I'll give up on trying to turn you into an adventurer now."

"Yeah, you do that," said Allen.

It was through such everyday exchanges with him that Nadia had found her vitality restored—or rather, simply going about her daily routine was perfect for getting back to her everyday state of mind...although she *had* thought that maybe if things went well, there was a chance Allen would give her a hand.

"Well, anyway. I still can't pay you for the materials," she told him.

“You really took a roundabout route back to the point,” said Allen with a smirk. He hadn’t come to the guild just to shoot the breeze. He wanted to know when he would be able to exchange the monster parts for money. However, due to the staff shortage as well as the sheer number of duties to be undertaken, the guild was still deep in the appraisal stage.

If word of the Crimson Dragonlord and the yet unidentified monster got out, any number of curious folk would surely come a-knocking, and the guild could not allow that to happen. Finding tight-lipped yet capable people through their channels would take time even if the task *hadn’t* been left to Nadia alone.

“To be honest, I’m not sure if I’ll even be done in a month,” she admitted.

And that was only for the appraisal itself. While Nadia was gathering funds at the same time, depending on the results of the appraisal, there was no guarantee she would be able to raise enough in a month. Then she had to consider how she would go about selling off all the materials, although she believed that by that point, the manager would probably be willing to provide some assistance. In summary, she’d be lucky if the whole affair was wrapped up faster than half a year.

“I guess there’s not much I can say other than good luck,” said Allen. “So, at least a month, huh? I hope I can get by until then.”

“Hm? Are you planning on going on a shopping spree or something?”

Allen might not have known it would take at least a month to receive payment, but he *had* already been given a hundred gold coins for the scale he’d turned in earlier. That itself was more money than Nadia had ever seen—her hands had shook as she’d handed it over. It wouldn’t be easy to use up so much money, and Allen was regularly slaying normal monsters and exchanging their parts for coin too. Unless he’d amassed some huge debt, it was unthinkable that he was already running out of funds.

“No, no, that’s not it. It’s just that we’re staying at a pretty expensive inn. You gave me a great payout for the scale, but it’s about to run out.”

“Ah...I see.”

Nadia was well aware of who Allen and the Silver Valkyrie were traveling with,

though she hadn't spoken of it out loud. Such a person would obviously require expensive lodgings.

"How long are you planning on staying at the inn, anyway?" she asked.

"Is that your way of telling me to get out of town? I guess keeping her here for another month might not be the best idea for a number of reasons."

"No, that's not what I meant! Just that if you're staying here for a long time, maybe buying a house would be a better idea?"

"A house?" Allen cocked his head. It wasn't such a strange question. In fact, it was commonplace in town. While their location on the Frontier meant that many people came and went, there was no small number of people who stayed for the long term, and there weren't enough inns to accommodate all of them, so many bought houses.

The surplus of land in the area meant that real estate was far cheaper than in other places, and there was enough demand to make one's money back the moment it was no longer needed. Compared to staying in an inn for a month, buying a house was a bargain, all the more so when compared to temporary lodgings as expensive as Allen's. Such a high-tier inn could only exist in this climate because it was built as a tax measure to serve very wealthy people.

"Then again, I suppose it's a no-go if you all simply can't stand being anywhere but in the lap of luxury," said Nadia.

"Not at all. Although if it did come to that, I guess I'd be the only one moving in. I wonder if I even have room to consider it, though? I'm not sure I have enough money for that either."

"No need to worry. The guild can handle it for you. We'll take it out of your payment for the monster parts, so you don't need to have the cash on hand. No matter what house you choose, there's no chance of going over budget."

Nadia hoped Allen would take her up on the offer—it meant fewer funds she would have to acquire directly. She looked at him with a pleading gaze, and he grinned vaguely in response—it seemed she had gotten through to him.

"Got it. I'll have a good think about it."

“Please do!” she responded with a broad smile. Allen only smirked more, but she didn’t mind. Her job was on the brink of getting much easier; there was no need to sweat the little things.

“Setting that aside...got anything else new to talk about?” he asked.

“Hmm, let’s see...”

This wasn’t the place to discuss the hot topics of the day. This was the guild, not a place to kill time. Nevertheless, Nadia stared off into the distance and began to think about what had happened lately. After all, this was part of her job too.

“Well, things in the forest seem to have settled down a lot. And I haven’t heard of anyone stirring up trouble anywhere else around here.”

“I see. I guess that’s good to hear,” said Allen with a shrug as if he didn’t particularly care, though Nadia knew that wasn’t the case; it was thanks to him that things in the forest had settled down to begin with, and not just because he’d defeated the unidentified monster. Allen had continued to settle any problem in the area as soon as it arose. Though he hadn’t admitted so himself, nor had Nadia requested it of him, it seemed that whenever she spoke of a monster in the area that the local adventurers were struggling to deal with, Allen would haul that creature’s corpse in the very next day.

Though Allen himself claimed it was just a coincidence, whether it was his intention or not, the result was that a continued peace had fallen upon the town and its surrounding regions. Hence making such small talk fell within the purview of her duties. It seemed that Allen was searching for something, so Nadia would provide him with information, and in return, he would deal with matters that the local adventurers could not. Though they had never spoken of it, they had reached an implicit agreement that kept things running smoothly. True, it would be much simpler for Allen to become an adventurer, but it was clear that she would make no headway on that front.

Suddenly, Nadia remembered something. “Oh, come to think of it...this is just a rumor, but I *did* hear that a famous person was spotted around here.”

“Famous?” Allen said quizzically.

“That’s right.” Nadia nodded.

This no doubt seemed like a matter of little importance to him, but Nadia had a reason for bringing it up. She didn’t know what it was that Allen was searching for, but it seemed like this might have something to do with it.

“Not only are they famous, but they were supposed to have died several years ago,” she continued.

Tales such as this made the rounds from time to time. Most were simple misunderstandings or malicious lies, but with this particular person, that was hard to imagine—they were the type who would see heads roll, literally, if the wrong words were said to them.

The man in question was Alfred Baverstam, formerly known as Alfred Adastera, a man who had once been second in line to the throne. Rather than waging war against his brother, he had abandoned his position, then climbed the ranks until he became vice captain of the First Knightly Order. He was the brother of the current king and uncle to the princess.

“I see... That’s interesting, for sure,” said Allen.

As expected, it seemed Nadia had piqued his curiosity. Hoping that she could be of some help, she began repeating the details of the story she had heard.

The Former Hero Has a Realization

Allen reflected on what he had just heard as he walked through the now familiar town. The fact that he wouldn't be receiving payment for a while yet was the most pressing issue. Although they had enough coins to last for the moment, his party was spending at a rate of at least three per day. The idea that they might not receive any funds for more than a month made Allen uneasy. In fact, he had paid a visit to the guild that day because his pockets were starting to feel empty. Even if the thought that he might have to stretch the money from the dragon's scale a little, or a lot further, had occurred to him, it was too late now.

Oh well. He would find a way to make it work somehow, whether that meant asking for an advance on payment or even buying a house, as Nadia had suggested. That might not be an ideal solution, but saving on the inn expenses alone would lighten the load a bit.

"Maybe I should get some advice on this?" he wondered aloud.

The thought that Riese and Beatrice would likely offer to cover the expenses themselves when they found they were about to run out of money presented something of a problem. In the first place, Allen had only paid for everything for simplicity's sake, with the idea that everything would be squared up later. While Beatrice and Riese were by no means penniless, when it came to having cash on hand, their pockets were hardly overflowing either. No matter how many valuable resources they had, spending money required them to first receive payment. Since that in itself was a bother, everyone had agreed to Allen paying for now.

As a result, should Beatrice and Riese agree to pay in the future, they could afford to do so for a while yet. That wasn't really an issue...but it didn't sit right with Allen. To an outside observer, it would look like he was allowing a lady to take care of him—a situation he would rather avoid.

"I guess buying a house makes more sense, but I dunno how long I'm gonna

be here for.”

He didn’t intend to stay in this town. It wasn’t a bad place—in fact, he thought it was pretty nice—but he got the sense that he’d never find a peaceful life so long as he remained here. Staying for a time was one thing, but taking up residence was unthinkable. And besides...

“I haven’t found a single clue since that day.”

He would head off to investigate whenever he heard talk of a monster that the local adventurers were having trouble with, but his efforts had turned up nothing. He had seen nothing else like the Fenrir and heard no information that seemed like a lead on the demons. That he had been able to do the guild a few favors in exchange for information was no bad thing, but the end result was the same as if he had received no information at all.

“Man, what should I do?” he muttered before suddenly realizing something. He tilted his head in thought as he stared off into the distance. “Wait, why am I doing this to begin with?”

He hadn’t abruptly lost his memory. The thought had only just occurred to him.

“I’m working a little too hard lately, aren’t I?”

He was supposed to have come here for a quiet life. All these battles with dragons and Fenrirs had been anything but. In fact, his time in the manor had been far more peaceful. True, he had said he would help Riese and Beatrice—he had no objection to *that*. But even so, hadn’t he been working too hard?

“Hmm. Besides, it doesn’t seem like they’re going to turn up any more clues, even with my help.”

Perhaps it was time to take a breather. The lack of leads had come at an unfortunate time, but at this point there was nothing wrong with lazing about at the inn for a week or so.

“I guess I can ask for input on the whole house thing while I’m at it. And I have another interesting matter to share too.”

Rumor had it that Riese’s uncle, who was supposed to be dead, had been

sighted. Allen didn't expect this had anything to do with the demons, but he couldn't afford to ignore it. Besides, the claim had made him somewhat curious.

Stories of the dead returning to life were not that rare. Of course, no such tale had ever been verified...but from what Allen had heard, the body of Riese's uncle had never been found. As a result, he was technically considered a missing person, despite the consensus that he was dead. As a result, there was some talk that he was still alive somewhere, quietly living his life.

Still, rumors were just that. If anyone had really seen him, surely he would have been found already. Even a royal who had given up his birthright was still a royal. He wouldn't simply be left to his own devices.

Even Nadia hadn't been able to say whether the current reports of his sightings were credible or not. He'd asked for interesting stories, and Nadia had given him one...plus she likely had some idea of exactly who he traveled with. Though she had never spoken of it, Allen had heard that Nadia originally lived in the royal capital. In that case, she probably recognized Riese, and had chosen to mention the story of her uncle to Allen.

"Part of me still isn't even sure I should mention this to Riese..."

According to Nadia, the man had been spotted in a village a seven-day carriage ride from town—not a journey to be taken lightly in pursuit of an interesting story. It would be cruel to bring it up only to pique Riese's curiosity. The way Beatrice had clammed up after speaking Alfred's name before also concerned Allen. If Riese held lingering feelings about her uncle's death, Allen couldn't be sure how she would respond. Perhaps it would be best to keep quiet...

"Wait, I'm being way overprotective, right?" He should have a little more faith in Riese.

Allen headed for the inn as he wondered how to present the many topics he had to discuss.

"What?! Really?!"

Riese had been even more interested than he'd expected. With their

investigations going nowhere lately, she and Beatrice often returned to the inn early. They had already been there when Allen arrived.

He didn't really know why he had chosen to lead with the story of her uncle. He *had* wanted to clear up the uncertain matter first, but that wasn't much of a reason. The moment he'd brought it up, however, Riese had reacted.

"It's just a bit of gossip. I didn't expect you to be so interested," said Allen.

"Oh...sorry," Riese replied.

"No big deal."

He had been genuinely surprised. It wasn't like Riese to respond so energetically, practically grabbing hold of him. In fact, he didn't think he'd *ever* seen her react like that before. Realizing there was clearly *something* afoot here, he glanced at Beatrice and saw a bemused look on her face. When she noticed Allen looking at her, she shrugged.

"Um, is it okay if I ask about this?" he said. He could hardly contain his curiosity, but there was clearly more to this story. If it wasn't the sort of thing they could comfortably discuss, it would be best to drop it there.

After thinking for a moment, Beatrice nodded. "Yes, so long as it won't be a bother to you. Well, I suppose it's a little late for that. Besides, I had intended to speak with you about this once you heard the rumors."

"You mean..."

"Yes. I've kept quiet until now, since I couldn't confirm whether you knew and it's an extremely personal matter. The truth is, we didn't come here only to investigate the general's assassination, but to look into this matter too. Knowing you, I'm sure you already suspected something."

"I didn't think you were telling me everything, that's for sure."

"I'm sorry, Allen," said Riese.

"No need to apologize. It's not like you lied. And like Beatrice said, it's personal. So..." he prompted them with a quizzical look.

Beatrice and Riese exchanged a glance, then Riese nodded. It seemed she would be the one to explain. Though Beatrice had described it as a personal

matter, based on her earlier response, it seemed clear that it was most personal to Riese.

Allen listened closely as she began to speak.

“Yes...I wasn’t quite sure what to say, but...the truth is, I had already heard the rumors about my uncle being sighted,” said Riese.

“Yeah, I’ve heard talk of it here and there too,” said Allen. “That his body was never found and he’s actually still alive somewhere.”

“Right. And in our investigations, we found that this town is the source of those rumors.”

“Oh yeah?”

That was the first Allen had heard of it, although... No, there was no reason Nadia should know everything about the matter just because she worked at the guild. But one possibility did come to his mind.

“So that’s why you two came here?”

“Pretty much,” said Beatrice. “Of course, investigating the General’s death was part of it too.”

“We wanted to find out whether the rumors were true,” said Riese.

“I see,” said Allen. Now he could understand why the two had been so diligent about covering every part of the town. If the General had truly been killed by a demon, they were unlikely to find any useful information there. It was likely they had been trying to pin down the source of the rumors—not that they hadn’t also been looking for clues about demons, of course. “So you found out the rumors are true?”

“No. It seems the rumor started quite some time ago,” said Riese. “We still haven’t been able to find out exactly who was responsible for it.”

“So you don’t even know if it’s true or not, huh?”

That was hardly surprising. Rumors being rumors, even if the pair were able to locate the party responsible, it still wouldn’t tell them if the claim was true. The person’s memories had probably already become hazy, and though they could insist on its veracity, that wouldn’t prove anything.

Through all their investigations, the most the women could hope to learn was whether the person in question was outright lying or not. Of course, Riese had to know this. There must have been some reason she had chosen to look into the matter regardless.

“Mind if I ask why you came to check out the story to begin with?” said Allen. “It can’t just be because he was a fellow royal. You said it’s personal.”

Since a missing royal was an official concern, an official, public investigation would have been not only sufficient, but the proper means of looking into the matter. There was no need for Riese and Beatrice to get directly involved, since there were others far more specialized at such tasks.

“The thing is...” Beatrice spluttered.

“No, it’s all right,” said Riese, silencing her. “I’ll explain it myself.”

As Allen had sensed, it seemed this was difficult for her to talk about. He didn’t particularly mind if Riese wanted to avoid the subject, but a serious glance from her stopped him from saying so. She clearly intended to attack the issue head-on, and he saw no reason to stop her.

“I saw a demon devour my uncle’s lower half with my own eyes,” she admitted, going on to explain that they had been returning from a gathering of nobles when, on a treacherous mountain pass, they had been attacked by a group of demons. There was no doubt her uncle had suffered a fatal injury. “I couldn’t do anything but watch...”

“You hadn’t acquired your healing abilities back then?”

“No, this happened beforehand.”

Allen could see how much the matter pained Riese, but it wasn’t her fault.

“I know deep down that there was nothing I could do, but...” She trailed off.

“Lady Riese understands that well, but it still came as a horrible shock,” Beatrice added. “Still, she tried her best to overcome it...and then she heard these rumors.”

“That her uncle is still alive?”

“Not just that, but that he is biding his time in the shadows, waiting to exact

his revenge on the royal family that treated him so cruelly.”

“Huh...”

This kind of thing happens all the time, Allen thought. Not the content of the story, but the spreading of irresponsible rumors. It wasn't rare for people to spread disparaging stories about others, whether by design or by accident. And besides...

“But that's unthinkable, right?” he asked. He had already heard that Riese's uncle had willingly abdicated his right to succession in order to avoid waging war against his brother. He'd never heard of him receiving any treatment that would cause him to seek revenge.

“Indeed, it normally would be. But there is another fact I can't ignore,” said Riese.

“The truth is, nobody actually confirmed that he was dead,” Beatrice clarified.

“Huh? Didn't Riese just say she saw it with her own eyes?”

“That's right,” Riese confirmed. “But right after, the ground crumbled and my uncle's body fell over the cliff. I wasn't the only one who witnessed it, and all agreed that he could never have survived such a wound, but...”

“There's still a slim chance?”

“Indeed.”

So that was why she wanted to confirm if the rumors were true. Having heard the whole story, Allen now understood just how personal it was for her. With official orders from the kingdom, she shouldn't have been spending time pursuing the matter. Not that Allen cared—he didn't feel like Riese and Beatrice had neglected their other duties, and even if they had, he wouldn't have cared anyway. Allen felt little sense of patriotism; between his country and these two women, he'd choose Riese and Beatrice every time.

As a result, the whole affair didn't bother him much, although that didn't mean he intended to simply ignore it. He still had the sense that there was something Riese and Beatrice weren't telling him. There were parts of the story that were...not glaring enough to be called contradictions, but that didn't seem

to add up. Again, though, he didn't plan to inquire about anything that they were not comfortable discussing. If there was one thing he wanted to ask...

"Hmm...well, if it has you so concerned, I guess there's nothing wrong with going to look into it, is there?"

"Hm?" said Riese.

"Like I mentioned, I heard that someone who looks like your uncle was seen in a village not far from here. It'd be easy to check it out yourselves, right?"

"Um...well...are you sure you don't mind?"

"I dunno why you think I'd mind, but I wouldn't have asked if I did. Uh...although, would you mind taking me with you? It's just what I need right now."

"What do you mean?"

"I've kinda been feeling overworked lately. A trip to this village seven days away would be the perfect chance for some rest and relaxation."

From what Allen had heard, few monsters had been appearing there, so all he'd have to do once they reached the village was search. It was the perfect way to take a breather. Although he'd intended to just laze around at the inn, a bunch of free time to think about how he had no money wouldn't be good for his mental health, so this endeavor had come up at the perfect time.

"You understand that this is a completely personal matter, don't you?" asked Riese.

"No problem. In fact, that just gives me all the more freedom to do as I please," he answered with a shrug.

Riese stared at Allen for a moment before giving him a look that was difficult to describe, though it contained elements of surprise, relief, and happiness.

"Understood." A smile finally returned to her face. "Let's have a nice trip, then."

"Yeah," said Allen, smiling back.

The Former Hero Embarks on a Carefree Journey

Allen looked up at the clear sky and squinted at the brightness of the sun's rays. The warm light and irregular vibrations that gently rocked his body made him sleepy, and he stifled a yawn.

"Feel free to go to sleep if you're tired," said Riese. "I'll be all right by myself now. And look, I have the perfect pillow for you."

Allen glanced sideways to see her wearing an impish grin and gently tapping her own thighs. Shrugging, he returned his gaze straight ahead. "Appreciate the offer, but I'd better not. That pillow's far too high-class for someone like me."

"Hmph. No need to be so modest..."

Allen smirked as he saw her disgruntled expression from the corner of his eye. He knew what Riese was trying to do, but he couldn't afford to let her.

"If I go to sleep while it's Beatrice's turn to rest, then what's the point of the shift system?" he said.

"Well, it makes sense for both of you to get some rest at once, doesn't it?"

"I guess that would have its benefits, but... I know, why don't you offer again once Beatrice is awake?"

"Now, I know you know I can't do that."

"Guess you'll just have to give up, then," said Allen, turning to her with a smirk.

Riese only puffed her cheeks in a display of dissatisfaction; she knew Allen was right, even if she couldn't admit it.

"Anyway, I know why you'd say that, and I'm happy to hear it. I bet Beatrice would be too. But in the end we all chose to come here for our own sakes. There's no need for you to worry about what you can do to help, you know."

"I suppose that's true..." Riese understood, but seemed bothered by it nonetheless. Allen could only smile at how her good nature sometimes made

her more difficult. She really didn't have anything to worry about.

The six days since the group had left the town had flown by. They had spent the time traveling by carriage, a fact that seemed to displease the resident princess. Or rather, she was displeased by being the only one with nothing to do.

Unfortunately, this was unavoidable. Beatrice, who on their previous journey had scarcely more duties than Riese, now found herself with an increased number of responsibilities. Though Allen had intended to maintain the same division of duties as on their prior journey, objections had arisen soon after their departure. Namely, that Allen was taking on far too much.

He certainly wasn't going to dispute those claims. Everything from preparing baths, to cooking, washing clothes, and keeping watch while the others slept had fallen on him. Just about the only thing he didn't do was drive the carriage. Still, this didn't seem excessive to him—it wasn't that much work for him, after all. Preparing a bath was a three-step procedure, and washing clothes, only one step. True, preparing food was not so simple, but unlike on their previous journey, they didn't need to hunt for food this time around, and keeping watch at night was easy when there were no monsters around.

On the other hand, Beatrice was constantly responsible for the driving of the carriage. To Allen, it seemed like he was getting off easy, but the other two disagreed. As a result, it was decided that Beatrice would handle half of the night watch duties, while Allen would drive the carriage a little. Allen had insisted this wasn't necessary, only for Beatrice to tell him that if he thought driving the carriage was such a difficult job, he ought to do his share of it, and since the only other job Beatrice could do was keeping watch, she also ought to do her part. Allen couldn't refute that logic. They seemed unlikely to run into any monsters at all, let alone dangerous ones. He had no good reason not to accept her proposal.

Now Beatrice slept, since Allen had agreed to keep watch for the latter half of the night. Whoever kept watch for the first half of the night would eat breakfast, then go back to sleep, while the one who handled the second half would sleep again after the other had awoken, ensuring that each received an equal amount of rest.

Thus both Allen's and Beatrice's responsibilities had changed somewhat from last time, but one person's hadn't changed at all—Riese still had nothing to do. Riese and Beatrice had previously appeared to be in the same boat to any outside observer, so her lack of duties hadn't bothered her. But now the fact that she had nothing to do was clear.

Of course, this was to be expected of a princess, but it wasn't in Riese's nature to think like that. As a result, she'd been trying to come up with various things she could do to be useful to them. It was not just her lack of duties that seemed to be bothering her, but the fact that this journey was, in her mind, the others indulging her on a personal quest.

On both counts, Allen felt she had no need to worry. He had meant what he'd said—this trip was just what he needed. He was getting the relaxing journey he'd sought.

"Hmm," said Riese. "I suppose this way I'll be able to sleep with you and make sure you're well-rested."

"Are you trying to take care of me or add to my worries?" he asked. If she tried something like that, Beatrice would surely get angry...at Riese, most likely, but that hardly made him feel any better. Seeing her face before him the moment he opened his eyes would practically give him a heart attack. He'd rather see a dragon.

"Goodness, do you really hate me that much?"

"Not at all." He didn't think she was being serious, but she was the type of girl where he could never really tell. As a royal, her thinking wasn't always the most conventional. *I guess I'll have to convince her of that myself*, he thought as he looked up.

Between the calming sky, gentle breeze, warm sun, soothing rumbling, and a conversational partner with whom he felt truly at ease, Allen realized that this was exactly what he had wanted. The breeze felt so tranquil that it caused him to sigh, wishing things were truly as peaceful as they felt in this moment.

Beatrice sighed as she watched the sun slowly sink past the horizon. It was a

sigh of wonder mixed with exasperation. Above, she saw the stars just beginning to shine. Below was her own body, submerged in hot water.

“Good grief, this really does feel extravagant,” she said, scooping up the bathwater in the palm of her hand.

The party hadn’t simply happened across a hot spring suitable for bathing in the middle of their journey—rather, Allen had created one. The space was large enough for four or five people to fully stretch out. The rim was lined with rocks that preserved the warmth and stopped the water from flowing away. With its perfectly circular shape, the bath blended surprisingly well into the surrounding landscape.

Knowing Allen, he probably thought of that when he was building it, Beatrice mused. As a result, she could enjoy this view of the setting sun as she bathed. Even a noble would envy it.

In fact, simply being able to take a bath was, in itself, the height of luxury. Although Beatrice, as the princess’s personal guard, had been able to enjoy daily baths while in the castle, the average knight was lucky to get one a week. Even some noble families would only bathe once every two or three days. Daily baths were the domain of royalty and the very highest noble houses alone. And yet she had been able to enjoy such indulgences while in the middle of a journey. It was sheer opulence.

“Trouble is, I think I’m getting too used to this...”

The current setup was far from normal, and becoming accustomed to it could only lead to pain in the future.

“But it’s going to be tough to stop now...”

For Beatrice, such journeys usually meant wiping herself down with an old rag, perpetually filthy clothes, and subsisting on dried meat and hard rye bread. She’d rather recuse herself from ever venturing on such an expedition again. Even being with the princess didn’t change things much. Before the pair had met Allen, they had been on just such a journey. Although the magical device they had borrowed had improved the food somewhat, it only meant eating white bread and freshly grilled meat. Even that had been enough for her to consider it a relatively luxurious trip, and now they had added vegetable soup

and other sides made possible by Allen's ability to produce an abundance of water. Giving all of this up to prepare for a future where it may no longer be available seemed utterly unappealing.

Listen to yourself! You're a knight!

The thought flashed through her mind for but a second and then was gone. She might have been a knight, but she was still a human. She wasn't about to willingly make things harder for herself.

Besides, even knowing I'll pay for this in the future, I couldn't force my liege to endure such hardship, she thought, well aware that it was simply a convenient excuse.

As she leaned against the stones and threw her head back to look up at the sky, she saw that it was steadily darkening, and sighed.

"You certainly seem relaxed," someone said.

"Hm? Lady Riese?"

She turned in the direction of the voice. There was Riese, her silver hair glistening, silky skin rosy beneath the setting sun. Even Beatrice found herself beguiled by the princess's appearance, but what came to mind now was confusion.

"Well this *is* unusual," she continued, tilting her head.

Beatrice had rarely bathed together with Riese. As her personal guard, she typically had to keep watch while Riese bathed. As such, the opportunity for them to relax together rarely presented itself, and even when it did, Beatrice could only recall two occasions on which they had actually done so. The other times, Riese hadn't wished to. Still, there was no reason for either to be opposed to it. Riese often changed clothes in Beatrice's presence, so Beatrice was used to seeing her in various states of undress, and the same held true in reverse. Then, as now, Beatrice had never sensed any displeasure from Riese—only a slight embarrassment.

That they hadn't bathed together more was likely due more to the fact that Riese simply wasn't used to it. As a princess, she wasn't used to bathing with others, and being assisted by servants hardly counted. Beatrice assumed that

she didn't have a confident grasp of how to behave in such situations. Thus her confusion at Riese's sudden appearance at that moment.

"Oh, yes... I thought it might be nice. Do you mind?" Riese asked.

"Fine by me," said Beatrice with a nod.

Smiling slightly with relief, Riese stooped down and began to scoop up water with which to wash herself. Beatrice watched for a moment before returning her gaze to the sky. Wordlessly, they remained there, only the sounds of water reverberating through the evening air.

There were two reasons Beatrice was not keeping watch at this moment. First, a great boulder behind them hid the scene from any potential onlookers (it seemed likely that this was exactly why Allen had chosen the spot for a bath). On the other hand, the opposite side was completely exposed to view, but this, too, was a positive, as the bathers could quickly identify any threats. That was the second reason Beatrice was not keeping watch; and, more importantly, it offered a wonderful view of the natural landscape. The scene was thus perfectly safe. They would see an attack from the front coming a mile away, and it was almost impossible that they'd be attacked from behind. Allen would never allow that to happen.

The only doubt Beatrice could possibly have was the possibility that Allen himself would attack them. In that case, there was nothing they could do, but that possibility didn't even warrant consideration. She had so much faith in Allen that she was sure he would never do such a thing, and if he ever chose to, being on her guard would be of little help.

Beatrice continued to relax without regard for Riese's presence. After a while, she noticed that Riese had finished washing herself. Since Allen usually produced water that hosed them down, clothes and all, they didn't really need to wash their bodies to begin with—it was mostly for the feeling. She heard the sound of a body entering the pool, and felt the rippling of the water.

"It's perfect," said Riese.

"You got that right."

Their conversation ended there. It was clear that something was on Riese's

mind; otherwise she wouldn't have done something so out of character. It wasn't hard for Beatrice to guess what that might be. Tomorrow they would arrive at the village. It was hard to think about anything else. Beatrice had been sure for a while now that there was something Riese was hiding even from her.



Or perhaps she had a sense that all of this was going to lead to something terrible. Regardless, Beatrice said nothing—that wasn't her role. Her duty was simply to remain by her liege's side. That was enough; she had already found someone qualified to handle the rest. Leaving it to him was all she could do.

She'd be lying if she said she hadn't given it any thought. She imagined a parent about to give their daughter away to be married would feel the same as she did right then.

I'm still too young for this, she thought, smirking as she gazed at the vast natural expanse before her. More and more stars were coming into view in the twilight sky. She narrowed her gaze. *Whatever's coming, I'm sure Allen can handle it...*

Allen cocked his head. "You know, I kinda feel like I've been roped into doing more than I bargained for," he muttered before continuing the work with a shrug. If he dallied too much, the girls would return from their bath before the food was ready, which wouldn't reflect well on him, even if their unusual decision to bathe together *had* reduced the time he had to prepare the meal. "I guess I'm only doing simple stuff. It barely even qualifies as cooking..."

Allen was making something like a vegetable soup: artlessly chopped vegetables, artlessly boiled and artlessly seasoned. Hardly a meal fit for a princess. No matter how much the pair told him that it was delicious, and that even getting to enjoy soup felt like a luxury, he couldn't help regretting that he hadn't studied the culinary arts more closely. He had wanted to at least gather some mountain vegetables, but they had seen nothing but plains for days. All he could scare up was wild grasses that barely looked edible.

True, on a normal journey, that would be enough. Simply being able to use vegetables at all was significant—most didn't keep long, and by this point in a journey, meals would usually be limited to rye bread and dried meat. The vegetables had thus been the work of Riese and Beatrice, or rather of the magical device that Riese had brought with her, but since without the two of them, Allen would never have had access to such a device, it seemed fair to credit them with its achievements.

The Magic Bag. At a glance, it looked like nothing more than an ordinary pouch. But its interior was expansive, capable of holding far more than its size suggested. Furthermore, the passage of time was slowed inside, allowing them to carry foods that would normally expire quickly for long periods. To purchase such a valuable item would empty the entire treasury of a small country. It would surely be the envy of many a merchant, though none could ever hope to even lay eyes on one—hence Allen being happy to credit Riese and Beatrice for bringing it along.

In fact, the pair had brought two such bags and had loaned one to Allen. It was with the help of this bag that he had been able to carry the monsters he had hunted all the way from the forest back to the guild. From the dragon, too, they had filled both bags and the carriage with parts, which was how they were able to transport so many.

Now, the bags were full of ingredients. This was closer to their intended purpose and indeed what had enabled Riese and Beatrice to embark on their secret journey to begin with. Since they could not openly call at every settlement for supplies along the way, they were relying on carrying bags filled with great quantities of food.

“I guess this is about done,” said Allen, stirring the iron pot and sampling a spoonful of the soup. The flavor that filled his mouth could hardly be called satisfying, but it was unreasonable to expect any better from either his own skills or the seasoning available to him.

In this world and particularly this country, seasoning was extremely valuable. Even the salt he had was scarcely enough, and Allen lacked the culinary talents to enhance the flavor much in any other way. If he’d at least had access to something other than vegetables, he could have made some kind of stock, but...

“Not like I can do anything about that.”

In this regard alone, the lack of monsters in the area was actually a negative. There were some that could be used to make a fine stock; mostly sea-dwellers, but some could be found on land too. Not that Allen had the knowledge or skills to do this; he had only learned of it using his Boundless Knowledge skill.

Even without a decent stock, simply adding more ingredients would at least

add a greater depth to the soup's flavor. As good as it might have sounded to say he had made good use of limited ingredients, all he was doing was flinging vegetables into a pot and adding salt. Even adding meat would have greatly altered the flavor.

"Man, I wish we could've stocked up back in town. No use complaining about it, though," he muttered.

Though there had been monsters and those who hunted them in the area, most weren't edible. The rare amount of edible meat tended to be consumed by each individual, with any excess turned into jerky for ease of storage. Fresh meat was almost never sold on the market. Thus even with the magic bag, the party had no access to it.

"Well, anyway..."

Unsatisfied as he was, Allen had done all he could. All that remained was to periodically stir the pot so the soup didn't burn. He would likely be finished before the others returned.

"Hmm...you know..." he muttered, glancing over his shoulder. Behind him was a large boulder, behind which Riese and Beatrice were bathing. Naturally, he had no intention of peeping and soon returned his attention to the pot, but something had caught his attention.

From what he'd been told, the pair almost never bathed together. In fact, in the time he'd been with them, they hadn't done so once, even at the inn. He'd assumed the same would be true today, but Riese had headed for the bath shortly after Beatrice. Beatrice had gone first since she would be keeping the first watch that night. She always stood guard when Riese bathed as well, and sandwiching her own bath between guarding Riese and the night watch would leave her unable to relax.

Beatrice herself had refused to bathe before Riese at first, but after some persuading, she had reluctantly relented. After that, Riese couldn't have possibly forgotten that Beatrice was using the bath first, nor could she have been unaware that she hadn't yet emerged. It had to be a deliberate choice on Riese's part. As for why she would do such a thing, it almost certainly had to do with the fact that they would be arriving at the village tomorrow.

“I guess she *is* still just fifteen,” said Allen.

Indeed, though of legal age in this world, and as mature and composed as she appeared, Riese was still only fifteen years old. It stood to reason that there were times when she felt anxious and wanted to be doted on. Yet her royal upbringing had instilled in her that she should never allow that side of herself to be seen by others. The opportunities Riese had to allow that side of herself to come to the surface were extremely limited, and this was one of them.

Allen didn't know why Riese was feeling anxious, but he assumed she would have some way of telling him when the opportunity presented itself. If she really didn't want him to know, she would never have allowed him to accompany her to begin with.

“I guess all I can do for her right now is make this soup and wait,” he said.

He felt like the gender roles had been reversed, but there was nothing to be done about that; if Riese and Beatrice could cook, he would have left it to them from the start. And besides, he really had no complaints. He couldn't go wrong just standing there with nothing to do but await their return.

Allen let out a sigh as he continued to stir the pot, deep in thought.

Later, Allen returned from his bath to discover that the person he had expected to see was nowhere to be found. Though the sun had already set, the flames of the burning fire provided ample light to observe the scene.

“Wait, where's Riese?” he asked.

“Hm? Oh, she returned to the carriage. She was obviously exhausted,” replied Beatrice.

“Ah, makes sense.”

During dinner too, Riese had spoken little, seeming somewhat sleepy. Allen had headed for his own bath as soon as they finished eating. During that time, she had evidently been completely wiped out.

“I guess she *was* weirdly on edge all night. That must be it...”

“So you noticed,” said Beatrice.

“Wasn’t hard to tell.” Allen shrugged, sitting down beside the fire.

“Aren’t you going to sleep?” Beatrice remarked with surprise.

“I can’t sleep right after a bath,” he replied, though he knew Beatrice would see through the excuse. He had always slept directly after bathing until then. Still, he wasn’t exactly lying—he really didn’t feel like sleeping just yet.

There the two sat, gazing into the fire, until Beatrice broke the silence. “Big day tomorrow.”

“Yeah. We’re making great speed. We should reach the village by noon, sundown at the latest. I don’t really feel as strongly about all this as you two do, though.”

“Oh, I’m not that much more invested than you. Not compared to Lady Riese, anyway.”

Allen had to agree. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

It was clear that Riese’s exhaustion was not the only reason she had little to say during the previous day’s supper. She would sometimes fall silent after receiving some negative premonition. Likely, she had been thinking of the village, or the man they hoped to find there.

Riese had seemed strained for the duration of the journey. Aware of this herself, she had avoided speaking but had likely been deeply concerned ever since she had heard the story about her uncle, which was hardly surprising, given the situation.

“You think she’s regretting coming?” asked Allen.

“I’m sorry.”

“I dunno what you’re apologizing for, but there’s no need. Like I said, I thought this was the perfect chance for me to unwind a little.” Whether that had proved true, he couldn’t really say. While on the surface, he had enjoyed many peaceful days, it was clear Riese wasn’t at peace on the inside. If Allen was the sort to be able to ignore that because it had nothing to do with him, he would have already been enjoying a quiet life for some time now.

“Still as lackadaisical as ever, I see,” Beatrice observed. “And yet when the

mood strikes you, you're far from a good-for-nothing."

"You're giving me too much credit. All I want is a quiet life. It just never seems to come to me."

"I think you said something similar when we first met. You seemed like you were having a rough go of it back then."

"I guess you weren't wrong, in a way. Past tense, though. Things *were* rough for me, way back when."

"Ugh, you make me feel old. You're much younger than me," Beatrice answered with a smile.

Allen shrugged. She was joking around, but she had a point, although Allen had actually been talking about his past life.

"Anyway," he said, "it really was time for a change of scenery."

"You're right about that. Not that we were anything but diligent in our duties, but..."

"I never doubted it."

If acquiring the information they needed had been easy, Riese and Beatrice would never have come here to begin with. Although Allen found it hard to imagine a demon taking such a circuitous route to killing someone, the kingdom was not so cowardly as to avoid investigating the killing of a high-ranking figure. Beatrice and Riese must have looked into the matter fairly thoroughly, so the lack of specific details uncovered only showed how well the truth must be hidden.

Indeed, the failure to turn up any crucial information was hardly surprising, but even knowing that, it was hard for Allen to not grow frustrated with the lack of progress at times. This little excursion was perfect for refreshing his motivation too.

"Anyway, no need to worry about it," he concluded.

"Understood. Then allow me to thank you. I'm sure your presence has done much to put Lady Riese's heart at ease," said Beatrice.

"I hope so. I guess I should say you're welcome, although I don't feel

comfortable taking credit for it. I only came here to take it easy, and there's a good chance this all ends without us turning up a thing."

"Lady Riese and I understand that, but I don't think she could have sat by and not looked into it."

Beatrice glanced over at the carriage. Allen followed her gaze to where it stood silently. Riese seemed to be sleeping soundly, though for all Allen knew, she could be crying out in her dreams at that very moment. Only Riese knew for sure, and that was why it was crucial that she turn her thoughts into action. That way, even if they returned from this endeavor empty-handed, she wouldn't have any regrets.

Presumably, that was what Beatrice was trying to say. Allen understood this well, having experienced it himself. Without taking action, it was impossible to move forward.

"I wonder how this is all gonna turn out," he muttered as he looked at the stars that filled the night sky and let out a sigh.

The Former Hero Arrives in the Peaceful Village

The journey proceeded on pace the next day, and the village came into view just after noon. A settlement could be seen from a distance away, and it could be no other—they had finally laid eyes on their destination.

However, they still had a ways to go. The carriage moved at a frustratingly glacial pace. Slowly but surely, however, the village became clear. Riese simply sat and stared, mouth closed in a stern expression, resolutely focused on her goal. It was clear that she was deep in thought. Allen didn't know what she was thinking, but he had no intention of distracting her. He only exchanged a wordless shrug with Beatrice as the carriage moved onward.

When they arrived in the village, the party was greeted by a similar atmosphere to that they had found in the settlement where they had met Akira. Although that village had been an unusual one, it seemed that all Frontier settlements were similar to some extent—either idyllic or desolate, depending on your perspective.

As they progressed inside, Allen realized just how unique the previous village had been. Here, they trundled through cultivated fields, though not a soul could be seen, as if the day's work had long since finished. Steam poured from the small number of houses. It seemed dinner was close at hand, if not currently in progress.

In the center of the village were a handful of villagers, but the gazes with which they observed the party were worlds apart from those that had greeted them in the last village. They beheld them—or rather, the carriage—with uniform surprise, but little more. Their gazes betrayed their curiosity, but showed no hostility. Of course, such attitudes varied not just by village, but by individual. The observers did seem altogether peaceful, though.

Allen watched their surroundings, wishing Frontier villages didn't have such a desolate atmosphere. Unlike last time, he was not seeking a place to live.

“Well...what now? I guess asking somebody would be the fastest route.”

“In a place like this, the person most likely to have information *should* be the mayor,” said Beatrice.

“Which one do you think is their house?”

“To be frank, I have no idea.”

“No kidding,” said Allen with a smirk.

In the last village, the mayor’s house had stood out clearly as the finest building in the area. Here, however, there was no such difference between the residences. There might not even be a mayor at all. As the town they had just been in made clear, such places had a surprising ability to function even without a leader. Someone to mediate disputes and hand down judgment in the event of a conflict was often enough, and that person didn’t necessarily need to enjoy a higher position than the rest of the population.

Still, unlike the last village, the residents of this place didn’t seem like they would refuse to give up any information if asked. The only problem was *who* to ask.

“You there, in that magnificent carriage. You seem troubled. Is something wrong?” asked a voice.

The party wouldn’t have to make the first move after all. Looking toward the voice, they saw a kindly, hardy woman of about forty years.

“Oh, yeah,” said Allen. “Actually, we were hoping to ask some questions. Could you tell us where we could find the mayor, or someone else who’s familiar with this area?”

“Came all the way here to investigate this backwoods, did you? You’re a strange bunch.”

“I guess you might call it that, but it seems like a nice place to me.”

“That so? Well, I’m happy to hear you say that, but you know, not much really goes on here,” said the woman.

“You seem happy to be here,” Beatrice noted. “We’ve seen value in this place just as you have.”

“That’s right,” said Allen. “I’m sure a place that’s home to a beauty like

yourself has all sorts of charms we're yet to learn about."

"Oh, come off it," said the woman. "You won't charm this old lady that way, though I appreciate the effort. Let's see if I can help you. What was it? The mayor's house? I'll show you the way. It's just a hop and a skip from here, anyway."

Allen and the others were happy to accept the offer. Except...

"By the way, what's with that young lady?" the woman asked. "She hasn't said a word."

"Oh, it's just..." Riese trailed off, unsure of what to say. As they had approached the village, she had observed it intently. Since their arrival, she had only sat there, head downturned, quivering slightly. While it seemed she was deep in thought about something, the only thing that was clear to all was her silence. It was natural for an outside observer to think something might be wrong.

Of course, they were under no obligation to answer the question, but it presented a convenient opportunity. Allen exchanged a look with Beatrice, confirming that it was all right to discuss the situation, then began to speak.

"Actually, the questions we were hoping to ask relate to her. We heard that her missing uncle was sighted in this village, and she couldn't abide not coming here to investigate. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

"I see," said the woman. "Her uncle, eh? Well, everyone who lives here, I've known for ages. I can't say I've heard tell of anyone like that. When would you say this uncle of hers went missing?"

"Let's see," said Beatrice. "It was about five years ago."

"I suppose I can't help you then," said the woman. "Some folks *did* arrive from elsewhere, but that was ten years ago. Can't be someone who lives in this village, at least."

"I see..." said Allen.

That all made sense; Allen hadn't exactly believed that Riese's uncle was simply living out in the open here in the village. That was why he had thought to

talk to the mayor, or anyone familiar with the surrounding area, rather than speaking to the residents directly.

“Coming all the way out here to investigate a disappearance from five years ago, they must have been close,” said the woman.

“That’s right,” Beatrice answered. “In fact, people said they were like father and daughter.”

“How lovely. Well, here we are: the mayor’s house.”

“*Here?*” asked Allen. It was hard to believe that this house, no different from the others, if not somewhat shabbier, belonged to the mayor. He would never have believed it if he hadn’t been guided there by a local.

“It *is* a little run-down, I admit,” said the woman. “Really, he’s the mayor in name alone. It’s more that he’s lived in the village longer than anyone else.”

“I see...”

Such arrangements were not uncommon in places like this. The sight of the house had surprised him, but on further thought, it wasn’t hard to believe.

“Thanks for taking the trouble,” said Allen. “You’ve really helped us out.”

“Oh, it was nothing. All I’ve got to return home to is my ne’er-do-well husband demanding his dinner. There are no youngsters around these parts, so just getting to talk to folks like you is a plus for me. Well, good luck.”

With that, she was on her way, with no expectation of thanks or compensation, as if it was perfectly natural to do a group of strangers a kindness.

“Nice lady,” Allen commented.

“Yeah. This must be a nice place, with people like her around,” Beatrice agreed.

As they talked, the trio quickly surveyed the surrounding area before settling their gazes on the house itself. Wondering what was to come, they headed toward it.

Meeting the Mayor

A knock on the door provoked a quick response from inside—almost too fast, Beatrice thought, before realizing that they *had* approached the place by carriage. Although they had maintained a speed barely faster than traveling on foot, the noise was sure to make anyone wonder what was going on, especially since the carriage had stopped right outside the house.

A white-haired, wrinkled old man stood in the open doorway. His good posture belied his apparent age, and he wore a friendly smile as he greeted the group.

“My, my. What could a group of youngsters want with this old man, I wonder?”

Beatrice and Allen exchanged a glance. With no sign of other people inside the house, it seemed that this man was the mayor. Though the woman had said the title was no more than a name, it was clear he was the most important person in the village. An appropriate interlocutor was thus required, and while Allen was the anchor of the group, his official lack of status presented a problem.

Perhaps for this reason, Riese alighted from the carriage, though she quickly resumed her downturned demeanor. With the princess in no state to deal with others, Beatrice assumed the role.

“My apologies for calling on you unannounced. We were wondering if we might ask you a few questions. We would all appreciate it if you’re willing to listen to what we have to say.”

“Hmm...questions, eh?”

“Yes. Sorry to be a bother, but...”

“No bother at all. I’m nothing more than a doddering fool with little time left on this earth, and yet I find myself with nothing to spend that time on. If you believe an old coot’s ramblings will be of use to you, I am happy to oblige,

though I have no idea how I might help.”

“You are too modest. I’m sure you will see plenty more years on this earth yet. But do you mean that you are willing to...”

“Yes, let’s hear what you have to say. Not here, though. Come, come in.”

With that, the man turned and began to walk away. Beatrice again exchanged glances with Allen. Things had proceeded so well that it seemed a little too convenient, but they would never get anywhere without telling him their story. With a nod, they began to follow the old man, who led them to a lounge area that, although it would have been impolite to say, was surprisingly neat and well-furnished compared to the building’s exterior.

Sinking into the sofa to which the man had gestured, Beatrice was again cognizant of the fact that he was someone of significant status in the village. Even more curious was the aroma that permeated the room. She didn’t particularly dislike the scent, but it caught her attention.

“Might I ask if you’re burning something?”

“Oh, is it bothering you? My apologies. It’s my favorite aroma—helps me relax. No need to be so polite, by the way. An old fool like me is hardly deserving of such reverence.”

“Oh, I don’t believe that.”

“Please, for my sake. Won’t you indulge an old man whose flame is almost extinguished?”

Beatrice couldn’t refuse such a request, and besides, it made things easier for her. She nodded, and the old man smiled more deeply.

“Oh, how rude of me,” he said. “I haven’t even offered you something to drink. Could you wait a moment?”

“Oh, don’t worry. We aren’t planning on being here long. No need to bother.”

“Oh, is that so? Very well. Let’s hear what you wanted to ask me, then.”

He leaned in to listen, and Beatrice explained their situation just as she had to the woman earlier: they had heard rumors that Riese’s missing uncle had been seen in the vicinity of the village. She also noted that they had only recently

heard this rumor, and that the name of the missing man was Alfred, which she had excluded from her explanation to the woman.

“Alfred, eh? And how old is he?”

“I suppose he was about thirty?”

Suddenly, Riese spoke up. “If he’s alive, he’d be thirty-eight this year.”

“Lady Riese?” said Beatrice, surprised by her liege’s sudden response after such a prolonged silence. She had assumed that Riese wouldn’t respond until they received some decisive information, but now the princess had lifted her head and was looking straight at the old man.

“Please, if you know anything—anything at all, would you tell us?” she pressed urgently.

Beatrice could only stare open-mouthed. Nobody knew better than her how much Riese had been suffering—she had witnessed it firsthand. Yet, in that moment, she seemed *too* desperate, even for a girl searching for her missing uncle whom she had regarded almost as a second father, and whom she had seen killed before her eyes, only to hear that he was still alive. There had to be something more to the story.

In truth, Beatrice had witnessed neither Alfred falling from the cliff nor him being attacked and bitten by a monster. Though it was to her shame as Riese’s personal guard, she had been separated from her liege during the fight. Several other guards had remained with Riese, however, as well as Alfred himself.

Though Alfred had been the vice-captain of the First Knightly Order, it was said that he was no less skilled than the captain himself. It was hard to believe that such a man could have been killed, and yet it had happened. By the time Beatrice had finally managed to make her way back to the blood-soaked, dumbfounded Riese, everything had already been over. Beatrice had been panicked at the sight of her liege, but Riese had nary a scratch on her—she was covered in Alfred’s blood, after he had been bitten in half trying to protect her. The monster was nowhere to be found, presumably having fallen off the cliff with its prey, who had resisted until the very end when the ground beneath him gave way. If that hadn’t happened, Riese would probably be dead. She owed her life to Alfred.

However, Beatrice didn't know all the ins and outs of everything that had happened, and that had always weighed on her mind. Riese's depression following the incident had seemed excessive. Furthermore, the knights who had remained with Riese during the fight had differing stories. True, these differences could be considered minor—whether Alfred had shoved Riese out of the way as the monster pounced, or had leaped in front of her before being bitten in half and falling from the cliff, everyone agreed on the overall sequence of events.

All of these knights, though not personal guards, were knights that Beatrice knew and trusted. They had no reason to lie and were still shocked by the loss of Alfred. They had likely simply remembered things their own way in the heat of the moment. As for Riese, she had recently officially been stopped from seeing Allen, so Beatrice had accepted the compound shocks as an explanation for her reaction. Now, however, it seemed that Riese in fact knew something that Beatrice didn't.

With that in mind, Beatrice returned her gaze to the old man, who wore a serious expression.

"I do wish I had something to tell you...but nothing comes to mind."

"Really?" said Riese.

"It needn't be directly related to Lord Alfred," said Beatrice. "Have you heard *anything* about a missing person being seen nearby?"

"Nothing like that, I'm afraid. As I'm sure you've noticed, this is just a lonely village. If anything like that had happened here, I'd surely have heard about it."

"I see..." Beatrice replied. It was hard not to feel disappointed despite not having had any great hopes to begin with. Suppressing a sigh, she suddenly had an idea—she realized Allen had not yet spoken. "Master Allen, do you have anything to say?"

"Huh? Me? Not really," he replied.

"True, I suppose you don't know much about this matter. Why would you have anything to say?" Beatrice mused.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more use after you came so far," the old man told

them.

“No problem,” said Beatrice. “We’re asking you to do the impossible.”

Riese seemed dejected, but Beatrice couldn’t change the truth. She did wonder exactly how the rumor of Riese’s uncle had started, but wouldn’t learn anything from this elderly mayor.

“By way of apology, would you care to stay the night?” he offered.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” asked Beatrice.

“Not at all. As you can see, I live alone in this big old house. Playing host for one night won’t bother me at all. Besides, the sun has already set, and this village doesn’t have anywhere for lodgers to stay. Please, stay the night.”

It was a much-appreciated offer. Beatrice wouldn’t have been averse to sleeping outdoors again, having done so thus far, but nothing was better than a night in a warm bed. Riese had sunk back into an unresponsive state, so she turned to Allen, who nodded at her.

“We’d be happy to, if you’ll have us,” Beatrice announced.

“Of course. I’ve been feeling lonely, so this is most welcome,” said the old man with a smile that she quickly reciprocated.

Their group had a lot to consider, and needed to take some time to discuss what to do next, but all that could wait until they had relieved their growing exhaustion. From that perspective, the chance to stay over came as a welcome reprieve and almost justified the trip in and of itself.

Beatrice let out a small sigh as she wondered what they were to do next.

The Former Hero Explores the Outskirts

The next day, Allen, Beatrice, and Riese left the mayor's house behind and wandered the outskirts of the village, looking for anything that might be connected to the rumor they had heard.

"At the very least, we know there *was* a rumor," said Beatrice. "There has to be a reason for it, even if it was just started to capture people's attention."

"That's true," Allen agreed. "It's hard to imagine anyone would just make it up out of the blue. There's gotta be some kind of cause."

From what he had heard, the rumor had first started a year ago. It said nothing more than that Alfred had been spotted on the outskirts of a certain village, so it was natural to assume that they would find some kind of trace—or *something*—in those very outskirts.

The group had briefly inquired around the villager but had heard nothing that sounded like a clue, which was another reason they had resolved to finally explore the village outskirts.

"Still, there's nothing but empty plains out here, right? Nothing wrong with a nice walk, though," Allen remarked.

"That and some vegetable fields," said Beatrice. "Although I doubt we'd find anything in those, and it's hard to imagine the villagers would let us explore them anyway."

"Yeah, they might even chase us away," said Allen. Although that would hardly stop him if searching the fields proved necessary, there was surely no value in such a course of action since it would only serve to anger the villagers.

"Well, that in itself would tell us something," Beatrice noted.

"True. It would mean there's a good chance that whatever we're looking for is in there. Plus..." He trailed off. There was no need to finish his statement.

Beatrice looked over her shoulder for a moment, then nodded knowingly.

Riese, head still hanging, trailed behind the pair, predictably appearing even more downturned since they had failed to gather any leads from the mayor.

The other two had, in fact, decided to perform the current search in part hoping—perhaps in vain—that it might improve Riese’s mood. Unfortunately, it had produced no such effect thus far.

The group continued to walk the plains. Though they were distracted by their own thoughts, the area was so bare that they would quickly notice anything important if they came across it. True, this was only the most perfunctory display of a search, but even that was better than doing nothing. Still, no matter how far they walked, all they found were more plains.

“Should we head back at this point?” asked Allen.

“I think so,” Beatrice replied. “We’re not going to find anything new. Besides, much farther and it will hardly be ‘the outskirts’ anymore. I think we can conclude that what we’re looking for isn’t here.”

The expedition had ended up being more of a stroll than a search, which they had more or less expected from the start. Still, it was no mere excuse for a relaxing outing—it was important for them to be sure they weren’t missing anything.

The group turned around and began to go back the way they had come.

“You know, I *am* rather surprised that we didn’t find *anything* so far,” said Beatrice. “I thought we’d at least run into a monster or two.”

“Yeah. I know villages tend to be built in quiet areas, but we didn’t even see a trace of a monster. I guess they don’t come near here.”

“What a tranquil village. Isn’t this the kind of place you were looking for, Master Allen?”

“Huh? Hmm...” Allen gave it some thought. “Yeah, I guess I’d have to say it’s pretty close, wouldn’t I?”

“It seems like a place you’d be able to enjoy a peaceful life to me. Is there something you don’t like about it?”

“Just one thing, but it’s a deal-breaker for me.”

“Oh? What could be so wrong with the place that you feel that strongly about it?”

“It’s a secret.”

After returning to the village, the group picked another direction and resumed their search. Realizing that there was no benefit to walking, they decided to continue the task in their carriage. Three more times they repeated the process, surveying the village outskirts and confirming that there was nothing to be found while chatting away.

As the sun began to set, the group returned to the village, but the dissatisfaction on their faces was the only fruits of the day’s labor.

“Oh, it’s you lot. Well, no need to ask how things went today.”

The group looked in the direction of the voice, finding, of all things, the woman who had shown them to the mayor’s house the previous day.

Allen smirked, the woman’s cheerful smile somehow soothing his tired mind. “Yeah. I guess you can tell.”

“That’s a shame. So what’s the plan now? Same thing tomorrow?”

“Actually, we’re not quite sure how to proceed,” he admitted.

“Right. We don’t want to impose upon the mayor again. Perhaps we should just return home,” said Beatrice.

“Is it that bad?” asked the woman. “That seems a waste.”

“How do you mean?” Allen replied. It was true that all the time they’d spent on this venture had been for naught, but he wouldn’t have put it like that. “A shame,” maybe, but not “a waste.”

“Aye,” said the woman. “Tomorrow’s the Festival of the Dead, after all. True, I can’t say it’ll be all that worth your while to stay and see this poor little village’s festivities, but still...”

“The Festival of the Dead? What’s that?” asked Beatrice, cocking her head. This was the first that any of them had heard about it.

“Oh, don’t you know? Well, I suppose it *is* rather unique to our village.

Actually, I'd completely forgotten just how surprised I was when I first heard of it."

"So what is it exactly?" said Allen.

"In short, it's a festival where you can meet with one who has passed."

At those words, Riese finally stirred. "One who has passed?"

The woman looked surprised by her sudden response, as until that moment, Riese had been as downcast as a lifeless doll. Her jovial expression soon returned, however.

"Well, to be accurate, it's a festival where people *say* you can do that—the one time a year when the dead return to this world for us to convene with them. Hence the name."

"I see," said Riese. "So nobody *actually* meets with them."

"Then why did you say it would be a waste to miss it?" asked Allen.

"Right, I suppose it wouldn't be obvious from what I just told you... Well, what goes on at the festival is a little unusual. Since the point is to convene with the dead, the villagers split into two groups: those who'll return from the spirit world and those who'll meet with them. And the first bunch get all made up to look the part. It's a lot of fun."

The woman continued to describe what sounded like one big impersonation contest. Half of the villagers would dress and conduct themselves like some departed person. If the others couldn't tell who they were trying to impersonate, they would boo, and if they could, all would share in the laughs. The event sounded like it could easily turn into a gloomy affair, but everyone did their best to ensure that was never the case.

"You mean it's all to entertain the villagers?" asked Beatrice.

"I imagine it was different at the start, but it's been this way ever since I came here, at least. Oh, come to think of it, couldn't this be what you lot were talking about?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" said Allen.

"Well, people imitate the dead, right? True, it's usually just their outfits, and

the person doing so might look nothing like the real one. But sometimes a villager really practices their impersonation. Perhaps someone saw that and thought it was actually your missing person?”

“Well, I suppose it’s possible...” Beatrice replied.

“Just the ramblings of an old lady. Feel free to ignore me. Anyway, our ways might seem odd to you, but I think you understand that it’s a merry old time for all. I welcome you to come and see for yourself.”

With that, the woman left, and the three companions exchanged looks.

“What do you think?” Allen asked.

“I suppose one more day wouldn’t hurt now that we’re here,” said Beatrice.

“Let’s stay.” Unexpectedly, it was Riese who made the decision. The fact that she spoke up at all was surprising enough. “Let’s stay and watch this festival. We were invited, after all. And also...” *Maybe I really will be able to convene with the dead.*

She didn’t say it, but it was clear what she was thinking. Beatrice glanced at Allen, who simply shrugged. He had no objections. And with that, it was decided that they would remain in the village for another day.

The Former Hero Observes the Festival Preparations

Riese cocked her head as she opened her eyes, unsure why she had awoken where she now found herself. All she saw was an unfamiliar ceiling, but for some reason she didn't feel anxious. Wondering why, she looked to her side, where she saw a familiar face: Beatrice.

This was the mayor's house. He had happily accepted their request to remain for another night. She wasn't even staying in a different room than the previous night. In fact, the ceiling wasn't unfamiliar at all. For a moment she puzzled over why she'd thought so but soon forgot about it—she had more important things to think about.

“The Festival of the Dead...”

The day she could meet with the dead. Of course, she didn't truly believe that. But deep down, there was some part of her that thought maybe there was a chance.

Despite what the woman had said, Riese knew that at least part of the rumor was true—that her uncle Alfred had wished to exact his revenge against the royal family. That alone she knew for sure because he had told her himself. But the information should never have reached the ears of anyone but the knights he told before his death, and they would never bad-mouth a man who had once been a royal. As such, there were only two possibilities: either one of the collaborators her uncle had sought in accomplishing his task, which he could never have done alone, had started the rumor, or her uncle had started it himself. Whichever it was, her goal was to find out.

Still, nobody would believe the rumor if they heard it. Everyone knew how diligently Alfred had supported the royal family. That was why the story had never amounted to anything more than hearsay. But it *could* serve as a message to those who already knew it was true, like Riese.

When she had first heard the rumor, she had wondered if someone was trying to communicate with her. Whatever the reason, it had to be something

that involved her uncle; otherwise, there were many other means of reaching her. To use such an uncertain way of catching her attention, the method itself had to have meaning.

That desire to *know* was why Riese had taken the great risk of leaving the royal capital for the Frontier and visited both the town and now this village. Although she had temporarily lost faith, she suddenly felt confident for some unknown reason that as the sun set and the festival began, she would learn the truth.

Or perhaps this was a revelation? The more she thought about it, the stronger her faith became, and her eyelids grew heavier and heavier. A comforting aroma enveloped her and beckoned her to the dreamworld. Embracing the soothing drowsiness, she let her consciousness slip away.

“Uncle Alfred...what do you mean, my father will kill me?” she asked. It was the question she’d wanted to ask ever since that day.

And with that, she fell into a dream.

Festivals could vary a great deal from region to region. Some were magnificent, celebratory affairs, while others were solemn proceedings. Some were even closed to outsiders, but thankfully that was not the case here.

“I see...” said Beatrice. “I wasn’t sure how things would go when the village seemed utterly unprepared yesterday, but it looks like they start their preparations at dawn today.”

“Seems that way,” Allen agreed. “Makes sense for a small village, I guess.”

The settlement was now almost unrecognizable as the quiet, peaceful place it had been yesterday. It had been vibrating with excitement since morning. To Allen and the others, the vibe as the locals bustled around in preparation for the Festival of the Dead was a pleasant one.

Suddenly the mayor appeared. “Sad as it is to say, we are few in number. If we started preparing a day early, the event would end up too grand in scale for us to manage,” he explained with the same joyous smile as his neighbors. “Anyway, this must be rather boring for you, no? I apologize for making you

wait so long in anticipation of the event.”

“Not at all,” said Beatrice. “It was our decision to stay and watch, after all. And you’ve been so kind to us, we actually feel like we should be helping out. Besides, this merry atmosphere is more than enough entertainment.”

“Oh, we couldn’t put our guests to work like that. I feel humbled that you would even ask,” said the man.

“By the way, there is one thing I’m curious about,” said Beatrice. “Do this many people really live here?”

Even only counting those she could see from where she stood, Beatrice could tell that a great many villagers were involved in the preparations. Of course, the party had not met all the residents, but more than half of those they saw were unfamiliar faces. It wasn’t surprising that she was curious.

“Well, among them are folks you don’t see out and about much, as well as those who don’t live here anymore,” the mayor answered.

“You mean they came back for the festival?”

“Correct. Since we’re a Frontier village, a fair few have cause to stay here for a while for different reasons before eventually moving on. There is a surprisingly well-developed town not far from here, you know.”

“I suppose it’s the same everywhere you go. This must be a nice place for so many to return for such an event.”

“I am delighted to hear you say that. I *am* the mayor, after all, if only in name.”

As the two talked, the preparations slowly proceeded. At this rate, they likely wouldn’t be done until nightfall—but that *did* seem fitting for the Festival of the Dead. According to the mayor, it had originally been about communicating with dead ancestors and therefore *had* to be held at night.

“People spending all day preparing for the festival instead of working is a holdover from those days too. Originally, everyone would await the proper hour in solemn contemplation. I am the only one who remembers those days, though. Please don’t allow an old man’s ramblings to spoil your enjoyment.”

“I appreciate that you’d even afford us such consideration,” said Beatrice.

“Anyway, everyone will have a rough day tomorrow after all the merrymaking this evening.”

“I suppose that’s all part of the fun, isn’t it?”

“Quite right.”

As usual, Riese did not join the conversation. It wasn’t clear if she was even listening or not. However, today she was not downcast and simply observed the villagers as they went to and fro. Allen sighed at the sight of her.

The sun remained high in the sky, but it would soon set, and the hour of the dead would arrive. The time of the festival gradually drew closer.

The Former Hero Observes the Festival of the Dead

Allen had thought the Festival of the Dead sounded like an impersonation contest, but, he now realized as he observed the opening celebrations, it actually more closely resembled a costume party.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be too surprising if someone saw one of these people from afar and came to a misunderstanding, would it?” said Beatrice.

“The villagers seem to think it’s possible, at least,” Allen replied.

“I never expected some of them to be kitted out in full suits of armor. I don’t know how you’re supposed to tell who they are, but everyone seems amused, so I suppose there really were people who went around like that.”

As outsiders, they struggled to understand what was so funny but nevertheless observed the spectacle with great interest. In the darkness, the sounds of laughter reverberated from people they could barely see in the flickering light cast by the bonfire, which was said to light the path to the realm of the dead. In one way, it all made for an unsettling scene, but the sounds of laughter soothed any unease.

“This certainly is a rare sight,” said Beatrice. “It was worth staying. I never knew such a festival existed. I suppose we should thank that woman later.”

“Yeah, I guess we had a good reason to stay, didn’t we?” said Allen, casting a sideways glance at their silent third companion. Riese stood there, wordless, watching the festivities unfold. However, she seemed to be more casually observing than focused—relaxed, or perhaps disappointed.

Turning to Beatrice, Allen saw that she, too, had been watching Riese. Though she seemed somewhat pained by what she saw, Allen could also sense relief in her expression. Nobody was under the impression that the departed would really return to life at this festival. That was clear from both Riese’s evaporating tension and Beatrice’s relief. Even if it hadn’t been the result they’d hoped for, returning Riese to her usual state alone justified extending their stay.

“Besides, something as unique as convening with the dead must require very special procedures, and they haven’t done anything like that,” Beatrice observed.

“Yeah. At the ceremony opening, all the mayor did was greet everyone.”

In this world, dealing with the dead was considered somewhat taboo. While the dead were not dealt with unfairly, it was thought ill-advised to engage with them casually. The dead were the dead, and were considered different beings from the living. That they and the living should not intermingle was a common rule, regardless of race or region. As a result, while various powers such as Gifts and magic existed in this world, the feat of reviving those who were gone was as forbidden as going back in time. Not only was researching it prohibited, but in certain areas even the mere mention of such things was taboo.

Yet here in this village was a festival that was essentially a ceremony for reviving the dead. Even if the reality was different, the mere concept of it was problematic. Here in the Frontier, things were different, but if this had been a normal village, it would have been burned to the ground along with its populace the moment any outsider witnessed the proceedings. Or perhaps it was *because* of the village’s location in the Frontier that the festival had come into existence in the first place.

“The only unusual thing I notice is this aroma,” said Beatrice. “But a scent alone can’t do much to the dead.”

“Of course not.”

As Beatrice said, the biggest difference they noticed in the village compared to earlier was the scent that hung over the area. But Allen was merely curious about how long it had taken for it to spread, considering they were in a wide-open area. It was nothing more than a smell, after all—he sensed no power emanating from it. The only use it could possibly serve was to hide something else, or perhaps to induce an intoxicating effect. At any rate, it seemed unlikely that it was part of a formal ritual.

In fact, the aroma was familiar to the three of them—it was the same one they had smelled in the mayor’s house, though never anywhere else.

“Hey, as a knight, can you let this slide?” asked Allen. “You said it’s a unique

experience, but I thought you weren't supposed to let stuff like this go on."

"I suppose you're right. I'm not sure how I'd handle it if I'd been officially sent here to investigate, but right now my duty is something else entirely. The ceremony isn't interfering with those plans in the slightest, so I'm happy to let it be."

"I guess so. Besides, it's all just for the sake of entertainment, and that includes us."

"Right. Hopefully this will be a nice change of pace for all of us."

Allen was doubtful about that as a change came over the festival. The proceedings were being held in the village square, and in the middle stood one person, surrounded by others. The figure in the middle would change from time to time, sometimes a person clad in silver armor, sometimes one wearing a strange mask, each representing a different departed person. The costumed villager would engage in a performance that produced laughs and applause from the crowd, and this had been going on for some time.

From their vantage point beyond the crowd, Allen and the others noticed that there was no longer just one person in the center of the square. Suddenly there were two, three, four, all of them familiar figures. They were the people who had performed already. All—no, *almost* all—of them now gathered in the center. Then the other villagers joined hands with them and began to dance.

"What's going on?" asked Beatrice. "Ah, I see. I suppose this *is* a festival for convening with the dead, after all."

"Exactly. Looks like that's what's happening. I guess they were introducing themselves before."

"I suppose this is the main event, then."

One of the dancing villagers left the group and came toward them. It was the woman from the day before.

"Well? Having fun?" she asked.

"Very much so," Beatrice replied. "I appreciate you advising us to stay."

"Oh, no need to be so formal. Anyway, I assume you couldn't understand

what was so amusing, so how about this? Why don't you come and dance with us? Come on, it's easy."

"We won't be getting in the way?"

"Oh, nobody will mind. I'd be more worried about the dirty old men of the village not leaving you alone, pretty young thing that you are. Look, even my ne'er-do-well of a husband is staring. I'll have to discipline him later."

"Ha ha ha! Oh, no. In that case, maybe I had better not after all?" Beatrice replied.

"What? Listen, we won't let anyone get away with any funny business. That is, unless you *want* them to."

I see, Allen thought. So she also had the goal of keeping them in the village. It made sense; this was a unique place, and they couldn't let a chance to increase the number of villagers pass them by. Whether or not the visitors might agree to stay, the locals had to extend the invitation.

"I suppose it makes sense to take part after you took the trouble to invite us," said Beatrice.

"I guess so," Allen agreed. "It's not as fun just standing by and watching. What about Riese, though?"

He hadn't expected her to respond, and yet...

"No, thank you. I'll just keep watching from here. I'm not feeling too well."

"Hm? Yes, you do look a little unwell," said the woman. "Perhaps you ought to just take it easy."

"Yes, thank you. I think I'd like that."

"You go ahead. Now, are you two still happy to join in?"

"Riese is a big girl," said Allen. "She'll be fine on her own here, right?"

"Of course. Don't worry, I'll keep my eye on all the ne'er-do-wells. Right then, let's go."

Beatrice seemed concerned about Riese's condition but ultimately decided it was best to leave her alone. The local woman began to walk away, and Beatrice

followed, though she did so with a reluctant expression.

Allen followed them without even looking back at Riese. He knew that her pale look wasn't caused by any physical problem. It was just as Beatrice had said earlier—provided nobody caused her any trouble, he had no problem letting her be.

As he followed the woman, Allen looked up at the stars scattered across the sky and sighed.

Riese watched as Allen and Beatrice joined the other villagers. Although the two of them had smirked with faint bemusement at the invitation to join the dance, they had also been happy to do so, despite what Beatrice had said. Even now, from afar, she saw her happily twisting the arm of a man who had attempted to play a trick on her.

While happy for her friends, Riese couldn't help but feel lonely. "I always have to make trouble, don't I?" she told herself reproachfully with a smile. Even knowing how the other two would worry, she had chosen to stay behind. And now she was about to do something that would worry them even more. "I'm sorry, but I have to," she muttered as she climbed to her feet.

Taking one last look at the pair, she decisively tore her gaze away from them and disappeared into the night, toward the outskirts of the village.

A Reunion in the Dusk

The village was not large, but it was not so small that every corner of it was perfectly lit in the dark of night—particularly at this moment when the only light came from the bonfire in the center of the village. The farther one strayed from the center, the more one was bathed in darkness.

Riese stood on the outskirts of the village, barely able to see. Somebody else was already there, but she didn't inquire as to their identity. She knew, or at least, she had a rather strong idea. The light of dusk was just sufficient enough to make out the figure that stood before her, particularly given its unique appearance. They were clad head-to-toe in a suit of armor that made it impossible to tell, from the outside, who was wearing it but for the fact that the armor itself, shining and silver, allowed her to surmise the identity of the wearer.

Though there had recently been word of someone whose signature was their silver armor, Riese knew that it held another meaning. Silver was a symbol of *him*. Beatrice's decision to adopt the armor ever since that fateful day was a show of respect for the man she had so admired.

That Beatrice didn't react when she saw the armor was presumably a result of the aroma that by now had floated to the edge of the village. Riese, always lost in thought, had begun to realize that the aroma had the effect of clouding one's thinking. Before she'd had the chance to tell the others, however, she had noticed the man in armor. Informing the others would have put them on high alert, and she would have lost her chance to meet with him.

Now Riese was alone with the armor-clad figure on the outskirts of the village. Even half knowing who hid beneath the silver helmet, to feel some sense of danger would have been perfectly natural—but strangely, Riese felt none.

“Came all the way out here by yourself, did you? I'm impressed.”

At the sound of his voice, Riese burst into tears, countless thoughts rushing

through her mind and disappearing before she could give voice to them. Finally, she resolved to smile, remembering how he had once told her that he preferred to see her smile rather than cry.

“Yes, I suppose I’ve been rather careless,” she answered. “But do I really need to be careful about meeting my father?”

“How long has it been since anyone called me that?” the figure asked, slowly removing his helmet, revealing silver hair the same color as hers. His face hadn’t changed since the last time Riese had seen him, though now he wore a wry smile and his eyes were wistful.



Just as Riese had expected, it was him—her uncle, Alfred Baverstam. Calling him her father was, in a way, a joke. But she *had* truly thought of him that way at one time. Not that her relationship with her real father was estranged or strained, but as king, he had always prioritized his royal duties. Inevitably, she had little contact with him, and it was Alfred who had spent time with and cared for her in his stead. Back then, he would remind her with a smile that he was only her uncle.

“You know, he was most upset when I told him that you called me ‘father,’” Alfred noted.

“Is that so? Come to think of it, he *did* begin to lavish more attention on me after that...”

“That makes sense. He was quite determined to show you that *he* was your real father.”

“That does sound like him.”

Of course, Riese knew the reality, but she would still sometimes half jokingly refer to Alfred as her father, both as a display of defiance against her real father and as a kind of entreaty to her uncle. She gazed into the distance thoughtfully as she remembered, biting her lip as her memories turned to *that* day.

“There’s so much I want to ask you, uncle, but one thing most of all.”

“Aye, I know. How I knew your father would try to kill you, correct? After all, I did all I could to inform you of that.”

“Yes. I can’t believe he would try to kill me... Well, I can’t believe he would ever have any *reason* to kill me.”

“Ah, but reason he does have, though you might never have seen it in his manner yourself. He *is* king, you know. A king can wear countless masks as needed and is capable of killing even his own child.”

“But that’s...” Riese began before trailing off. She couldn’t deny it. Her father was indeed a most kinglike king. He would give even his own blood no quarter if it served his country. She continued, “That might be so, but it’s not a *reason*. What would killing me—”

“There’s a very good reason, though you’re not aware of it yourself. You must have at least an inkling, though, no? Why did you come here? No—why were you *able* to come here? How could a king allow the princess to travel to the Frontier, no matter the cause?”

“That would usually be true, but there were special circumstances this time —”

“Oh, more importantly,” interrupted Alfred, “were you not attacked on your way?”

“Wha?!” said Riese, her eyes widening with shock. Of course, Riese and Beatrice themselves had anticipated an attack, but they’d had the benefit of information only known to themselves. How could Alfred know about that?

“Wondering how I knew? That can wait for later. For now, tell me, do you know exactly what attacked you?”

“No...I don’t.”

“Let’s say that it was wise to send you here. There still ought to have been some method of ensuring your safety. At the very least, a platoon of knights should have been posted to protect you. That was always the case whenever you embarked on journeys in the past, was it not?”

“Yes, but this excursion was a secret.”

“Then your safety should have been ensured in a different way—perhaps by deceiving others into believing you were heading to a false destination. Of course, that wouldn’t help with bandits, but you know that was not what attacked you, don’t you?”

Riese was sure that the creature’s goal had been to take her life. There was no chance it had been the work of bandits.

“You would be secretly dispatched from the capital, and discreetly disposed of, given a task that you were told only you could accomplish and finished off as you made your way there. Perfect. He could kill you without anyone suspecting a thing. Yes?”

“I suppose so... No, the most I can say is that I can see how it could be

interpreted that way.”

“All right, then allow me to explain what I put off answering before. How did I know that you were attacked? Because I know the *reason* that all of you were targeted.”

“All of us?” Riese echoed. He had to mean Beatrice and the other knights. Only she and Beatrice knew about the only other thing that statement could be referring to.

“Yes. Those of you with innate Gifts.”

“Wha?! How did you—?!”

Those who possessed innate Gifts were being targeted. Only Riese and Beatrice should have known. In truth, it was only a suspicion, though one that came close to a firm belief after the assassination of the General.

The General, like Riese, was the owner of an innate Gift possessed since birth. As best as anyone could tell, there were five wielders of innate Gifts in the kingdom. The suspicion that they were being targeted had arisen when the remaining four confirmed they had had the sense that they were being watched for close to a year, even before the death of the General. None of them could have confirmed the sense by themselves, but when four of them each noted feeling the same sensation at times when nobody else was around, there could be little doubt. It was natural to suspect that the killing of the General had something to do with it.

Of course, Riese had consulted with her father on this matter, but his investigations had yielded nothing. That was another motivation behind Riese leaving the capital—she was to serve as a lure. The attack had confirmed that her suspicions were correct, but only Riese and Beatrice ought to have known that.

“Essentially, I am privy to information that you are not,” said Alfred. “But before I get to that, I have a proposal for you.”

“A proposal?” Riese cocked her head in confusion at not only Alfred’s words, but the many things she did not understand. Why was he alive? Why hadn’t he told her he was alive? What was he doing in this place?

Alfred must have known she was possessed of such doubts. His current line of explanation must ultimately have been leading to answering her questions, so Riese continued to listen, despite how much remained unclear.

“Yes. Will you join me in overthrowing the kingdom—or rather, the king?”

An Exchange in the Dusk

“Uncle? What on earth are you...” asked the dumbfounded Riese. Overthrowing the king? That would mean killing her father.

“Is it so surprising? I thought you’d at least heard how I resent the royal family,” said Alfred.

“True, I did hear that,” said Riese. She had heard it on that day after being separated from Beatrice, at the same time she had heard that her father planned to kill her. In fact, she had first been told that Alfred resented the royal family, then about how her father had planned to kill her, after which they had been attacked by monsters. So invested had Alfred been in that conversation that he had let his guard down to an extent that would normally be unthinkable, leaving him open to attack and being bitten in two. The shock of this discovery had left Riese unable to do anything but stare at her uncle’s bloodsoaked body.

“But I...” she started before trailing off.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to dredge up bad memories. But look, there’s no need to worry about me anymore, is there? Besides, I brought that whole episode on myself.”

“But...”

“Let’s discuss that later. First, I’m sure you’re wondering why I’d propose such a thing.”

“Well...yes, of course I am,” Riese answered. Trying to overthrow the king was one thing. Whatever the motivation, she could at least understand that, even if she couldn’t accept it. But for Alfred to invite her to join him was inexplicable. “Why would I do that to my father? I’ve never held any hatred for him.”

“You have good reason to do it. As I told you, if you do not, you will be killed. It is the only way to ensure your own survival.”

“I can’t believe these words, even coming from you, uncle. Why would my

father be trying to kill me?”

“Hmm. I suppose you *would* feel that way. It is an outrageous claim, after all. Do you know what some people call you who possess innate Gifts?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. Or perhaps I should say I’ve never heard of anyone having any particular name for us,” said Riese. In fact, she had barely heard *anything* about those who possessed innate Gifts. The mechanics of Gifts barely differed whether innate or bequeathed—certainly not enough to warrant different names for those who had them from birth...or so Riese thought.

“They call you ‘God’s puppets,’” Alfred stated.

“God’s puppets?” It was hard to imagine that was a positive term, but she felt more confused than surprised. She couldn’t understand why anyone would call them that. What would their reason be?

“I can see why you wouldn’t understand,” said Alfred. “You’ve been this way since birth, so you wouldn’t comprehend how you’re different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gifts are granted by God. That means they contain God’s will. No objections yet?”

“Of course not. That’s common knowledge.” Gifts were not granted by God haphazardly. They necessarily reflected His will. But His will was not absolute—much like revelation, it was a sign to proceed in a certain direction, but not an ironclad decree. Stats were much the same; though they indicated where one’s talents lay, it was one’s own choice to pursue a particular path or not. If one’s desires lay elsewhere, one simply needed to follow them.

“You are not strictly wrong, but neither are you right. Your views are those of royalty—or rather, of the vast majority of nobles.”

“You mean to say that others feel differently?”

“To the common people, Gifts are much grander things. They determine one’s future. A commoner who is granted a Gift has no choice but to pursue a path that makes use of it. Still, that is the responsibility of the bearer of the Gift alone. It has nothing to do with God. But you are different.”

“We are?”

“Yes. Surely it is clear merely from the nature of your Gifts? They have an incredible power to affect the lives of others. *Too much* power.”

Riese considered this for a moment, but still she felt confused. It didn’t seem that way to her. Perhaps that could be said of the General’s Gift, but the others?

“It’s obvious when it comes to the General, is it not? It’s no exaggeration to say that it is his Gift that leads his army to victory. And most unfairly, the Gift does nothing to exhaust the General himself, only his troops. If he so desired, he could utterly destroy our neighboring nations, never mind *conquering* them.”

“But that would—”

“Of course, whether he *would* or not is another matter entirely, but there can be no doubt that he *could*. Don’t you agree?”

Riese couldn’t deny it. With his Gift, the General surely could have done such a thing. That was precisely why each of their neighbors had chosen amity, knowing they had no other options but subjugation. That fact, however, seemed to make it even less believable that her father would have them killed, as he would only be endangering his own country.

“Hear my full story before you make up your mind. The same is true of the Archbishop, is it not?”

“Is it? He is certainly very influential, but there are others who can hold Blessing Ceremonies, aren’t there?”

“True, if that was all there was to it. But what would happen without the Archbishop? Those with superlative Gifts would suddenly become useless, no?”

Riese realized Alfred was right. The Archbishop was the only one who could identify Class 5 Gifts. Without him, those with such Gifts would be seen as not having been granted a Gift at all and would likely be treated unjustly. Riese could hardly say such an outcome was inconceivable, since she had seen it happen firsthand with Allen.

“Of course, great as the Archbishop’s impact might be, there’s even less of a question about the Champion’s. She has an impact on the very existence of all the people in the land.”

“Is she really *that* important?”

“You heard that she defeated a dragon, did you not? A being thought to be unkillable by any mortal. The ability to hunt monsters that are hostile to all mankind means her impact extends thus. And of course, she has Hauteclairé.”

The name of the sword reminded Riese of the events of the past weeks. In addition to the dragon, under normal circumstances, that monster could never have been handled without the help of the Champion. That they had managed to deal with it without her was simply a testament to what anomalies both Allen’s power and Noel’s skills, having forged a sword to rival Hauteclairé, were.

“As for the Elven Monarch... This is conjecture, but I believe she wields influence over the spirits and that which grants them their power. Of course, the mere ability to produce a first-class weapon is impactful enough.”

“The Elven Monarch?” Riese had never heard the name before, but she knew it must refer to Noel, another possessor of an innate Gift and the only one Riese had not been able to check on. Noel was the real reason they had paid a visit to the town in which she dwelled. However, she had never heard of Noel being referred to in that way before. As she was about to ask what the elves had to do with anything, Alfred continued.

“And you, Riese. The Saint.”

Riese gasped. “How did you...”

The kingdom’s search for the Saint was, of course, a bluff. The royal family knew of Riese’s power, but, as they were unsure of how the knowledge would affect others, none outside of the family were supposed to have that information. They had spread rumors of the Saint and had her visit places throughout the land in order to gauge the people’s response.

Although Alfred was in a position to know the kingdom’s secrets, Riese’s powers had not awoken until he had seemingly died. It was impossible for him to know that she was the Saint, although Allen had surmised as much without

being told.

“I have my own information networks, you know,” said Alfred. “Besides, that isn’t what is important. The question is the extent of your impact. In a way, you are the most powerful of all.”

“I can’t see how that’s true,” said Riese. Unclear as the extent of her impact may have been, it mostly affected alchemists, who were the main source of potions. It was principally the response of the alchemists that the royal family had been investigating by seeding rumors of the Saint. Riese couldn’t see how she could possibly have the same impact as the others.

“I didn’t expect you to understand,” said Alfred. “Listen, you possess a miraculous power that no other in this world does. Not only that, but you are the only person in *history* to possess such a power. The consequence of others learning that you possess such power would be immeasurable. Other countries would do whatever it took to acquire you for themselves. It could lead to war.”

To Riese, this seemed overblown and ridiculous. Nevertheless, the look in Alfred’s eyes made her gulp. She could see how serious he was.

“If that were true, I suppose my father *would* try to kill me. My existence is a threat to the kingdom. But what of the others? Aren’t they beneficial to the nation?”

“As I told you, each of them possesses a power too great to allow a single person to wield. Besides, do you remember what I said they call you? Now consider the potency of your powers with that in mind. Understand?”

“Surely not.”

“Yes. You are controlled by God. No, I suppose that isn’t quite right, but suffice to say, you move in accordance with God’s will. Why else would God grant such great powers to individual people?”

Riese believed she had done everything under her own will, but now, faced with the question of whether that was truly the case, she couldn’t assert with confidence that it was. And of course, she received revelations—she couldn’t deny that those were connected to God’s will. But...

“Others have been sent revelations too. They sought to prevent misfortune

befalling mankind. If what you say about us is true, then aren't we the same? We are to defend people from misfortune and bring happiness to all. In that case, I wouldn't object to being controlled by God."

"I see," said Alfred. "But even if *you* feel that way, there are others who do not...like your father."

"And that's why he's trying to kill me?"

"Yes. The idea of your kind displeases him. Or rather, he does not believe that your existence is in the interests of mankind. To him, your holy protection is evidence of your manipulation by God. That is why he wishes to kill you, so that mankind might seize control of the world back from God."

"That's..."

"But that is why I—we have a proposal for you. Join us to defeat him."

The look in Alfred's eyes was deadly serious. Riese turned the words over in her head repeatedly.

"I'm sorry, uncle."

"I understand. This must all be hard to believe."

"No. Well, that might be true, but more importantly, I believe in my father. Even if what you say is true, I believe I can convince him to take another course of action. After all, didn't you tell me of the importance of always believing in others, even in the hardest of times?"

"I see. That's true; I did."

"Yes. So..."

"Then I suppose there's nothing for it." For a moment, it seemed, Alfred's tone had changed, and Riese sensed a clear darkness in his eyes that could not be explained merely by the dim light in which they stood. "I suppose I expected as much, in a way. In fact, perhaps this is for the best; it will be simpler this way."

A ringing reverberated through the air. Alfred had drawn his sword and was raising it overhead.

“What? Uncle!” Riese cried out the only words she could muster in her dumbfounded state.

“Yes, worry not. I will put your remains to good use. Now, die peacefully,” said Alfred as he brought down the blade.

The Former Hero Reveals the Dusk's Deception

A shrill sound resounded, and at the same time, Allen sighed—a deep, exasperated sigh.

“You just had to go and cause trouble, didn’t you? And here I was planning on leaving you be.”

“Wha... You! Do not interfere!” Alfred ordered.

“You’re the one interfering with my quiet life,” said Allen. “Well, whatever. Away with you!”

Sword of Cataclysm: Everflowing Blade.

“Ghkk!”

Allen braced his arm only slightly, bringing his blade down, then kicking at Alfred. As a move that didn’t use his blade, the kick had little destructive power, but in this situation that didn’t matter—Alfred was sent flying several meters away.

Allen sighed as he looked over his shoulder. “I know you won’t listen to a word I say, and I don’t have the right to say it anyway, but will you be a little more careful? I doubt I can hide this from Beatrice. She’s gonna chew you out later. And me too, probably.”

“Allen? How did you...” Riese started.

“Oh, how did I jump in at the perfect moment? I was watching the whole time. Sorry for eavesdropping, even if it *did* turn out to be a good idea.”

“Hm? Um...can I ask how much you heard?”

“Sure, but not now, all right? I have the feeling we’re about to be interrupted.”

“Hm?”

Allen averted his eyes from the confused Riese and back in the direction of

the man he had sent flying. Alfred rose without difficulty in spite of the heavy armor he wore, a testament to his physical abilities—or perhaps he was simply adept at ignoring pain.

“Hngh... Allen? Riese’s former betrothed? The good-for-nothing?”

“Huh. You know, it really hasn’t been that long since I last heard the term, but it feels like a long time. I guess a lot’s already happened since then. Now that I think about it, how the hell did I end up in this situation? I was *supposed* to be coming out here for a peaceful life. I guess that plan was messed up from the jump, though.”

“Quite arrogant, aren’t you? Very well. I won’t mince words. Get out of here! Do not interfere with my plans!”

“Yeah, sorry for interjecting when you’re all worked up about something or other, but I don’t really feel like hashing it out with you. Not much point in arguing with someone who isn’t acting under their own will, after all.”

“What? Don’t tell me you—”

“I just said I don’t feel like dealing with all this. Let’s have the old Alfred back.”

Parallel Wisdom: Domain Mastery—Spellbreak.

Allen thrust his palm out toward the man, then clenched his fist, as if crushing something in his hand—which, in a way, was exactly what he was doing. A moment later, Alfred collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Wha... A-Allen? I... What did you just...” Riese stammered.

“Huh? Oh, I didn’t kill him. I mean, you can’t kill someone who’s already dead.”

“What?!”

As they spoke, something about the collapsed man changed. He slowly rose to his feet, wearing a look that said he couldn’t believe what he was witnessing. Allen simply shrugged.

“Impossible! Who *are* you?” the man asked.

“Oh, I’m nobody special. Just a poor good-for-nothing. Don’t worry about me.

More importantly, are *you* all right? I think you should be able to move around just fine, but this is the first time I've done that trick, so I'm not totally sure."

"No, I'm fine. Feel just like my old self," Alfred replied.

"What... What just happened?" asked Riese, understandably baffled by what she had just seen.

Allen hadn't offered a word of explanation, since comprehending the situation all at once would have been even more terrifying for her.

"Where should I start?" said Allen. "Hmm... Oh, I know. I guess the most important part is that this man—Alfred—is already dead."

"I... Huh?" Riese looked in surprise at her uncle, who responded only with a gentle nod. Her expression twisted as she realized the truth. She bit her lip as though trying to hold back tears. "B-But just now, my uncle was perfectly—"

"He wasn't 'perfectly' anything," said Allen. "That was a different person you just saw."

"You did well to notice while I was wearing all this armor," Alfred remarked.

"I have my ways. I could tell from the moment you showed up at the festival—about the same time Riese presumed it was you, I bet."

"I see. Then why did you let me be for so long? Even if not immediately, surely you could have dealt with me at some point before now."

"I guess I could have, but what was the rush?"

"Hmm?"

Allen didn't mean to imply that he didn't care what happened to the village. Rather, it seemed that Alfred had been in the village for some time already.

"You've been here not for some months, but *years*. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to hear you've been here since you first went missing."

"What makes you say that?"

"The reaction of the other villagers when you appeared. They were clearly very familiar with you."

"But I'm wearing a full suit of armor and a helmet. Anyone could have elicited

the same response.”

“Not at all. Riese’s reaction told me that suit of armor is the same one you wore in life. What would be the point of another person being inside all this time only to switch places with you today?”

Alfred had been dwelling in this village without issue for some time. Of course, for a dead man to dwell among the living was strictly forbidden in this world, but where was the harm, really? Allen was happy to let him go on doing as he pleased. He wouldn’t have chosen to live in this village himself, but the villagers seemed to enjoy peaceful lives. What objections could he possibly have?

“So as long as there’s peace, you have no objections?” asked Alfred. “What an unusual way of thinking.”

“You think so? It doesn’t seem unusual to me.”

“Well, if you knew, shouldn’t you at least have told Riese?”

“And how would that go? ‘Sorry, but the person you came all the way here to search for, and finally found, is already dead’? I’m not that cruel.”

“But by telling her, you could have avoided putting her in danger.”

“If I were to eliminate everything that might endanger her before she even encountered it, I’d have to wipe out all of mankind. After all, you never know when someone might try to hurt her somehow, or if a person who was harmless yesterday will still be harmless tomorrow.”

“A rather extreme way of looking at things, but I take your point,” said Alfred as he turned to Riese, who flinched in response but did not avert her gaze.

“Uncle...”

“Everything your friend said is true. Despite appearances, I am already dead.”

“Then how can you move around as you do? To my eyes, you appear as you always were.”

“I suppose that’s true now. But it wasn’t until moments ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“I suppose you might say I was being controlled. At least, I was not acting of my own free will when I tried to kill you. In fact, I was made a puppet by the very people who would call you ‘God’s puppet.’ How ironic.” Alfred briefly flashed a coy smile before remembering the gravity of the situation and returning to his composed demeanor.

Riese wrung her hands as if grappling with a range of difficult feelings, but she did not avert her eyes.

“I suppose,” Alfred continued, “we might say that your friend here rescued me from that state I was in.”

“Something like that,” Allen agreed.

Using his Boundless Knowledge skill, he had gleaned that Alfred was in the thrall of two distinct enchantments. The first allowed him, a dead man, to move. The second forced him to act according to the will of whoever was controlling him. It was the latter that Allen had destroyed. Knowledge was a basic rule in this world, and the power to manipulate knowledge was more or less equivalent to having control over the rules of creation. Using such a power to dispel an enchantment or two was no problem for him.

“Th-Then what about everything you told me before?” asked Riese.

“It wasn’t all lies,” said Alfred. “There *are* people who are trying to kill you. But your father is not among them.”

“I see...” Riese replied, bewildered, wearing an expression that looked relieved but by no means happy.

“What I told you were lies designed to win you over. It *is* true that I resent the royal family, however.”

Riese gasped. It seemed that was the part that had concerned her most. She swallowed and turned her gaze downward.

“I’m sure you’ve known this ever since the words I said to you before I died: I joined forces with others in order to have my revenge on the royal family.”

Even there in the dusk, the darkness in Alfred’s eyes was clear. Of course, this was a discussion between two of the highest-ranking individuals in the

kingdom; it would be no surprise if there were even deeper complexities between them than Allen could see from the outside. But for that very reason, perhaps Riese could not see what he could.

“However,” Alfred continued, “as you might surmise from my being attacked right after, I was simply being used as a convenient tool. I daresay they would have been content to disturb you, even slightly. My death was all part of that endeavor—all within *their* plan.”

“*Their?*” said Riese. “You mean...”

“Yes, I believe your assumption is correct. There is much I’d like to tell you, but this body is already dead, and I am merely forcing it to act. The sorcerer is doubtless already aware the enchantment has been broken and is likely listening to this conversation. My time is up, so I can only tell you the few most important facts. Now, Allen, was it?”

“Yes?” Allen replied.

“If you’ll forgive my presumptuousness, I have two requests for you.”

“Go ahead. I can’t promise I’ll fulfill them, but I’ll do as much as I can. If that wasn’t my intention, I never would’ve given you the chance to talk to me in the first place.”

“Understood. Thank you. Well then, for my first request...may I leave this girl in your care? As you can see, she’s a good girl, but worrisome too. I won’t ask you to do anything unreasonable, but if she is ever in need and you can help, will you please do so?”

“No problem. I already planned on doing as much anyway.”

“Is that so? Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. You know, you almost seem like a father to her.”

“Hah. In a way, I am. I don’t know how the girl thinks of me, but I certainly view her as my own daughter. In fact, she used to call me ‘father,’ and it was all I could do to hide my joy.”

Riese swallowed upon hearing Alfred’s words but said nothing. This wasn’t the time. She bit her lip hard, trying to hold back the tears.

“Now, for the second request,” Alfred continued. “Will you cross swords with me?”

“Uncle?!” Riese cried.

“Sure, why not?” asked Allen.

“Allen!”

“I’m surprised you accepted,” said Alfred. “I expected you to respond as Riese did.”

“I kind of expected it,” Allen admitted. “Only natural for a father to want to test the mettle of the man he’s entrusting his daughter to, right?”

“Heh. Yes, that’s right. Thank you,” said Alfred, drawing his sword a moment later.

Allen stepped forward in response. He could sense Riese’s eyes on him, wishing she could say something, but she remained silent. He sighed. She really was a worrisome girl. It was hard to imagine she didn’t understand what the outcome of this encounter would be. She had all the right in the world to tearfully put a stop to it, but she had no intention of exercising it.

“Just to be clear,” said Alfred, “you are aware I’m fairly handy with the blade, yes? Of course, this is not my original body, but its owner was said to be a master swordsman, and I am more than capable of making use of those abilities.”

“Is that right? No problem. A master swordsman is nothing to me.”

“Hah! Really, now? You certainly are dependable!”

With that, Alfred leaped forward at a speed that would have instantly brought death to any normal foe—a sign of how high his requirements were for the person in whose care he would leave Riese.

Sword of Cataclysm: Final Flash.

Two shadows intersected, and a moment later, one of the figures had been sliced in two.

“I see,” said Alfred. “So all that big talk wasn’t for nothing. This time I can die

peacefully.” His voice was surprisingly clear, given that it came from a severed head—likely the lingering effects of the enchantment. Nevertheless, he had little time left. It was the human form that bestowed human consciousness, whether the person in question was dead or alive. That was why Allen had taken this course of action, which was exactly what Alfred desired. Now, at least, he could die as a human.

“Oh...there’s one last thing I must say,” said Alfred. “Riese...sorry for everything. And live a happy life. I suppose that makes two things. Hah. I suppose that’s just...what makes me...the man I am... Muddled...to the very...end...”

With that, he spoke no more. The sound of his voice was replaced by a stifled sobbing, and Allen sighed. This was why he had sought a peaceful life. Looking to the sky, he heaved a sigh once more.

The Former Hero Resolves the Happening in the Dusk

Allen and Riese returned to the village square in time for the end of the festival. Beatrice didn't bother scolding the pair, though the look she greeted them with upon their return told them that she was merely saving her remonstrations for later. Although it was impossible for her to have guessed everything that had transpired, she nevertheless seemed to understand—she knew Riese too well.

Even if she hadn't gleaned everything, Riese's recent behavior had suggested that only one thing would spur her into action. Beatrice didn't want to force them to share the details of whatever unpleasant events had unfolded, but she did wonder exactly what had taken place.

The three took part in the festival's closing ceremony. In a way, it seemed like a fitting end. At the conclusion of the festival, the fires were gathered and brought to the center of the village square, and everyone—dead and living alike—danced around them. They danced until the fires burned out, at which point the dead returned to their own world and the living slept in preparation for the next day.

The timing had been carefully arranged so that the fires would burn out at the correct moment. Nobody would collapse out of exhaustion from dancing continuously, as the fires would have gone out long before then, and everyone would head home. Or, for Allen and the others, to the mayor's house once again. After three days, they had gotten used to their surroundings and had no trouble finding their way back in the darkness.

However, as the other two were about to enter, Allen stopped in his tracks.

"What is it, Allen?" asked Riese.

"Oh, I still have a little business to attend to," he replied. "You two go ahead and get some rest. We'll need all we can get."

“Is that right? Very well,” said Beatrice. “If that’s what you want, that’s what we shall do.”

“All right,” said Allen. “And don’t lecture Riese too much, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll save the lectures until tomorrow, when I’ll give it to you both in equal portions. We’ll have plenty of time for that while we’re on the move.”

“Can I ask you to go easy on *me*, at least?” asked Allen.

“Me too,” Riese added.

“I’ll take suitable measures,” said Beatrice. With that, the pair disappeared into the house.

I’m probably busted, he thought dryly. He wondered if he was causing them unnecessary bother but soon discarded that thought. He really wanted them to get some rest, especially Riese. Compared to her earlier behavior, she seemed to be back to normal, but Allen knew she was making a great effort to appear that way. If this was a matter she was capable of getting over so quickly, she never would have cared enough to come here in the first place. Whatever it took to help them get the rest they needed was fine.

“Now then, let’s get this over with quickly so it doesn’t interfere with tomorrow,” Allen murmured, looking over his shoulder at the figure behind him. He had already noticed its presence and therefore showed no surprise. And since the figure seemed unsurprised as well, it seemed they had noticed Allen too.

“There’s one thing I’d like to ask you,” came a voice. It was one Allen had heard the most during the past three days. He had already expected that too. He cocked his head as he observed the figure: the mayor.

“Yeah? Go ahead.”

“Can I ask how long you’ve known?”

“Hm, I feel like I’ve been asked that before. But sure, I don’t mind.” Answering wouldn’t cause him any trouble, and his response was the same as before.

“From the very beginning.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“I knew there was a dead person residing in this village from the moment I set foot in it. And I knew that you were the demon necromancer controlling him from the moment I met you.”

“What?!” cried the mayor, eyes wide in shock at some (or all) of the revelations within Allen’s statement. But Allen hadn’t intended to surprise the mayor; he had simply been answering honestly.

“Then...why didn’t you say anything? No, for that matter, this entire affair doesn’t seem to concern you at all.”

“Right, that’s exactly why I didn’t. I didn’t feel like getting involved.”

“Even though you knew I was a demon? A necromancer?”

“Yup.”

Necromancers were capable of turning the dead into their servants—a heretical practice for which execution was a common punishment. Considering the mayor was a demon, his circumstances were probably different, but Allen’s response would have been the same even if the mayor had been a normal person. After all, the village was the picture of peace and quiet.

“If villagers were being sacrificed night after night, I might’ve felt differently,” Allen continued. “But that’s not the case. The living, dead, and demons are all peacefully spending their days here. Why would I disrupt that for no reason?”

To Allen, it seemed an enviable situation, so much so that he was eager to mingle with the villagers. It was just as he’d said to Alfred: though he couldn’t seriously consider living here since it seemed clear that any trouble was simply hiding beneath the surface, he didn’t want to upset the peaceful lives that people had made for themselves.

“Even though I’m a demon?” asked the mayor.

“That’s what you’re stuck on?” Allen answered. “Doesn’t matter to me. I barely know enough about demons to say anything about them one way or another.”

Although the last demon he’d met had been unpleasant, he felt it would be rather closed-minded to assume that all of them were bad people. As far as he

could tell, the mayor was not a danger to the village, and in fact actively *helped* it. To bring harm to such a person would be the height of ungratefulness. At least, that's how Allen had felt prior to the festival.

"I really hadn't planned on doing anything," Allen continued. "I was only keeping tabs on Riese to be safe. Even after what Alfred said to her, I wouldn't have interfered with either you or him. Of course, I would've had to stop Riese if she'd tried to take action based on what she'd heard. That story was full of holes."

Allen would have been content simply to stop his friend from making a mistake. True, he might have had to give the mayor a piece of his mind later, but nothing that would upset life in the village. As a rule, he believed in treating others the way he wanted to be treated. But...

"Of course, this is all hypothetical in the end. It's meaningless now. Maybe I should've told you how I felt earlier, but I didn't want to cause you any undue stress. I guess that's my fault. What a tough situation."

"Indeed. Thanks to my hasty judgment, I've lost one of my finest pawns, much to my lament. However, when I consider that I have acquired one even finer, perhaps it is not so bad," said the mayor.

Suddenly, the number of presences Allen could sense in the area swelled into the dozens. It wasn't that they'd simply been hidden by the dark until now—they had just been produced out of nowhere. It seemed the ground here had been prepared in advance to allow the mayor to produce a legion of the dead with a snap of his fingers.

"I see," said Allen. "I figured you had to be hiding all these dead somewhere. In the ground, huh? I guess that's the most fitting place for them, after all."

"Arrogant, aren't you? You certainly are powerful, but powerful enough to handle this many foes? What's more, unlike the other pawn you dealt with, these don't even possess consciousness. Simply losing their head won't be enough to destroy them."

Indeed, Alfred's death via decapitation had been an act of self-destruction. It was only because he recognized himself as a person that decapitating him had been enough to kill him. Those lacking such consciousness were simply zombies

who would keep coming even without their heads. This was the nature of the dead.

“They feel no pain and will keep attacking even as their limbs are torn to pieces. No matter how powerful you are, you can’t possibly hope to—”

Parallel Wisdom: Domain Mastery—Spellbreak.

Tiring of the drawn-out conversation, Allen suddenly thrust his left hand out in front of him, then clenched his fist. Though there was nothing in his hand, he nevertheless clearly felt the sensation of grasping and crushing something. Moments later, the effect became clear—the dozens of dead that surrounded him fell to the ground, where they crumbled into clods of earth.

“What?!” gasped the mayor, mouth agape at this development too sudden for him to fully grasp.



Allen wasn't prepared to patiently wait for the dumbfounded mayor to return to his senses. "Oh, right. I forgot to tell you the most important thing of all. I'm in a really, *really* bad mood right now. Don't expect me to go easy on you, okay? It's far too late for that."

Sword of Cataclysm: Sundering Slice.

With a sideways glance at the mayor's body, now cleaved in two, Allen wondered if this demon that had taken the form of an old man had had time for one last thought before meeting its end.

With a sigh, he flicked the blood from his blade and returned it to its sheath, the metallic sound somewhat consoling his addled mind. Looking up, he saw, predictably, the very scene he reviled, and sighed again. His business in the village had finally been brought to a close.

The Former Hero Laments His Lost Peace

The next morning, a minor commotion arose in the village. It was inevitable that the disappearance of the mayor the day after the festival would cause something of a stir. When it came to who was responsible, Allen and his friends were clear candidates...yet nobody seemed to even suspect them. In fact, the commotion mostly concerned the selection of the next mayor; the question of responsibility was barely raised, let alone the idea of searching for the culprit.

“Is the village really just that peaceful, or do people living on the Frontier just accept that this sorta thing happens sometimes?” Allen wondered aloud.

“I think you’re onto something,” said Beatrice. “I get the impression they’re more concerned with preserving the peace than kicking up a fuss.”

“Is that a good thing, though?” asked Riese.

“I guess it’s not our place to judge,” said Allen.

“I suppose you’re right.”

If the villagers were content to simply accept the mayor’s disappearance, then Allen and the others would have to be content too. This wasn’t a situation for outsiders to get involved in.

Besides, the truth was that it was more convenient this way. Thanks to the villagers’ lack of concern, Allen, Beatrice, and Riese were already on their merry way, once again being gently rocked by the carriage, having left the village earlier that morning after the commotion died down. That had always been the plan, and they had done everything they could in the village. There was no reason to stick around.

The goodbyes had been quick and painless. They hadn’t had much contact with any of the villagers anyway. The woman who had shown them to the mayor’s house had wished them well, and with that they had left the place behind. The group was treated with such an absence of suspicion that Allen almost felt guilty about so easily getting away with it, but he chalked it up to

that simply being the village's way of doing things. He hoped the approach continued to bring them many more years of peace.

He had told Riese and Beatrice that the mayor had been the one pulling the strings earlier that morning. Both had simply nodded in response—it seemed they had already surmised as much. Now the party rode the carriage back to town while bathing in the rays of the sun.

“Oh...” said Allen.

“Hm? Something wrong? Forget something?” asked Beatrice. “I suppose you didn't really bring anything you could forget.”

“I was just wondering what happened to the lecture you were ready to give us.” Although there hadn't been time in the morning, they'd had an abundance of downtime since leaving the village. Allen had almost forgotten that she had been preparing to give him a piece of her mind.

“Why did you have to bring that up?” said Riese. “Shouldn't you be happy she forgot? Or have you been anticipating being told off? Does that get you going?”

“Hey now, don't go getting the wrong idea,” said Allen. “Of course I don't want to be lectured, but we *were* in the wrong. We've gotta take our medicine.”

“Ugh...I suppose you're right.”

Allen noticed that she seemed rather fearful of being scolded by Beatrice. He looked toward the other woman and saw her smiling wryly.

“I didn't forget,” said Beatrice. “I just wasn't sure if I had any right to scold you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...just like back in town, I was hoodwinked again. It never occurred to me that the slightest thing was off about the mayor until the festival was well underway. How can I turn around and chastise you two?”

“Hmm...feels like you're overthinking it,” said Allen. At the very least, sneaking off as he and Riese had done warranted a reprimand. “And besides, why should being hoodwinked mean you don't have the right to criticize

others? It's the person who deceived you who's in the wrong, isn't it?"

"That's right," said Riese. "And don't forget, *I* was fooled by the mayor too. And unlike you, I didn't even *notice* that I'd been fooled."

"I suppose you'd be right if it wasn't my responsibility to serve you, Lady Riese," Beatrice said faithfully. "If I had allowed any harm to come to you, I would have rightfully been made to shoulder the blame."

Allen and Riese glanced at each other, both smiling with bemusement at the stubborn extent of Beatrice's loyalty. For the most part, it was a positive quality, but at times like this, it troubled them.

"I guess so, but I still think it's okay," said Allen. "Maybe you screwed up as a knight in service, but as a person, you did the right thing."

To place one's trust in people without fear of being deceived was a surprisingly difficult thing to do, and almost impossible for a knight. That side of Beatrice was a precious thing, and Allen hated the thought of her losing touch with it. He himself would probably never be able to think that way again.

"In fact, I'm the one who's in the wrong as a person, in a lot of ways," he continued, his honest feelings coming out sounding like a self-disparaging remark.

"That's not true," said Riese.

"What do you mean?"

"I think you were in the right, no matter what anyone says," Riese declared with an intense look. "After all, you were the one who saved me."

Allen couldn't help but chuckle at her sheer earnestness.

"What are you laughing at?!" Riese exploded. "I'm baring my soul here! Hmph!"

"Sorry, sorry. I know you really meant it, it's just that... I mean, thank you, Riese."

"Hm? Um, you're welcome."

Allen smiled at her clear confusion. Once again, without meaning to, Riese

had acted as if Allen was her hero. Nevertheless, whatever protestations he might make, he *was* here, doing whatever he could to help her.

“Anyway, that being said...Beatrice, please go ahead and give Riese a good tongue-lashing,” Allen told her.

“What? Why are you bringing that up again? Wait, and why just me?!”

“You just said that I was in the right, didn’t you? So you’re the only one who deserves to be yelled at.”

“That’s not fair!” cried Riese.

“Hm...I don’t think I can forgive my own missteps, but I suppose it’s true that this is a separate issue,” said Beatrice. “Perhaps I ought to upbraid Riese this instant.”

“Wait, just me?! Really?!”

Amused by the exchange playing out before him, Allen’s thoughts suddenly turned to the object he carried in his breast pocket. When would it be appropriate to bring it up?

The item in question was a familiar stone that had rolled out of the mayor’s pocket as he had collapsed to the ground. Familiar because it resembled the stone that the gentleman had produced in the forest. At a glance it appeared to be a crystal, but Allen’s abilities told him it was not as simple as it seemed. It was some sort of powerful tool that could be used to control the dead.

He hadn’t spoken a word of this to the others yet. He wasn’t sure how to go about it. The fact that it could control the dead; Alfred, whose body below the neck was not his original body; the General, who had been decapitated... All these facts were clues pointing to a bewildering conclusion—one that, with the help of Alfred’s explanation, Allen had already largely figured out.

He felt like crying out, “All I wanted was a peaceful life! How did things end up like this?!” But it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. It was clear now that Riese was deeply embroiled in this sequence of events, and he couldn’t just abandon her now. Even if he’d wanted to, they were deep within the Frontier, and it would still be days before they made it back to the relative civilization of the town.

Whatever his next steps were to be, it would have to wait until then. As for what those steps would be, all Allen was sure of was that they would take him even farther from the peaceful life he sought. Part of him felt like throwing in the towel, but all he could do was have faith that once this episode reached its conclusion, he would finally find his peace. For now, however, he would have to put those thoughts aside and try to find whatever sense of calm he could in this moment.

“Oh, wait a moment, Beatrice!” said Riese, interrupting Allen’s thoughts.

“Hm? What’s wrong? It’s no use stalling, you know. You’re still going to get it from me in the end.”

“No, this is serious. I just received a transmission,” said Riese, touching the jewel that hung around her neck—a magical device that normally allowed her to send one-way reports to a designated recipient. The large amount of magical power it consumed, however, meant that she couldn’t use it frequently.

“What?” said Beatrice. “*You* received a transmission from *them*? Is it an emergency?”

“I’m not sure,” said Riese. “I’ll check right now... Huh.”

Riese’s dumbfounded look gave Allen a bad feeling. “What is it?” he asked. “A disturbance in the capital?”

“In a way. The General has just appeared there.”

“What?” cried Beatrice, astonished.

Allen sighed. Not even a moment’s peace...

Enter Madness

Craig took a summary glance at the report in his hands and snorted. Noticing Brett's curious gaze, he handed the document to his son, who soon responded with a snort of his own. The contents of the report were appalling.

"Again?" said Brett.

"Indeed, I feel the same," said Craig. "But to be precise, this is different from last time, is it not?"

"True, but even so...just how incompetent can they be?"

"Again, I feel the same. But let us remember that it is thanks to our alliance with the demons that we enjoy our current position."

"That is certainly true, father," said Brett, mustering a nod despite his discontent. He read over the contents of the black parchment once again.

Put simply, the report detailed the failure of an experiment to enable a dead man to exist alongside the living. Contact had been lost with a village essential to the conducting of the experiment. It seemed that, considering the circumstances, the party responsible had decided this could only mean it had failed.

In truth, this was not a matter of great import. Perhaps if it had been ten days prior... But no, even then he would have felt the same. Although the responsible party may have failed to fully complete the task assigned to them, they had succeeded in accomplishing the original goal. True, it seemed they had ultimately been discovered, but considering what was to come, they had done more than enough. Besides, it was easy to guess why they had failed.

"For them to suddenly fail after coming so far, the Saint must be responsible, no?" asked Brett.

"Indeed. I cannot conceive of any other possibility," Craig agreed. He snorted haughtily. "How covetous, to seek to acquire another pawn at this point. I suppose they were eager to apologize for their past failures."

“I suppose it depends on who shoulders the blame for the matter with the dragon,” Brett replied. “If we ignore that, they only failed once before. And they *did* do well in spreading those rumors and bringing the Saint to them. Alas...”

Alas, then they had been done in by those they had been tasked with destroying. The report also detailed the success of luring in the Saint, for what little that was worth at this point. Presumably they were eager to show that they had succeeded in accomplishing the bare minimum—and the bare minimum it certainly was. No matter how Craig and Brett hurried, they would not make it in time to deal with her.

“At least we now understand that the Saint is our greatest problem,” said Craig.

“Indeed,” Brett agreed. “By the way, something in this report concerns me.”

“What’s that?” asked Craig. He hadn’t noticed anything particularly concerning after reviewing it twice. He looked at his son with great interest.

“The report says the Saint’s party numbered three people.”

“Yes, that’s right. The Saint, her personal guard, and a young man of the same age as the Saint herself, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. And that young man has me curious.”

“Mm. I *do* wonder where he came from, but I imagine it was a towns person they picked up along the way. The Saint is still a woman, after all. Now she has escaped the confines of the castle, I would hardly be surprised if she acquired a fancy man or two. And threats to one’s life only heighten a person’s lusts. Survival instinct.”

“But I think that... No, it’s nothing.”

Craig snorted. Had Brett developed a thing for the Saint? True, she wasn’t half bad to look at, if one only considered appearances. Craig was content to let his son go on thinking that way. After all, the Saint was not long for this world. He would gladly allow Brett to enjoy her for the limited time she had left.

More bothersome was that he had felt such a trifling matter was worth bringing attention to. Still, what more could he expect from *him*? It had served

as a good enough diversion as they waited.

Craig looked out the window of the carriage as he addressed the man before him. “It’s about time, isn’t it? Is everything ready out there?”

“Yes. All in perfect order,” came the muffled reply from the man whose black robes hid his face.

Craig snorted. “Such confidence, despite your constant fiascoes of late. Perhaps that is all the more reason to trust your words, though. I’m sure you people are keenly aware of your recent mistakes. Do not let me down this time. This is, of course, what *you* people wanted too.”

“Yes, sir,” the robed man replied, head bowed.

Craig snorted at the foreign nature of the group he had cast his lot in with. Not to worry. They had the same goals. Their natural enmity was the very thing that had brought them together—they were both using each other. At some point these ties would have to be severed, but he could cross that bridge later. He did not have the capacity for such thoughts at the moment. These people had exactly what Craig needed right now, but an enemy was still an enemy, and he could not afford any distractions when dealing with them. Of course, that might have been exactly what they were counting on. Both parties were always thinking about how to outmaneuver the other. He had to focus on what was most pressing without ever letting his guard down—a difficult task, but not impossible. It was the only way to see his aspirations through to fruition.

As he was rocked by the irregular movements of the carriage, Craig peered out of the window again. It was a familiar sight, with the royal capital coming into view.

“Finally. Finally!” he muttered in a flood of emotion, narrowing his eyes and clenching his fists in an effort to curb the surging anticipation of what was to come.

Brett was beset by frustration as he watched Craig stare out of the window. He wished he had been more insistent in voicing his concerns, but he was

paralyzed by a lack of proof. Nevertheless, he couldn't help but feel disquieted by the report's details on the Saint's male compatriot. He had a strange feeling—a feeling that they were making some clear mistake. But again, he had no proof, and mere intuition would never convince his father of anything.

And anyway, what did it matter if they *were* somehow erring? All this would soon be over, not even an entire day from now. No matter what they had or had not overlooked, no matter what powers the Saint had access to, it would all be irrelevant soon enough. However forcefully the driver spurred the horses on, they would never make it so deep into the Frontier lands in time.

Reassured, Brett breathed a sigh of relief. He was worrying too much. He had been arrogant to believe that he could have been attuned to some reality that his father had not noticed. His fears were naught but whispers of self-doubt that had surfaced on the eve of his unprecedented triumph, causing him to invent out of whole cloth an imagined flaw in their grand designs.

Brett repeated this to himself as he began to feel increasingly relaxed. Yes, the moment would soon be at hand. Away with these trifling thoughts. He closed his eyes, reminding himself to focus on the moment to come just as his father was doing. Only the sounds of the three men breathing filled the carriage, each thinking of the immediate future. Brett had been assigned a crucial role—one that would forgive no failure, however unlikely such an outcome might be. All the more reason to focus his energy on his duties.

And yet even as he attempted to convince himself that all was well, to remain fixated steadfastly on the events about to unfold, the hazy unease that had taken root in his mind would not depart.

Rumors and Unrest

The royal capital of Caldea was the most flourishing city in the Kingdom of Adastera, and on this day it was particularly lively. Today the city's usual hustle and bustle was possessed of a curious quality, different from the norm. A short walk through the streets would clarify the reason for this change in atmosphere, as it was on the lips of much of the population.

"Hey, did you hear?"

"Aye, about what the kingdom's doing to us? It can't be true, right?"

"You doubt the words of the General?"

"Of course not, but you know what I mean."

"Sure. I don't want to believe we've been deceived either, but here we are..."

"And if it's true, what are we supposed to do?"

Such conversations were shared between friends, merchants, and even lovers, and most voiced the same feelings: fear and unease. It was this that lent the city its tense atmosphere.

The man could only sigh at the current state of affairs. His white hair and wrinkled visage showed a man beginning to transition into old age, but his features were as rugged and eyes as sharp as ever. Even if not for the suit of armor in which he was clad, the warrior's spirit emanating from him made his station clear.

The man was Edward Geauxgourd, Captain of the First Knightly Order of Adastera, known as the strongest warrior in the kingdom. He currently occupied a room in the castle assigned to him for the fulfillment of his bureaucratic duties, where he had just received a report from an adjutant.

"So the town's condition is as bad as ever, if not worse," said Edward.

"Yes, sir," replied the adjutant. "I believe we can safely say that the rumor has been repeated throughout the city. The source being what it is, this was to be

expected to some extent, but the rate at which word has spread still seems entirely too fast.”

“As if someone is deliberately doing it, you mean.”

“I’d say it’s almost certain.”

Edward had no quibble with that argument. There was no other conceivable explanation. The capital was not some small town—a great number of people flowed through it daily. It was impossible for a single topic to be the subject of conversation across the entire city unless it was by design.

“And who are these agitators?” he asked.

“I’m afraid we have not found them. All I can say is that considering the situation, they must number a good many.”

“Hm. Yes, I suppose only an organized group could be so effective. And a large one at that.”

“Perhaps subjects of some other nation?”

“Perhaps. But this is only a feeling, not evidence. Bear in mind that it is my strength, not my wits, that earned me this station.”

“You are too modest, sir. If you truly possessed naught but strength, our nation would have long since been invaded by some foreign land, if not outright cast under their yoke.”

“That’s enough flattery out of you,” said Edward. The adjutant had been a great help in fulfilling matters of documentation and other duties, but worthless praise was one thing he didn’t need. He appreciated the admiration with which the young man regarded him but struggled to know how to respond. With a bemused smile, he tried to change the subject. “And what of the General?”

“I’m afraid we are still searching for him.”

“Understood. I suppose by the time we heard about it, he had already gone into hiding. Are we sure it was even really him?”

“I understand your doubts, but he was seen by much of the populace. I find it easier to believe it was really him than to think so many people were deceived—though, I don’t want to believe it either, to be quite honest.”

Edward chuckled slightly, disregarding the sincerity with which the adjutant, his eyes downcast, was speaking. His own thinking differed to the younger man's. The adjutant meant that he didn't want to believe the General had betrayed them.

The origin of these rumors had been the sudden appearance of a man resembling the General in a city bar. He had claimed that the kingdom was deceiving its people, and that while he could not offer further details, proof of his claims would become clear in the coming days. Coming from anyone else, such claims would be regarded as little more than idle chatter, but coming from one of the kingdom's key servants, they had the potential to have a greater influence than the words of all but the highest-ranking nobles. Such an incident couldn't simply be ignored. Whether his claims were true or not, they had the potential to cause great harm to the nation.

Considering the situation, it was understandable that people thought the General had turned traitor and joined up with some foreign nation. However, it was a different, much more fundamental matter that Edward was concerned with. He suspected that the General was already dead.

"Or perhaps I'm wrong? Could it be..." Edward wondered aloud.

"Captain?"

"Oh, worry not. Just talking to myself."

"Yes, sir."

Could it be that he had not died but turned traitor and gone into hiding, as his adjutant believed? No. It was inconceivable. It had to be an impostor. Edward knew how much love the General had for his king and country. And yet he had not been seen for months.

Though the General had earned his nickname due to his Gift, his formal title was Captain of the Second Knightly Order. He had duties comparable in scale to Edward's and was a cornerstone of the kingdom's national defenses. It was impossible that he would simply disappear for an indefinite length of time. True, Edward had heard that the General had fallen ill and become bedridden, but it had now been several months—far too long. Chances were he was already dead, and that fact was being hidden from everyone.

“Very well,” said Edward, climbing to his feet. “Message received.”

The adjutant blinked a few times in confusion before realizing the significance of the captain’s sudden movement. “Where are you going, sir?” he asked, flustered. “You still have business to attend to here.”

“Here? What business could be more important than the very fate of the kingdom?”

“The fate of the kingdom?” asked the younger man, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“The General has betrayed us, no? I believe I’m the only man in the kingdom capable of dealing with such a threat.”

The adjutant gasped at a sudden realization that he either hadn’t considered, or simply hadn’t wanted to. “I... Yes, certainly.” The loss of the General would mean the sudden transformation of a rival nation’s rank-and-file into elite soldiers. Failing to respond immediately could be fatal.

Of course, this was precisely why Edward struggled to believe that the General had truly betrayed the kingdom. At the very least, the kingdom’s higher-ups would have notified the knights of such a fact, so that they would be prepared for whatever attack might be coming.

“Besides, I’ve never truly crossed swords with the man. This will be a fine opportunity to see who is the strongest in the kingdom,” said Edward with a grin, causing the adjutant to gasp with admiration. It seemed he had faith in his captain’s capabilities.

Inspiring such confidence was one of Edward’s duties—the duty of any strong person. Though he did not feel it was his forte, he could not shirk the responsibilities of leadership that were not to his taste.

Edward moved to leave his room to join the search party. With the General apparently a traitor, there would be no choice but to deploy the army. He narrowed his eyes as the light from the window hit them. He had much to consider, but no matter how high a position he had achieved, there was ultimately only one thing he had to do: destroy the enemy. That hadn’t changed.

At the same time, Edward felt a vague sense of apprehension. This, however, had been with him since before his conversation with the adjutant—since he had heard about the General appearing in town yesterday. Still, the knights were an elite force, and even if the General had indeed turned traitor, it was hard to imagine any enemy action would be immediately forthcoming. When that moment did arrive, he would need only deploy his forces to hold them back. There should, hopefully, be nothing to worry about.

But no matter how much he reassured himself, Edward couldn't dispel the sense of foreboding. As if trying to refute his misgivings and rouse his spirits, the captain walked ever more forcefully as he left the room.

An Unforeseen Meeting

As soon as Edward made it outside of the castle to join the search party, he received word that a suspicious person had been sighted. Sure that this was simply an overabundance of caution, he nevertheless headed to a backstreet close to the castle. There he found three knights surrounding the person in question.

The man's black robes, in which he was clad head-to-toe, made it impossible to discern who he was, or even his station.

Certainly easy to tell he's suspicious, though, Edward thought with amusement as he faced the knights. "Good work, all of you."

"Just doing our duty, sir," one of the knights replied. "Sorry for bringing you all the way out here."

"Oh, it's no bother, though I *am* curious about why I was needed to handle this matter. I suppose you have good reason for surrounding this gentleman as you have."

Edward would not have been requested to deal with the sighting of any old suspicious person. And yet the man did not seem so slippery that he should be required to capture him, nor did he seem particularly violent. He certainly *was* suspicious, but there seemed to be no reason to have him surrounded like this rather than hauling him off to the nearest military post.

"That was our intention, but this fellow told us we'd better call for you first," said the knight.

"What?" Edward couldn't understand why this man would request his presence or why the knights would accede to his demands. Now that he was here, though, there was no point in asking.

"Ah, forgive me, sir. I was the one who said we'd better call for you," admitted the youngest of the knights, a sharp-featured man of about thirty. "The truth is, I thought this man's voice seemed familiar. I thought it best to

check with you rather than make a grievous error.”

“Hmm,” Edward mumbled.

All three of the men were members of the First Knightly Order under his command. The unit comprised the most elite of all the knights in the kingdom, each personally inducted by Edward himself, who could proudly attest to their skills. Due to their limited number, Edward knew the names and faces of each of his subordinates. He therefore knew that each of these three, while not prone to ostentatious displays of gallantry, were steadfast and reliable soldiers whose judgment would not err in such a matter. Thus it was likely that this suspicious character *did* indeed require the presence of the Captain of the First Knightly Order to handle. Perhaps it was even the General himself.

“Understood,” said Edward. “We’ll soon know if you made the right choice.” He turned toward the robed man, who certainly did not appear particularly noteworthy.

Suddenly, the man spoke. “Hah. You ought to appreciate the good judgment of your knights. Dragging me off would have caused all sorts of problems for you.”

Edward gasped. He, too, recognized the voice. His presence was warranted after all.

“Your Holiness?!”

“Hah. Indeed.” He removed his hood to reveal a white-haired old man. It was unmistakably the Archbishop—officially the Church’s number two, though it was he who truly held the power within the institution.

“What are you doing here dressed like that, Your Holiness?” The Archbishop to be wandering the backstreets was sure to raise questions—all the more so dressed as he was. Considering the current state of affairs, it would have been perfectly reasonable to haul such a figure off for questioning. Had the knights actually done so, however, it could have caused quite a stir.

The Church had a presence in this country but was not exclusive to it. It had many branches and believers throughout all the kingdoms of the world. Besmirching the honor of the Church would not be taken lightly. Indeed, small

nations had been utterly destroyed for such transgressions in the past.

Furthermore, the Church was the administrator of Gifts. All priests, the ones responsible for holding Blessing Ceremonies, belonged to the Church. To betray the Church would be to no longer receive Gifts—an outcome that nobody could tolerate. Fortunately, it was staffed by people of virtue so that there was no need for excessive concern about such risks, but it was hard to imagine what might have happened if the organization's de facto leader had been arrested. Considering the circumstances, it was clear that the Archbishop was the one in the wrong, but it was unlikely the Church and its believers would extend such understanding to the Order. That was an outcome to be avoided if at all possible.

“Well, first let me say that you made the right choice, including holding His Holiness here. I’m proud of you, soldier.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“My, my,” said the Archbishop. “And things could have been very bad for you if they had made a different choice. Your knights certainly are the finest in the land.”

“Your Holiness?” Edward prompted with a look that asked exactly what the Archbishop was up to. It was hard to imagine he wasn’t acquainted with the current climate of the kingdom, but he behaved as though he didn’t understand the implications of his current actions. Edward couldn’t imagine what reason the robed man would have to set them up, but couldn’t help but glare suspiciously at him.

“Goodness, how scary you look, Captain,” said the Archbishop. “Please don’t scowl at me like that; my old heart can’t take it.”

“Spare me. You’re still young.”

“Hah. I’ll spare you any more of my jibes. Besides, I am merely the bait sent to draw you here. Frankly, I never thought I would be so successful.”

Edward raised his brows at the old man’s suggestive mutterings. “Your Holiness?” Disquieted, he instinctively extended a hand toward his sheathed sword.

“I asked you not to glower at me like that.”

“Why did you call for me? I am sure you must have some business with me.”

“You are correct and yet not correct. It is not I who has business with you. As I told you, I am merely the bait—or rather, a lure.”

“What are you talking about? Who is using you?” asked Edward, continuing to stare unflinchingly at the Archbishop. Nobody had the power to use this man as a mere lure, but what reason did he have to lie?

Suddenly, the robed man turned his back to Edward. “If you wish to know, then come with me. Alone. I am sure these young men have more important duties to attend to than dealing with an old man like me, anyway.”

“Had you only been so considerate from the start! Very well. I will follow you, Your Holiness. Not only am I curious about who has summoned me, I cannot leave you unaccompanied.” He glanced at the knights.

“Understood,” one of them replied. “We’ll return to our normal duties.”

“Stay sharp, soldiers.”

“Yes, sir. And may God go with you.”

“I’m not about to march into battle, am I?” said Edward, his smile only superficial. He had no illusions about this matter ending without incident. Yesterday the General, and today the Archbishop. Edward wasn’t optimistic enough to believe that the two were unrelated. The Archbishop had already begun to walk away, and with a nod to his subordinates, Edward followed, wondering what could be waiting for him.

An Explosion of Malice

Brett bit his lip as he gazed upon the shadow of the town in the distance, feeling only frustration and impatience. He understood why he had to remain here and had not objected, but that didn't make the sense of impotence any less frustrating, even as he received detailed reports on exactly what was happening.

"It appears that we were successful in luring in the Captain of the First Knightly Order. Reports state that he is en route to the planned destination."

Brett snorted. "Then phase two is complete. After we deployed the Archbishop, anything but success would have been disastrous. Nevertheless, now comes the main course."

Securing the Captain of the First Knightly Order was crucial to the success of their current plan. The moment that man was left free to act, their schemes would crumble. Edward Geauxgourd was a man who defied reason. Even the General was no match for him on that front. Edward's Gift, known as the Absolute, allowed him to negate any other Gift. Though the power was only effective within a meter from Edward himself, it was nonetheless the most harmful Gift that Brett knew of, for it negated not only Gifts but any phenomena associated with them. If someone with Gift of Strength attempted to thrust their sword at Edward, the attack would be rendered ineffective, failing to cause even a scratch. Arrows would fall to the ground before him, and magic would dissipate the moment it encroached upon his power's area of effect.

Any indirect attacks that relied on Gifts would similarly fail. A falling boulder trap whose mechanism was triggered by an arrow would crumble to dust. Magic might be used to form a fissure beneath Edward's feet, but he would simply float in the air as if he were still standing on the ground. No matter the manner of attack, if a Gift was involved in any way, Edward's ability would negate it. How else to refer to such a Gift if not as one that "defied reason"?

Most soldiers, no matter the nation to which they belonged, possessed some Gift that served them in battle. After years of hard training, their reliance on these abilities in battle was almost unconscious. This made Edward nearly invincible on the battlefield. What was more, even setting Gifts aside, at Level 10, he was one of the most powerful men in existence. For enemy soldiers, he was a sheer nightmare.

The elite status of the First Knightly Order, too, was ultimately a product of Edward being their Captain. Not every recruit was elite, but only the knights capable of serving in a unit led by such a superlative individual remained for long. No praise for his abilities on the battlefield was too lavish.

Though Brett wasn't sure how effective Edward's Gift would be against those they had joined arms with, the risk of failing to deal with him was too great. After all, his fighting abilities alone were fearsome enough. He had to be handled as quickly and directly as possible.

"Hmph. We would be much further along by now if you people could have dealt with him already."

"Forgive us. We don't believe he can be assassinated."

"I suppose if you *had* been able, you would have handled this yourself. And then *we* would have been your next targets."

The man didn't respond. Taking this as an indication that he was correct, Brett scoffed. He understood the necessity but still resented having to join forces with this lot.

"There is little we can do about him," said the man, "but I am sure you will be able to handle him, no?"

Brett scoffed again. "Of course. Who do you think you are talking to? He may be feted as the most powerful man in the kingdom, but he is still only a man. True, if allowed to act freely, he would be most troublesome for us, but we will take care of that."

Brett believed his own words, but still a faint sense of unease lingered. This was the cause of his frustration, his impatience. Their plans had continued to advance, but in a manner too hasty for his liking. An unplanned disturbance

could cause everything to unravel. Still, although he would have liked to have taken more time, doing so would only increase their chances of failure. Not because the kingdom would be more likely to catch on, but simply because it was the way of the world.

At that very moment, as if a symbol of that fundamental truth, Brett received a report. “Lord Brett, she has arrived.”

“Of course. Before we have even taken decisive action, she has arrived to obstruct our plans. How typical of the Champion,” Brett sneered. He had anticipated this.

“You. I take it you have this under control?” asked Brett.

“Of course, Master. Those annoyances will die by our hands today, and in short order. Of that you can be sure.”

“Hmph. Very well.” Brett had no faith in the man’s words, but had to hope that his assurances were reliable. Besides, if what he had heard was true, there was no doubt that the troublemakers would die today. And yet still he could not quell the sense of foreboding—the same one he had felt while reading the report the day prior.

Brett clicked his tongue in exasperation. The feeling was the product of the same overactive imagination that had envisioned that good-for-nothing when he had read about the man who accompanied the Saint. Now that the Champion had arrived, it was almost his chance to shine. He didn’t have time for such foolish fantasies.

As Brett headed for the city, he narrowed his gaze to disguise his trepidation.

The moment she entered the city, she noticed that its streets bustled with an energy as unpleasant as it was unusual.

Akira tsked. “Was my timing off? I thought this would be the best spot for it,” she said, mumbling further curses under her breath. There was nothing for it now; she would just have to keep on walking. She looked over her shoulder. “Stick with me, okay? There’s a lotta people here. You dawdle and you’re gonna get lost.”

With a gasp, the tiny figure behind her clung to her legs tightly, determined not to lose her. Akira sighed as she felt the warm gazes of the crowd on her.

“I’m not gonna leave you, you know. Damn it, I can’t walk with you holding on to me like that.”

Akira forcibly peeled the girl from her legs. After hesitating for a moment, she grabbed her by the hand. With a gasp, the girl went from being on the verge of tears to smiling. More warm gazes came from the crowd that surrounded them. Part of Akira wondered what she was doing, but she knew this girl was her responsibility. Defiantly, she began to walk again.

“I see this place is as busy as ever.”

She had come to the capital to search for someone to whom she could entrust the girl. As far as Akira was concerned, she herself was still a child, regardless of what the conventions of this world said. She wanted to do as she pleased. She wasn’t the kind of upstanding individual who could take responsibility for the life of another. More than anything, she felt incapable of raising a child, of being a good example for her. She had no intention of abandoning her now that she had taken her on, but she was sure the girl would be better off with a suitable guardian if she could find one. Perhaps once Akira felt she herself had grown up, she could come and find her once again.

“All the orphanages I’ve seen so far seemed like awful places. I was sure they’d be nicer in the capital,” Akira muttered to herself as she wandered aimlessly through the streets, observing her surroundings.

She had lived in the capital for a time but wasn’t too familiar with its layout. She could only meander. Besides, it wasn’t as though she didn’t have a goal in mind.

“Here we are...” Akira muttered as she came to a stop deep inside a backstreet. This was no place anyone would bring a child, but...

“Gonna keep playing hide-and-seek, huh? Want me to come and grab you? Fine by me, just don’t start bitching if you lose a limb,” she announced.

Three black-clad figures suddenly appeared behind Akira. “You found us. Impressive.”

From the sound of his voice, she could tell that one was a man, but nothing more than that. Without regard for the intimidating atmosphere, she casually turned around and shrugged. “Seriously? With that level of bloodlust, I’d have to be an idiot *not* to notice. Not to mention you’ve been following me around for half a year.”

“Very well,” said the man. “Then let us hurry this along. Die, Champion.”

“I appreciate you being straight with me, but do you guys really think you’re bad enough to kill me?” she asked. It wasn’t just bombast; even if the black-clad would-be assassins had numbered ten strong, Akira would have defeated them with ease.

“Indeed, we three would be incapable of defeating you...*if* you were alone.”

“Threatening the kid, huh? Figures.” She glanced briefly at the girl who clung tightly to her, then shrugged again. She would easily be victorious even while protecting the child.

“It appears you have misunderstood,” said the man.

“Oh yeah?”

“We were merely the backup plan in the unlikely event the dragon failed to kill you.”

“Then what the hell took you so long?”

“We assumed you would carry the girl. What a surprise to discover that the Saint can restore limbs. Thanks to that, many chances passed us by. But in a way, this is the perfect time. There will be no escaping now.”

“No, there’s no way...”

“We have, in essence, turned the child into a bomb. I imagine one as strong as you could withstand the explosion, but...” The man trailed off, his meaning clear. “Or perhaps you will try to save the child’s life instead? How fitting for the Champion.”

“You bastards!”

Despite her young age, Akira had already waged many bloody battles. She was experienced enough to understand the situation she was in, but it was too

late to make a hasty exit from the scene now. The black-clad figures' plan was already in motion.

“Farewell, meddlesome Champion.”

A great fireball flew toward Akira. It would have been trivial to avoid, but she simply turned to the young girl who was clinging to her with a pleading look in her eyes. From behind, she heard the uttering of a strange incantation.

A roar reverberated through the air.

Echoes of Madness

Edward and the Archbishop soon reached the town outskirts. On the way over, Edward had heard an explosion. He'd had no choice but to trust his subordinates to handle it, however, since at present, what stood before him concerned him far more.

"This is a training ground, isn't it?" The shabby facility was certainly not used by any knightly order. It was likely used to train adventurers and was hardly a fitting place for the Archbishop. "Why have you brought me here, Your Holiness?"

"Aha, that you can only ascertain for yourself. My purpose here is fulfilled."

"Your Holiness?"

"You surely know how busy I am. At this moment in particular, an important duty awaits me. I regret that the best I could do was to lead you here."

Edward wasn't aware of any upcoming rites that would require the Archbishop's presence. He must have been referring to some Church duty. The Church was a secretive organization with many obscure facets. There was no use in inquiring further, nor did Edward have the right to further inconvenience the man.

"Is that right? Understood. Thank you for showing me here."

"Conscientious as ever, Captain. You have all the right in the world to be angry with me. Still, I like that about you. You behave almost as though I am doing you a favor."

"Your Holiness..."

"Oh, ignore my ramblings. Farewell."

Edward watched blankly as the Archbishop walked past him and off into the distance. There was much that was dubious about his conduct, but what had caught Edward's interest was the familiar scent as the man had passed by—the

pungent, unfamiliar aroma that wafted through the air.

“Hardly the time to be worrying about that, I suppose.”

Edward was busy too. With no time to waste, he headed cautiously toward the training ground, soon finding himself in a wide open area. He again stared blankly. A completely desolate space spread out before him, without a soul to be seen. For a moment he wondered if he had been tricked, before a shrill sound rang out.

“Not bad,” said Edward. “But I could sense your violent intent just before you attacked.”

“Still,” came the reply, “that would have been enough to end any ordinary foe. But as I’ve come to expect, you are no ordinary foe.”

“Is that supposed to be praise? You are just as I’ve come to expect too. Attempting to cut me down with nary an introduction is conduct most befitting of you, Craig.”

Edward swung his sword, but the man who had just slashed at him quickly backed away. Craig’s movements were unfaltering—clearly the product of intense training. Edward expected nothing less of the man whose territory bordered the Demon Kingdom.

“It’s been a while, Craig. I believe the last time was...”

“Indeed,” said Craig with a slow nod.

Edward sighed. Clearly Craig had still not put the incident of ten years ago behind him—a sign of how much that girl had meant to him. In a way, it was touching, but even Craig must have understood that no man should live in thrall to the dead forever.

Edward kept those thoughts to himself. She hadn’t been *his* wife. Besides, he had more pressing concerns. “What do you intend to do? You must have a good reason for having the Archbishop lead me here.”

Craig scoffed. “A good reason? Why should *I* need a good reason to summon *you*?”

“What?” said Edward, confused. It was true that, despite his current title, he

was of common birth. While his position did bestow him certain rights in dealing with the nobility, knights were not themselves considered nobles.

Officially, Craig's position as a duke far outstripped his own. However, this was not an official meeting, nor had Craig issued an official summons. And in an unofficial sense, Edward held the higher position—his status as captain allowed him to ignore noble privilege, and he was the older man. More importantly, it had been Edward who had first instructed Craig in the art of battle. Though that period had lasted only a year, it afforded Edward the right to address the duke as an equal. Edward had no interest in bringing up such old matters, but it was the truth. He was under no obligation to unconditionally do as Craig said.

Craig scoffed again. "A joke. I see you are as thick-headed as ever."

"Fancy hearing that from you. She told me many times that you had no sense of humor."

It was Edward who had introduced Craig to the woman who would become his wife. To the duke, she had become a symbol of his old mentor's friendship, and the two would occasionally check in on each other. Edward had not introduced them with any such intentions in mind—the occasion had simply come up during Craig's training—but it was true that his facilitating their meeting had led to Craig's marriage. Thus the two had remained in contact even after Craig's training had come to an end.

"I didn't come here today to reminisce," said Craig.

"Of course not. I'm afraid I don't have the time for such dalliances either. I suppose you may not be aware of the current situation in the capital. I presume you have just arrived, since I wasn't informed of your presence."

"I am fully aware of the situation. Far more than you, in fact." For a moment Craig's voice had taken on a different tone.

"And what do you mean by that?" asked Edward, instinctively bracing his sword-bearing arm. He realized that both he and Craig had been gripping their swords the entire time.

"I meant it when I said I was joking. I had a reason for calling you here. You were mistaken about one thing, however."

“And what was that?”

“That I needed good cause to have the Archbishop lead you here.” Craig snorted. “The Archbishop is my pawn. Why not use him for that purpose, if it would be effective?”

“Your pawn? What have you—”

“Hmph. Did you think my attack was mere tomfoolery? And yet you defended against it well. Perhaps you will claim that was unconscious, but it is clear you aren’t lacking in caution. Well, that is precisely why I have come here.”

“Craig, it can’t be...”

“*Now* you’ve cottoned on? *Can’t* be? What other reason *could* there be?” As he spoke, Craig brought down his sword in a great swooping slash. “I brought you here to eliminate a man who would obstruct my plans!”

Instinctively, Edward reacted. A moment later, a shrill sound rang out as a great shock reverberated through his arm.

Ceaseless Madness

At that moment, the stir that had come over the people was mostly one of confusion. The much-rumored General, as well as the Archbishop, had just appeared in the flesh in the center of the town square.

With all eyes on the pair, the General, an old man wearing a gentle smile, began to speak. “My apologies for shocking all of you with our sudden appearance. However, we have a very good reason for being here—there is no other way to communicate to you the things we need you to hear.”

With his smooth voice and kindly appearance, it was hard to imagine this was the man who struck fear into the hearts of his enemies, but it was common knowledge among the people of the kingdom that the General exuded a disarming personal effect. Thus they heard the man’s words not with surprise, but confusion.

“What we’d like to say,” the General continued, “what we *must* say, is something I imagine you already know. It is what I told you yesterday: that the kingdom is deceiving its people.”

“But that statement was not quite precise enough,” added the Archbishop, smiling warmly, though the assembled crowd knew that he, too, was no mere good-natured old man. Few had the privilege to actually receive a Blessing Ceremony, yet many had seen him administer various religious events with their own eyes. Even if they didn’t understand exactly how important he was, they knew that his words carried a lot of weight. “The truth is, the *gods* are deceiving us.”

That statement intensified the commotion. While the details of the Church were not well understood, there was no doubt that it was an institution that served God. Why would the man who was practically at the Church’s helm disavow the actions of its deity? It was a naturally bewildering state of affairs.

“However, the General’s earlier words were not mistaken. The kingdom itself is well aware of this fact, but it has failed to let the people know. Thus, it is true

that the kingdom is deceiving its people.”

“But that is not what is key. What the Archbishop has told you is what we truly wish to inform the people of—the gods are deceiving you.”

The men had continued to speak before the clamor had a chance to subside. Their words only worsened the uproar, and yet even within that chaos, their declarations, though spoken calmly, resonated with each observer as if whispered directly into their ears.

“I am sure you are all wondering why I did not tell you this yesterday,” said the General. “I do have a reason.”

“This matter concerns the gods,” said the Archbishop. “I am sure you all understand what that would mean if it went poorly. And, to be frank, I feel a great guilt. Though we speak of ‘God’ and ‘country,’ the truth is that I, too, have deceived you.”

“I feel the same,” said the General. “Despite my knowledge of this fact, I did not declare it loudly. I now understand how cruel I have been to all of you.”

The commotion among the crowd increased further, though its character had changed. Before, each member of the throng had treated the matter of deception as if it was somebody else’s problem. After all, they had come to no clear harm as the result of any god’s actions. Of course, they had their day-to-day gripes, but they could hardly blame God for that. Perhaps they had been kept out of the loop, but it had had no major impact on their existence. Now, however, the General was making it sound like they had been personally affected.

The people chattered among themselves, each with their own concerns.

“Hey, what does he mean ‘cruel’?”

“How am I supposed to know? He’s about to tell us, isn’t he?”

“From the sound of it, maybe we don’t want to know.”

“Yeah. I mean, if it’s not just the kingdom but *God* that’s involved, it must be awful,”

“From what those two are saying, it’ll be worse for us if we don’t know.”

“Damn it, what should we do?”

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

“Huh? Is that the General and Archbishop? Is this related to what happened yesterday?”

The crowd continued to grow as more and more people noticed the assembly. Demands for an explanation intensified, which attracted still others. Strangely, all those gathered were civilians despite the size of the crowd and the fact that the General was at its center. There was no sign of the knights who were supposed to be searching for him.

Although the uproar showed no sign of calming down, the General and Archbishop continued to speak.

“It appears some newcomers have joined us, but regardless, let us continue,” said the General.

“Even the newcomers should be able to understand what we are about to say,” the Archbishop added. “I am sure you are curious about what we have already relayed, but please listen closely to the following.”

“Of course, you are under no obligation, but I believe it would be to everyone’s benefit to heed to our words. They may hurt to hear, but not listening is sure to lead to future regrets.”

Their words once again worsened the crowd’s agitation, the throng becoming a billowing sea of bodies. The disturbance further intensified, nobody so much as making a move to calm the mob.

“What should we do?”

“If we’re gonna regret not listening, we’d better stick around.”

“I *am* curious, I’ve got to say.”

“I just got here, but when someone tells me I’ll regret not listening, how can I not pay attention?”

“What do you think?”

“Might as well listen, right?”

“Yeah. I’m curious about what they’re going to tell us.”

“Right. It’s hard to know what to do until we’ve heard them out.”

“Seriously?”

“Hey, what do you think they’re gonna say?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be standing here listening!”

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

The General continued. “I see that you are growing impatient for answers, so I will be clear. What, exactly, are the kingdom, the gods, *us*, deceiving you about?”

“Gifts,” said the Archbishop. “Why? Because Gifts are how the gods control us.”

The words reverberated through the air. Brett narrowed his gaze as he listened. They likely didn’t even understand what they were hearing, but that couldn’t be helped—he had been the same once. It wasn’t until several years after he had first heard those words that he had comprehended their meaning. Still, it was key to sow the seeds of doubt. There would be plenty of time for the rest later.

“Well,” said Brett, “I have some free time now. The rest of the city must be empty at the moment. Shall we go for a stroll?”

“Master Brett...” came the reply.

“I know, I know. Just a joke. Good grief, fancy having to surround myself with people who don’t understand humor. Couldn’t you at least put on a little show for me?”

This, too, was a jest. It was true, however, that Brett was unoccupied for the time being and that his unresponsive company provided little in the way of entertainment.

Peering down his nose, he snorted. “Very well. What is the situation?”

“The duke is currently engaged in combat with the Captain and is said to be

getting the better of him. The knights are thoroughly occupied. And you see what is unfolding before you.”

“All according to plan. No surprise when it comes to father, but you lot have done well too.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“And? You’ve said nothing of the Champion. Should I assume she has already been disposed of?”

“We are currently investigating that matter.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, sir. We have not heard from those tasked with disposing of the Champion. Perhaps the explosion was more powerful than anticipated. The expectation, after all, was that it would leave them at the brink of death.”

“Collateral damage? And after I just praised you. You really are a useless bunch, aren’t you?” said Brett. In truth, he had expected this and was not at all disappointed by the development. If the demons had used such tactics to begin with, he and his father could have accomplished their goals much sooner. Such losses were already accounted for. “Very well. It seems it will soon be time for me to play my part.”

Though Brett had done what he could to the best of his abilities, the lack of direct involvement was frustrating. He felt as though he had been left out. But soon, at last, he would no longer be vexed by such concerns.

Even as a sense of unease continued to trouble him, Brett focused on what was before him, gradually turning his thoughts toward what was to come.

Spreading Madness

The knights of the First Knightly Order sighed with exasperation as they observed their surroundings. They had arrived before they knew it. The order had been investigating the back alleys, or people's houses, or the source of the explosion they had heard. Suddenly, with a slight sensation of dizziness, they found themselves in an entirely different location. A bleak and barren place—or perhaps more accurately, a space. It resembled a training ground yet somehow felt far less natural. More than lacking any unnecessary accouterments, it lacked any kind of objects at all.

One by one the knights appeared, each wearing a look of shock until they quickly processed their surroundings. Clearly, they had been brought here by the power of a Gift or some similar ability. Gifts that allowed the user to manipulate environments *did* exist, rare though they were, and while it would be extremely difficult to achieve such an effect with magic or sorcery, it was not impossible. That they had been transported to some faraway location was well within the realm of possibility—not to mention hard to deny when presented with the reality of the situation.

The knights began to investigate with this presumption in mind but quickly hit a dead end. None could find a single means of escape. In such a desolate place, there were countless exits, but following any of them, the knights only found themselves once again in the same place, as if it were twisting back in on itself. This made it all the clearer that this place had been created by some sort of Gift.

The knowledge offered little help. The knights were elite, fearsome warriors and had a strong grasp of what they could and could not accomplish alone. When it came to Gifts in particular, they had very specific affinities and capabilities. Dealing with Gifts that involved strengthening their own powers was one thing, but Gifts that isolated them in a constructed environment were quite another. With no way of dealing with such an ability, it hardly mattered how superlative their own skills were.

Nevertheless, the knights could not help but blame themselves on some level. As part of an order, they rarely acted alone. Particularly, those of the First Knightly Order, few in number as they were, almost always worked as a group. They rarely had the need to consider such unique situations—no matter the circumstance, the Captain would give them their orders.

Of course, each was, to some extent, equipped to act alone in situations where they were split up, but those preparations were of little use in this case. They were not prepared to deal with a foe who could manipulate space like this. For now, all they could do was stand by impotently.

All the worse, even as knight after knight appeared there, nothing happened. Any kind of occurrence whatsoever might have led to a breakthrough, but with an absence of any other events, there was nothing they could do. Some began to suggest that they use the opportunity to train.

Soon, all the knights except for the Captain were present, at which point something finally happened: a suspicious, black-robed, hooded figure appeared. Rather than leaping into action, the knights prioritized information. The appearance of this figure could lead to a revelation, so it would be foolish to act rashly and waste that opportunity. Prepared to defend themselves at any moment, they trained their eyes on the figure, waiting for it to do something.

Paying no mind to the uncomfortable atmosphere, the figure began to speak similar words to the General and Archbishop (that the knights had been deceived by the kingdom, or rather, by the gods). The knights scoffed and dismissed the claims.

“Gifts are used to control us? What a bunch of nonsense.”

Here they had been sealed away in a desolate space, all to listen to such a ridiculous tale?

The black-clad figure, its mouth the only part of its body exposed, laughed scornfully in response. Then, in a condescending tone as if trying to reason with a child, it continued to speak. “Ridiculous? I suppose you would think so. Think hard about this—can you really say you had no inkling of this fact? Are you not merely pretending to have overlooked something you have known all along?”

“That’s enough out of you! Even if it *were* true, so what?!”

“Right! I’ve used my Gift countless times, and I’ve never once felt like I was being controlled!”

“But of course,” said the figure. “I do not mean to say that the gods control you directly. But your Gifts have changed all of your fates. Can you truly tell me you have never wondered what might have been if you had received different Gifts, or not received them at all? Is this not the gods manipulating your fates to serve their own convenience?”

“And that’s the same as being controlled?”

“Of course. You disagree?”

None of the knights could decisively say that the figure was wrong. Each of them had been born to different circumstances, but their Gifts had brought them all to the Order. If their Gifts had been different...

One had wished to be a baker, spending all day eating delicious pastries. One had wanted to travel the world as a merchant. Another had hoped to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a blacksmith. They had approached their Blessing Ceremony not with hope but trepidation, and the surprising results had caused them no small amount of disappointment.

If even the knights, successful as they were, felt this way, then the common people felt it all the more strongly. If they had received a different Gift, or no Gift at all, perhaps they could have walked a different path in life. And if it was suggested that that other life was their *true* life, that would be hard to deny. The knights looked at each other, many opening their mouths to speak but ultimately saying nothing.

The black-clad figure smiled with satisfaction. The knights, those sworn to protect the people, continued to silently listen to the figure’s words.

Deepening Madness

“Haaaagh!”

“Hngh!”

Just in time, Edward deflected the slash that accompanied the piercing scream and regained his distance. Somehow quelling his ragged breathing, he took one last great gulp of air.

Craig scoffed at the sight of the man who brandished his sword before him. “You’ve gotten old.”

“Keep it up. I’ve still got plenty more fight left in me,” Edward bluffed. He knew his limits better than anyone. His arms felt heavy. His body was covered with wounds inflicted by Craig, who had not sustained a single scratch. It was clear who had the upper hand.

“Even in the face of certain defeat, your eyes tell me you refuse to die,” said Craig. “Ever the sore loser.”

“Not to say that the victor is always decided by luck, but it certainly plays a role,” said Edward. “It’s never over until it’s over.”

“Surely that is only true for relatively evenly matched opponents? You *must* understand how outmatched you are.”

Edward knew. He had once reached the very peak of human capabilities. He never misjudged how he matched up against an opponent. He didn’t want to accept that he could be so outclassed, but he couldn’t deny the reality before his eyes. He simply had to devise a way to win regardless.

“And still you refuse to concede. Most admirable, but what is making you go to such lengths?”

“You ask that of *me*? Captain of the First Knightly Order of the kingdom?”

“All the more perplexing. Do you not understand that I am trying to *save* the kingdom?”

“Because the kingdom, the gods, are deceiving us?”

“Indeed.”

Craig had explained his reasons as the fight was being waged. Edward couldn't deny that in some ways, Gifts *were* a tool of control. He had experienced that himself, and strongly.

“I believe I know what you're trying to achieve by saying these things,” said Edward.

“I imagine you do. I have never hidden my intentions. In fact, I have been quite clear.”

“The Archbishop,” Edward said confidently.

Craig's lack of response was a clear admission that he was correct. The logic was simple. Gifts were granted at a Blessing Ceremony. Preventing Blessing Ceremonies from being conducted would prevent people from receiving Gifts. Normally this would be an unforgivable transgression, but if it came from the mouth of the Archbishop itself, the Church would have no choice but to accept it.

“Surely it can't be that simple, though.”

“Indeed. Gifts are fearsome powers. Many would still wish to receive them.”

“Then all you will accomplish is unrest.”

“Not at all. Yes, Gifts are incredible, but we have ways of acquiring even greater power. I have just proved that to you.”

Now Edward understood. He was capable of negating the power of any Gift, and on top of that, was one of the most powerful humans to ever walk to earth. There was only one way such a man could be surpassed.

“Your level.”

“Indeed. I am Level 15.”

“I see.” Edward had already surmised as much. Even he, through endless training and brushes with death, had only managed to reach Level 10. He couldn't imagine what kind of experiences could have allowed someone to

reach Level 15. “Nevertheless, a high level is no substitute for a Gift.”

“Are you quite sure about that? That is where your kind is wrong.”

“What?”

“You must have heard levels described as the measure of a man’s soul, no? I could never understand why you people pay no mind to their value. Another of God’s deceptions, I imagine.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Men understanding the true value of levels would be inconvenient for the gods. To raise one’s level is to raise the rank of one’s soul...to draw closer to the gods themselves. Raising stats is merely a side effect.”

It was the first time Edward had heard anything of the sort, but in some way, he understood. A mere increase in power had never truly explained the sensation he felt each time he had increased his level. That he was drawing closer to the gods and spirits made a great deal of sense.

“But why is that inconvenient for the gods?” he asked. “Why would they be troubled by a greater number of servants capable of assisting them?”

Craig scoffed. “What foolishness. Assisting them? That is not their concern. Levels do not provide the power to draw closer to the gods. They provide the power to *kill* the gods.”

“What?!” Edward was lost for words. While he didn’t believe what Craig was telling him, he was shocked that anyone would give voice to the idea of killing the gods. “Craig, are you mad?”

“Perhaps I have always been a little mad. Who would not go mad after his wife was slaughtered by God?”

“What? Impossible.” It wasn’t just that Edward didn’t want to believe it—it was truly inconceivable. Craig’s wife had always been physically frail. The doctor had told her that she would likely not survive a second childbirth, but she had chosen to go through with it rather than cast away the fortune she had been gifted. If her death was the fate God had chosen for her, then he supposed that did amount to killing her, but... “Isn’t this all misplaced resentment? I

understand that it's frustrating having nobody to blame, but to go to such lengths..."

"You don't understand a thing. Misplaced resentment? Fate? You are gravely mistaken. It was all God's plan."

"His plan? Do *you* understand what you're saying?"

"Of course. It is a simple fact. You are familiar with the Holy Mother, yes?"

"Yes. The Gift bequeathed to her. But what does that—"

"A Gift with hidden powers that even the Archbishop does not understand. You know this too, don't you?"

Edward nodded. Of course he knew—his own Gift had been the same. When he had first been appraised, he had been told that he merely had the power to negate the effects of any Gift that touched him directly. However, as he had explored its potential, he had found that he could negate any attack that originated from a Gift. So he knew that Gifts could possess such hidden effects.

"But your wife's Gift had no such effects."

"Indeed. I thought so too. Had I known, I would never have let her bear that child."

"What?"

"The hidden power of the Holy Mother Gift—no, its original purpose—is to give birth to a hero, and to give her own life in order to do so. *That* is why she was so frail. Her life force was consumed so that she might give birth to a hero."

"Ridiculous. She was frail since birth. Wait—unless..."

"Now you understand. Since her Gift had few other effects, nobody noticed, but *her* Gift, too, had been with her since birth."

The story made sense. Little was understood about innate Gifts. While most displayed awesome powers, it was conceivable that, depending on the nature of a Gift's effects, it might be difficult to tell whether it had been granted at a Blessing Ceremony.

"But how do you know this?" asked Edward. "Or about the hidden effects?"

How *could* you know?”

Again Craig scoffed. “Those that you people look down on are, in some ways, far more talented than you. Of course, one cannot believe everything *they* say either.”

Edward went wide-eyed with shock. “What? Don’t tell me you’re working with—”

Craig responded only with a contemptuous snort.

“Not only are you a traitor to the kingdom, but you’re consorting with *demons!*”

“A traitor? Have you listened to a word I’ve said? Everything I do is for this kingdom, for its people. My alliance with demonkind is merely a temporary arrangement.”

“I have listened well to your words, but they are nonsense! What ‘hero’ was ever born of this supposed Gift?”

“In that respect, it seems that God erred. That is why the current Champion was summoned. Surely you don’t believe *that* to be nonsense too?”

Edward gasped. It was true that the next Champion was awakened as soon as the previous one died, within a year at most. But it had been over ten years before the current Champion had appeared. Edward had always found this deeply strange.

“It seems that God finally realized He had failed to produce a hero. He killed her to produce that good-for-nothing!”

“And so you intend to prevent that tragedy from being repeated?”

“Yes. More importantly than elevating the soul, raising one’s level allows one to acquire power even greater than that granted by Gifts. Once the people realize this, they will no longer be deceived by Gifts and their sham powers, no longer relegated to serving as dogs of God.”

“And then, at some point, you will kill God?”

“Yes. It is said that a man of Level 100 can kill a god. Certainly, it will be an arduous journey. But until now, people have not understood the value of

raising one's level. They have not shared in that struggle. Through shared efforts and rigorous training, I will reach that summit. The first step is to put an end to Blessing Ceremonies. For the dogs of God, freedom can come only in death."

"But you have a Gift too."

"Indeed. When my work is done, I intend to die as well," said Craig, his steely eyes evidence of his sincerity. He truly was prepared to die for his cause. "Now do you understand? I do not do this for my own benefit. For the sake of our country, for the sake of all men: lend me your power."

Faltering Madness

“This is the truth of this kingdom, of this world,” said the General.

“Few will be able to accept it,” said the Archbishop. “In fact, it is natural *not* to believe. If what we say is true, we have all already become slaves of God. However, no good will come of averting your eyes from the truth.”

“We ask that you consider not only yourselves, but the future,” the General continued. “This represents an opportunity for your children who did not receive a Blessing Ceremony, and it is the best choice for your unborn children, grandchildren, and descendants hereafter.”

With this, the commotion in the square—as well as from those observing from the surrounding buildings—reached its peak. A throng so great in number that the square could barely contain it had accumulated, and yet despite the absence of the knights, the people did not run riot, remaining strangely composed. Perhaps this was due to the presence of the General, or perhaps the people were too shocked by what they had just heard to even raise their voices.

The crowd exchanged glances of confusion, unease, and doubt.

“You say it’s the best choice, but what exactly do you want us to do?”

“Right! We already received our Gifts. What are we supposed to do about it now?”

“There’s no chance everyone will stop receiving Gifts at once, and those who still have them will have an advantage over everyone else. It’s not so easy to raise your level.”

“The entire kingdom will become weaker for a little while, or maybe even a long time. The next generation will be far less skilled than the one before it.”

“There are many things that can’t be replicated without Gifts. And surely our defenses will take the biggest hit of all? I doubt our neighbors will be too impressed with this. Maybe they won’t conquer us completely, but it’ll be impossible to keep defending all our territory.”

The expressions of the two men at the center of the crowd did not waver.

“I am sure you all have your thoughts,” said the General. “I cannot blame you for finding this hard to believe. I truly understand the scale of what we are asking you to accept.”

“Perhaps we have given you too much information at once,” the Archbishop added. “Of course, we have prepared answers for all of your questions. Here...”

He gestured behind him, and two figures walked forward casually, without regard for the surprised gazes of the onlookers to whom they seemed to have appeared from nowhere. One was a young man, barely an adult, if he was one at all. His expression conveyed an unusual level of confidence. As he drew alongside the General and Archbishop, he surveyed the crowd before him with a condescending gaze.

The other figure, clad in a hooded black robe, appeared deeply suspicious. As they too drew alongside the others, the crowd was once again overcome by a commotion, though different than before.

The young man was the first to speak. “Now, since most of you have never met me before, allow me to introduce myself. I am Brett Westfeldt, heir to the Duchy of Westfeldt.”



Brett smiled as the clamor intensified. However, the murmurs he overheard from the crowd soon curbed his good humor.

“Brett? I’ve heard of the Duchy of Westfeldt, but who’s this guy?”

“Well, we don’t even know much about the duke himself. Why would we know about his heir?”

“I thought the heir was a kid called Allen?”

“Come to think of it, I *did* hear something about a child prodigy in that family.”

Taking a deep breath to quell his rising anger, Brett continued. “I... No, my name is not yet widely known. You cannot be blamed for being unfamiliar with me. However, only *I* can bring all of you true freedom. *I* am the General’s rightful successor. No, I am *more powerful* than the General.”

The crowd responded only with raised eyebrows. They all understood the great stature of the General. They would not readily believe that anyone else could be more powerful, especially when the claim came not from the General himself, but from some unknown young man. It seemed all too much like the bravado in which many youth specialized.

“I do not expect you to believe me. You will understand soon enough. You!”

Brett turned to face a disheveled, unshaven man who appeared out of place in this austere scene. The crowd regarded the man with confusion.

“This is the alchemist of the House of Westfeldt. His skills are not so great—or rather, *weren’t*. However, he has now succeeded in creating a *magical life-form*.”

The term provoked further hubbub among the crowd, not from shock, but because they had no idea what it meant.

“From your faces I see that most of you have never heard the term before. A magical life-form is a sort of golem, created by our alchemist here. Unlike a golem, however, it is capable of acting independently, and its fighting ability compares to that of a knight of the First Knightly Order.”

“This is true,” said the General. “I have already seen the proof. I imagine the

Captain might present a challenge, but such a magical life-form could handle simultaneous attacks from three regular knights with ease.”

Surprise erupted from the crowd. Amid the commotion, however, were cries of “So what?” The accomplishments of the House of Westfeldt’s alchemist must have been great news for those concerned, but what did it have to do with the matter at hand?

“I see that you do not understand our point,” said the Archbishop. “I assure you that this is one of the answers to your earlier questions. These magical life-forms can be used for defense.”

“It will take time, but they can be produced en masse,” Brett elaborated. “Since a Gift must be used to produce them, we cannot say for sure that each will be identical, but as a type of golem, they should live for decades, if not centuries. That power will ensure that we are not attacked by other nations.”

“We simply need to ensure that the people of this nation become powerful enough before we lose the golems,” said the General. “Of course, this is easier said than done. But on that front, Brett’s power will prove useful.” He turned his gaze toward Brett, who smiled and nodded.

“It was not entirely correct to say that our alchemist has improved his talents. To be more accurate, *I* did. With my power, Marionette.”

“The Marionette Gift allows its user to draw out the latent powers of its target,” said the General. “The full extent of a person’s latent powers cannot be exposed at once, of course; it takes time. But using that, anyone at all can become much more powerful than they are at present, without needing a Gift at all.”

“And not only in regard to combat prowess,” said the Archbishop. “For example, Marionette can draw fitting powers out of a person who wishes to become a blacksmith, provided they possess the natural aptitude, of course.”

“Any powers drawn out are ones that the individual already possessed,” said Brett. “And since they are different from Gifts, they can be passed on to the following generation. When I am long gone, my descendants will still receive incredible powers, *true* power to which even Gifts cannot compare.”

The people responded with confusion. While some approved, most were skeptical.

“If this is all true, I suppose it’s all right?”

“Sounds like it, but who knows what the truth is?”

“If we’ll be fine without Gifts, then I guess there’s not much reason to oppose them...”

“But what if something comes up that we can’t handle without Gifts? There are unique powers that can’t be replicated by magic.”

“That’s right. And we can’t ignore that our neighbors will continue to use Gifts. We wouldn’t even be able to make potions for ourselves. If we were forced to import them from other countries, they’d be able to charge whatever they wanted.”

“And aren’t the alchemist’s skills dependent on a Gift to begin with? What’s that all about?”

Still, Brett smiled, as if he had been waiting for this opportunity. “Indeed, there are many things that cannot be handled without the use of Gifts. At times like that, we have *them*. Show yourself!”

“Yes, sir.” The black-robed figure nodded as it removed its hood, revealing a horned man.

Time stood still. Among all the races of the world, only one had horns. The man was a demon. *A demon*, here in the middle of the capital. Screams erupted from the crowd. Some tried to run.

Then the General spoke in a gentle tone. “Settle down. Yes, as you can all see, this man is a demon.”

“However,” added the Archbishop, “we have managed to form a cooperative relationship with him—in fact, with *all* of demonkind.”

“A cooperative relationship?”

“Indeed,” said Brett. “We have avoided being explicit so as not to alarm you all, but it is thanks to the demons that we learned much of what we have shared with you today.”

“Demons possess powers comparable to Gifts, but which are not Gifts,” said the General.

“Though it seemed to all of you that we appeared from nowhere,” Brett continued, “we were in fact here the whole time, using demonic powers of invisibility.”

“Now do you understand?” asked the Archbishop, his words ringing throughout the square as the commotion calmed. “For challenges that can only be overcome with Gifts, we may depend on the help of demonkind. There is truly no problem at all. In fact, for the sake of our future, we *must* leave Gifts behind. I think you are all beginning to understand that.”

The people had begun to accept what they were hearing—or at least, their major misgivings had been assuaged.

“All that remains is... Yes, there is one more thing we must tell you.”

“Indeed,” said Brett, looking out across the square as he delivered his final entreaty. “Please place your trust in us. That means everything to us.”

Suddenly an unfamiliar voice rang out through the square. “Hmm. Is that so? I don’t think I can do that.”

Brett’s smile disintegrated. He hadn’t anticipated such a response. Stifling his instinctive desire to bellow with fury, he looked over the faces that populated the square with bloodshot eyes, searching for whoever had called out. The unease that had occupied a corner of his mind returned to him. He felt like he had heard that voice somewhere before.

“I—we—know exactly what you’ve done.”

Brett gasped as he finally located the source of the voice. His eyes widened. In the square stood someone who should not have been there. As hard as it was to comprehend, the evidence was right in front of him. “What?! Y-You?!”

“Long time no see, Brett. Or maybe it hasn’t been that long after all.”

“What are *you* doing here, you good-for-nothing?!” Brett cried out.

There stood Allen, his former brother, wearing a knowing smile.

Signs of Resistance

“I refuse,” said Edward to Craig, who stood there, hand outstretched. The repudiation couldn’t have been any clearer.

Craig scoffed. “Very well. I expected better judgment from you. Should I take it to mean you don’t believe me?”

“Not at all. What you say makes some sense. Perhaps you are even in the right.”

“Then...why?”

“Simple. If everything you have told me is the absolute truth, then why did you not tell me from the very beginning?”

“What?”

“If you were in the right, why begin by attacking me? You ought to have engaged me in conversation first. That you did not must mean you are hiding something. You said that you intend to die when this is all done.”

“You doubt me? I assure you—”

“I believe that you *intend* to die. As the possessor of a Gift, you yourself could interfere with this brilliant future you envision, correct? In that case, all other possessors of Gifts could do the same—the possessors of innate Gifts most of all. What do you intend to do about them? What *have* you done?”

Craig didn’t respond immediately. Edward glared intensely at him, and Craig responded in kind. He scoffed. Edward had begun to regard him only as an enemy.

“Sagacious as ever, I see,” said Craig. “And yet you always bragged that you were most at ease in battle.”

“That was the truth. Unfortunately, one in my position does not have the privilege of leaping into battle mindlessly. A certain amount of wisdom is a necessity.”

“Perhaps if you had been a little less wise, or a little more, then you needn’t have had to die.”

“Should I interpret that as your confession of doing something to the Archbishop and the General?”

“If I told you otherwise, would you accept my response? It seems you have already made up your mind.”

On that point, Craig was correct. Edward was sure that Craig had done *something* to the General and Archbishop. “For all your grand displays of villainy, your nature is surprisingly honest. When it comes to inconvenient truths, you do not lie or deceive others—you hardly speak of them at all. You might have learned how to hide your emotions, but that has not changed.”

Craig clicked his tongue as he again drew his sword to ward off an attack that stopped just short of his body. He had expected it might come to this. Edward’s movements were less poised now, as if Craig’s words had caused him to lose his composure. Edward had always struggled with unexpected circumstances.

Craig stepped into his own strike. Finally, his blade made contact with Edward’s body. “Enough of your arrogance, Edward!”

It was an artless, wild blow, but Edward had been unable to respond to its speed. He had done all he could to deflect the attack with his own blade, but the best he had managed was to avoid being cleaved entirely in two. His sword shattered, and his body was flung into a wall. He hacked up blood.

Craig breathed raggedly, then scoffed. “You fool. Now that you understand the difference between us, fall in line. Yes, you are correct. They are already dead. They were fools, just like you.”

“Necromancy, eh? Possible with the help of demons, I suppose.”

“It is not as simple as that. The head must be preserved, then attached to a suitable body. I intended to add you to my collection, but...” Craig scoffed. “Perhaps I have gone too far. Perhaps you may still serve as an undead soldier.”

“I won’t be a pawn of your heresy.”

“Your will is of no consequence. Heresy? You fool. This power is a mere trifle

compared to what is to come. While you worry about ‘heresy,’ I will reshape the world in my image!”

Whether right or wrong, there could be no doubt that Craig meant what he said. Both his words and deeds showed clear intention. All the more reason for Edward to stop him. Even if his motivations proved true, it was clear that he had gone astray in how he was choosing to achieve them. Though it was often said that hardships are the birth pains of revolution, the righteous path could surely not involve exploiting death and sully the divine. It would only lead to destruction.

“I *will* stop you. In the place of my dead comrades and, most of all, as your friend.”

“You will, will you? In that state? Impossible. Give up. You could never. Nobody in this entire *nation* can stop me.”

“That so? I think there’re at least a few. Me, for example.”

“What?!” said Craig, turning in the direction of the third voice.

Edward was equally shocked; all the more so once he saw who was there.

“Hey, old man. I see you got yourself into a spot of trouble again. I wanted to be the one to kill you, and here you’ve gone and almost gotten yourself finished off by some guy I’ve never even seen before.”

“Impossible,” said Craig. “What are you... What is the Champion doing here?”

“Huh? I just had a feeling,” said Akira.

“What?”

“That something bad was going down here. And in other places too, but I felt like this was the place where I was needed most.”

“Ridiculous! The barrier was supposed to prevent anyone from entering...and besides, you’re supposed to be dead!”

“That’s not cool, taking me for dead. I *did* kinda think I was a goner for a minute there, though.”

Craig snorted. “I see. You abandoned the child and saved yourself, did you? I

can't fault your judgment. Champion they might call you, but you are still God's puppet."

"Huh? Quit coming to your own conclusions. I didn't abandon anyone...although it wasn't *me* who saved her either. Man, how did he see all this coming?"

"What?"

"Well, that's none of your concern. Anyway, since you know what happened to me, I take it those were friends of yours?"

"And what of it?"

"I'm gonna beat your ass, of course! Course, I was gonna do that either way," said Akira as she stood there nonchalantly.

Edward cast a glance at her. She appeared totally open, yet in truth she was well prepared for any attack. He smiled bitterly, knowing that he would surely be defeated if he did battle with her right now.

"Anyway, you don't mind me interrupting, do you, old man?"

"Go ahead," said Edward. "You see the state I'm in. I could use some assistance."

That was the truth. As much as he intended, *wanted*, to stop Craig, he knew it was a tall order. He couldn't ask for better reinforcements than the Champion.

"Very well," said Craig. "In a way, this is most expedient. It is a fine chance to vanquish the puppets of God."

"Puppets, puppets, puppets. Shut up already! Who the hell is a puppet around here? True, I guess my powers were granted by God or something, but I'm my own person! I decide what I do. And I've decided to kick your ass!"

"Quite right," Edward nodded. Even if his Gift reflected God's will, he was the one who ultimately decided what path to take. To blame God was simply an excuse. He had known that since long ago. Realizing it was time to bring an end to this, he began to move, tossing aside his broken sword and drawing his auxiliary blade.

"Come, you minions of God," said Craig. "I will kill you and prove that my way

is true!”

“I’d like to see you try!” roared Akira as the two faced each other down.

I suppose I’m consigned to a supporting role, thought Edward. He had expected as much from the start. But even a supporting character had a will of his own.

Edward, too, faced Craig, ready to bring his will to bear.

Will and Resolve

Each of the knights of the First Knightly Order had their own thoughts, but in the end, they were unified in one simple response: “So what?”

“What?”

“Well, even if what you’re saying is true, what does it matter? Even if we’re being deceived, we’re still knights. It’s not our duty to question why.”

“We’re not children. You think we don’t realize that our country doesn’t always do the right thing?”

“Of course, it would be different if harm were to come to the people. But those Gifts provide strength to our nation. They’ve allowed us to foster friendly relationships with our neighbors, even if only on the surface. Why should we refuse them?”

The knights’ arguments made sense. The gods meddling in their affairs was beside the point. Even if it were true that the gods had determined their fates, how to act on that knowledge was up to them. Perhaps they would have chosen different paths if they had received different Gifts or no Gifts at all, but it didn’t change the fact that they were who they were.

“If it’s a revolution you want, go ahead and try. But you’ll have to defeat us first.” The knight accompanied the statement with a steely gaze and firm resolve, representing the collective will of all who stood there.

The black-clad figure responded with an ostentatious sigh. “Good grief. This was all as they anticipated...but I suppose I shouldn’t expect the likes of you to understand such a complex issue.”

The knights responded in turn.

“Come off it. True, we might not be the sharpest bunch, but we know where we ought to place our trust.”

“Hey, don’t lump us all together like that. Not that I disagree with you.”

“How could we believe anything such a shady character says, anyway? Dressed like that, you should be grateful we’re even listening to you.”

A sudden change in the atmosphere silenced the knights as they reflexively responded to the stranger’s swelling bloodlust.

“My role was only to keep you here and prevent you from interfering...but my mood has changed. I will give you ample cause to consider how fearsome our powers are. I am sure you will have a change of heart once you are dead.”

“Now you’ve gone and pissed him off. What are we gonna do now?”

“His anger shows we were on the mark. Let him blame us if he wants.”

“If it’s such a problem, he shouldn’t have come around offering us such unwanted advice to begin with.”

The knights spoke casually among themselves, but they knew they had little room to maneuver. Their pride and confidence in their own elite status did not blind them to the difference in power between themselves and their opponent—in fact, it only made it clearer. They knew that even with their great advantage in numbers, they stood little chance of victory. Nevertheless, they were not to be dissuaded. Knights, even the elite, existed in service to the kingdom and its people. Since the moment they had become knights, they had been prepared to die. There was no reason to hesitate now that their day had finally come.

“I see you all refuse to lose hope, even in these dire circumstances,” said the black-clad figure. “What foolishness.”

“Say what you like,” one knight replied. “We’re part of a greater whole. Even if we all die here, someone—our captain—will have his revenge.”

“Foolish indeed. Your captain is destined for the same fate. True, we did not anticipate his strength, but that is precisely why we will be sure to deal with him.”

“Why don’t you show your face instead of rambling on about nonsense? Afraid to let others see your ugly mug?”

“I hide my face as a courtesy to all of you. To behold it would cause you to

tremble in fear. You truly are fools.”

With that, the figure removed its hood to reveal a horned head. The knights, however, were utterly unsurprised.

“Aren’t you shocked?” the figure asked.

“Even the biggest idiot could guess what you were after all that nonsense you were saying. Well, maybe not the *biggest* idiot.”

“Hey, what’re you lookin’ at me for?! I could tell!”

“Trying to inspire yourselves by pretending this is nothing to be alarmed about, are you?” asked the demon. “It will not change the outcome. Spare me this pointless charade and I promise to make your deaths quick.”

The knights reacted only by drawing their weapons. No other response would do.

“Such fools. Very well. I will be sure to make you regret this.” With that, the demon vanished along with its powerful aura of murderous intent. It seemed as though it had disappeared entirely.

“What just happened? Did he run away?”

“Must be some kind of Gift...or whatever power demons have instead. We have to assume as much.”

“So you mean he’s just turned invi—”

Midsentence, the knight was sent flying, though nobody could see or sense any sign of an attack.

“What the hell’s going on?!”

“He can hide both his form and aura, and then *attack* us like that too?!”

“I couldn’t sense a thing, even the moment he was hit.”

“Now do you understand the difference between us?” asked a voice. “Hmm, should I give you a chance to reconsider?”

“There you are!” said a knight, swinging his sword in the direction of the voice, but it was as if he were slashing at thin air.

Surveying their surroundings, none could sense any trace of the demon. Just as they wondered if their only hope was to attack the air at random, another knight was sent flying.

“Gah!”

“Such foolishness. You think I would make an amateur mistake like giving away my location with my voice?”

The knights had already known that they stood no chance of victory, but this was another matter entirely. A simple difference in power at least suggested a slim chance of a lucky victory, but now even that seemed impossible. There was no point in even trying to resist. Was this the difference between those who relied on Gifts and those who didn’t? Perhaps they *could* defend the kingdom from attack without Gifts...but that would mean leaving their defenses to demons. No knight could countenance such an idea. Besides, it was clear that demons would not hesitate to use force against them if anything didn’t go according to plan. How could they leave any responsibilities to such people?

“Have I now convinced you of our claims?” asked the demon.

“Damn right you have. But you’ve also convinced us that you can’t be trusted.”

“I see. Foolish as ever.”

“Enough! This is what it means to be a knight!”

“Is that so? Then to be a knight is to be a fool.”

Suddenly, another voice sounded. “I can’t deny that. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that only a fool would become a knight.”

“What?!” said the demon in surprise—a feeling shared by the knights.

Looking in the direction of the voice, they saw a shadow standing in an entranceway that had previously not existed.

“Beatrice?!”

“It’s been a while. Shame we have to be reunited under such circumstances,” Beatrice answered with a smirk.

The knights regarded her with quizzical looks. They sensed that something was amiss. Beatrice and the Captain were old friends, and Beatrice, though the princess's personal guard, could not recuse herself from training. Furthermore, she was one of the strongest warriors in the land. She was no stranger to the training grounds during the First Order's occasional drills. And yet something felt off.

Suddenly, each member of the group realized what it was—they weren't used to seeing her like *this*, as if paying no mind to the severity of the occasion.

"I know we have a lot to say to each other, but it will have to wait. There's something I have to do first," said Beatrice with a steely look. Following her gaze, she appeared to be looking at thin air—but then the knights heard a nervous swallowing.

"You can see him?!"

"Of course I can."

"Impossible!" said the voice. "How... No, what are you *doing* here?"

"I've got a question for *you* first. This is the same power that was used to kill the General, am I right?"

"What?!"

The General, killed? The knights again stared at Beatrice, confused, as she simply looked questioningly toward the open air. Finally, scornful laughter broke the tense silence.

"And what of it?"

"Then my duty will soon be complete. I ended up here by surprise, but all's well that ends well."

"You certainly seem confident. Simply being able to see me doesn't mean that you can defeat me, you know."

"Can someone whose only move is hiding possibly hope to defeat *me*?" she retorted.

"Let us see. Feel my power!"

The knights couldn't see what was going on, but they knew that, with a sudden movement, Beatrice had thrown the demon violently against a wall. Surmising that even the stranger was no match for the blazing speed of her attack, they let out sighs of awe. She might have been their training partner, but her skills clearly outstripped all of theirs. This was the power demanded of a royal's personal guard.

"No! How could you possibly..." The demon trailed off.

"Your confidence far outstrips your ability," said Beatrice. "Even the others would have no trouble with you if they were able to see you. Then again, I'm not exactly using my own powers either, so I shouldn't be too arrogant."

"I don't understand how you can see me, but very well. I can tell that I stand no chance of victory. Time to retreat, though it pains me to do so."

"Do you honestly think I'll let you get away?"

"You have no hope of catching me. Do you think hiding is my only power? Farewell," said the demon.

Nothing happened. The knights, ready to spring into action, stared with confusion—but none were more confused than the demon itself. With a dumbfounded expression, it looked over its own body. "I-Impossible! Why can't I control this place?! I *created* it!"

"Mylène seized control of it," said Beatrice.

"What?!"

Suddenly, one, then two more figures, both young girls, appeared in the spot where Beatrice had first arrived.

"What are we doing here?" asked one. "Weren't we told to stay away?"

"It's safe now, isn't it? Besides, I was called, so I answered," responded the other.

"Could you show a little more of that spirit in the shop? I guess you're right that it's safe now, though."

The knights stared wide-eyed at the unusual pair: an Amazon and an elf.



Again the demon was more shocked than anyone. “‘Seized control’?! How can she use my power?”

“I learned it by watching you,” said Mylène.

“What? Such a thing is impossible! Wait, weren’t you a slave? What are you doing here?”

“You *learned* it by *watching*?” echoed Nadia. “You really are a mystery.”

“*You’re* a mystery to me,” said Beatrice. “Being able to lend your powers to others temporarily...and what powers they are!”

“Shouldn’t you be saying that to *him*? I only found out I could do it because he told me,” Nadia answered.

The knights could make neither head nor tail of this scattered conversation, but there was one thing they understood: their prospects had turned around in a big way.

“Any other bright ideas?” said Beatrice. “If not, I’d appreciate you coming quietly. There’s a lot I’d like to ask you.”

“Such disrespect!” said the demon. “Who do you think I—”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

In a flash, she closed the distance between them and slew the demon, whose body shed not a single drop of blood as it fell to the ground. As the knights watched in confusion, they realized that the sword she held was still in its sheath—and yet her attack had managed to extinguish the demon’s life.

“That should redeem me somewhat, I hope,” Beatrice remarked.

“Although...considering my true duty, I shouldn’t be here to begin with. Still, it seems like everything is wrapped up here.”

Beatrice took a look at her surroundings and sighed. The knights had a mountain of questions for her, but for now they were happy to exhale in relief, safe in the knowledge that they would go on living.

Depths of Darkness

Brett looked with scorn at the person who had suddenly appeared on the scene—someone he had formerly called “brother.” A man who was supposed to have disappeared following his banishment. A good-for-nothing. What was he doing here?

Then his awareness of the present situation abruptly returned, and he forced himself to continue. “I... Ah, excuse me. What do you mean, you don’t believe us?”

The good-for-nothing seemed momentarily surprised, then gave a look of admiration. Brett felt anger welling up inside him, but he had a duty to keep up appearances.

The good-for-nothing began to speak again. “Uh, let’s see here... Well, about this alchemist of yours, and this magical life-form.”

“Yes, what of it? You won’t believe it without seeing one in the flesh?” If the good-for-nothing intended to disrupt his plans with such trifling objections, he would be sorely disappointed. Brett had prepared for such an eventuality.

“From the sounds of it, you’ve brought one with you,” said the good-for-nothing.

“Of course. Here!”

“Yes, sir. Just a moment, sir.”

Brett waited impatiently, frustrated by the bumbling alchemist. Finally, it appeared—a wolf fashioned out of the earth itself rose up from the ground.

“Well? This is a magical life-form. If you are still not satisfied, I will be happy to show you its power,” said Brett with a smug grin. He didn’t know what the good-for-nothing was doing here, but it was clear that he had an ulterior motive, probably some naive idea of obstructing his plans. He truly was good for nothing, not only ungrateful for his life being spared, but now actively trying to oppose Brett out of some lingering sense of resentment. Brett wondered

whether to ask his father to have him executed later, but then he noticed the look on the good-for-nothing's face. A look of contempt, disappointment, and pity.

"No need to go that far. But would you mind if I asked you a couple of things instead?"

"What? Very well," said Brett. Why did the good-for-nothing wear such an expression? What could he possibly have to say at this point? Likely just the last-minute flailing of the defeated. He really didn't know when to give up.

"First, your alchemist over there is the only one who can make those magical life-forms, right?"

"Correct. Their creation is a closely guarded secret. Our neighbors will never learn the method."

"Got it. In that case, my second question is...that thing's called a Clay Wolf, isn't it?"

Brett gasped. "How did you know that?!" Their research into magical life-forms was top secret. It was impossible that the good-for-nothing could know its name. Although...no, it was hardly an esoteric name. He could easily have guessed it just from the creature's appearance. But the confidence with which he had spoken... And what was he getting at anyway? Brett couldn't understand his intentions. Such a good-for-nothing shouldn't be able to achieve much of anything, and yet his questioning felt like a noose tightening around Brett's neck.

"Huh. I knew I was right not to trust you. I mean, why would I believe the words of the very people who tried to kill the princess?"

Brett gasped. An uproar surged through the crowd, who turned their hateful, distrusting gazes on him.

"Kill the princess?"

"You mean Princess Riese? Or..."

"No, who it was isn't important! Does that mean the Archbishop and the General were involved too?"

“What would they stand to gain? It’s gotta be a lie!”

“No, wait! Look, who’s that standing next to that guy?”

“Princess Riese!”

“What?!”

It was ridiculous. Impossible. According to reports, it should have taken her another ten days to reach the capital. Yet there, obscured though she was by the shadows of the crowd, stood a familiar girl. The first princess of the kingdom, Riese Adastera.

Unbothered by the gazes of the crowd upon her, she stepped forward and spoke. “What this man said is the truth. An attempt on my life was made by this ‘magical life-form.’ Though she is busy with other duties right now, my personal guard, Beatrice, can attest to it. Furthermore, the attempt on my life was made in the territory of the Duchy of Westfeldt.”

Again the people turned their attention to Brett, even more furious than before.

“Wait, didn’t he say...”

“Aye, he said he was the heir to the Duchy of Westfeldt!”

“So the General, the Archbishop, and the House of Westfeldt tried to kill the princess?! Haven’t they already tried to stage a revolution, then?”

“That’s certainly what it sounded like they were talking about before...”

“If what they were saying was true, they could have deposed the royal family properly, without resorting to assassination! Wait, isn’t Riese barely an adult? Even if the royal family was lying to us, what could she possibly have to do with it?”

“Even if she *is* involved, it isn’t right to kill her!”

“Exactly! It’s obvious these people are hiding something from us.”

Brett squirmed. The crowd’s positive reception had turned into outright animosity. He hadn’t mentioned innate Gifts for fear of such a response, and yet here it was regardless. What was more, it seemed the good-for-nothing was

in league with the princess. That concern could wait, however. For now, his priority was calming the current situation. But at this point, there was little he could do. The princess was here in the flesh, directly opposing him. No words he could offer could possibly turn the crowd back in his favor. And so...

“Goodness. I didn’t want to have to resort to this, but...if you must resent anyone, it ought to be those good-for-nothings. We wanted to bring this matter to an end peacefully, but they had to go and stir things up.”

“What? What is he talking about?”

“Forget that, is he saying it’s all true?”

“Then he was trying to fool us?”

“And the General and Archbishop are in league with him? What were they trying to do to us?!”

To Brett, the furor of the crowd was irritating, but at this point inconsequential. He looked at the General, who nodded, and a group of knights appeared in the middle of the crowd.

“Huh?! What’s going on?! The knights just...”

“I... I don’t know what’s happening, but what luck! Knights, please, arrest these men!”

“Right! They’re planning something awful! Wait...what?”

“What’s... What’s wrong with them?”

Brett scoffed. “They have already become our pawns.”

The group that had appeared was the Second Knightly Order—the General’s fighting force that lay camouflaged around the city for an occasion precisely like this one. A widely unknown aspect of the General’s Gift was that it allowed him to compel his subordinates to act in any way he chose. His good nature meant that he had never used this element, but if he chose to, he could send his subordinates into action with no regard for their own will.

It would cause him extreme fatigue to continue to use the power, but that was no problem for Brett. Even as an undead minion, the General could be used. Doing so would likely mean losing access to the General’s Gift, making it

an outcome to be avoided. What happened next would then depend on how the knights acted after the General's influence over them had worn off. If they would not obey Brett's orders, he would let them become undead minions too. It seemed the tables had turned. "I don't know what you were thinking, but I'm sure you must understand the situation before you, yes?" said Brett.

"Man, you really went and did it, huh?" said the good-for-nothing.
"Whatever. This'll be easy to deal with."

The good-for-nothing raised his left hand. He clenched his fist, and the knights all fell to the ground at once. Brett gasped.

"Looks like you've been controlling them for a long time. We'll have to be careful to ensure there are no long-term effects. That can wait for later, though." Without even looking at Brett, the good-for-nothing again clenched his fist. This time, the men who stood on either side of Brett—the General and Archbishop—fell to the ground. Then their bodies crumbled, transforming into earth.

The crowd watched, mouths agape.

"What?! Did he just kill them?!"

"No, wait, why do they look like that?"

"He turned them into dirt?!"

"He forced people who had already died to live again. Looks like in the case of those two, even their minds were lost. This is what happens when you defy the laws of nature."

Brett stared dumbfounded at the two figures of earth. What was happening? What had he done? No, it was impossible—Allen was nothing. He *had* to be. If he wasn't...

"You good-for-nothing! Don't get in our—*my* way!" Brett screamed, dashing toward him. His level far exceeded Allen's, and he had a Gift. It was impossible for the other boy to defeat him.

Just as Brett tried to take a swing at his former brother, their gazes met And Brett gasped. He could see that his foe had his measure.

Allen sighed. “You know, you’re a real pain in the ass, little brother. I guess it’s my fault for not giving you enough attention. Still, it’s time I finished this.”

Before his own blow could make contact, Brett felt a shock to his jaw, and his vision went black. It seemed he was his brother’s inferior after all—a fact that he had known all along, deep down. He moved his lips, though he could not tell what sound he produced, or if he produced any at all, as his mind sank into darkness.

Overflowing Darkness

Allen sighed as he looked at the fallen body of his younger brother. The weight of all that had transpired was almost too much to bear, but he had no time to rest—this still wasn't over.

"Guess I'll have to leave the rest to you," said Allen.

"Yes, I'll take care of it. And Allen..." Riese trailed off, unsure of what to say. Allen smiled. He was similarly lost for words. With that, he turned and headed away from the scene, disregarding the confused gazes of the surrounding crowd.

A noise that could only be called a roar, a sound that nobody would believe could be produced by the clashing of swords, rang out. The battle between Akira and Craig had been fierce, with each of the countless heavy, piercing swings of their blades having the potential to kill. It was all Edward could do to not get in Akira's way.

Akira retreated for a moment to compose herself. "This is bad. The old man might talk big, but he can back it up," she muttered. She had put up a good fight, but Craig had the advantage.

"Yes." Edward nodded. "I hate to say it, but I expected as much." He knew that Craig had been going easy on him during their earlier encounter. If Craig had used his full power, Edward might not have survived the initial attack. That Akira was able to keep up with Craig was in itself incredible, but that was a slim comfort when it was nevertheless clear that the duke had the upper hand.

"What's with the way he moves, anyway? Sometimes it's like he knows what I'm about to do before I do it. Is that somethin' to do with his Gift?" asked Akira.

"Yes. His Gift is that of Future Sight. He can see events several seconds into the future."

“Man, that’s not fair.”

“The extreme concentration it requires is supposed to make it impossible to use in battle.”

At the very least, Craig shouldn’t have been able to use the skill more than a handful of times. But to Edward, it seemed the duke was using it at each key moment. Was Akira all the more impressive for being able to put up such a great fight against Craig’s Gift, or was it Craig’s ability to fight a winning battle against the Champion using his Gift alone that was more impressive?

There was one thought that Edward couldn’t shake. “What an incredible power you have,” he told the duke. “Why will you not use it in service to the people? It must have taken incredible effort to acquire it. Your wife would never have wanted—”

“Quiet!” said Craig. “You know nothing! How could you know how it felt to witness her death over and over again?”

“What?” Edward answered, surprised by his words. Considering Craig’s Gift, there was only one thing he could mean. “I thought your Gift could only see a few seconds into the future?”

“I thought so too. Even now, it is the same. And yet at that time, for an entire year prior to that day, I could see her death.”

That confirmed Edward’s suspicions. Craig was right; he couldn’t imagine how that must have felt.

“The future was not set in stone. Whenever I took action to avoid her death, the future changed—but her death was always the same.”

“After all, she was—”

“You know, of course. She told me at the end that she was satisfied. How ridiculous! There was nothing I could do but hopelessly behold what fate had in store for her! There is only one conclusion: that her destiny was decided by God!”

“I see. So that is why you reject God.” Edward finally understood, though he still didn’t approve.

Craig scoffed. "That was nothing more than the impetus for my awakening. The realization that this world is shackled, controlled by God, and that God must be killed to free it from that enslavement!"

Edward saw sheer darkness in Craig's eyes. He could never accept this madness. Perhaps only Craig's late wife could.

"Hmm...I feel like I'm missing a couple of details here," said Akira. "So, in short, you can't forgive God for the death of your wife, right? You could've just said that. You men are always blabbing on."

As Akira talked, something about Craig changed. He seemed to have lost all restraint, and his eyes brimmed with an incomparable darkness. "Yes... Indeed, I have been using entirely too much judgment. True... To accomplish my goal, there is only one choice."

"Crap. I just touched a nerve, didn't I?"

"That's putting it rather lightly, I think," said Edward. "Although I suppose we were bound to end up here sooner or later. Not that that's much consolation."

"Damn it. Well, here I go!" Understanding instinctively that she couldn't afford to leave Craig alone for another second, Akira jumped at him with full force, swinging her sword down.

Craig grabbed the blade in his left hand.

"Huh?!"

"Consume, Left Hand of Sorcery!"

Blood flowed from the hand that gripped Akira's sword, but darkness spurted out with an even greater force.

"Damn it!" Akira cried. "Burn it up, Azurebolt!"

Pale blue lightning sparked through Hauteclaire, meeting the approaching darkness, which stopped it in its tracks. They were at a standstill.

"Damn it, you're just as bad as that dragon!"

"Envelop, Right Hand of Sorcery!"

Darkness overflowed, covering Craig's right hand, which he swung at Akira,

sending her flying against the wall at a ridiculous speed. She showed no sign of being able to climb to her feet.

“Craig,” said Edward. “What have you...”

“I told you there was only one choice. Now, away with you.”

Before he knew it, Edward had been flung against the wall in the same way as Akira. Strangely, he felt neither the shock nor the pain of the impact. From his many years of experience, he knew what that meant—his circumstances were too dire to be able to sense anything.

At the same time, however, Edward felt a sensation he did not quite understand. Not death, but something closer to sleep, one from which he would never awaken. He felt his own sense of self being overwritten, replaced. Then, just as he lost consciousness, he understood—it was *Craig’s* consciousness.

Anger, sadness, grief, pain...all of Edward’s mind, from the most mundane experiences to the most unique and personal encounters, even things that he had forgotten himself... As his mind was overwritten, a thought occurred to him: *Someone, do what we could not, and stop this friend of mine.*

Then, with a sound like something smashing to pieces, Edward’s mind fell into a bright light.

The Depths of Hatred

The sound of shattering glass rang through the air. Craig showed no surprise; he must have expected that he would be interrupted.

“I didn’t think it would be *you* who interrupted me, good-for-nothing,” he said, turning his gaze toward the figure who stood by the entrance. The young man who stood there, slowly returning his extended left arm to his side, was unmistakable—the bothersome boy of his own blood whom he had cast out.

“I wish someone else could’ve come here in my place too,” said the boy with a shrug and an intense stare.

Craig snorted with frustration. He really was an irritation. “In that case, do not interfere. If you leave this place with haste, I will forgive this transgression. There is no value in dealing with the likes of you.”

“If that was enough to resolve it, I’d love to. But the way you’re acting, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night. Besides, that’s not exactly what I meant when I said I wish someone else could’ve come instead.”

“You would disregard my compassion? You truly are a good-for-nothing. Very well.”

This wouldn’t take long. True, the good-for-nothing must have been responsible for what had just happened, but even so, whatever power he had just used, or however he had acquired it, was of no importance. It paled before Craig’s newly acquired power.

“I care not how or why you are here. I have only one thing to say to you—away, you blemish on my sight!”

Craig waved his right arm with a string of demonic words, and darkness flowed from it, swallowing the good-for-nothing. He scoffed at how disappointingly easy it had been. He had felt nothing. Perhaps Brett was right and he should have simply finished him off long ago. Still, in the end, the outcome was the same. Someday he would have to dispose of Brett too.

“But that can wait. I still have use for him. He can be dealt with once he has fulfilled his purpose.”

“Man, that’s some really heinous stuff you’re saying. I don’t wanna think that your blood runs through me. Oh well. Children can’t choose their parents, right?”

Craig turned in shock, but the darkness was still there—the darkness made of Craig’s hatred for God and the world. Nobody should have been able to survive such an attack.

“Officially, I don’t even *have* a father, of course. But that doesn’t change the truth. Man, what a pickle.”

As the good-for-nothing spoke, the sound of crashing glass rang out once again. The darkness crumbled, and the boy appeared unscathed, wearing the same intense stare, having clearly just completed a slash of his sword.

“Impossible!” said Craig. “How could you so easily dispose of my hatred for God? What are you?!”

“I’m exactly what you think I am. Don’t tell me you forgot you were the first to call me a good-for-nothing.”

Craig gasped. Almost reflexively, he stepped backward. He felt as though he were being propelled by some invisible force, but biting his lip, he shook off that thought. It was just his imagination—his surprise at the unexpected turn of events. He had easily dispensed with both Edward and the Champion. Why would he be afraid of this good-for-nothing? Yes, perhaps there was something strange, something different about him—but he wasn’t anyone of note. Craig could not be obstructed by such a trifling foe now.

“Yes... You *are* a good-for-nothing. And a good-for-nothing will not stand in my way!”

“Surely even someone like me has the right to try to stop you. After all, this country’s been pretty good to me. And most of all, I have friends here that I can’t just abandon.”

“Enough of your prattle!”

\$&%!#?: !%##%\$.

With a wild scream, Craig swung his arm and pounded the good-for-nothing with darkness of even greater volume and intensity—and yet this time it crumbled before it even managed to envelop him, disappearing without a trace the moment the boy swung his sword.

“Impossible! Even Hauteclairé could barely hold my darkness back. How could that blade be even greater?!”

“Noel’s gonna be happy to hear that...but this is still just a sword, you know. True, a first-rate one, but still.” It seemed that the sword was special indeed. “Oh, that reminds me, Before I lose my chance, there’s one thing I wanted to tell you.”

“And what might that be?”

Words of hatred? Craig had no need for them. This boy had been nothing to him—no, still was. Craig would prove that soon enough. Whatever the outcast had to say could amount to nothing more than noise.

“Well...I feel like you’ll get the wrong idea, but whatever. I was listening to your conversation earlier.”

“What conversation? What are you—”

“It’s interesting how the details change a little depending on who you’re talking to, but that’s neither here nor there. I’m talking about my mother’s Gift—the Holy Mother. It’s not true that she had to give her own life.”

“What?” What was he talking about? It seemed he had been listening for a long while.

“I looked into it for myself. It seems it did have a hidden effect, but only to grant her one small wish regarding the child she gave birth to. She wished only that her child would grow up to be healthy. Her Gift had nothing to do with her death. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Craig nodded. “Correct.” The story he had told Edward was a lie. The demons had relayed it to him, and demons never told complete truths. Besides, after seeing her death countless times, it was impossible to believe that it was the

fault of her Gift. But that made no difference. All that mattered were his countless visions of his wife's death and the fact that he could do nothing to help her. That was enough to render him hopeless, to stoke the fires of hatred in his heart.

And the demons' stories contained truths too. His powers, his level, were clearly the genuine article. That was enough, so long as he could have his revenge on God. Even if it was not truly by his own hands, even if it was nothing more than misplaced resentment founded on a misunderstanding...even if he was simply being used by demonkind.

“So long as I can throw this hatred back at those who caused it, naught else matters! As long as I can destroy all you hated foes!”

Craig hurled even more overflowing darkness and demonic incantations at the good-for-nothing, but again it immediately crumbled, as if his hatred were entirely meaningless.

“Ridiculous! How could a wretch like you...”

“Maybe I *am* a good-for-nothing, but you’ve overlooked something. What you intend to do will bring shame to my mother!”

“Speak not of her!”

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Darkness flooded from Craig's arms, enveloping him as if he were being devoured by it. The power that swelled now was unlike anything he had produced before.



A surging omnipotence. The power to kill a god. In exchange, however, he felt his own body weakening...but that didn't matter. As he had said, he had no choice. Destroying himself was a small price to pay in exchange for his revenge.

"As far as I'm concerned, you can do what you like with your own body," said the boy, "but considering the effect you'll have on others, you're being pretty selfish. Guess it's up to me to show you just how badly you've screwed up."

Craig's field of view again opened up, the sense of omnipotence dispersing. He saw the boy right in front of him, swinging his arm. Shaking violently, he began to fall to the ground.

"You... You good-for-nothing... How?!" Craig reached out as if to clutch at something; however, he found nothing but air as he collapsed—a symbol of his own existence.

Staring at his empty hand, his mind slipped into the depths of darkness.

The Former Hero Wishes to Live in Peace

The hectic nature of that day was attested to in later records—not just that demons had appeared in the capital, but that nobody from the castle had even noticed. That the parties responsible for keeping on top of such things only discovered the truth after everything was over caused them much distress. At least the princess's appearance and the First Knightly Order having faced down the demons allowed them to save some face.

Those facts meant that even though they had been slow to notice the problem, they had been quick to respond to it. The princess's presence had also calmed the populace, preventing them from sliding into total confusion. Widespread panic could have presented a great opportunity for neighboring nations, but instead the kingdom soon returned to a peaceful state.

On the other hand, the Duchy of Westfeldt was thrown into confusion. The duke and his son had joined forces with demonkind and turned traitor. Regardless of the contribution their house had made to the kingdom, it would have to be dissolved—but that left the matter of what should be done with its remaining territories. For one thing, the duchy's population had done no wrong, and the region also played an important defensive role. But no other noble house was suitable for handling the territory, nor would any be willing.

The royal family's plan was to grant noble status to the man who had made a great contribution to the defense of the kingdom and grant the territory to him—a highly unusual arrangement, especially since he had no status at all. Furthermore, they planned to grant him the lofty title of duke. Such a move would usually have inspired questions regarding the royal family's competence, yet in this case no objections arose. What objections could there be? Among the people, a rumor spread that he was a banished former noble, but that was impossible. They could not find a single shred of evidence to support the claim.

Even this resolution, however, hardly brought the matter to a close. It was still unclear why the entire incident had taken place to begin with. All that was

known was that it had happened.

It was still hectic within the castle grounds, though the atmosphere had changed. Amid the frenzied activity, there was an air of relief. Toward the back of the room, the king sat on high above his audience, his gaze directed at one young man. Though of unclear birth, the stranger's contributions to resolving the recent unrest meant he would be recognized as a duke, as highly unconventional as it was.

After a long speech, the king finally began the conferring of the title, eliciting sighs of relief from the nobles who watched over the proceedings, most of whom had little interest in becoming duke themselves. While some might have felt small pangs of jealousy, it wasn't enough to hide. The relieved expressions that each wore were sincere. After all, the house they had thought was defending the kingdom from demons had turned out to be in cahoots with them—a fact that had already spread widely among the populace.

While the leaders of the rebellion had already been disposed of by the time the nobles' scrupulous investigations were completed, that was not the end of the matter. Their investigations had revealed even more problems. For one, Gifts that sensed whether a person was truly who they claimed to be were not effective if someone truly believed they were the genuine article. This, as well as the matter of finding a replacement for the House of Westfeldt, were issues that had to be resolved immediately. Now one of those issues had found its resolution.

"In recognition of your great contributions to the kingdom, I confer upon you the title of duke," said the king.

"I respectfully decline."

The air was sucked out of the room. The assembled nobles stared at the young man, mouths agape, so shocked they forgot to breathe. None—except one—could have anticipated such a response. It was inconceivable. And yet now the young man raised his heretofore downturned head and began to speak.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, to grant a nobody such as myself the title

of duke is to grant me control of the most important territory in the kingdom. Out of consideration to the kingdom, accepting such a responsibility would be an outrage. I must refuse.”

The young man stood up and turned to leave without even waiting for a response. If anything was outrageous, it was *this*. Few would have complained if he had been cut down on the spot. That he was not was a testament to the sudden shock of his words and deeds, as well as the understanding that nobody could possibly succeed in killing him. Rumor had it that he had killed the former Duke of Westfeldt, who himself had defeated both the Champion and the captain of the First Knightly Order, known to be the strongest warriors in the land. Even if everyone assembled had attempted to stop him at once, they would have likely all been killed.

“Is this acceptable to you, Your Majesty?”

“What? I don’t mind. I expected it,” said the king, the one person unsurprised by the young man’s conduct, as he looked at the door through which the young man had disappeared. Given his apparent lack of concern, it would have been inappropriate for anyone else to pursue the stranger.

The king had anticipated such a response. He understood the young man’s nature, and besides, he had already been informed of his intentions.

“But how will we fill the void left by the House of Westfeldt?”

“Not to worry. In fact, that void has already been filled.”

“Is that so, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. I’m afraid this charade was always intended to end in his refusal, although since he was unaware of that, I suppose we have both been discourteous to one another. To be frank, had he accepted, it would have presented something of a problem, though I suppose it all would have worked out in the end. I believe that daughter of mine was hoping for such an outcome, anyway.”

With that, the king smiled, his eyes narrowing. It was a cheerful smile, but his gaze was that of a hunter zeroing in on his prey. He had expected this outcome, but he was far from giving up on the young man. He had realized that by all

conventional wisdom, the boy was indeed a talentless good-for-nothing, yet that only proved how naive conventional understanding was. The young man had already shown what he was capable of. A king could not afford to let such a valuable asset slip through his fingers.

“I *do* have one misgiving, however,” he muttered with a smirk. “I *do* hope I am able to deftly influence proceedings without incurring the wrath of my daughter, but perhaps there is nothing to be done about that.”

Allen turned around and tilted his head. That had been easier than he’d expected. He’d anticipated at least *some* sort of objection, but...

Well, whatever, he thought as he continued walking away. So long as this wasn’t going to cause him any further trouble, he had no complaints. Besides, he still had business to attend to—business to which he now turned his attention.

Reclining in the chair in his personal room, the man sighed. As the events of the past few days ran through his mind, he sighed again. He couldn’t help but feel that he’d gotten a bad bargain out of what was *supposed* to be a cushy job. It had been days since the incident, but after being shaken to the core by the ordeal, he still couldn’t escape his sense of unease.

“I should feel fine by now. I’ve explained everything fully, ensuring that nobody would be so foolish as to involve themselves with humankind again. I’m sure people will forget in time, but by then it will be their responsibility.”

The risk of getting involved with humans was too great. Yes, they could be useful in achieving one’s goals, but the consequences inevitably defeated the purpose. Dying for the sake of one’s offspring was one thing, but any death that came from dealings with humans would surely be in vain.

“This was a severe blow, but there were successes too. All that remains is to vacate this place and return home,” the man muttered as he rose.

“Huh, is that right?” came a voice. “Good timing on your part. I don’t want to associate with you any more than I have to.”

The man gasped, turning in the direction of a voice that he surely could not have heard. A young man who shouldn't have been there stood before him. The man's expression contorted in shock and fear.

"Impossible! Why are you here?! How?!"

"Not that I owe you an explanation, but...you can't be *that* surprised, right? Did you think I'd let you get away with ravaging my former family?"

"B— Wha?!" The man trembled in fear. He had no idea where the young man had come from. There had been no time to look into it, but now that he thought about it, that family *was* supposed to have had another son, one that he'd heard was so useless that he had been cast out. Surely this young man couldn't be him!

"Wait! True, we demons *do* share some blame in this, but *they* reached out to *us*! We didn't—"

"Do anything wrong? Do you think that's gonna work on me?"

The young man's piercing gaze caused the demon to tremble even more with a paralyzing fear as he realized that his hopes of escape had been dashed. Perhaps if he'd fled before, when first he'd recognized the dire nature of the situation... But even then, perhaps not. He sensed that the young man had allowed him to escape in order to create the current confrontation.

"You're right, of course; most of the blame does lay with those two. I won't argue with that. They did what they did for their own ends, and when it comes down to it, *I'm* the one who really ravaged the family. But anyway..."

The demon had a moment of realization then, of both the inevitability of his own death and that his kind had meddled with a force far more dangerous to them than even the gods.

Out of the blue, and for no reason that anyone understood, the area the demons had taken as their stronghold crumbled to the ground, leaving not even ruins behind.

With all the loose ends tied up, Allen returned to the outskirts of the capital. “Hey, sorry I took so long,” he said, waving at the pair he found waiting for him.

“I wasn’t waiting that long. I wasn’t sure if you’d show, though,” said Noel.

“What do you mean?”

“You bailed on your conferring ceremony, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I turned the offer down properly.”

“That’s even worse! Well, whatever. Not like it has anything to do with us.”

“Yeah, you can do what you like,” Mylène added.

Allen shrugged as the pair giggled, then gestured to the two of them to keep moving. Their work in this area was done. There was no need to hang around.

“I guess I’ll return to that town, although I dunno if I’ll be welcome there,” Allen mused.

“You’ll only be there for a little while. That’s no problem, right?” asked Noel.

“It’s the most convenient choice, at least until I’ve gathered information about the surrounding villages.”

“And then?”

“I guess we won’t know until we get there.” As long as no further trouble broke out, Allen could see himself staying there, but he’d have to attend to some business at the Adventurer’s Guild first. “Oh, I almost forgot to thank you two for your help here. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Seemed like you did it all by yourself to me, but hey, it feels good to hear that,” Noel answered.

“No problem?” Mylène replied uncertainly.

“Right...I’m glad you feel that way.” Allen had brought the two of them to the capital, having predicted how things would play out once he’d heard that the General had shown up. He had thought the talented pair would be essential in bringing things to a swift conclusion, but he couldn’t say it had really been worth it. Then again, without them, he would have had at least a little more difficulty. Even he couldn’t handle everything by himself, after all.

“I’m sure you would’ve figured something out on your own,” said Noel.
“Anyway, are we walking from here?”

Allen had transported them through a virtual space he had created using his Boundless Knowledge power.

“Hmm...it may not seem like it, but after everything that’s happened I’m pretty tired. And my powers are exhausted too. Since there’s no need to hurry, I’d rather we take our time heading back. Of course, if you’re in a hurry...”

“I see,” said Noel. “Well, I don’t mind. I don’t have anything important to get back to.”

“I don’t mind either,” Mylène agreed.

“Guess that settles it,” said Allen.

“That’s fine,” said Noel, “but shouldn’t you say something to Riese first? Or did you talk to her already?”

“I said a few words to her, yeah,” said Allen. “Plus she’s gotta be busy right now.”

Riese had become the woman of the hour: the Saint who had saved the kingdom from the demonic menace. It seemed she had decided to take advantage of all the rumors regarding the Saint, and that had made her suddenly extremely busy. She didn’t have time to associate with a nobody like him.

“Even one who saved the entire nation?” asked Noel.

“I refused credit for that, so I’m back to being a plain old nobody,” said Allen.

“What a shame,” Mylène murmured.

“Kinda. It means I didn’t get to say goodbye to Riese. But I’m glad I didn’t get burdened with all kinds of responsibilities right as I was about to get back to looking for a peaceful life.”

If Allen and Riese never met again, that would be best for both of them. If they had cause to reunite, it would mean that another calamity had befallen the kingdom.

“We can have this talk while we walk,” said Allen. “Let’s get—”

Suddenly an unexpected voice interjected. “*There* you are!”

He turned in the direction of the voice. There stood an unmistakable silver-haired girl. “Riese? What are you...”

“What am I doing here? Going back to that town with you, of course! I thought you’d take me with you!”

“Huh? But why? Your duty there is done.”

“True, but is it so strange to want to return to my own territory?”

“What?” Allen wasn’t sure what she meant—or rather, he couldn’t believe what she was implying.

“Oh, right! You see, I’ve had a slight name change. I’m now known as Riese Westfeldt!”

Allen gasped, and Riese explained that the old Duchy of Westfeldt would simply become the new Duchy of Westfeldt. It was the best way to avoid confusion among the people. Things would probably have played out the same if Allen had accepted the role of duke. There seemed to be myriad problems with anyone but him accepting the position, but the choice of Riese made those problems evaporate. The renown she had won as the official savior of the kingdom made her qualified enough, and the fact that she was willing to renounce her right to the throne, all the more so. Furthermore, she would be duchess in name only. All her powers and responsibilities would be delegated to someone else. It was a solution that eliminated all practical problems.

Allen had just one concern. “What do you get out of this?”

“Plenty. I have never felt particularly well-suited to being a princess. And besides...I seem to be in the habit of befriending mavericks and eccentrics. This is the only way I can continue to enjoy their company.”

“I don’t think the Frontier is the sort of place the duchess should be visiting whenever she pleases.”

“You think? It’s still part of my domain, whatever you call it. I say it’s important that I survey it with my own eyes.”

Surveying the territory with your own eyes isn't exactly a duchess's job, thought Allen, but it was clear his feelings would hold no sway here. Riese would just tell him that was the duchess's job to decide, and that would be that. This exchange was all a formality, anyway, contrived by Riese to elicit his approval after she effortlessly parried all his objections.

Understanding his role, Allen simply sighed and shrugged. "I guess there's nothing I can do to stop you."

"Correct."

"Finally, we got there," said Noel. "Are you two done now? Can we get moving?"

"The sun will set on us if we don't hurry," Mylène added.

"Jeez, aren't you two impatient? You're right, though. Okay, let's— Wait, Riese, what about Beatrice?"

"Beatrice was my personal guard. I'm no longer royalty, so she has been relieved of that responsibility...although she's currently busy twisting arms and greasing palms in an attempt to accompany me."

"I see. So you're coming alone? You're not on a secret mission anymore, you know," said Allen. Riese may have no longer been royalty, but a duchess was still one of the kingdom's most important figures. Ill fortune could result from her traveling alone.

She stared intently into his eyes. "Why would I need anyone else when I have you, Allen?"

Allen was lost for words. He couldn't deny she was right, but...

"That's true, you don't need anyone else," said Noel.

"They'd just get in the way," Mylène agreed.

"Exactly," said Riese with a satisfied smile.

There was nothing Allen could say. Swallowing his objections, he grinned. "Okay, *now* let's get moving."

"Yes, let's go!" said Riese.

The group passed through the castle gates, heading for the Frontier. Allen's goal was to live as he pleased. Whether his wish would finally be granted, only God knew. Looking up at the sky, he saw perfect weather for a long journey.

I wonder what'll happen next? he thought with a smile.

Interlude

The Marquisate of Linkvist was the most important territory among the sprawling lands of the Viktor Empire, particularly because the Kingdom of Adastera was among the nations it bordered. The kingdom and empire were bitter rivals with a history of conflict that spanned ages. It was said that were it not for Adastera, the empire's territory would be many times its current size. Although the nations were not presently engaged in all-out war, conflict still raged beneath the surface. As that conflict's front line, Linkvist was a crucial strategic location for the empire. Therefore, it was also the place where a great volume of intelligence regarding the Kingdom of Adastera could be gathered most quickly.

While Adastera was the target of the most enmity, the empire was embroiled in disputes with most of its neighbors. Worst of all, it currently shared a border with the Demon Kingdom. They could not afford to focus only on Adastera, nor to fully appraise all the available intelligence. The best they could manage was to quickly survey it, then report the items they judged to be most important to the imperial capital. However, the perceived value of intelligence often varied depending on the observer. The intelligence deemed unimportant by the imperial upper ranks could conceivably contain useful information.

Anriette Linkvist was poring over intelligence she had acquired under just such a pretense. She was a beautiful girl of about fifteen years, with rose-colored hair and determined eyes that belied her young age. Almost—but not yet—of age, she was possessed of a fleeting quality that only accentuated her charm. She was the first daughter of and sole heir to the Duchy of Westfeldt. Her position afforded her access to intelligence reports, which she perused at her leisure in her own room in the Westfeldt estate.

Anriette rolled her eyes in consternation. “Nothing I didn't know in this one either! That ‘elite intelligence force’ of ours is useless!” she exclaimed, tossing the report to one side with a sigh in a clear display of disregard for the protocols on the handling of such reports and the top secret information contained

within.

The head butler, cradling a stack of similar documents in his arms, cried out in shock at her treatment of the information he had brought her. “My lady!”

The man took no further action—he had only recently come under the employ of the Westfeldt estate, and a set of circumstances too complex to explain here had resulted in him suddenly being thrust into a senior position. For the moment, what mattered was that he was still struggling to understand the young woman he had been tasked with serving. The butler was well aware that each noble had to be served in their own way, and some would readily punish their servants simply for speaking the truth. As a result, he had no idea how to respond to the situation.

Anriette simply waved dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. They’re just copies. Who cares if they’re top secret? Nobody’s gonna complain that I’m not handling them properly.”

“I-I’m sure that is true, my lady, but...” the butler protested. Even copies had to be handled with care. Besides which, such careless conduct was not befitting of a noble. And for that matter, nor was her way of speaking.

“It’s *fine*! Blame the guys who brought us such worthless intelligence!”

The butler held his tongue. He knew that the lady was no common boor despite her conduct. In his brief time serving her, she had proved herself to be sagacious indeed. Surely even her coarse manner of speaking had some deeper purpose behind it, and the report she had tossed away must have been deserving of rough treatment. Yes, that had to be it.

“Understood, my lady. And what of the remaining reports?”

Anriette peered at the stack of papers the butler carried. They contained yet more intelligence regarding the Kingdom of Adastera and would likely meet the same fate as the last report, but perhaps not.

“Hmm. There’s gotta be something juicy in there somewhere. Our ‘elite intelligence force’ produced them, after all. Gimme the next one.”

“Of course, my lady.”

As Anriette surveyed the document, something caught her eye. The previous report had contained an overview of happenings in the Kingdom of Adastera over the past three months, while the remaining reports contained more detail. The report she was currently perusing described events in a different way than the previous one. Rather than a simple enumeration of facts, it included rumors and conjecture. Since it was densely packed with information, much of it was difficult to understand.

“Some of this seems more like urban legend than hearsay and speculation. Dragons are God’s messengers? In some places they’re even worshipped as gods themselves? How is this supposed to be useful?”

“I requested *all* the information, just as you asked, my lady. I admit that the intelligence team *did* wonder if I was joking.”

“I see. They really take note of everything.” It was impossible to predict what information might end up being useful, so it made sense to note anything that might be even remotely significant. Reports would then narrow things down to only the relevant information.

“I guess I should take back what I said about this stuff being useless,” Anriette continued. Although it did seem like their intelligence forces could do a better job of collating the important information, it made sense that, for them, this form was easiest to understand. After all, these documents were never intended for outside consumption. She couldn’t complain.

Besides, it seemed like the previous document really had been only a rough overview. The current paper contained details about things that had been completely omitted from the previous document.

“I guess these aren’t too bad after all,” said Anriette. The document contained information she already knew, which was almost inevitable since she knew so much. “I guess I can’t really expect them to find even more details than I’ve already...*observed*.”

“What was that, my lady?”

“Oh, just talking to myself. Next, please.”

Puzzled, the butler handed her another report, and she continued reading.

This one was much the same as the last. It contained an assortment of novel miscellany, but when it came to the facts, there was nothing she didn't already know.

Anriette smirked. "Still, reading all this again, I've gotta say...well played."

The slaying of a dragon, a giant wolf monster, and then a demon attack on the royal capital. A sequence of unbelievable events, any one of which would have been enough to cause a widespread commotion. And all this in the space of three months—or one month, really. To anyone not in the know, it must have seemed as though the Kingdom of Adastera was cursed.

The imperial capital had to be in uproar too. Yes, these were the problems of another nation, but not entirely. There was one particular piece of information that the empire couldn't afford to ignore: the possibility that the General had been killed by a demon.

"That doesn't have anything to do with me, though. Fortunately." Perhaps things would be different if she had been the heir to the *true* power in Linkvist, but that was not the case. She was free to regard all of this as someone else's problem. "Unfortunately, I have to worry about the other thing, though."

The reports she surveyed contained little information about the matter that actually concerned her, which was a small mercy. A monster resembling a giant wolf had been slain in the region known as the "Frontier." Yet despite all their investigations, Linkvist had been unable to ascertain who was responsible. The dragon was understood to have been slain by the Champion, and the demon invasion quelled by the first princess. It seemed unlikely that the kingdom itself had somehow devised a means of disposing of the other creature.

"I bet *he* finished it off," Anriette mused. Her powers hadn't been enough to tell her that, but she could take a guess.

Their forces could hardly be blamed for the scant intelligence regarding the affair. They probably hadn't posted many spies in such an inconsequential-seeming region. There had been no word on the village that had been infiltrated by a demonic necromancer either.

Anriette continued to read the reports. Finally reaching the end, she sighed. "Still nothing new, but I guess it doesn't hurt to review things once in a while."

Silas, take these.” She picked up the discarded report and placed it on top of the pile. “And this. Dispose of them.”

The butler took the reports and carried them out of the room. Watching him leave, Anriette smiled. He had been a good find.

“What a stupid man, firing such a fine servant.” She quickly turned her thoughts to other matters, although even thinking about that idiot was a kind of idiocy. She sighed again in exasperation. “Didn’t you want a peaceful life? Isn’t that why you were reborn? What are you doing?” She smiled wryly. She *did* have some idea of what was going on. “It *is* just like him, though.”

Still, there probably wouldn’t be any more incidents. There had already been a sequence of once-in-a-lifetime events. There wouldn’t be any others.

“He’s not a hero anymore, after all. And he’s only one man.” Anriette remembered the scene she had observed. Her expression shifted, relieved but also envious. “I’m sure he doesn’t need my concern. We’ve got plenty to worry about here in Linkvist, anyway. It might not have anything to do with me, but that doesn’t mean I can afford not to care.”

In fact, that in itself was a problem, she thought. Which gave her an idea.

“I wonder if he’ll come here?”

It seemed inconceivable. Visiting the empire would be about the furthest thing possible from a peaceful life. But for some reason, the thought wouldn’t leave her head.

“He can’t help poking his nose into trouble...” Perhaps she ought to at least prepare for the eventuality.

“What a knave he is.”

She looked out of the window at the full moon, a bemused smile playing across her lips.



Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Kouduki.

Whether you've been around since the first volume or are a new reader, I'd like to thank you for picking up this novel. This volume more or less ties together the story that began in the first volume, but we're not done yet. Thanks to your support, it seems that I'll be able to produce another volume. I hope you'll keep reading.

It's also thanks to everyone's support that a manga version of this series has begun. Karasumaru really created an amazing piece of work. If you haven't read it yet, I implore you to do so! I'd be delighted if you would continue to support it along with the original novels.

Once again, many people helped to put this volume together.

I'd like to thank my editors S and F. Here's to our continued relationship.

Illustrator Chocoan produced yet more wonderful pieces of art for this volume. See you in the next one!

My deepest thanks also goes to the proofreaders, management, designers, and everyone else who made the publishing of this volume possible.

Most of all, I'd like to thank you, the readers, for your continued support and for purchasing this book! I truly can't thank you enough.

That's all for now. I hope we'll meet again in the third volume. See you!

Shin Kouduki, January 2018



Bonus Short Story

Surprise and Confusion

Mylène looked on blankly as she heard the regular sound ring out. She was not absent-minded; she simply had nothing to do. As always, Noel, the shopkeeper and blacksmith, had been forging since morning. Having just eaten lunch, she would now continue until dinnertime. Sometimes, she'd heard, she forged long into the night without even eating.

Thankfully, the current circumstances weren't so pressing. Though her passion for the forge tended to be roused to even greater heights whenever her pride as a blacksmith was inflamed, at the moment she was dispassionately, almost unconsciously swinging away with her hammer, almost as though she was avoiding looking at something, or perhaps intently inspecting something. Mylène hadn't known Noel for long, though. She knew there was a chance she was misreading her.

All she could say for sure was that until Noel put down her tools and called out to her, she had nothing else with which to fill her time. If a customer were to pay them a visit, she would have a job to do. But ever since she'd started working at Noel's smithy, not a single person other than Allen and his friends had come through their doors. Mylène was no expert, but the swords Noel forged seemed like quality weapons to her. And yet she had no apparent interest in selling them, and the townspeople seemed to know it. Noel told Mylène that she could handle odd jobs and that was enough, but odd jobs alone weren't enough to occupy her. A quick survey of the room revealed nothing—she'd already finished cleaning before lunch.

She went back to staring into space. That was when it hit her. Yes, she was bored, but until recently, she could never have imagined being able to one day laze around this way.

"Is all of this thanks to Allen?" she muttered, craning her neck in thought.

In truth, there was no doubt about it, but only recently had she realized it. At first, she'd found Allen and the others more confusing than anything. She couldn't tell what they were thinking. Yet even though she'd been a minion of the demons, they'd rescued her. And even though she had no choice but to do as they said, even though she'd been of little use, they'd taken her in as one of them. She couldn't be blamed for feeling more cautious, more wary of what they might be planning than grateful. Allen had said it was in return for the information she'd given him about the man she'd been with, but that debt had already been repaid—she'd thought as much when she'd been on the brink of death.

Caution was her way of not getting her hopes up. If she believed Allen was really going to save her, it would only hurt more when he didn't. She was trying to guard against her own temptation to believe the best of people. But the others had kept their promise. The little information she'd offered was enough for them to not only have mercy on her, but take care of her. Perhaps the most shocking of all had been...

She looked in the direction of the nonchalant, rhythmic clanging. From where she stood, she couldn't see the girl who was its source, but it still brought back memories. She'd been present when her future had been decided, not by invitation, but because the conversation had begun moments after she'd provided what information she had to offer. Mylène had thought she was about to be made an example of—that they had already decided to abandon her to fend for herself and surely die in the Frontier. Looking back on it, it did seem ludicrously pessimistic, even for her, but in a way, she hadn't been too far off the mark.

Setting aside the roundabout approach they'd chosen to take, it was an appropriate measure, exactly what she'd expected from the start. Whatever justifications she might have had, there was no reason to expect them to spare a person who had attempted to kill them. Especially not when that person had been working with demons. She'd heard about this place beforehand. The Frontier: a dumping ground for the world's most wretched beings, each clawing desperately at the walls of their personal tunnel to hell.

The reality was immaterial; having been primed to see it that way, that was

her impression when she first laid eyes on the town—a place where every inhabitant was struggling to stay alive. They had no time to offer kindness to others. With some obvious exceptions, such as the Adventurer's Guild, they didn't concern themselves with others at all. There was no question what would happen to her if she was left to fend for herself in such a place. Whether by the hand of nature or man, she'd end up cold, alone, and eventually dead. So when Noel had offered to take her in, she'd been suspicious. She'd considered a natural death the better of the two options.

But soon, she'd understood. Noel wouldn't kill her immediately; she would work her to death instead. It was a much more productive approach. There was only one problem—if Noel wasn't going to work her hard enough to kill her, why not just throw her out? Not that it made much difference to her, but it stood to benefit Noel and the others.

It was on the day she moved into Noel's shop that the possibility she'd been mistaken first struck her. The warlike Amazons were known for their superhuman strength. She had heard they were coveted as slaves for that reason, but she had no such power herself. She'd already come of age and hadn't been granted the strength-increasing Gift that even the most talentless Amazons were widely believed to have benefited from. She was a weakling, capable of losing to even a child if she hesitated too long. If Noel's plan was to benefit from her inherent strength, the smith would surely throw her out before the day was through.

Instead, Noel had assigned her the role of shopkeeper. Even this would have made sense if Mylène was playing bouncer, but all she was charged with was greeting customers. Customers who, Noel said, would be few and far between. Mylène didn't get it, but she didn't have a choice. There she had stood at the front of the store, deeply confused, as Noel offered some parting words —“Leave everything else to me”—and set about forging.

It had to be some kind of trap. Nothing else made sense. The shop was littered with swords, quality weapons that could easily be stolen and sold for a healthy sum—weapons so fine that even the Giftless Mylène could sneak up behind the blacksmith, her footsteps hidden by the sound of hammering, and with one swing of her arm deliver a fatal blow. She'd assumed Noel must be

confident in her ability to repel any such attack, but a quick glance at the smith as she hammered away exposed a fundamental problem with that attitude. Noel was completely engrossed in her work. No matter how deft the smith's defense, Mylène was sure she could kill her with an attack from behind. True, for an Amazon, she wasn't the best fighter, but even she knew that was only by the standards of the incredible warriors that comprised her peers.

In the end, as hard as it was to believe, she had to conclude that Noel really had offered her shelter and the responsibility of working in the shop, not as a slave, but as a person. She hadn't used some kind of covenant-making Gift to control her like that demon had. Mylène could do whatever she chose.

It didn't make sense. It was immediately obvious that Noel and her friends weren't like the other people in the Frontier. They weren't desperate or wretched; they'd come here by choice. They were free. But why would any free person extend charity to others? Once you started, where did it end? Inevitably, with your throat cut. But they didn't seem that naive and unworldly.

She just couldn't figure it out. With no customers to interrupt her thoughts, she'd turned it over in her head again and again until her empty stomach pulled her back to reality. Noel had brought her here in the morning, and already it had passed lunchtime. But Noel just kept on working. Mylène had wondered what to do and eventually settled on staring at her as she worked, waiting for her to stop. But Noel paid her no mind.

It wasn't until Noel stopped hammering and raised her head, panting, that she finally noticed Mylène. At first she just tilted her head in confusion, asking what was wrong. Mylène timidly communicated that it was past lunchtime, which spurred Noel into another shocking act.

"Oh! So it is," she replied, followed by, "Can you cook?"

Despite her lack of strength, Mylène was fairly dexterous. She was at least as good a cook as the average person. She proudly believed that she'd been the best cook in her village, though she would never say it aloud. So although she couldn't figure out why, Noel had assigned her the responsibility of cooking dinner with the same casual attitude with which she'd entrusted her with the care of the shop.

She was contemplating this in the storeroom when Noel called, “Give me a shout when it’s ready!” and began working on a new sword. Mylène wondered if she’d lost her mind again.

She looked over the storeroom, wondering what to prepare. Eventually, despite her confusion, she somehow managed to produce a complete meal. She attempted to relay this to Noel, but the smith was once again so engrossed in her work that Mylène was unable to catch her attention no matter how many times she called out until Noel had finished the sword.

Noel finally told her, “Next time, you can just give me a good shake so long as you’re careful about it.” Then Mylène had offered her the meal and watched in disbelief as Noel commenced eating without hesitation.

How was she to interpret Noel happily chowing down, telling her how tasty her food was, showing no concern about being poisoned? Mylène said nothing, acting as though none of this fazed her as she too began to eat. She’d already tasted the food and knew it was edible, but for some reason it tasted better now.

They finished eating, cleaned up, and returned to their respective positions. It wasn’t long after that when the others arrived. This didn’t surprise her at all; of course they’d want to keep an eye on her. But she could never have anticipated the first words out of their mouths.

“Is life with Noel going okay?” It was Riese who asked, her expression as sincere as could be. But shouldn’t it have been the other way around?

Mylène nodded, then proceeded to Noel’s workshop, where she interrogated her about if she was giving her new charge a hard time. It was all backward. Allen watched with a faint smile, and Beatrice alone watched Mylène intently, with a cautiousness that came as an intense relief to her. Finally, this was someone she could understand. But they soon left, satisfied that everything was okay, and her confusion returned.

No other visitors came. At dinnertime, Mylène and Noel played out the same exchange again, except this time Noel assigned her cooking duty without hesitation. By then, Mylène was tired of being surprised and just accepted it.

After supper came bedtime. Noel seemed like someone who would normally

work late into the night, but on that day she went to bed early. She must have been tired. She told Mylène she could stay up if she wanted, but Mylène said she would go to sleep too. She didn't have anything else to do. Her mind tired from so much thinking, she soon fell asleep.

Many similar days came after that. Slowly, the shock and confusion lifted, and Mylène came to accept reality. It was only recently that she truly understood what was really going on. She still couldn't comprehend why they would forgive her and accept her, but she had already shrugged that question off; she was sure she'd understand one day. Or perhaps she'd always understood the true reason—one that she'd felt intuitively the moment she'd met Noel and the others.

A faint creak came from the front door. It hadn't opened once since Allen, Riese, and Beatrice had departed for the village to the south. Mylène was shocked once again. Finally, a customer?! She stared intently at the door as she prepared herself, but the person who stepped inside was familiar.

"Allen?"

"It's been a while, Mylène. Well, not that long, I guess."

There was no doubt it was the real Allen, but she was surprised that he was back so soon. It was supposed to take seven days by carriage to reach the village. He was at least five days early, and that was if he'd turned around and come back the moment he'd arrived.

Riese and Beatrice were next to appear. "Hello, Mylène," said Riese. "I'd love to talk, but...is Noel here?"

"Sorry for barging in," Beatrice added. "We'll have to exchange greetings later."

Allen was as cool as always, but both Riese and Beatrice seemed agitated about something.

"What happened? Something to do with Noel?" asked Mylène.

"Not exactly, but we'd like to ask for her help. It might not even be necessary, but just in case..." Allen trailed off. His vagueness could only mean something big was happening.

Before she had the chance to think about it any further, Mylène heard herself speaking. “Can I help?”

She surprised herself, but she immediately understood. It was obvious. She didn’t understand why they had saved her, but saved her they had. If she could do anything to help them in return, she wanted to try. “If there’s anything I can do...”

“You?” said Allen. “Yeah, maybe there is.”

Mylène knew from the look in his eyes that he meant it. She suddenly felt energized. She had no idea what the situation was or what they were planning, but it didn’t matter. Allen had asked for her help, and she would do as much as she could as thanks for everything he’d done for her...and simply because she wanted to.

Mylène lightly clenched her fists as she headed to the workshop with the others, eager to hear the details.



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The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases: Volume 2

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by TO Books, Inc. Tokyo.

This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Inc. Tokyo
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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2024