



Shin Kouduki

Illustrator: Chocoan

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The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases



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Former Hero
Lives as He Pleases



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“I’ve changed my mind.
I’ll forge a sword for you.”

Noel, Blacksmith

“I trust I can leave my
liege in your care.”

Beatrice, Royal Guard

“Spar with me!”

Akira, Champion

“Why did you assume
I couldn’t kill that thing?”

Allen, Former Hero

“W-Well...Allen and I are
sort of...betrothed, you see.”

Riese, Firstborn Princess



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Banishment

The man's voice reverberated throughout the hall. "I hereby banish you from the Duchy of Westfeldt. Understood?"

Despite barely raising his voice, his proclamation permeated the farthest corners of the room. This was not simply due to the scant few people present in the space. As the head of the family that boasted the strongest military force in Adastera—the sprawling kingdom that reached far across the center of the continent—the duke's voice naturally carried real power. However, the particularly grave tone of his words was explained by the circumstances to which they referred.

There were three figures in the room. First among them was the duke himself, narrowing his eyes, which were the same indigo color as his hair, as he gazed downward. The second figure stood to his side, and the third, a boy, knelt at his feet, eyes cast toward the floor. It was almost as though the group was condemning the boy for some crime. In fact, that was very likely what they were indeed doing.

The duke's tone betrayed nary a hint of emotion as he regarded the boy, a young man of medium build with aquamarine hair, no differently than he would a stone on the side of the road. Though the shadows covering the boy's downturned visage made it impossible to make out his features, the duke could plainly see the gentle trembling of his shoulders.

At this sight, a mocking voice erupted from the duke's side. "It was inevitable, wasn't it? Frankly, you should be thanking us for not having banished you already. Isn't that right, you good-for-nothing?"

The insult was clearly directed at the boy, who didn't raise his head even an inch. He remained still, his shoulders shaking.

"Hmph. Nothing to say for yourself, eh? I was hoping you'd at least have some amusing parting words for us, but you're a disappointment to the very end. Guess I shouldn't have expected more from a good-for-nothing like you."

With this last insult, the fellow—who was, in fact, still a boy himself—by the duke’s side sniffed at the kneeling, trembling figure beneath him. His scornful expression dissolving, he turned to face the duke and realized how striking the resemblance between the man and the boy was. This was, of course, to be expected. The two of them—in fact, all three of them in the hall—were father and sons. The standing youth, younger brother by blood, flicked the slightest glance at his older brother as he spoke to their father.

“But weren’t you rather slow about making your decision, father?”

“Don’t say that,” the duke replied. “If he had, by some chance, ended up having some sort of useful Gift, wouldn’t it have been worthwhile?”

“That’s true, of course...but he turned out to be just as we thought, didn’t he?”

“That’s easy to say with the benefit of hindsight. You’re too eager to hurry things along. How can I have faith in you as the successor to this duchy so long as you demonstrate such tendencies? Don’t be like this good-for-nothing; you’re better than that.”

The younger brother faltered. “You’re right. Forgive me, father.” The boy bowed his head as a wry smile broke out on his face. With his downturned gaze, he looked like a child brimming with pride over a prized possession. But within that pride lurked an arrogance, as if flaunting a toy that only he possessed and others could never touch. “By the way, father, now that you’re finally banishing this good-for-nothing, what exactly is to be done with him? It’s not that I don’t understand; it’s just...well, he’s not exactly as sharp as we are, is he?”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose he’ll never even understand a simple matter like this if I don’t spell it out for him. From now on, there will be no member of our family called Allen Westfeldt...or rather, there has never been such a member of our family. It is as simple as that.”

The kneeling boy, Allen, still did not lift his gaze upon hearing these words. He simply trembled slightly as he kept his gaze steady. At this sight, a sadistic smile surfaced on the face of his younger brother.

“Is that right? That’s very magnanimous of you, father. I thought that bringing such shame on our family would be cause for a more drastic method

of...disposal.”

“I cannot say I did not consider it. His inability to acquire any kind of Gift, let alone raise his Level, is not at all what I expected.”

“Good grief. He really is deficient, isn’t he? The idea that this trash shares my bloodline... I’m rather loath to think about it.”

“You are much better than him. There are those who have taken this matter as evidence that my blood must be cursed. While I am glad to have you as my son, I have thought many times that she must have found him on the street somewhere.”

“Yes, that certainly seems plausible. In fact, although most of my memories of back then are quite hazy, I clearly remember mother being most kind to him despite his shortcomings. Still, perhaps that means it would be better to...*dispose* of him after all?”

The younger brother took obvious pleasure in emphasizing the word. His father, however, did not rebuke him for it. His visage twisted into an unpleasant expression for an entirely different reason.

“I greatly desire the same. But he was betrothed to the princess before we discovered what a good-for-nothing he truly is, was he not?”

“Indeed. And as I recall, they remained betrothed for some time after we discovered his true nature. But don’t tell me the royal family actually offered him mercy?”

“The princess likely did. The king, I’m sure, has other motivations. I imagine he does not wish for his daughter to have been betrothed to a man who was ultimately executed, even if we claim he never existed.”

“I feel as though it would change little, but if that is what you have decided... Yes, surely it’s the right move. Heh, how fortuitous, you good-for-nothing.”

The vexed expression the younger man wore betrayed the truth that he did not, in fact, consider this news fortuitous at all. However, he soon came to a realization that restored the sadistic smile to his face.

“No, perhaps I am being too hasty. After all, you will no longer be a member

of this family. You don't expect you'll be taking all the treasure you've enjoyed access to until now, do you? You'll be cast out, utterly penniless. Hah! How long do you think you'll be able to go on living?"

"It would be rather cruel to cast him out entirely without aid," the duke replied.

With a shocked expression, his younger son asked, "Do you have something in mind, father?"

"Yes. I could not bear to cause a public fiasco by throwing him out as a pauper. Hmm...yes, I will allow you to take one item from among your personal effects."

This declaration immediately restored the cheery expression to the other boy's face, as if he was fully satisfied with what he had just heard. "Ha ha... I see. You really are a magnanimous sort, father. Are you listening, good-for-nothing?! Show your appreciation for father! Oh, and make sure to take something useful with you!"

His words had a simple explanation. He knew that the good-for-nothing—Allen—had never been granted any great items, so taking any one of them would help him little.

"Now, I believe I have carefully explained everything in a manner that even someone like you can understand," the duke declared. "Therefore, I will say this only once more. As of this moment, you are hereby banished from the Duchy of Westfeldt. Understood?"

Though expressed as a question, the duke's words were clearly a decree already settled upon. Allen had never had an option other than assent. Still, even if refusal had been a choice, he would have assented anyway. Or more precisely, even if his refusal would have been a sufficient means of striking back at the pair, who never for a second seemed to consider that he might say no, Allen would never do so. After all, it would not be conduct befitting of the duke's elder son.

And so...

"I understand. Thank you for everything."

Thus Allen responded, his head bowed until the end.

The Former Hero Happily Heads for the Frontier

A robed, hooded figure slipped inconspicuously through the streets of Nox, the most flourishing city in the Duchy of Westfeldt, the southernmost region of the Kingdom of Adastera. Such sights were not uncommon in the bustling city and therefore did not attract the attention of its denizens. With the location's proximity to neighboring countries and the region known as the Frontier, many people with complicated circumstances flowed through the area.

Most such people met the same fate, however. Upon realizing they could find no place to call their own, they quickly left the city behind. This was no less true of the robed figure in question. Heading for the outskirts, it made its way through the city gates, keeping a steady pace, never once looking back.

"Hmm...I never really thought they'd have me executed, but it's kinda surprising that they didn't do anything. I was sure they'd have some punishment in store for me. Not that I'm complaining. Guess I'll just do as I please now."

As the figure mumbled to itself, it did allow itself one look back, but quickly narrowed its eyes and continued forward. Abruptly removing its hood, it revealed the face of a young man. That face—Allen's face—bore a profoundly cheerful expression, his manner scarcely betraying the fact that he had just been banished from his family home.



Indeed, Allen had been exiled only moments prior. His upbeat expression as he ventured out of the city belied the fact that he was a young man who had greeted his fifteenth year only a few days prior.

Still, there was a good explanation for that. Allen was not truly fifteen years old at all, and having been reincarnated, he still had memories from his previous life. It was this that explained his strangely cheerful demeanor.

The fact was, Allen had always wanted to get out of that mansion. In his past life, he had been known as a hero who had saved the world. But that didn't mean that he'd enjoyed a glorious life. Quite the opposite—he had spent most of his days soaked in blood and was similarly dirtied by his involvement in all manner of cloak-and-dagger intrigue. With his life constantly under threat from assassins, it was no exaggeration to say that he had never enjoyed a peaceful moment. In the end, despite the lengths he had gone to to save the world, its people had regarded him with fear.

Fed up with that world, Allen had resolved to depart from it, and in a stroke of what could only be called luck, he'd had a means of doing so. His power as a hero, as well as his duty as savior, had been assigned to him by the goddess of that world. As repayment for fulfilling his obligations, she agreed to grant him one wish, and thus Allen's wish to be reborn in another world was granted—reborn, rather than simply transported, because he sought a fresh start. Unfortunately, that was the only part of his wish that had come true.

“All I wanted was a peaceful life. That's why I came to this world.”

And yet, he had been unfortunate enough to find himself born into the duchy. As he grew, he became aware that he was being referred to by terms such as “child prodigy,” appellations which, at the time, seemed far removed from the peaceful life he had hoped for. Indeed, although he was now known as a good-for-nothing, Allen had very much been the prodigy they claimed. In fact, given the memories he carried with him from his past life, it was likely his own doing.

“Back then, all that crap about Levels and Stats just seemed like such a pain, though...”

This world was said to be loved by the spirits and the gods, for they offered their Levels, Stats, and Gifts (the first two being granted by the spirits, while the

third was granted by the gods). This belief was held so widely that it was all but considered conventional wisdom, and it had a great impact on the religious beliefs of the people of this world.

There was only one belief system here that could be called a religion. While the people were polytheistic, competing religions had not sprung up around them, perhaps because they directly felt the gods' blessings in their lives. Naturally, this resulted in a strong sense of piety. It was less a matter of blind faith and more an acceptance of obvious truths. While people were grateful to the gods for giving them their daily bread, they could not be accused of blind fanaticism. For his part at least, Allen, who was not much concerned with religion, had never witnessed such behavior in this world, although when he considered the reasons religions were founded, he imagined similar reasons could be found throughout the land.

In this land, the word "church" referred not to any building, but collectively to the organization that governed religion. This was headed by a person known as the Hierophant, but the real power lay with the Hierophant's subordinates: the archbishops who locally took up residence. But this is a matter for later in this story. Suffice it to say there was one organization that governed all religious matters. And given that those affiliated with it were particularly pious, it would be no surprise if some among them proved fanatical.

Allen, however, was not a man of great piety. It would be no exaggeration to claim that he had no piety at all. He had been treated better by the gods in his previous life, as strange as that was to admit, but he accepted his fate and thus did not resent them. He simply had no interest in worshipping them.

His feelings toward those who had helped him were a different story. Despite—no, *because* of—these facts about the world, Levels, Stats, and Gifts were understood to be absolute truths for the simple reason that they *were* absolute.

Stats were an objective quantification of a person's abilities, divided into seven categories: Strength, Agility, Intelligence, Dexterity, Stamina, Magic, and Luck. Again, these Stats were absolute; a person with 1 Strength could never defeat a person with 2 Strength in a test of strength. Even a difference of one point was overwhelming, and upsets were fundamentally impossible.

Most Stats ranged from 0 to 2 at birth. A 0 Stat did not mean that a person had *no* ability, simply that they did not yet have enough to reach 1 full point. A higher Stat meant greater ability, with a 3 Stat at birth demonstrating a natural ability in that sphere.

While Stats were not fixed for life, the time at which they changed was set in stone: whenever one's Level increased. A person's Level, also referred to as the rank of one's soul, increased as one accumulated experiences. At such times, one's Stats would increase according to the experiences accumulated. However, increasing one's Level was no small feat.

As a rule, a person's Level was 0 at birth. One full year was considered the minimum amount of time necessary to reach Level 1. With each increase in Level, the time required to further increase one's Level also increased. The ease with which a person could increase their Level, as well as their limits, varied. In some cases, a person could train for twenty years without gaining so much as a single level.

There were also very few instances of someone's Stats dramatically increasing with the gain of a single Level. Only in cases of concentrated study in a sphere in which they had natural ability could a person even hope to gain 2 Stat points with a single increase in Level. Increases of 3 points were almost unheard of.

While both Stats and Levels were granted by the spirits at birth, it was customarily through a process of Judgment on a person's fifth birthday that they were measured, as it was understood that a premature grasp on the presence or absence of prodigious ability could have a negative impact on a child's development. As a result, efforts to raise one's Level necessarily began only after that point, although as previously noted, this was extremely difficult to do. While reaching Level 1 required at least one year, it took about five years on average. Reaching Level 2 took ten. A child who, upon coming of age at ten years old, had reached Level 3 was considered a genius, and a child who had reached Level 4 was a prodigy. It also merits mention that any single stat being greater than 5 at the time of Judgment was considered genius-level.

As for Allen, his Stat Judgment at five years of age showed that he was already Level 1, and all his Stats were 5. Needless to say, this was incredible. Allen was called a child prodigy and was the focus of a great deal of extravagant

praise.

“Still, I guess I should be thankful that I managed to make it another five years.”

Indeed, Allen had reached the age of ten, all the while being praised as a genius. But on his tenth birthday, it was found that he had not gained a single additional Level. Meanwhile, his brother, one year his junior, had already climbed to Level 2. Thus, Allen—in some sense mercifully—ceased to be known as a child prodigy, was labeled a “good-for-nothing” by his father, and earned the contempt of his brother.

It would have been no surprise if Allen had been banished at that point, and in fact he had eagerly anticipated it. The only reason he hadn’t been was the matter of his Gift.

A Gift was a blessing granted by the gods, a mighty power that at times could outstrip any disadvantages implied by Stats alone. A Gift could even result in upsets that should have been impossible given two people’s differences in Stats. An endless variety of Gifts existed, each having enormous potential. As a rule, the blessing provided by a Gift was extremely limited in a sense. For example, the Swordmaster Gift bestowed the skills of a first-class swordsman to those who received it, even if they had never picked up a sword. A person granted the Heracles Gift could effortlessly lift boulders with one arm, even if their Strength Stat was 0. Someone with the Monster Master Gift could communicate with monsters, and one with the Analyze Gift could recognize the Levels, Stats, and Gifts of others. With all this variety, the one certainty was that the recipient would be conferred a blessing befitting a gift from the gods.

Unlike Stats, Gifts were not granted at birth. An event known as the Blessing Ceremony had to be held. This was done to celebrate the maturity of a child who had come of age. While, as a rule, all children received such a ceremony upon coming of age, slight differences might exist based on the nation in which the ceremony took place. As one would expect of a ceremony in which divine blessings were conferred, the Church ran the proceedings free of charge. Still, it was said that in some nations, the Church required payment to conduct the proceedings, though they preferred the term “contributions.” As a result, there purportedly existed people who had not undergone the Blessing Ceremony due

to a failure to make these contributions.

Fortunately, perhaps, no such system existed in this nation, and even the children of the poorest villages were able to have their ceremony, presumably due to the presence of the archbishops, who favored their citizens. Still, the real reason was unclear.

Of course, any organization run by people required money to operate. The mystery was not why the Church collected this money in the form of contributions, but why this particular nation was exempt. They were not small enough that the presence of the archbishops could explain their decision to offer the ceremony to all people for free, so there had to be a better reason.

It was nothing for Allen to be concerned about, though. He had already had his Blessing Ceremony a few days prior...and look how that had turned out.

“Hmm. Considering I’ve already been worthless and been cast out, I guess my future prospects aren’t looking great.”

But that assumption would prove wrong today. Of course, this outcome was what Allen had wished for all along. That was why he hadn’t bothered to put up a fight. In fact, the reason he had been trembling with his downturned gaze wasn’t that he could barely stand the humiliation—it was to avoid uncontrollably breaking into a smile.

It had already been fifteen years since he was born into the duchy. He couldn’t have cared less if they called him a good-for-nothing; in fact, every time he’d heard it, he had hoped that it meant he would soon be cast out. And now he was finally free to pursue a peaceful life. He was feeling happy, utterly without worry, and his destination was clear in his mind.

“The Frontier... I wonder what it’s really like?”

That was where Allen was heading. He had to admit that he didn’t know all that much about the area, but just from the name, it sounded like a place free from strife and turbulence. Surely he would finally be delivered from his restless life.

With his heart full of hope, he headed eastward.

The Former Hero Witnesses a Troublesome Matter

“Are you sure it was such a good idea to treat him as a good-for-nothing?”

Craig Westfeldt lifted his face from his hands and looked in the direction of the voice that had suddenly intruded on the room. There he saw a young man: Brett Westfeldt, his only son. As the young man stared in anticipation of how his question would be received, Craig narrowed his eyes, as if trying to divine the boy's true intentions.

Not seeming to notice his father's demeanor, Brett spoke again. “Surely he must resent us and be planning some manner of harm to our family? Then again, I suppose he's not likely to have the nerve. He's never shown a hint of resistance to all the verbal abuse we've subjected him to—”

“Brett.”

The older man interrupted the younger's diatribe, causing his son to tremble. While his tone was not stern in the slightest, he appeared to be standing up for the good-for-nothing. Surely, his father would not do such a thing, but...

“As I have told you countless times, you are too hasty.”

“It's just...father, you must have some idea in mind, mustn't you? Some use for the good-for-nothing?”

Despite his words, Brett was certain this was not the case. After all, his father knew better than anyone how worthless Allen was. Never mind finding a use for him—the young man hadn't even managed to raise his Level. And considering he hadn't been granted a Gift, what possible purpose could he serve?

Then, something occurred to him. “Father...could it be that you're planning to put his lack of a Gift to good use? If used wisely, that could be a wonderful—”

“Brett.”

“Hnh...”

This time, the Duke's tone was much more forceful. Recognizing his slip of the

tongue, Brett quickly shut his mouth. However, opening his mouth in the first place was the issue. Brett might have seemed, or at least *tried* to seem, like an adult, but he had not yet come of age. It was inevitable that he would make a few mistakes.

Craig spoke slowly in an admonishing tone. "I have already considered what you are trying to say. However, I have a better use for him."

"And what in the world might that be?"

"Hmm...let me give you an example. Imagine that close to this town, a noble is witnessed in a terrible state, after which they disappear. And imagine that recently, a person of unclear identity was seen wandering around. Who do you think would be the most likely culprit in such a situation?"

For a moment, Brett's expression betrayed his lack of understanding, but a look of comprehension soon emerged on his face. While many people in difficult circumstances flowed through the city, few of them could be said to be mysterious. But if there *was* someone who was seen that way...

"I understand completely. My utmost apologies for not thinking that far myself, father."

"Please. You are still young. Unlike that boy, you still have a fine future ahead of you. Now is the time to make mistakes."

"Yes, thank you, father. But I promise I will prove myself useful."

"Indeed. I expect as much." Craig truly meant his words. He had no choice but to expect great things of Brett; after all, the boy would be an indispensable part of his current plan.

"There's just...one thing that's bothering me," Brett ventured.

"And what's that?"

"Well...what exactly do you intend to do once you've gotten that good-for-nothing wrapped up in such an affair?"

"I suppose from our current vantage point, it seems ridiculous, but once we've managed to bring about those circumstances, everything will fall into place. It's simply a matter of making one dead body disappear. And a mere

Level-1 good-for-nothing will stand no chance against us.”

“You’re certainly right about that.” Seeming convinced, Brett returned to his own work. He had much to attend to.

Craig’s gaze also returned to his hands...when suddenly, his gaze narrowed. It hadn’t occurred to him during their conversation, but he realized now that it was just about time for the show. If things went well, all of this would finally be over.

As he wondered how everything had gone, a faint smile played across his lips.

Thinking that someone had called out to him, Allen spun around only to find there was nobody there.

“Huh? Am I imagining things? Maybe it’s just been too long since I was in such high spirits?” he wondered, tilting his head.

With a wry smile, he stopped and surveyed his surroundings. It had been little more than an hour since he had left Nox behind. Now he found himself surrounded by sprawling plains, with no sight of even the distant city, let alone another person. All that lay in his field of view was the predictable sight of the horizon.

Allen had spent the last hour or so running at a fairly brisk pace. Granted, this was simply because he was so excited by his newfound sense of freedom. As a young man of fifteen years with his whole life ahead of him, he felt as though the hour had passed in no time at all.

“Anyway...now that I’ve calmed down a little, I guess I’d better give serious thought to what I’m gonna do.”

Yet, Allen wasn’t one to worry too much about specifics. He *had* decided to head for the Frontier, but his plans extended no further than that. He had no idea *where*, exactly, he would head for once he got here, nor what he would do. Even the name “Frontier” was nothing more than a vernacular appellation. Although, as the name indicated, it was located on the outskirts of the kingdom, it referred specifically to a stretch of land in the eastern region of the Duchy of Westfeldt. To be even more specific, while the region was officially part of the

Duchy's territory, it was effectively ungoverned.

Since the Duchy of Westfeldt occupied the southern region of Adastera, the Westfeldt family served as margraves, responsible for protecting the nation's border—a duty they were granted due to their possession of the most exceptional military force in the country. This explained why Allen had thus far not been the victim of any chance encounters with monsters during his travels.

Indeed, as in Allen's past life, monsters existed in this world. But while, in his previous world, they could be found throughout the land in such great quantities that one could never hope to hunt them to extinction, it was no mere coincidence that Allen had never encountered any. In this world, however, it was accepted that monsters were simply living creatures, and so efforts were made to hunt them and reduce their numbers as much as possible.

The Duchy of Westfeldt was said to possess the greatest military force among the four great duchies of the kingdom, and this was no mere flattery. Wiping out all the monsters that could be found on the city's outskirts, known as the training grounds, was an everyday pursuit. So effective were these efforts that Allen had even heard rumors that the Adventurer's Guild had complained of a lack of adventurers coming to the city, since they couldn't hope to make a living hunting monsters there.

Although it was the Duchy of Westfeldt's military might that qualified them to rule over the southern, most dangerous region of the kingdom, even they could not exercise control over the entirety of their domain—the main reason being that the land was simply too large for the hand of governance to extend to its furthest reaches. Even if they had attempted to assign their more remote lands to another ruler, few noble families wished to accept land in the south, which was considered the kingdom's most treacherous region. As a result, those lands were currently lawless.

There was also the simple matter of the Duchy's warlike nature, which left it ill-equipped to deal with matters of local governance.

"I guess I should be thankful for that, considering it means there's a region worth being called the Frontier..."

Indeed, there were people who gathered at the Frontier precisely *because* it

was ungoverned territory. For Allen, too, this was just the kind of region he was looking for. But such regions were hardly in the habit of advertising their presence to the outside world. It was precisely because the people lived freely in such places that Allen would have no way of knowing where they were located. In short, he'd be roving around at random until he stumbled upon what he was looking for.

That surely wouldn't be a problem, though. If he happened across monsters, so be it. He almost hoped they *did* show up to save him the trouble of finding food. And he *had* been cast out of his family. Few were likely to be too concerned with what he was doing.

"Oh...come to think of it, there *were* one or two oddballs who did care, weren't there?" Allen mused, their faces suddenly drifting into his mind.

There had been some who had continued to associate with him even after he had become known as a good-for-nothing. One had even mentioned how strange they thought it was that others called Allen a good-for-nothing in the first place. Although the situation had never particularly bothered Allen, he had to admit that it had been something of a relief to hear those sentiments.

"I suppose it's been a good five years since I last saw them. I wonder if they even care about me anymore?" He smirked, thinking how stupidly self-indulgent such thoughts would end up being if the worst were to happen. "All right, then," he muttered as his thoughts turned to other matters. "I was planning on having a nice walk, but...it appears I've gone and seen something I'd rather not have."

While there was no sign of anything in the immediate vicinity other than vast plains, Allen had spotted a horse-drawn cart being pursued by what looked like a monster. From his vantage point, he could not make head nor tail of what was going on, but it was clear that *something* was happening. And unfortunately for Allen, he wasn't the sort to walk away from such a sight.

"Oh well. I guess it beats having a guilty conscience," he muttered.

He was about to get a little sidetracked from the peaceful life he sought, but only a little. Taking care of a minor incident like this was no big deal.

Repeating his refrain of "All right, then," Allen burst into a sprint.

Attack

She would be lying if she said she hadn't considered this possibility. Still, she couldn't help wondering why this was happening to her. It was easy to anticipate an attack, but she could never have predicted that three of the knights who accompanied her would all be killed at once.

This was no time for regrets, though. She didn't have the right. She would never be permitted to start regretting things after coming so far. She was only allowed to do the minimum necessary to safely reach her destination and successfully fulfill the duties that her role required.

"Hnh!" she grunted as a tremor beneath her feet made her jump. Reflexively turning her attention to the view outside, she saw only the same vast plains she had seen before. The carriage must have run over a rock or something. Yet the vehicle showed no sign of slowing down—it couldn't afford to.

She didn't need to be told that the situation was grave. Even now, the personal guard that drove the carriage said nothing, partly because they did not wish to upset her and partly because they scarcely had the chance. There was nothing she could do, even understanding how dire her circumstances were. Nobody would hear her cries for help in a desolate place like this...and even if it weren't so desolate, who would come to her aid and visit the danger that had befallen her upon themselves? Right now, the only people in the world who would risk their lives for her were the knights of her guard who were furiously driving the carriage. They could be in the capital, or anywhere, and still...

"Well, maybe if *he* was here..."

She voiced no further thought before a self-deprecating smile appeared on her lips. That would be entirely too convenient. For one thing, he would never be there to begin with. For another...

"Why would he ever bother to help me? I couldn't do a thing for him back then," she regretfully reproached herself, glancing backward as she did so. The structure of the carriage being as it was, nothing entered her vision, and yet she

was sure she felt someone drawing near. Riiz Adastera tightly gripped her own arm.

Beatrice Allereade clicked her tongue as she spurred on the horse that drew the carriage. At this rate, the horse would collapse and it still wouldn't be enough to outrun the thing that pursued them. On the other hand, given how fast the creature behind them was closing the distance, it wouldn't be long now until it caught them.

"Hnh... There's nothing for it but to handle this myself, is there? Although..."

Beatrice bit her lip as she peered over her shoulder. No matter how she turned it over in her mind, she couldn't imagine herself defeating that thing. It resembled a wolf, but she had reason to believe it was neither truly that nor a monster. Her group had already battled it once—strictly speaking, Beatrice herself had not, but her fellow knights who had been accompanying her on this journey had already faced and fallen to the creature. In a flash, it had disposed of three of the strongest in the kingdom—knights much stronger than Beatrice. How could she possibly hope to defeat it when they had failed? She hadn't come on this journey for the purpose of fighting. Her Gift was much more suited to defense.

Beatrice's "Chevalier" Gift strengthened her physical abilities used for defending others. However, its strength lay in oaths and contracts—its true strength was not revealed until she had sworn fealty to a liege. Until then, her Dexterity and Stamina stats were only increased by ten percent. After swearing an oath of fealty, this grew to twenty percent and would grow further based on how much danger her liege was in. In the event of a threat to her liege's life, her stats could even double. Of course, things would ideally never come to that, but in the unfortunate event that they did, her Gift would be a valuable asset.

Beatrice had come along on this journey precisely in case of such an occurrence. She was the shield; the other three who had accompanied her were the swords. Now that those swords had been lost, however, the principle no longer applied. There was nothing left but to handle this herself...hence the dilemma she faced.

In a fight with the creature, she could see no outcome but an ignominious death. It was not that she was particularly afraid of dying here, but she *did* fear dying without fulfilling her purpose after already exposing her liege to danger. On the other hand, fighting alongside her liege would maximize the power of her Gift, allowing for at least a small possibility of victory...but no knight who had sworn an oath of fealty would ever consider such a thing. Better to die a chivalrous death than risk exposing her liege to danger.

On the other hand, to deliberately seek a chivalrous death would be nothing but self-indulgence. And so...

"I suppose there's only one path forward," Beatrice muttered, pretending to check on the situation behind them as she looked over her shoulder to quickly assess her liege's state, who, sitting there in the carriage, seemed so small, looking just as a young girl her age should and nothing more. Of course, this was no surprise, as she had only recently come of age. She was surely beset by unwarranted thoughts of how this was all her fault. Beatrice had been in her service for ten years now; she could easily tell these things.

And so Beatrice made up her mind. She had resolved to give her life for her liege the moment she'd sworn an oath to her. Now, she resolved to personally send her liege off into an uncertain future. Even if the young woman survived, Beatrice couldn't guarantee her continued safety. She might even meet her death. But Beatrice believed in her liege—though she might curl up, beset by unwanted thoughts, a powerful light lived in her eyes. Beatrice was sure she would be all right.

Determined to do what she must, Beatrice's body welled with strength. Now that she had made up her mind, the rest happened quickly. She released her grip on the reins that controlled the sprinting horse and stood up, jumping from the driver's box.

"Wha—?!"

For a moment, she glimpsed the shocked expression of her liege in the carriage to her side. Beatrice knew the girl would soon surmise her intentions and realize there was no other way.

Though Beatrice had relinquished the reins, the horse didn't stop. Rather than

continuing to bolt straight ahead, it moved as if it could hardly decide which direction to run in. Fortunately, the plains stretched out before them in all directions. Even her liege, who had no ability to guide a horse, could handle getting them to flee far away. What would happen after that, Beatrice didn't know, but she had already decided to believe in her.

The moment Beatrice's feet hit the ground, the creature caught up. Her plan was clear and simple: hold out long enough to allow her liege to escape. Even without the girl's presence, Beatrice possessed superlative defensive capabilities. She didn't truly believe that she could survive long enough to allow her liege to escape, but she wouldn't be felled in an instant either. So long as she could buy enough time to increase the other's chances of survival, that was enough.

Beatrice held her shield before her with her left hand and readied her sword with her right, maintaining a defensive stance while focusing intensely on her foe. The thing did indeed resemble a wolf, although having been granted an extended look at it now, she could see that it clearly was not. While it had been elaborately constructed, it appeared to be made of clay—some kind of golem. Of course, that had been clear enough when her comrade had slashed at it during their first encounter. She had seen it decapitated, and yet it had quickly returned to its original form. No living being could do that. Her comrade had let his guard down for a split second and the thing had jumped on him, taking, as if in revenge, a chunk out of his neck.

Beatrice didn't know how her other two comrades had been killed. She had hurried her liege into the carriage, jumped into the driver's seat, and flown from the scene, instinctively sensing how dire the situation was.

The present circumstances proved that her intuition had been on the mark. Another reason that Beatrice was surveying her foe's approach was that she wasn't sure how it might attack. In addition to buying time, appraising the creature's capabilities was the obvious thing to do. The two comrades who had remained after the first knight was killed would not have allowed the event to make them careless, after all.

“Hm?”

As she observed the creature, what puzzled Beatrice was that it also seemed to be observing *her*. This thing ought to have attacked her the moment she'd jumped down from the carriage. It wouldn't have been too surprising if her remaining comrades had managed to pose enough of a threat that it now carefully watched to see what she was capable of. Even so, the situation felt a little strange. Golems were only capable of following basic orders, but this thing seemed to be acting independently...in which case, it must have only *looked* like a golem, but...no, that wasn't important. What mattered was why it was watching her.

"Huh?!"

Beatrice looked over her shoulder, searching for the source of the cry that had just reached her ears. It had not been a person. Unless her eyes were deceiving her, the two horses drawing the carriage had run far into the distance, where they had been pierced by something that had thrust out of the ground. Now they writhed in pain as their movements slowly pulled the carriage onto its side.

As she stared, wondering what on earth had happened, Beatrice braced her shield-bearing arm, waiting for the shock she was sure was soon to come.

"That *thing* must have done it somehow," she thought...until a sudden pain in her arm stole her attention. "What..."

Beatrice reflexively returned her gaze to her shield-bearing arm, only to find that her shield had disappeared—or rather, it was lying in pieces on the ground.

"Impossible! That was a mithril shield!" she cried. It had been granted to her by the Kingdom to help her protect her liege. It was inconceivable that anything could shatter it so effortlessly.

"Guh!"

That brief moment of astonishment proved to be a fatal mistake. Beatrice felt as though she had lost part of her body as the strength in her legs vanished and she fell to the ground. Though she couldn't see from her vantage point, the creature had bitten off about a third of her abdomen. Yet, most concerning of all was that she didn't feel any pain. That could only mean that her body had already given up any hope of survival.

Even so, Beatrice didn't let go. She *couldn't*; that really would be an ignominious death. If she could at least manage one counterattack, buying even a little time, maybe she could die with pride...

"Hnh..."

As she gazed desperately upward, she saw the creature's front legs—the claws that had rent her mithril shield—now mercilessly descending upon her. Dumbfounded, she could do nothing but await her death. But death didn't come. At that very moment, the creature that was about to end her life was blown away.

"Wait... Beatrice?"

Before she even had a chance to wonder what had happened, Beatrice heard a voice... A voice that she should never have heard in this place, but that was nevertheless familiar.

The Former Hero Shows His Power

Allen tilted his head at the sight of the familiar face-down figure on the ground. It made no sense for her to be there. She was a member of the royal guard and the direct servant of a member of the royal family, who would never visit a place like this, so what on earth was she doing here?

“Master Allen? What are you doing here?”

“Surely that’s my line? And like I’ve told you before, you don’t need to call me ‘Master.’ Hell, I don’t even hold that station anymore.”

“Hm? What do you mean by—”

“Look, I’ve got a lot of questions, and a lot I’d like to say to you too, but now isn’t the time...in more ways than one.”

Beatrice might have been lying face down, but Allen could see the blood flowing from her abdomen, which he presumed was the work of that wolflike thing he had just sent flying. Both matters demanded his attention, and neither were simple enough that he could handle them simultaneously. It was clear that attending to Beatrice’s wounds would take priority, but...

“Uh...Beatrice, think you can hold off on dying for a little bit longer? It would be great if you could hang on for a few minutes.”

“Pfft. That’s all you have to say to me as I lie here bleeding out? I see you haven’t changed a bit,” she retorted, although the smile that danced across her lips as she delivered her lighthearted response showed that she, too, was the same as ever. It was no wonder she had been entrusted with *her* protection. “To be honest, it’s going to be quite difficult, but...if it’s just a few minutes, I’ll try to endure it. Are you sure about this, though?”

Beatrice’s last question was packed with meaning. She not only knew that Allen had been called a good-for-nothing, but also *why*. In contrast, Beatrice, a Level 9 warrior, was one of the most powerful in the Kingdom. Though she insisted there was always someone better—and that was true for offensive

matters—when it came to defending others, Allen had heard that she was one of the top two strongest warriors in the kingdom.

And yet that creature had easily done her in. Allen had witnessed the attack. He knew she had been taken by surprise, but even so, she could have easily defended against such an attack from any normal foe. That could only mean the creature was no normal opponent. Anyone would be worried about that...but Allen, as if by way of response, simply shrugged and casually walked forward.

Whether due to her trust in Allen, or simply because she had no further energy to spare, Beatrice did not speak further. Pressed for time, Allen didn't try to confirm which reason it was. Beatrice was one of a small number of people who had continued to associate with him even after becoming aware of his problems. Losing her would be awful, for *her* most of all, and Allen was determined not to see that happen.

He continued to press ahead as these thoughts weighed on his mind. Soon, there was a distance of ten meters between him and his foe. Judging by the creature's earlier movements, it should have been able to close that distance in a flash, and yet it remained motionless, inspecting Allen, who advanced with no intention of allowing it to continue surveying him.

Still, despite (or rather, because of) how little time he had, it was essential to gather information. He examined the creature without a moment's hesitation, hoping to bring things to an end in an instant.

Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.

Information on the wolflike thing flooded his vision: its height, weight, true name, nicknames, creator, level, stats, method of attack, and weaknesses, as well as a variety of other details, from which Allen retained only what was necessary. The creature, perhaps realizing that it was being examined, leaped at Allen, but it was too late; he had already learned everything he needed to know.

The creature's formal name was the Clay Wolf Magical Life-Form, but Allen already knew that it was something similar to a golem. Its weakness was the same as a golem's: destroying the core found within its body would make it self-destruct. Since he now knew the location of the core, the only problem now

would be if the creature suddenly made a break for it, but given it was looking right at him from so close, there was no need to worry about that.

“Hnh... Master Allen!”

Allen smirked at the voice coming from behind him. He had just told her there was no need to call him “Master.” She had stopped speaking to him so formally, at least, but obstinately clung to the title. Still, this wasn’t the time to worry about that. He knew why Beatrice had called out to him—she was trying to warn him.

In his blind spot, a sharp, spearlike object thrust out of the ground toward Allen. He couldn’t have seen it; he had simply anticipated it. Having witnessed the horses being run through by the same object before, he knew that the creature was somehow able to manipulate the earth and control the clay. In short, its leaping attack was only one half of the trap. If he focused on the Clay Wolf’s attack, he would be pierced by the spear from his blind spot...and even having noticed it, dealing with two attacks delivered at once was no small feat. As he knew from the attack on the carriage, this thing was using its head. But...

“That won’t get you anywhere.”

Sword of Cataclysm: Hundredblade Bloom.

In a matter of seconds, a hundred blades gleamed. The Clay Wolf, the spear that approached from behind, and a second spear hidden in the shadow of the first were torn asunder in the blink of an eye.

“What...?”

Allen grinned again as he heard the sound of surprise behind him. Of course she would be shocked. He had never shown them he could do that. Yes, Allen was stuck at Level 1. No, he had never received a Gift. But it was more than memories that he had brought with him from his previous life. He could still use his powers from back when he had been called a hero. The technique he had used to examine the Clay Wolf was one of them.

Wishing for nothing more than a peaceful life, Allen had never spoken of or shown the powers he had acquired in his past life to a single soul in this world. Why should he? Letting them know would only result in an unpleasant future

for him. But now, banished from his home, he had no need to worry about what others thought. And this was clearly a situation where his abilities were required, so he did not hesitate.

Although Allen had never raised his level and had no Gift, he possessed a power that outstripped all of that...but he would only wield that power to secure the peaceful life he sought. And with that thought, he hurried back to Beatrice, who was still on the brink of death.

The Former Hero Is Regarded with Surprise

Beatrice was so stunned by what she had just seen that she forgot the dire straits she was in. She had heard countless times that Allen had never advanced past Level 1, even from Allen himself. And though it had been five years since they had last seen each other, she hadn't heard anything contrary to that in the meantime. Yes, he was known as a good-for-nothing, but he was still the duke's oldest son. If anything had happened, she would have heard about it...so surely he must have still been at Level 1. And yet what she had just seen him do was in no way the actions of a Level 1 warrior. In fact, Beatrice wasn't sure exactly *what* she had just seen him do.

What she did know was that both the wolflike creature and the objects that were attacking from his rear had all been torn to shreds. Clearly, Allen had done *something*.

Beatrice was a Level 9 warrior, known as one of the strongest in the kingdom. No, she wasn't confident in her offensive abilities, but she knew that nobody could best her when it came to defense. The most crucial aspect of defense was observation, as the only way to defend against an opponent's attacks was to be able to recognize them. And yet even she couldn't comprehend what Allen had just done. It shouldn't have been possible.

At the same time, a sense of understanding awoke in the back of her mind. Somehow, it really didn't seem all that strange that Allen in particular would be capable of such a feat. It had been ten years since Beatrice had first met him—four years since she had graduated from the Knight's Academy, her swearing service to her liege soon after that, having joined the Order and been selected for the Royal Guard—that was when she had been summoned to a birthday party for some noble or other. She still clearly remembered the sight of the pair who had attracted more attention than the guest of honor: Allen, still known as a child prodigy at the time, and the girl to whom Beatrice had sworn her service, who was treated as a child prodigy as well, though in a different way.

It was only natural that the two of them would converse. They were both young, recipients of preferential treatment, and of similar status. In terms of both their personal feelings and the social concerns of the adults, there was good reason for them to interact.

Accompanying her liege as part of her guard, Beatrice had witnessed their conversation firsthand. They had exchanged pleasantries, commenting on each other's busy lives and the like. But Beatrice, observing Allen, sensed something strange about the boy. She had an odd sense that she couldn't quite get a handle on him. The best way of putting it was that she questioned whether he was really a child at all. It was not a matter of precocity—her liege a precocious sort herself—nor could it be explained simply by him being even more mature. All she could say was that it seemed strange.

The many subsequent meetings between Allen and her liege would do nothing to weaken this impression. In fact, it only deepened, becoming ever more apparent as Allen's celebrated reputation worsened and he became known as a good-for-nothing. In spite of the fact that her liege's reputation conversely continued to improve, Allen's attitude never changed, and it was Beatrice who ended up more concerned about the boy's fortunes than he himself was.

The last time she had seen Allen before he had disappeared from public life about five years prior had been at her liege's birthday party, and her impression of him hadn't changed. Perhaps that impression, still strongly lingering, was why it had seemed fairly reasonable that Allen was able to effortlessly dispense with the creature that had so defeated her.

Seeing Allen do so, she felt relieved. She had no idea why he was there, or what he had just done, but assuming he was still Level 1, it made sense that he had used his Gift to do something, in which case, he must have possessed an incredibly powerful Gift and would surely no longer be treated so inhospitably.

Though it was her liege whom Allen had always come to meet, he and Beatrice would often exchange words when they were in the same place. She was almost twice his age but thought of him as both a younger brother and a friend. If her friend's life circumstances had improved, that would naturally be a source of happiness and relief. What was more, she could leave her liege in his

care. That was another reason to feel relieved.

Thus, Beatrice let out a sigh...and all her strength left her body. She had managed to somehow hold on until now, but she was finally at her limit. Her wounds were fatal, and she had lost too much blood. Yet while she no longer had the energy to even raise her head, her heart was at peace. She knew she was causing trouble for Allen, but she could die without regrets. So Beatrice stopped resisting her heavy eyelids and closed her eyes.

Parallel Paradox: Healing Light.

As Allen held his hand aloft, Beatrice's body was surrounded by a powerful light, centered around her abdomen. At the sight of this, he breathed a sigh of relief. He had been a little—no, *very* worried, but seeing this, he knew that everything would be all right. That light could only strengthen a person's life force; it was useless on the dead or people past the point of no return. The light appearing meant that Beatrice could be saved.

It lingered around her abdomen before finally fading away. At that moment, Beatrice energetically leaped to her feet. She patted her entire body, paying particular attention to her abdominal region, and a look of astonishment came over her face as she realized that not even a scar remained from her wounds.

"Impossible... A person's injuries cannot be healed this way, no matter what manner of magic or sorcery you employ."

It was true. Though magic and sorcery both existed in this world, there was no spell that could cure someone's wounds. Only natural healing methods could do that. The only exception was a potion made by an alchemist: a liquid that would instantly heal deep wounds when quaffed, though its power did not go as far as regenerating lost limbs.

But creating such a potion took a significant amount of time and money, not to mention very few possessed the Gift that allowed one to become an alchemist. Such a high price did these potions command that even Allen had only seen them enough times to remember each instance. Nobody could make potions without the Gift of alchemy, and the very existence of Gifts that allowed one to heal wounds directly was inconceivable.

There was, however, a rumor that had been circulating through the kingdom in recent years. It claimed that a saint had traveled to houses of the poor, healing wounds and sickness with naught but an outstretched hand. However, although many claimed to have been healed by her, none would say who she actually was. All that was known was that she was a woman, but it was said that she was a young girl, a beautiful young woman, or a hunchbacked old crone. While it was impossible to say just how useful the hunt for her would prove, it was unsurprising that the kingdom would search for this saint who had suddenly appeared in a world where the power to heal did not exist.

Of course, Allen was not her. He had simply been able to heal wounds using magic in his past life, meaning he could indeed perform the same feats as this mysterious woman. It was no surprise that Beatrice now regarded him with a mixture of bewilderment and suspicion. It seemed unlikely that she suspected him of being the saint—he was the wrong gender, for one thing. And it had been three years ago when the woman in question had first appeared, which was before Allen had come of age, even if her power did use the Gift.

Allen's power was, of course, not a Gift, and he had been able to perform such feats three years ago as easily as he could today, but Beatrice had no way of knowing that he had retained his memories of his past life, let alone his powers.

There was one other reason Beatrice was unlikely to think that Allen was the saint, although it was merely speculation. But for now, he put aside those thoughts and spoke as he shrugged.

“By the way, shouldn't you be rushing to the rescue? It's *her* riding in that carriage over there, isn't it?”

“Gah?!”

Without even a glance in Allen's direction, Beatrice ran toward the overturned carriage. As Allen had intuited, her liege was inside. To ensure the safety of her liege was a knight's utmost priority. Questions about the small details of their situation would have to wait until later.

“Then again, I guess nobody but Beatrice would think it's a small detail...” Allen mused. But it was precisely because Beatrice prioritized her liege above all

else that he trusted her. It might have been five years since they'd last met, but it was quite clear that she hadn't changed.

With these thoughts on his mind, Allen slowly made his way toward them. Beatrice appeared flustered, yelling something as she stood by the side of the overturned carriage. It appeared that the shock of falling over had warped the carriage door, preventing it from being opened. Beatrice was scanning the damage, searching for a way to help.

"Oh. She broke it," Allen said to himself.

It seemed she had decided to solve the problem with brute force. With no regard for the blown-away door, Beatrice thrust her hand into the carriage. Then, a lone girl appeared from inside. The brilliance of her silver hair in the sunlight forced Allen to narrow his eyes as she turned to face him. He shrugged as she opened her golden eyes. As expected, he knew her face all too well.

"Hey, Riese. It's been a while."

"Allen...what are you doing here?"

It was Riese Adastera, first princess of the Kingdom of Adastera and Allen's former betrothed.



The Banished Former Hero Reunites with His Former Betrothed

Riese had been prepared to lose her life. That was not to say she didn't care whether she lived or died. She was, after all, a royal. Even if she had been so inclined, she had immediately understood Beatrice's intentions and thus knew that she had no choice but to go on living.

Well, so long as she *could* go on living. The door that was her only escape route had been warped by the shock of the carriage being overturned and wouldn't budge an inch. Riese might have been Level 2, but at 0 Strength, she had no chance of breaking the door down. And the odds of rescue as she lay there helpless were slim to none. If Beatrice had stood any chance of defeating that wolflike thing in battle, she would have fought it from the start. There was no hope of survival other than escape, yet her escape route was sealed.

In such a situation, there was good reason to be prepared to die—but she didn't *want* to die. Nobody would want to die a helpless death in a place like this. But more than anything, Riese simply wanted to live. Even so, with her royal upbringing, she couldn't bring herself to cry out. All she could manage was to curl up and await the death that would surely come soon.

Perhaps it was because she had recently been thinking about him that thoughts of him floated into her mind at a time like this. She chastised herself for being so frivolous in such a situation. But...

"If only I could see him one more time before I—"

"Lady Riese!"

"Hnh... Beatrice?"

Riese reflexively looked upward toward the sound of the voice she had expected never to hear again. The door rattled, shook violently, then flew away as Beatrice's face appeared in its stead. Riese barely understood what was happening as Beatrice grabbed her by the arm and pulled her from the

carriage...and her confusion was instantly dispelled, replaced by shock at her incredible stroke of luck when she had thought she was already dead.

Then she realized that he was standing in front of her. He'd gotten taller, more mature-looking since back then, but he was still unmistakable. There stood her former betrothed, Allen, wearing the same smile as always.

“Um...Allen, what are you doing here?”

As Riese looked over at him, Allen saw that there was no deeper meaning reflected in her eyes. It was a simple question, without a shred of ridicule. It seemed like she hadn't changed either.

Riese was another person who had continued to interact with Allen despite his difficult circumstances. In fact, it might be more accurate to say she was the first—or perhaps only—person, but that was good enough for now.

Regardless, looking straight at Riese in that moment, Allen felt a true sense of surprise. That Beatrice's attitude toward him hadn't changed was not particularly remarkable—she had, after all, already been an adult when he had last seen her. But when Allen had last seen Riese, she had been ten years old. She must have heard a lot of things about him since then, and at an impressionable age. It was not that she hadn't been influenced...but as far as Allen could tell, at least, she hadn't changed a bit.

Of course, they had just met, and there was always the chance that she was only pretending not to have changed. Again, she was a royal, and it would be no surprise if she had acquired such a skill in the intervening years. Still, despite his current circumstances, Allen had been a hero in his past life and the heir to the duchy in this one. He had crossed paths with countless nobles and was confident in his ability to see through the masks they wore, yet he couldn't sense an ounce of deceit in Riese. Her appearance might have changed since then—she looked more like an adult now—but inside she seemed the same as ever.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't happy to discover this, which must have been why he felt compelled to tease her a little.

“What am I doing here? Well...I came to save you, I guess?”

“Wha?!”

“I’m still your former betrothed, despite everything. I’ll always come to your rescue when you’re in trouble.”

“I...um...that’s...well...what do you...” At first, Riese appeared flustered by Allen’s words before pursing her lips in a pout as she noticed the smile that danced across his face. “Hmph!”

Of course, Allen was only half-joking. He *had* come to rescue them, although he had only realized it was Riese and Beatrice after the fact. But that wasn’t Riese’s question.

“Always poking fun at me, Allen.”

“I would never. Okay, yeah, I wasn’t being entirely truthful, but I really do feel that way, you know.”

“S-So you mean...”

“All right, all right, I understand you two wanting to flirt with each other after such a long time apart, but don’t we have more important things to worry about?” Beatrice interrupted, prompting a flustered glance from Riese.

“Fl-Flirt?! I can assure you that was not my intention at—”

“Is that right?” Allen needled. “Sure seemed that way to me.”

“That’s enough!”

He closed his mouth and shrugged in response to Beatrice’s scolding. Seeing Riese’s beet-red expression, he realized that he had perhaps gone a little too far. Despite being a royal, Riese lacked imperviousness to such taunting—another way in which she hadn’t changed. Seeing this, a look somewhere between self-deprecation and a wry smile played over Allen’s lips as he felt for a moment as though he had been transported back in time.

However, he soon discarded his nostalgia and refocused on the present. They did indeed have important business to take care of.

“I suppose we should start by mentioning what’s going on with all of us,” he

suggested.

Again, Riese was a royal, fifth in line to the throne. Given that the line of succession totaled ten people, this was neither a particularly high nor low standing, but it did mean that she was hardly someone who could wander around the great outdoors without good cause. As such, Allen's first concern was what she was doing out here.

While this region was known as the Frontier, it was still within the duchy's borders. Though Allen had been banished a few days prior and had been treated frostily leading up to that point, news of a royal within their borders, let alone in this particular location, would have reached his ears. The Frontier was not a region into which one wandered casually, and it was certainly no place for royalty, hence Beatrice and Riese freezing up for a brief moment, confirming that they were up to something.

"But first, maybe we should do something about this carriage?" he offered. "I can hardly send you on your way on foot, Beatrice, never mind sending Riese."

"You've got a point there. But it looks beyond saving already," Beatrice answered.

"I guess so. The carriage itself should still be usable, but..."

Beatrice and Allen both looked toward the front of the overturned carriage, thinking the same thing: it was useless without horses to draw it.

"Hmm," said Allen. "You won't understand until you see it, but I think I might be able to do something."

"What?" Riese questioned.

Beatrice said nothing, but an expression surfaced on her face as if to say, *Surely not...*

Allen understood her skepticism, but he chose to ignore it, saying nothing as he headed for the front of the carriage. There, as expected, he found two horses, collapsed on the ground and gasping for breath...but not dead. It seemed that the Clay Wolf had deliberately avoided inflicting lethal wounds upon them. Killing them would have stopped the carriage in its tracks, but making them bolt and overturn the carriage was all the better for distracting

Beatrice.

What mattered now was that, since the horses weren't dead, there was something Allen could do.

Parallel Wisdom: Healing Light.

The moment Allen lifted his hand, the two horses were swathed in light just as Beatrice had been. Allen continued, disregarding the gasps of the two women, who had just caught up with him. When the light finally subsided, the horses, who had been in bad shape only moments ago, appeared to be in good health once more. Allen looked on, satisfied to see the horses slowly climb to their feet. Then he heard a voice that sounded like a groan from behind him.

"No way... Even a potion can't heal the wounds of nonhumans," said Beatrice.

Riese concurred. "Y-Yes... And for that matter..."

"Even the saint can't do that, right?" interjected Allen.

"Huh?!"

The pair reflexively glared at him. Riese's body stiffened with shock, while Beatrice seemed faintly on her guard. Allen smirked at their reactions, especially Beatrice's. He had a pretty good idea why they would react that way, and he thought they'd been rather careless. There was nothing particularly odd about what Allen had said, so based on their responses, something else was clearly afoot.

Granted, it wasn't as though Allen had no ulterior motive. He had his suspicions, but he didn't know anything for sure, so his little interjection had served as a means of verifying his theory. He had planned on using their reactions to confirm his conjecture, but he'd never expected it to be so obvious. Still, he had gotten what he wanted and truly held no hostility toward them, so he knew he had to deal with the fact that they were now on the defensive.

"Oh, that reminds me... I guess this is kind of out of nowhere, but I just got banished from the duchy today. Do you two know that?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

The overflowing tension instantly evaporated at those words. Allen smirked again at the pair of dazed and dumbfounded expressions before him.

Looks like those were just the right words for the occasion, he thought with a shrug.

Murky Eyes

Anger reverberated throughout the room.

“What was that?! Care to repeat yourself?”

The target of this ire trembled and shrank in response to the verbal assault. The man had done nothing wrong; he was merely providing a report...not that his interlocutor would care. Knowing this, he simply took it on the chin. Believing an ill-advised response would get him killed, he chose only to repeat his previous words.

“Yes, Your Highness. The alchemist reports that he has failed.”

“Why, you!”

He really was about to be killed. Facing the murderous intent of his interrogator, he began to seriously consider fleeing...but this soon proved unnecessary.

“Brett,” a voice interjected.

“B-But father!”

“I understand your irritation, but this man has done nothing wrong. Why needlessly leave us with one less servant?”

“Ugh... Forgive me.” Brett tutted. “Report understood. Is that all?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Very well. Then away with you!”

Rather than heeding the young man’s exhortation, the messenger lifted his head and glanced in the direction of the duke. It was, after all, he who the messenger had come to see, and not his son. He could not leave at the son’s command, yet to speak out of turn would surely incur his wrath. Judging by the youth’s current demeanor, he really would kill the messenger.

As expected, the duke understood the hesitation and signaled with a look that

he was free to leave. With the slightest huff of relief, the man bowed and departed from the room. Gently opening the door, he headed into the hallway, where, after walking for some time, he finally let out a huge sigh.

“My God...at this rate, this family isn’t long for this world.”

Nobody would abide hearing him utter such words. If the duke, let alone his son, had heard them, he wouldn’t have escaped with his life. Still, the dire atmosphere within the estate of late compelled such grumbling. He might have come off like an old-timer complaining that the old days were better, but there was no avoiding it—it was true. Things had been much better ten years ago, but even the previous month—even the previous *day* had been better than now.

There was but one reason this was the case. The family’s heir—or rather, *former* heir—was gone, and Brett, now the duke’s only son, was becoming increasingly arrogant. He had not been quite so bad when Allen was still around. While he might have called him a good-for-nothing, it seemed that Brett had truly feared the ever-composed Allen would someday steal the position he enjoyed from him. So long as Allen remained in the family, when it came to the matter of who would succeed the duke, a majority of the servants would be sure to side with Allen. As a mere servant, the man had no idea who would serve better as duke, but there was no doubt in his mind that he would prefer to see Allen assume the role.

Truthfully, he had never believed all the talk of Allen being a good-for-nothing. He’d been given that moniker due to failing to raise his Level above 1. But by that logic, most of those who inhabited the duke’s estate, and furthermore, most of the townspeople, didn’t even qualify as good-for-nothings; after all, most people in the world never advanced beyond Level 0. While Allen likely wasn’t aware of this, raising one’s Level was a privilege afforded only to nobles, wealthy merchants, soldiers, and adventurers. Most others lacked the time or means. They had to work to live, and one’s Level could not be raised simply by working.

Soldiers and adventurers could only raise their Level by continually doing battle with monsters—acts that the average citizen could never hope to imitate; they would be tantamount to suicide. This was no less true of children, who were simply part of the labor force. Most families didn’t have the privilege

of allowing their children to play. Only nobles and wealthy merchants had the time and money to acquire the necessary special training. In the end, raising one's Level was simply impossible for the majority of the populace.

While even among the common people, Levels and Stats were regarded as absolute truths, they were used as a means of understanding the direction of one's own abilities and were viewed very differently from the way in which nobles and soldiers saw them. For this reason and others, the people tended to regard Gifts as more special than Levels and Stats. However, this too was only because of the role they played in determining one's future, so Allen was not considered deserving of scorn simply because he had not been granted one.

In fact, many servants were greatly confused by Allen's banishment. The boy had always treated them kindly and seemed to care for them, and never lived extravagantly or acted haughtily. If anything, he was *too* concerned about them, always readily doing whatever jobs he could for himself, much to the servants' chagrin, though this was charming in its own way too. At the very least, it would be positively impolite to compare him to the foul-tempered young man who tried to kill his servants.

Still, that hardly mattered now. Allen had already been banished, and Brett had begun to run wild, as if finally releasing all his pent-up frustration. The servant could tolerate this if it were only for a few days, but he had a feeling that was not to be.

Fortunately, servants were not bound to remain at the estate. If the current state of affairs continued, he wagered no small number of them would be on their way. Those deserters would soon be replaced, and the maintenance of the estate would likely proceed unhindered...but if senior servants kept leaving without properly handing down their expertise, the situation could eventually become untenable. This was what the man meant when he said the estate was not long for this world.

"Even so, I can't imagine that son, let alone the duke himself, are not aware of this..."

And yet, while the duke would quietly rebuke Brett for his actions, the boy fundamentally had his tacit approval. It was as though he saw no problem with

the possibility of the majority of the servants vacating their posts.

“Or does he simply not care if it does cause problems?”

The man shook his head as the thought occurred to him. He just couldn’t understand what Craig was thinking. There was only one thing he understood.

“I suppose I’ll be taking my leave of this place at some point.”

The man—Silas Crantz, head butler of the estate—considered his future course of action as he continued to walk the halls.

“Damn him! How dare he look at me with such mockery in his eyes! I’ll make sure he regrets it!” The young man paused. “No...this isn’t the time for that. Father, what are you going to do? How could he have failed?”

Craig responded to his son’s fearful, questioning gaze with the most composed expression he could muster, speaking in a gentle, considered tone. “Not to worry. His failure presents no problem for us.”

“Are you sure about that? What about that saint?”

“This was merely the fastest means of achieving our goal. I have already considered other methods. There’s no need for you to worry.”

“I see...”

Craig maintained his composed look as he watched Brett let out a sigh of relief. It was all he could do to hide his own anger. Still, his assertion contained no word of a lie; they had failed, but he had already given enough thought to alternatives that they would be ready to revise their plan in response to whatever lay in store. But it was nevertheless true that it would have been preferable to bring the matter of the saint to an end immediately, and most vexing to know that, had things gone according to plan, they would have already moved on to the next phase of their scheme by now.

So foul was Craig’s mood that he almost unconsciously clicked his tongue, stopped only by his pride as duke and his need to maintain his dignity before his son.

“Then what shall we do next, father?”

“Hmm. Well, there is no need to act immediately.”

“Are you quite sure? I’m certain you told me that if this matter went well, we would soon be making our next move.”

“Only if the saint was dealt with. Then we would have had to move quickly. So long as she remains a problem, we must consider our next steps very carefully indeed.”

“Forgive me...”

Craig had not intended to rebuke Brett, but he chose not to revise his words. His mask of composure concealed the grim pleasure he took in his son’s sullen countenance. Ignorant of this and trembling with frustration, Brett continued.

“And what is to be done with the alchemist? Will he be disposed of?”

Craig sniffed at Brett’s efforts to shift the burden of failure onto anyone but himself. The boy seemed to be enjoying a newfound sense of liberation following the banishment of the good-for-nothing and was eager to resort to execution in response to all manner of problems. But disposing of the head butler and the alchemist would do them no good.

At a minimum, putting the head butler to death would make it difficult to maintain the estate, which was already too large. The residence was now inhabited by only two people, yet it required the services of ten times that many servants. To Craig, this seemed wastefully expansive, but knowing that the size of his estate reflected the extent of his power, there was little he could do about it. Even if he were to someday dispense with the place, it would have to be maintained until that point.

Craig chose not to caution Brett, however, instead explaining why executing the alchemist would do them no good.

“Wait, wait. We can still make use of him. Besides, hasn’t this experiment already been useful to us?”

“That is true. It has deepened my understanding of this power.”

“Indeed. In some ways, that was the most important part of this whole affair. We could even say it makes this entire ordeal a success.”

“Do... Do you really think so?”

“Yes. This was merely a learning experience, with your true duty yet to come. Isn’t that right?”

“Y-Yes, father, I’m sure you’re right! Ah, yes. After all, I’m not like that good-for-nothing. When it comes to my duty, you’ll see that!”

“Indeed. I have great hopes for you.”

Craig gazed into the distance, hiding the cold eyes that belied his encouraging words. He turned his thoughts to the question of how they could have failed—a result that should have been unthinkable. His consideration of backup plans had been preparation for a worst-case scenario that his scrupulous planning should have ensured never came to pass. Their plan was strategically perfect—there should have been no possibility, no matter how slim, that the saint survived their assassination.

Of course, since he had not done the job himself, there was always the chance that the alchemist had blundered, but that was yet another obstacle that his careful preparations had taken into account from the start. Success had seemed guaranteed, and yet they had failed. That meant that some unaccounted-for factor must have come into play. The chance that someone or something had interfered with their plan was high.

“Hmph. I don’t know who you are, but don’t go thinking you can interfere with my plans and get away with it.”

“Father?”

Craig cleared his throat as he explained away his careless mutterings. “Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself. Don’t worry about it.”

The unexpected news had caused his true feelings to bubble to the surface rather too much. It was no use acting on emotion in search of revenge. That would only result in him being outmaneuvered again. Absolute composure was required to continue to exercise control over all things.

Restoring his mask of stoicism, Craig again turned to Brett. “Moving to deal with the saint can wait. Another matter entirely is now approaching its conclusion, is it not? From that perspective, perhaps it is for the best that we

failed.”

“That is true. I imagine it is a matter of great importance to them too.”

“Indeed. Once that general is out of the picture, it will be our house’s time to move. This entire affair may seem a farce, but we cannot afford to let our guard down.”

“I know that, father.”

“To be frank, if we can succeed in this, whatever comes next is of little consequence.”

Craig looked off into the distance, narrowing his dark, murky eyes in a look of utter vexation, as though he truly resented whoever he imagined was the target of his gaze.

“But we must do something about that irritating little hero.”

The Former Hero Explains His Situation

“I can’t believe that’s what happened. Do those fools only care about Stats? They certainly don’t have an eye for talent,” said Riese.

Allen smirked as he felt a vibration from beneath. Her words weren’t phrased as a compliment; in fact, despite the casual manner in which they were uttered, a palpable anger lurked within them. He felt just a little flattered at the thought that she was angry on his behalf.

“I’m sorry, Allen.”

Turning his gaze toward the unexpected apology, Allen saw Riese bowing her head and biting her lip.

“I don’t know what you’re apologizing for. Don’t tell me you’re responsible for me being banished from the duchy,” he replied, tilting his head.

“Well...I think I might be, actually.”

“Huh?”

Allen’s eyes widened slightly at her answer to what had been meant as a joke. Still, one look at Riese’s face told him it wasn’t really true. He saw a variety of emotions reflected there, chief among them remorse.

“I wish I’d been more forceful in insisting that you weren’t a good-for-nothing. If only I’d made sure everyone knew, then maybe...”

Allen couldn’t help but smile, seeing Riese blame herself like this. It wasn’t that he was laughing at her—more that he felt a sense of relief. Her attitude was just the same as when he had first been labeled a good-for-nothing, and Riese was the only one who had dared to voice how absurd that was. Her statement now confirmed that she truly hadn’t changed.

Indeed, Riese and Beatrice had been the only two curious folks who had continued to associate with Allen as his reputation declined. Beatrice, however, held her tongue; Riese was the only one who spoke out. While it seemed in

Beatrice's nature to join Riese in voicing her objections, Beatrice was first and foremost a knight, and Riese her liege. Despite her dissatisfaction, she couldn't afford to speak imprudently. Allen understood this well, which was why he had no particular feelings about Beatrice's decision not to speak out, and why Riese's decision to do so moved him so greatly.

Of course, as a result...

"No, you did more than enough, Riese. Knowing I had just one person willing to oppose them was a real source of strength for me back then. You have no reason to blame yourself," Allen assured her. As he gently patted Riese on the head, he remembered how often he had done it in the past. Then he spoke again.

"You know, the truth is, this is what I wanted anyway. I could've never been the heir to the duchy. Even if you *were* the reason I was banished, you would have done me a favor. 'Thanks for getting me kicked out of that family!'"

Riese giggled. "What in the world are you talking about? Well, thank you."

"You're very welcome."

The pair smiled as their gazes met. It was a ridiculous scene, thanking someone for being banished from one's home, but it really was for the best. Allen truly had been good for nothing so long as he remained in that family.

"Hmm...well, Lord... Master Allen, if you're satisfied with the current state of affairs, I suppose there's no need to think about what we should do, is there?" asked Beatrice.

"I guess not. I mean, that's why we're all traveling together, isn't it?" said Allen, giving the driver's box on which they sat a hardy pat.

Beatrice smirked and gently pulled the reins. The scenery began to pass at a slower rate, and the rumbling that coursed through his body softened. It wouldn't be accurate to say that the group had chosen to ride together simply because there was no other suitable spot for Allen to leisurely explain his situation, but the ride provided a useful opportunity to discuss the matter. It not only saved time, but also allowed them to pass the time as they traveled.

Since the journey offered Allen the chance to tell his story, there was no good

reason not to. If he hadn't planned to tell them, he never would have mentioned that he had been banished. Riese and Beatrice seemed to have business in some Frontier village—one of the many settlements the region played host to, despite its name, and since Allen had no particular destination in mind, the chance to accompany them seemed fortuitous.

Allen and Riese rode in the driver's box rather than struggling to communicate with Beatrice from within the carriage. Though the box was only meant to fit two drivers, Riese, with her slender frame, managed to get inside. Furthermore, the carriage—particularly the door that Beatrice had busted open—had been damaged when it had been overturned earlier. Still, it was good enough to travel on.

"You know, your Gift is incredible, Allen," said Riese as she lightly tapped on what had been the damaged section of the driver's box, though it no longer showed any sign of damage after he had repaired it.

"No kidding. I mean, not only can you heal animals, but you even repaired this carriage? It's hard to even comprehend how valuable a Gift like that could be," said Beatrice.

"Oh, it's not that big a deal." Allen grinned with a shrug. Of course they would think that. While he hadn't technically told Riese and Beatrice that the powers they'd seen him use were his Gift, he had certainly led them to believe as much, which wasn't that different. But it would be too much trouble to explain the truth—this was easier for them to accept than the sudden revelation that he had been a hero in a past life.

"That's no mere flattery, you know. Perhaps you're just being humble, but if you truly don't understand how valuable you are, you'd better learn, and fast," said Beatrice.

"That's true. At the very least, if the Duchy of Westfeldt learned of this, they'd try to bring you back by any means necessary," replied Riese.

"Nothing to worry about there. I knew that, which is why I lied to them," said Allen.

"I'm not sure if I'd call that lying. You never actually said anything yourself, did you?" replied Beatrice.

“I suppose not.”

“Still, even I believed it. It came from the Hierophant, after all. Nobody could have predicted that you’d be granted a Gift that outstrips even his,” said Riese.

Since Gifts were granted by the gods, the Blessing Ceremony that was necessary for a person to receive a gift was conducted by a priest. Thus, during the ceremony, it was a priest who determined what Gift had been granted—or to put it another way, those who had the Gift of judging what Gifts others possessed became priests.

It bears noting that Gifts were ranked from one to five, with the higher ranked Gifts being more powerful. Identifying someone’s Gift was an extremely laborious process: those who could do it could not identify Gifts of a higher rank than their own, which meant that if a person’s ability could be identified by a particular priest, its rank must have been lower than the priest’s. In order to identify the rank of a person’s Gift, it therefore had to be identified by priests of decreasing rank, until one could not successfully identify it.

In some cases, a person’s Blessing Ceremony could not identify whether or not that person had been granted a Gift. In such cases, however, the presence of the Hierophant overlooking the proceedings meant that this presented no great problem—with a Rank 5 Gift, it was understood that there were none the Hierophant could not identify. But the Hierophant had been unable to see any Gift in Allen. This was understood to mean that Allen had not been granted one. Yet Riese and Beatrice had seen him use powers that, to them, could only be explained by one, thus he must have a Rank 6 Gift. That was the most sensible explanation.

While it was true that Allen had led them to this conclusion, he hadn’t strictly lied in doing so. If a Gift was a power granted by the gods, then his powers fit the definition. These were not simply the powers from his past life—they were powers granted to him by the Goddess there.

Boundless Knowledge. Sword of Cataclysm. Parallel Wisdom. These were the three powers he had received. As divine powers themselves, they were the strongest among all Gifts, even in the scaled-down forms that Allen possessed, as their original forms were far too powerful for any human to wield. It could

hardly be said that he had lied, though he did of course understand that he was being deceptive.

“I suppose it makes sense that the family would cast out their own son for something like that,” said Beatrice. “Any other family would probably have them lie about it. I think this whole Gift thing was just an excuse.”

As Beatrice implied, the House of Westfeldt lived by a belief system that might be termed “stat absolutism.” To them, Gifts were no more than a supplement. This was unusual, since while most placed equal importance on both the god-granted Gifts and spirit-granted stats, if forced to choose, they would place a higher weight on Gifts. Stat absolutism was close to heresy and was sometimes called spirit-worship.

Allen thought the idea had some merit, however. While a Gift would occasionally allow someone to win out over a person with higher stats, this was a rarity. It was reasonable to place a greater emphasis on stats, making it equally reasonable to cast out a useless son who couldn’t raise his level. Although Allen felt this way because he had always wanted to leave the House of Westfeldt anyway, he imagined he would quickly change his tune if he saw someone else subjected to the same treatment.

“That reminds me, are you two okay with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re the only ones who know about my powers. Are you happy to let me go now that you know?”

“I see... I suppose as both a citizen and a knight of my country, I ought to return you to your home. But before I am a servant of my country, I am a servant of my liege. When I consider Lady Riese’s proclivities...”

“I prioritize friendship over country. I am sure that renders me unqualified to be a royal, but I believe that a kingdom that requires one person to sacrifice so that it may stand is a nation that is misguided.”

“And given the proclivities of my liege, I will prioritize friendship also.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Allen was sure he could have escaped even if they *had* tried to take him back home, but regardless, they had chosen to work with him. It was certainly true that they had failed as citizens, but as human beings, they had made the right choice. They deserved Allen's thanks, both for agreeing to help him and for being decent people.

"You are most welcome."

"You're welcome."

The three looked at each other and smiled as a gentle breeze passed by. It felt just like old times.

"By the way, since we're friends, I wish you'd call me something a little more casual. Keep calling me 'Master' and people are gonna figure out who I am."

Beatrice just couldn't get used to addressing Allen without his title. She had tried calling him 'Master Allen' but had slipped back into calling him 'Lord Allen' so many times—with Allen correcting her each time—that she had eventually given up on calling him by his name entirely.

"Hm...well, old habits die hard. Please bear with me while I get used to it."

"As far as I'm concerned, you needn't give me any title at all."

Riese spoke up. "This isn't fair! I want you to talk to *me* without my title too, Beatrice!"

"A knight...refer to her liege in such a way? Even the casual manner in which I address you at present is only at your insistence, Lady Riese..."

"It truly does not bother me, though."

"It bothers *me*. Please, allow me to be at least this courteous."

Allen and Riese laughed at the meek exhortation from the usually gallant Beatrice. A gentle rumbling accompanied the gentle breeze. Soothed by the first jovial atmosphere they had enjoyed in some time, the trio headed toward their destination at a leisurely pace. Eventually, a small village came into view ahead. But...

"That's the village we're heading to, right? You both told me it was a relaxing and laid-back place. Doesn't it look kind of intense to you two?"

“We’d heard it was that kind of place, but we’ve never actually visited before,” said Beatrice.

“Doesn’t it seem more like they’re in some kind of trouble?”

The three looked, but none could make out exactly what was going on—only that some ten villagers were gathered outside. Focusing his gaze, Allen was able to make out that they had severe looks on their faces—*something* was certainly going on.

“Here we go again. Doesn’t look like I’ll be enjoying the quiet life just yet,” Allen said with a sigh as they slowly approached the village.

The Banished Former Hero Arrives in the Village

The place where Allen and company arrived resembled a settlement more than a village. Perhaps the desolate air that drifted over the small community was inevitable; after all, while Allen had made great pace and arrived the same day he had left the Westfeldt estate, this remote region would usually take two days on foot to reach from the central city of Nox.

At the moment, though, a commotion had broken out, piercing the normally lifeless atmosphere. The villagers were gathered around in deep discussion. Judging by the looks on their faces, it was not a peaceful conversation.

“Hmm...I wonder what this is about?” said Allen.

“Hopefully they’ll take some kind of action as we get closer, but right now they’re just staring at us,” replied Beatrice.

“They appear to be bewildered, expectant, and scared,” Riese added.

The villagers continued to gaze silently at the group as the strangers entered the village. Normally, one would expect a reaction, but the fact that they were all gathered together was odd to begin with. After all, surely they must have had tasks to attend to.

“Hmm...come to think of it, why did you two come here, anyway?” Allen knew that Riese and Beatrice had business in the village, but had no idea what it was.

“Well...to be honest, we don’t know the specifics either,” Riese admitted. “We just received a revelation that this village was in trouble.”

Allen sighed. He supposed there wasn’t much other reason to come to a place like this. “Ah. A revelation.”

A revelation. One of the powers afforded to those with priestly Gifts, it was the ability to converse with deities. However, this power could not be used freely, and it usually took the form of unilateral dispatches from the gods, often some type of prophecy or counsel. Ill fortune could be avoided by heeding the

gods' words—or rather, ill fortune was inevitable if those words were not heeded. It was not guaranteed that the victim of this ill fortune would be the recipient of the prophecy, but it was said that those who were inclined to disregard the misfortune of others would never receive priestly Gifts in the first place.

The main problem was that such prophecies tended toward the abstract. While the place and time were relatively easy to comprehend, there were often coded messages included, which were difficult to follow even if one tried.

“So the problem is that you don't know what you're supposed to do, huh? Just receiving a revelation doesn't mean you can understand it,” Allen mused. He had already known that Riese's Gift allowed her to receive such revelations.

“Hm? You mean you're going to help us?” asked Beatrice.

Allen merely shrugged in response. He had told them that he would travel with them simply because it was convenient. His goal had been nothing more than to enjoy a peaceful life at the Frontier. Agreeing to help Beatrice and Riese was asking for trouble.

“Hey, I'm not so shameless that I'd let myself enjoy the quiet life while my friends are in trouble. Being forced into it is one thing, but I'm choosing to help you.”

Besides, it wasn't like he was deliberately throwing his peaceful life into disarray. How could he enjoy a laid-back existence if he was worried about his friends? He would give what aid he could, but no more.

“I see. That'll be a great help,” said Beatrice.

“Yes. Thank you very much, Allen,” said Riese.

Allen shrugged again. “Anyway, what are we gonna do? Marching right into the center of the disturbance would probably be the fastest route...”

“True, that would be the surest approach,” Beatrice answered. “Based on how the villagers are acting, that seems to be—”

As she was speaking, her and Allen's eyes landed on the same spot. Facing each other, they both smirked.

“That has to be it,” said Allen.

“It looks like the villagers are avoiding that place too, consciously or unconsciously.”

“That’s a nice-looking house compared to the others. Must be the mayor’s or something.”

If the mayor wasn’t widely disliked, then someone would likely have called on him. Since the villagers were staring from afar without drawing too close, he must not have been particularly welcoming. On the other hand, the place didn’t seem like the source of the restless atmosphere in the village either.

“Go away! I don’t have anything to say to you!”

Suddenly, the door to the house swung open and someone came tumbling out. Then the door slammed shut, leaving a young boy—no, a girl—standing there. She seemed about the same age as Allen, with black hair, which was rare in this world.

“Tch... Guess that didn’t work. Ugh, but what the hell else was I s’posed to do? Damn it, I told them I’m no good at this kinda thing,” she grumbled to herself. Then she stood up and turned toward the three. Finally noticing she had an audience, she blinked her dark eyes—the same color as her hair—and tilted her head, as if not understanding what was happening.

“Huh? Ain’t there more people here than before? Wait, who’re you?” The girl looked each of them over in turn, her gaze coming to a stop at Riese. The surprise on her face, while slight, was still noticeable.

“Someone you know?” asked Allen.

“Yes. We have met before, though only once,” Riese answered.

As the first princess of Adastera, she knew a great many people. Even Allen had crossed paths with many people in his lesser role. But, impolite as the thought might be, this girl didn’t seem like someone who would have had the opportunity to meet with the princess. Her conduct was altogether too common for her to be of noble birth. Not that she seemed ill-natured—it was just that, from her behavior and attire, she came off more like an adventurer who would have no cause to deal with royalty.

Nevertheless, the girl drew close as she continued to stare at Riese, again tilting her head. “Uh...Riesen, right?”

“That’s a much prettier name,” quipped Allen.

“Ah, that’s not it. Sorry. I’m no good with names,” replied the girl.

“I know how it is. I’m sure she doesn’t mind anyway. Wait, why am I the one doing the talking?”

Realizing that he had jumped into the conversation when Riese, by all rights, should have been the one talking, Allen turned to her. At the same time, Riese began to speak.

“Guide the light to drive away the darkness.”

“Huh? What’s that s’posed to mean?” asked the girl.

“That was the revelation I received.”

“Revelation? Sounds like something one of those old archbishop guys would say.”

“Indeed, it is similar. And I have finally realized what it means.”

“That’s great, but would you mind explaining it so that the rest of us can understand too? Wait, actually, could you introduce her first?” said Allen.

“Right... I daresay, once you know who this girl is, you will understand what the revelation means too.” Riese gestured at the girl. “This is Akira Kazaragi, the current Champion.”

The Former Hero Meets the Champion

“Champion...”

The title referred to those granted the “Champion” Gift. However, unlike other Gifts, this one was only bestowed on one person each generation. While that person lived, no others would receive the same ability, and when they died, the next generation’s Champion would be born.

The Gift’s strength matched its rarity. One of the most powerful abilities, indisputably Level 5, it granted bewildering strength in battle to those who could wield it. The bearers of this Gift were welcomed wherever they went—but with it came a responsibility to use their power to achieve great things.

Allen had always associated the Champion with the Archfiend, but the truth was, there was no particular entity that Champions were destined to defeat. While they did possess great power, the holder of the Champion Gift was only one person. Regardless of any obligations, it was said that the Champion was innately driven to act in the interest of others, although it was also said that their power tended to attract trouble, regardless of their intentions.

“I see. Sounds like this is a bigger predicament than I thought,” said Allen.

Clearly, this girl was the Light to which Riese’s revelation referred. While it wasn’t clear what was meant by “the dark,” it seemed reasonable to assume it was related to the villagers’ troubles. And “guide” was simple enough—they were being told to assist the Champion, which meant that whatever conflict was afoot was difficult enough that the incredibly powerful Champion needed help. While such issues usually came part and parcel with revelations, this was beyond what they had imagined.

“Hmm...” said Beatrice. “You’re right, this does seem like a bigger problem than we anticipated. The biggest problem is that I’m not sure we can be of assistance.”

“Right,” replied Riese. “Revelations aren’t only granted to people with the

power to act on them. However, it is usually possible to solve the problem, provided one calls on the right people for help and offers one's assistance."

"It pains me to have lost my comrades-in-arms," said Beatrice.

"Hmm...by the way, is there some connection between this and that business earlier?" asked Allen. He hadn't asked for many details about the attack of the Clay Wolf; they'd reached the village while he was still explaining his own circumstances, and he wouldn't necessarily have asked even if he'd had the opportunity. While it had been clear that they were here for a purpose, one didn't simply pry into the business of a princess and her knight—even if this particular pair *had* continued to treat him kindly.

Of course, once they had asked for his help, things had changed.

"I cannot say for sure, but I suspect there is no connection," said Riese. "I believe that golem-like thing was after me and wasn't looking to intervene in this matter."

"Got it." Gazing at her, it seemed to Allen like she was *hoping* there was no connection, but he merely nodded and turned his attention to the girl. "Let's just focus on this for now, then. Um...should I call you Akira?"

"Huh? Sure, whatever. We're about the same age. And you are?"

"Allen. Address me however you like."

"You got it, Allen. So, what do you want from me?"

"Well...we figured asking you would be the fastest way to find out what's going on around here. Know anything?"

"Ah... I do, but...based on what you've said, I s'pose you're gonna help me?"

"Hmm. I guess that depends on what you tell us."

As Riese had said, receiving a revelation didn't necessarily mean that they were equipped to do anything about it. They would have to make an informed decision.

"Figures. You're a weird bunch."

"You think? We only said we'd hear you out."

“Hearing out someone you’ve never met based on a ‘revelation,’ whatever that is? I’d say that’s pretty weird.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Allen conceded. He couldn’t deny it; in fact, the very same thought had already occurred to him. “So, are you willing to tell us your story?”

“I guess there’s no harm in tellin’ you guys. But...”

“But?”

Akira punctuated the pause with a grin, as if she’d just had a brilliant idea. Then, still smiling, she answered. “Under one condition. First, you gotta spar with me.”



“All right. Shall we begin?”

Lightly pounding her fist against her palm, Akira put her game face on. With the slightest of signals, she began to step forward, eyes locked on the young man around the same age as her. The young man in question—Allen was his name—stood there coolly, though his eyes revealed his exasperation.

Akira smiled at his confident, unafraid demeanor. She knew this was going to be interesting. Other than the one who now stood before her, she had never known anyone who could keep their cool while the Champion stared them down. All others had shown some level of fear, apprehension, even terror on their faces. But Allen showed no shred of aversion or hesitancy. Considering he was about to do battle, he seemed positively relaxed.

Akira didn't think she came off much like a Champion, but she still had a strong conviction in her abilities. She wasn't used to being treated as though she was just anyone. Still, Allen's demeanor didn't faze her—in fact, it made him all the more interesting. She had realized out of the blue that she wanted to take him on. Nobody was more surprised by this feeling than Akira herself; she had no idea where it came from.

With all her experience, Akira had become quite capable of gauging an opponent's strength, and Allen didn't seem particularly strong. But at the same time, some intuitive sense of hers—she couldn't quite pinpoint it—told her that he was a more-than-capable foe. The only thing for it was to fight him and find out.

There was another good reason for Akira to see how Allen stacked up. Associating with her tended to be a rather perilous enterprise. If this young man was determined to join forces with her, she had to confirm that he was up to snuff or he'd only end up getting in her way.

Since there were no suitably open places to spar within the village, the group now stood in the open plains on its outskirts. Only Allen's two companions observed; the villagers did not leave the confines of their home, but watched with interest from afar.

Akira hadn't intended to put on a show, but it wasn't worth worrying about now. She narrowed her eyes as her mind turned to more important concerns. Though she was casually drawing closer to Allen, he hadn't reacted in the least. They had begun at a distance of ten meters, and she had already drawn five meters closer. Soon they would be in fighting range, and yet it seemed as though he hadn't noticed. He hadn't even assumed a fighting stance and was giving her countless openings.

"Well, whatever. I'm not the type of girl to overthink things. Oh, let me apologize in advance. I'm not gonna hold back, so sorry if I overdo it."

"You're certainly confident. That's nice, but be careful you don't get blindsided, okay?"

"Heh. You've got some nerve. Let's see you try!" Akira roared as she stepped forward. Summoning her power, she traveled at an explosive speed toward Allen, and—

"Huh?"

For a moment, Akira saw only sky. It wasn't that he had disappeared from view—she couldn't even tell what was up or down, left or right.

"Ugh. You really should listen better, you know. Told you not to get blindsided."

As she heard those words, a shock rattled her spine.

The Champion's Hubris

Beatrice stood in disbelief at the scene before her. Allen stood calmly as the Champion fell to the ground. It was a sight that nobody would have believed if she had described it to them, and yet there she was, seeing it with her own eyes.

And not even for the first time. Nine times now, the Champion had flung herself at Allen, only to be thrust to the ground moments before landing her attack. That wasn't to say the Champion had taken the exact same approach each time—only the first time had she casually drawn closer to Allen. Even then, she had not been taking him lightly, and with each subsequent attempt, her determination had visibly grown. Yet no matter how much she redoubled her efforts, it always ended the same way.

After the second try, she had drawn her sword and kept it drawn for each subsequent attempt, yet she had inflicted nary a scratch on Allen. She had only been brushed off, gotten knocked into the air, and fallen to the ground, over and over again. It was truly an unbelievable sight.

If things had been the other way around, Beatrice would have understood. In fact, it would have been the most natural outcome. It was the current state of affairs that was odd. True, they had just been discussing the possibility that Allen's Gift was Rank 6, and the Champion Gift was Rank 5, so since Gifts of higher rank were stronger, it made sense that Allen's was superior. And yet, even understanding this, Beatrice found the scene before her inconceivable. That was how shocking it was to see a Champion so easily dispatched. The situation only became more inconceivable the more she thought about who this girl was.

"I've never seen Allen fight before. So, he's this formidable, huh? I'd only heard about it from you, Beatrice," said Riese.

"It's only been a little while since I saw him battle that monster too. Even so, I can't believe he's this powerful. It would be easier to believe that I'm dreaming

right now. But you must feel that even more strongly than I, don't you, Lady Riese?"

"Indeed. The Champion Gift is only one of the five hereditary Gifts. It's said to be the most balanced of the five that currently exist, but for that reason, it should never find itself lacking in power compared to any other."

"Even two years ago, she was said to have barely fallen short of besting the Captain of the First Order," the knight agreed.

The Captain of the First Knightly Order of the Kingdom of Adastera was known as the most powerful person in all the kingdom. Two years ago, they had gotten word of the Champion taking the Captain to a draw. This had caused quite a stir at the time. The Champion Gift gained strength based on the amount of time the Champion had held it, and Akira had possessed it for only a year at that point. If she was that powerful after a year, it was no surprise that two years later, she was capable of defeating the captain.

Judging by Akira's movements, it was clear that she was capable of such a feat. In fact, the way she moved barely seemed human anymore. Even when viewed from a distance, she would occasionally disappear from sight. If Beatrice, dedicated to defense as she was, had taken her on, she would have been no match for her at all. And yet Allen was handling this Champion as though she were a mere child.

Beatrice once again realized how foolish the House of Westfeldt had been as she wondered how strong Allen truly was—though she was equally bemused by how he had hidden his true strength until now.

"Still, it's not like they're going to kill each other, no matter how long they fight. Akira isn't going all out. If she did, this might be a different matter altogether. Of course, I could say the same of Allen..."

Beatrice was attempting to reconcile conventional wisdom with what she saw before her when her expression suddenly stiffened. After being thrown to the ground for a tenth time, Akira's aura changed completely. Eyes on the ground, she rose to her feet with a bloodlust emanating from her.

Riese cried out, "No, don't tell me! Stop, Miss Akira! If you do that, even Allen will—"

Akira didn't stop. Raising her right arm above her head, she swung it down to point at Allen. "Heaven-piercing lightning, I summon you!"

A dazzling flash of light rained down from the sky right where Allen stood, exploding with a thunderous roar.

Champion: Magic—Thunder Rain.

Akira narrowed her gaze at the dust cloud produced by her most destructive attack. She had never thought it would come to this. Her intention had only been to establish how strong Allen was. Resorting to such a technique meant this had now become a fight to the death. But that was all the more reason she had no choice but to use it.

"Tch. If this doesn't work, you must be a monster or something."

"How rude. If that thing hits me, I won't let you get away with it, you know. I guess that means I'll just have to make sure I don't get hit."

Allen appeared from the cloud of smoke without a scratch on him. If Akira believed his words, he had somehow defended against the attack—but that was hard to believe. She was buzzing with the sensation of a direct hit, and her attack had been magically summoned lightning from the skies. How could he defend against something that struck in an instant?

"Hm? Looks like you don't believe me. It's true. I mean, I already knew that you could use lightning magic."

"Hnh?!" A chill ran down Akira's spine as she saw the look in Allen's eyes. She felt as though he could see everything about her—even things she didn't know herself.

"I know this is really rude of me, but I had a feeling you could do something like that. You're one tough customer, after all," he continued.

"Where do you get off talking to me like that?" replied Akira.

She would have been lying if she'd said she wasn't thrown off. She was angry too. She had heard that Allen was only level 1 when she had left the village. Even though her intuition told her that he was capable, in this world, people judged their opponents' strength based on their level, almost without thinking.

Not to mention...that day she had first tasted defeat two years ago.

She had been enraged by the lack of deference shown to her by the captain, challenged him, and lost. Vowing that she would be victorious next time, she had trained strenuously ever since. As a result, she had not been defeated since that day and had dominated most foes.

Now she realized how conceited this had made her. Akira wasn't so foolish that she would fail to examine her own weaknesses after being so easily dealt with over and over. But that was precisely why she had begun to fight in earnest, unleashing magic intended to kill. While she *had* anticipated that Allen could defend against it, that didn't make it any less frustrating. It was a matter of her pride as a Champion. All the accomplishments she had accumulated up until now were proof of the fact that she was a Champion—she couldn't tolerate a loss, even in a mere sparring bout. That meant that she couldn't stop now, even when the result was no longer in doubt.

“Hnh!”

Akira hit the ground for the tenth time. She half expected to hear Allen say that they should stop already. The fact that he didn't suggested that he was deferring to her wishes. Somewhere along the way, this test of her opponent's skills had turned into a real challenge for her.

Realizing that, she smiled, feeling a faint sense of enjoyment. Nevertheless, her blade was as sharp as ever. She stepped forward, swung...and was easily dodged. Her approach—one could hardly call it “swordsmanship”—was entirely self-taught. While her Gift's skills did lend her assistance, the Champion Gift had no particular weapon of choice—she would receive the same assistance when using a spear, axe, or bow. Akira's use of the sword was simply a personal preference.

Allen's swordplay had therefore captivated her for a brief moment. While she had no experience in the art herself, it was clear that he had reached its very pinnacle.

A short laugh escaped her lips. Whether by sword or by magic, she couldn't harm a hair on his head, even though her natural abilities should have guaranteed victory. Despite her absolute defeat, her body bore not a single real

wound. This, above all, was the greatest symbol of their power.

Akira wondered if she even had the right to call herself a Champion...but even now, she smiled, overjoyed with her inability to claim victory. Though she still felt that she could overcome this challenge somehow, she knew deep down that this was mere hubris and self-flattery, having seen all that Allen had to offer. The world was great and wide, and she still had a long way to go to reach its limits.

As she felt that refreshing shock reverberate through her spine for the tenth time, one thought danced through Akira's mind:

"I'm so glad I came to this world."

The Former Hero Assesses the Situation

Had she hit her head, or was she just a masochist? Allen wondered as he watched Akira suddenly break into a smile. Regardless, he had believed that a sufficient display was necessary to help her properly assess his power and had taken their battle seriously to do so.

Judging by the relieved look on Akira's face, he had made the right choice. Whether her expression was the result of a satisfying outcome or simply the opportunity to get her frustrations out, he couldn't say, but either way, it beat her getting angry with him.

Her face returning to a more composed expression—perhaps she had sensed that Allen was beginning to wonder if she enjoyed the pain—Akira drew closer. Allen waited for her to approach, ready to dodge at any moment if she suddenly attacked.

"Sorry for testin' you like that. I feel like all I did was show that I don't know when to quit," she said.

"Not at all," Allen replied.

Among the many things he had learned by examining Akira with the Eyes of Akasha was that it had only been three years since she'd acquired her Gift. She deserved to be praised for the extent to which she had awoken to her Champion powers and had put them to good use in that time. The power *did* seem a little too much for her, but that was hardly rare for someone of her age, especially those who had been granted extremely powerful Gifts. This experience should have provided an opportunity for her to rectify that.

"Shall we say that means I passed, then?" said Allen.

"If I said you'd failed, you'd have to stop me. Back when I went to that old man's house, I'd planned on doing this all alone, but...if I really think about it, it might be tough for me to tackle this alone. You'd really be helping me out, to be honest."

“Hmm...from the sound of it, some kind of tough monster has shown up in the area, right?”

“Not exactly. I don’t totally understand, since that old guy threw me out when I went to ask for more details, but it seems like it’s always been here.”

“So it’s suddenly turned violent?” asked Riese.

“Something probably happened to its old territory and it moved, and now it’s causing problems for the village. This kinda thing happens from time to time,” Allen explained.

Akira shook her head, indicating that none of those guesses were quite on the mark. “I don’t think it’s that either. They say this thing is on the mountain.”

“The mountain?”

Akira pointed. Sure enough, there was a mountain in the distance. But it was far away; it was hard to imagine that any monster there could have an effect on the village—unless it could fly.

An image appeared in Allen’s mind. It was hard to believe, but he had to ask. “Wait, don’t tell me the monster is—”

Akira shrugged as if she’d read his mind. “I think so. There’s a dragon living on that mountain.”

Riese gulped. Allen furrowed his brow. Now they understood—dragons were the most fearsome monsters of all.

“I see. I *thought* it was strange that we didn’t run into a single monster in the area. They’re all steering clear of the dragon,” Beatrice remarked.

“Seems like it. For what it’s worth, I’ve never heard of there being a dragon here,” said Allen.

“That’s right,” Riese answered. “If you’d known, you wouldn’t have had to ask. And I’m sure you wouldn’t have simply let it run wild here.”

“I think you’re giving me a little too much credit. I wouldn’t have been able to do a lot,” Allen protested, although in reality, he probably would have tried to help if he had known.

Akira tilted her head at these strange statements. She had good reason to be confused, as she had no idea that Allen had belonged to the House of Westfeldt. Still, she resolved to keep the conversation regardless.

“Uh, I don’t get what Allen has to do with this... Well, whatever. Do you have enough information now?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” he replied.

“Yes...the stories of guardian dragons and sacrifices are fairly well-known, after all,” Riese added.

Strictly speaking, dragons were not monsters at all; they were monsterlike beings known as “mystical beasts,” distinguished from monsters by their ability to communicate their thoughts. As a result, given certain conditions, dragons could be convinced to protect rather than attack humans.

The mere presence of a dragon was enough to prevent monsters from gathering in the vicinity. While towns with large enough walls had little reason to fear monsters, attacks were a frequent life-or-death occurrence for small settlements like this one. There was good reason to choose the protection of a dragon, even if the villagers had to accept certain negatives in exchange, such as the provision of sacrifices.

“I’ve heard the same things,” said Akira. “But does that kinda thing really happen a lot?”

“You certainly *hear* about it a lot, but this is the first time I’ve ever seen it actually happening,” said Allen.

“That’s right,” said Riese. “Dragons are powerful, but many useful materials can be made from their bodies. Adventurers will gather and countries will mobilize entire armies at the mere word of a dragon’s presence, hoping to win riches. These days, the dragons know this and avoid doing things that will attract such attention. At least, they usually do...”

“It seems like someone told you about this, Akira,” Beatrice observed. “Who was it? It can’t have been the mayor.”

“Oh... I found this scruffy little kid when I was walking close to the village. She told me she’d escaped from being sacrificed, but when I went to ask for

details... Well, you saw what happened.”

“I see,” Allen replied. “So that’s what got you thrown out.”

Since dragons were a popular hunting target, villagers would usually request the help of a kingdom or adventurers to deal with one. But if the villagers didn’t ask for help and simply accepted its presence, they could quietly form a symbiotic relationship: safety for the village in exchange for a few lives. However...

“The situation is even worse than that, though,” said Akira.

“Huh? What do you mean? Is the dragon threatening them?”

“Not exactly. Well, there are threats going on, but not from the dragon. It’s the people who *should* be helping them.”

Twenty days’ travel on foot was positively close by for a creature that could fly. And twenty days away lay the estate of the Duchy of Westfeldt. A mountain dragon dwelling so close couldn’t have escaped their notice, even if it was at the frontier. But Allen had never heard any talk of it.

His cold treatment would have had no bearing on that. He had still been free to travel around the estate. It was trivial to collect a range of information by listening to the servants gossip. Anything he hadn’t heard about had not been allowed to reach their ears: information that had been hidden by the duchy’s most powerful members before it had ever become public. That meant that whatever entreaties the villagers might have made had fallen on deaf ears, or that there had been an agreement between the duchy and the dragon from the very beginning.

“Actually...it’s probably more that this village was set up to be a sacrifice from the very start,” said Allen.

“Huh?” said Akira. “Isn’t the duke supposed to be an important guy? Would he do something like that?”

“I’m only a member of the guard and can’t speak too much on this,” Beatrice answered, “but important people do not always do what is right. Especially when it comes to that family, I wouldn’t be surprised by it, if they had a good enough reason.”

“But how would the House of Westfeldt stand to benefit from this?” asked Riese. “The royal family would certainly never allow it. It is hard to imagine they would make a deal with a dragon to protect the peace in this area, knowing the consequences that would befall them should they be found out.”

“True,” said Allen, “but those probably weren’t the conditions of the agreement. Bringing peace to this area is just a side effect. They’re probably requesting that the dragon continually provide its scales, or blood, or something.”

“That’s certainly possible,” Beatrice replied. “Alchemists can use dragon scales to strengthen armor, and their blood to create powerful reinforcing agents. It wouldn’t be unusual for such a warlike family to happily seek such an agreement.”

“Wouldn’t be unusual? I’m sure they did it,” Allen retorted.

Riese shot him an anxious look, but he responded with a smirk. He no longer had anything to do with that family and could afford to state the facts as he saw them. He wasn’t speaking out of resentment—he genuinely believed it was the sort of thing the House of Westfeldt would do.

“What a lousy family,” said Akira.

“No kidding,” Allen agreed. “So, are you planning to go and slay the dragon?”

“That’s kinda why I came here. Not a single one of the villagers approved of that idea, though, and that old man threw me out.”

“The villagers are probably living under the protection of the dragon—or should I say the duchy. They’re probably happy to be able to live in peace, even if it carries the risk of becoming a sacrifice.”

While they had seemed like a normal group of villagers at a glance, it was likely they were all criminals. Allen had heard talk of some thugs being taken away somewhere, although since there was no proof, some said the rumor was simply meant to bring the House of Westfeldt into disrepute.

“I see...” said Beatrice. “If they’re waiting to be executed anyway, I could understand why they’d act like that.”

“Executed, huh?” said Akira. “They did look like a gloomy bunch, but they didn’t seem like they’d done anything that bad to me.”

“All sorts of people are executed,” Allen noted.

While some had certainly committed serious crimes, there were sure to be those whose trivial misdemeanors were treated as grave sins. There were many stories about people being put to death for stealing expensive medicine to heal an ailing family member, or being discourteous to someone they were not aware belonged to the duke’s family.

“It could be down to social pressure,” said Allen. “If they go along with you, they could end up as the next sacrifice. Or perhaps it’s not that they particularly *want* any help from the dragon. It’s just that if you slay it, they’ll end up being killed as soon as tomorrow. Do you still plan on going after it, knowing that?”

“Yup,” replied Akira, her expression showing no hint of indecision. “I was asked for help, so I’m gonna help. Simple.”

The little girl she’d met must have asked for her aid. It wasn’t because Akira was a Champion that she felt compelled to grant her request—it was that compulsion that made her a Champion.

“Got it,” Allen answered. “Well, I guess that settles it, then.”

“Wait, really?”

“Huh? Did you expect me to stop you? No way. Helping someone is reason enough for me.”

The result would probably be an unfortunate outcome for the villagers, but there was no way to be certain. After all, there was another among them who had come to the frontier to help unfortunate souls.

Riese returned Allen’s knowing glance with a grin.

“All right,” said Akira. “Let’s slay that dragon!”

The Former Hero Helps Slay the Dragon

It was easy enough to speak of slaying a dragon, but actually doing it wasn't so simple. It would be no exaggeration to say that dragons were the strongest of all monsters. Kingdoms would mobilize entire armies to deal with one, partly because of their great value, and partly because to not do so would be to suffer great harm. Champions were powerful too, but they couldn't match the strength of an entire kingdom. Furthermore, dragons lived for thousands of years and were said to grow in power as they aged. While this wasn't necessarily too much for a Champion to handle, it was safe to say that seeking help was a wise move.

Allen had never done battle with a dragon. Even in his past life, he had encountered the creatures but never had cause to engage one in combat. Besides, even if he *had* fought a creature called a "dragon" back then, there was no guarantee the experience would be applicable to the dragons of this world.

Regardless, no matter the opponent, information was his best weapon. At times it could make the difference between life and death. If they were to fight a dragon, it was common sense to gather as much information as possible and make sure that all their preparations were in order. Despite knowing this, however, Allen's party elected to head directly for the creature.

As much as they wanted to gather information, they couldn't right now. The locals would normally be their primary source, but these villagers didn't want to see the dragon defeated, and they knew that was Akira's goal. There was no chance of them telling her anything. Even if Allen and the others tried to gather information on their own, the result would be the same—the locals had seen them leave with Akira, and while none of them had set foot outside the village, they had watched Akira and Allen spar from afar. If Allen, Beatrice, and Riese now came to them asking for details about the dragon, the villagers would know they had agreed to help Akira. There was no way they would tell them anything—and, as it turned out, they didn't.

Since the group's earlier discussions had all been based on supposition, they knew there was a possibility that they were wrong. Returning briefly to the village to gently make inquiries, they found themselves stonewalled. Allen had known his former family was worthless, but this experience gave him a new appreciation for just how awful they truly were. Admittedly, there wasn't much he could have done about it, but there were others who *could* act. Hopefully he could convince the people with that power to use it as they should.

Any attempts to prepare for the battle ahead were stymied in much the same way as their attempts to gather intel. Nobody in the village would sell anything to them, and more importantly, there was little there that would be of any use in battling a dragon in the first place. Regardless of the circumstances, the village enjoyed the dragon's protection and thus had no need for equipment or combat skills. Given the situation, it seemed there was nothing to do but head straight for their foe.

As the group approached the base of the mountain, exchanging what knowledge they had and making predictions, someone popped into Allen's mind: the one person who seemed they would have the most knowledge of the dragon, and in fact, the only one who might talk to them.

"Hey, what happened to that little girl, Akira?"

Everything Akira knew about the dragon had come from a local child. Surely, there was more she could ask her.

"Huh? Oh, her. She should be sleeping in a cave not too far from the village."

"*Alone?*" asked Riese.

"What else could I do? I couldn't send her back to the village and I couldn't bring her with me."

"It seems dangerous to leave a kid alone like that," said Allen, "but I guess there don't seem to be any monsters around here. It probably beats bringing her along with us."

"Hmm," said Beatrice. "Perhaps, but is engaging the dragon inevitable? So long as it stays far away, couldn't you have simply found a safe place that would take in the child and avoided putting yourself in danger?"

“That village might not be the greatest place, but it’s still the kid’s home. They might have chosen her to be sacrificed, but abandoning her hometown would still hurt. I couldn’t really call that ‘helping her.’”

“I see. Guess we have no choice, then” Allen conceded.

It sounded like Akira had headed out without telling the girl, in which case it was probably naive to assume they could simply return to where she had left her. She had only asked him for the bare minimum of information, but that was enough to do her job.

“Is this as far as we can go by carriage?” asked Allen.

“Looks like it,” replied Akira. “I can already sense the thing. If we keep going by carriage, we might be too slow to respond to a sudden attack.”

“The horses will probably be too scared to go any farther anyway. If we leave them here, we won’t have to worry about them being stolen or attacked. Probably best to go the rest of the way on foot,” added Beatrice.

Until that point, the whole group had been traveling by carriage. There was no particular need to walk, and they couldn’t just leave the vehicle by the village after they’d established an adversarial relationship with its inhabitants. Riese had come with them for the same reason, although now...

“Are you really coming with us?” asked Allen. “You could always just wait with the horses. Actually, I think that would be best.”

“Please take me with you. I promise not to slow you down,” she replied.

It seemed Riese was heading to meet the dragon with them after all. The group had already confirmed that she had some knowledge of self-defense—although it would be useless against a dragon. Still, the reality was that Allen and Riese were not traveling together. They had simply run into each other and agreed to accompany each other for their mutual benefit. If Riese said she was going, Allen couldn’t stop her. What was more, Allen *was* Riese’s former betrothed and was well aware of how stubborn she could be.

“Oh, is this about the revelation?” he asked.

“That’s right, although I’m not sure exactly what was being revealed to me, I

feel as though I must go. I have a similar sensation now as when I received the revelation. That isn't why I'm going, though. It's because I want to," she said, addressing Allen without a shred of fear or hesitation in her eyes. It seemed that, while she couldn't put it into words, she felt very sure of her course.

Allen didn't have the words to refuse her. "Got it. But don't go doing anything hasty. If I think you're overdoing it, I'll have to make you back off."

"I understand. Thank you." She gave him a smile that caused him to breathe a sigh of relief. If he was truly acting in her best interest, he probably should have left her behind, regardless of the resentment it would cause, but at least if push came to shove, he could protect her. If he couldn't manage that much, he could hardly call himself a hero, even if it *was* a dragon they were dealing with.

"Hmm..." said Akira. "I thought Allen would be the one dragging her out of there. Guess not."

"Well, usually he would be," said Beatrice. "It's just that he's easy for her to manipulate."

"Huh. I guess I can see that. So, those two are an item, right?"

"Used to be."

"Sounds complicated. Must be tough being such a big shot. Not that you guys seem too worried about it."

Allen shrugged in response to Akira's teasing. "Quiet, you! It's not that big a deal, anyway."

Without realizing it, he had begun to talk to Akira as if they were old friends. That was just Akira's nature. While she had a rough way of speaking, she wasn't an unpleasant person; in fact, she was very easy to talk to. She showed no hint of being bothered by her earlier defeat and had quickly apologized for using magic, which she had only resorted to after realizing that Allen was not the type to drag things out. In short, she had a way of making people warm up to her. Of course, the simple fact was that if they were going to march into battle together, getting along was preferable to being standoffish.

Allen didn't mind the casual conversation, but it soon came to an end. He readied himself as he exhaled. "All right. Things are getting serious now, so

brace yourselves, everyone. Akira, you ready?"

Akira shot him a look of resolve. "Yup. Leave it to me," she said with a confident smile. It was time for her to do her part, but of course, she showed no sign of feeling the pressure.

The party was going to split into two groups and head for the summit. While they couldn't afford to take the child's words at face value, dragons tended to be huge creatures, and their footing on the mountain was unsteady. There was a greater risk of them all being killed at once than of them each being attacked individually.

Akira would act as a diversion. While they couldn't say how useful this would be with a dragon, it was impossible to be too cautious against an enemy whose power was unknown. Allen had originally intended on playing this role, but Akira had seized the responsibility for herself, saying that if he acted as a diversion, he'd just end up defeating the dragon on his own. Allen wasn't sure if she was joking or not.

"Looks like there's little need to wonder which path she should take forward," said Riese.

"Yeah," Allen agreed. "I had a feeling the villagers would just take their sacrifices straight up the mountain. Looks like I was right."

The mountainside wasn't paved, exactly, but an easily walkable path had been formed. It would likely take them directly to the creature.

"I'll go on ahead, then. You guys hurry after me, okay? Otherwise I'll kick that dragon's ass myself," Akira assured the group before breaking into a run.

Allen and the rest began to follow as she shrank into the distance.

"Guess we'd better get going too," he said.

"Indeed," replied Riese.

"Yes," said Beatrice. "With that energy, she really will defeat the dragon by herself."

That depends on how tough it is, Allen thought with a smirk as he briskly made his way up the other side of the mountain.

This way was not so easily navigable, but the group managed to find a relatively safe route. If they didn't hurry, the diversion would end up becoming something else entirely.

Suddenly, Allen let out a sigh at the sight before him. "Hmm...I can't say I didn't consider this outcome, but I wanted to be wrong."

If the worst option was the dragon simply ignoring both them and fleeing the mountain, this was perhaps the third-worst scenario: in front of them were dozens of monsters.

"Monsters?!" said Riese. "But there's a dragon living here!"

"Hmm, I suppose humans aren't the only ones who seek their protection," Beatrice offered.

Humans and monsters couldn't communicate with each other, but this was due less to language and more to their differing worldviews. Intelligent monsters did exist, and conflicts between monsters were not unheard of. It wasn't surprising that some monsters could be found close to the dragon. Still, Allen had hoped that wouldn't be the case.

"Oh well. I suppose there's no harm in a little warm-up before we take on the dragon," said Beatrice.

"Right. If we can't handle these things, what chance would we have against a dragon?"

Allen had Riese take a step back as he drew his sword. At that moment, the ground beneath them shook, and a roar emanated from the summit.

The Champion and the Dragon

She had never thought of this as reconnaissance. The dragon's true power may have been unknown, but any half-hearted attempt at an attack was liable to be interpreted by the beast as a violation of the agreement, resulting in it laying waste to the surrounding villages. Dragons were said to always uphold their contracts, but this was always ultimately at the dragon's discretion. While they were intelligent creatures, they did not think like humans. If it determined that they had violated the agreement, there was nothing they could do.

Thus, diversion or not, Akira couldn't afford to practice restraint or take a wait-and-see approach—she had to be prepared to go all out from the very beginning. She hadn't been joking when she'd said that if the others were late, she would have to defeat the dragon herself.

Akira reached the summit, involuntarily clicking her tongue as she saw not a slope, but a perfectly flat plane before her.

"Welcome, to my lair, human. Allow me to offer you a most magnificent greeting. Now die!"

Akira had been prepared for an attack from the outset, but that didn't prevent it from taking the wind out of her sails.

"Damn it. I can't say I didn't expect this, but you're really just gonna throw your weight around without giving me a chance to talk first, huh?" she complained.

Suddenly, her entire field of view was painted orange. Recognizing that the area before her had been enveloped in flames, she looked forward—no, upward—to see a giant red figure in the center of the blue sky.

The dragon was about fifty meters in length. Its golden eyes peered down at her resentfully as a contemptuous voice reverberated through her skull.

"Hmph. What strange words. You are the one who came to slay me. Did you think I was not aware?"

Akira had no response. It was true. She could only click her tongue as she took stock of her surroundings. There was no time to think of anything but evading the dragon's flames, but her escape routes were blocked. The path she had come from was now an inferno. She could try to retreat another way, but all the open ground offered unstable footing. She couldn't make a complete escape. Although she wasn't planning to retreat, losing her escape route couldn't be good.

Nerves rather than heat were the cause of the sweat that now dripped down her face. It was fortunate that Allen had just taught her the limits of her powers. The feeling in her bones now told her that this dragon was leagues more powerful than her. If her old, overconfident self had come here, that last attack probably would have killed her.

Still, there was no chance of pulling out now—that decision had been made already. Leaving the real fight to Allen had been a wise choice, but she was the one the kid had asked for help and who had agreed. Allen and the others were only here to help her; there was no way she was going to be the first one to back out. To cede the high ground to a foe that was already more powerful was tantamount to forfeit. The only option was to force the dragon out of the sky. That was the one choice she had.

"Think you're such hot stuff, do ya? All right, two can play that game. Hold still while I drag your ass out of the sky! Come, thunder!"

Champion: Magic—Lightning.

Akira raised her right hand and lightning came raining down from the heavens.

The voice in her head resounded again. "Keh heh... Won't *she* be hit too?"

"Huh? What the hell are you..."

The dragon's head moved, staring straight down at her. Although it was the perfect opening, Akira resolved to continue her current attack...but something about the dragon's gaze gave her a bad feeling.

While the mountain peak was a wide open plain, there were boulders of various sizes dotted around. Nothing particularly eye-catching, and it was true

that Akira's magic could only be roughly targeted, but nobody would be bothered if she hit a few rocks.

Suddenly, her attention was drawn to one particular rock for a reason she couldn't explain. A small, particularly ragged-looking rock...

No...

"You bastard," Akira muttered as she realized what she was looking at, clenching her fist so hard that her nails dug into her skin. The rock that looked like a pile of old rags was a child. One with a familiar face: the girl she had thought was sleeping in a cave somewhere. It was not without reason that she hadn't noticed until now—the girl's arms and legs had been bitten off.

Again came the voice. "What's wrong? You seem perturbed. Could it be that you don't care for what you see there? That is a sacrifice to me. It is only natural that I devour it as I see fit, is it not?"

In that moment, Akira's head cleared. All questions of "why" or "how" that had muddled her mind were violently silenced by one singular emotion—an all-consuming, murderous impulse.

"Time to die, you bastard."

She didn't have any particular connection to the girl. She had just found her while wandering around; she hadn't even asked her name. The girl's circumstances had angered her, and she had thought she was foolish for seeking only rescue rather than revenge upon the village that had offered her up for sacrifice. Even as she had asked for help, Akira had wondered if the girl's pleas were nothing more than the fantasies of a childish mind. In her enraged state, and having never done battle with a dragon before, she had simply decided that she would vanquish the beast and resolve the problem.

Indeed, that was the extent of her relationship with the girl. But it was more than enough reason to kill this fiend once and for all.

Champion: Pulverizing Blackblades.

Akira was instantly surrounded by an uncountable number of black blades. She had been told never to use this technique, that it was unbecoming of a Champion, but there was no other that suited the rage she felt in that moment.

Raising her left hand, she directed her palm as if it were a crosshair.

“Die.”

With a clench of her first, the blades flew toward the dragon, painting everything black. But...

“Tch. Guess you’re not weak enough for that to finish you off,” Akira said, clicking her tongue. The next moment, accompanied by a sound like shattering glass, the dragon reappeared, unharmed and glaring straight at her.

“What was that? Understand who you are doing battle with. Come, face me with all your might, not these childish ploys,” it said mockingly.

Akira clicked her tongue again. The attack had been a serious attempt to kill the beast. She had been told not to use it because it was too powerful. She had known that the dragon was stronger than her but had never expected this.

As a result, Akira’s temper cooled slightly. “Tell me one thing. Why didn’t you kill the kid?”

The child’s limbs had been bitten off, but she was still alive. It even appeared that the dragon had stopped the bleeding. Given the creature’s size, it could hardly be satisfied with devouring four limbs.

“Hmph. Why do you think I desire sacrifices? I take no particular joy in devouring your kind. I simply wish to see you wear a countenance of utter despair. A fitting pastime for me, as my indomitable power ensures that I will live for ages.”

“Ugh...”

The dragon was purposely prolonging the girl’s suffering. It was even more of a brute than Akira had ever imagined. She bit her lip.

“And allow me to tell you one more thing,” the dragon continued. “You seem confused about how I found the child. I simply followed your trail. It was my guidance that allowed it to escape in the first place.”

It was true; Akira *had* wondered about that. Given the state of the village, it was hard to imagine anyone being able to quietly escape. The girl herself had said it was just luck, and Akira had allowed herself to believe it at the time,

but...

“I was curious about what would happen if I allowed my tribute to escape...but I could never have imagined this. You have provided a most entertaining display for me, hard as it was to contain my laughter as you resolved to vanquish me, unaware that I was watching the whole time.”

“Is that right? Got it. Now die, you piece of shit,” Akira spat as she drew her sword. It was the same one she had used against Allen, but different—now it showed its true form, its blade glowing brightly in response to her thoughts. The holy sword Hauteclaire. The sword of the Champion.

“Oh? Hauteclaire, eh? I see. So you truly *are* the Champion you claimed to be.”

“Ready to apologize now? Not that I’ll let you off the hook.”

“Keh heh. How haughtily you bray for a mere Champion.”

“Huh?”

“You seem confused. A Champion is a mere rookie, born at most a thousand years ago. You stand no chance against one who has lived for eons. Know your place.”

“Huh. In that case, taste this rookie’s blade!”

The dragon might have been in flight, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t attack it, and right now it had let its guard down. Recognizing that fatal mistake, Akira kicked off the ground, heading straight for the beast on which her eyes were trained. It would normally have effortlessly swatted her out of the sky, but right now its pride had rendered it vulnerable. True, one blow would be far from fatal against a foe of such great size, but Akira had a way of making attacks fatal.

Champion: Beastbane Azurebolt.

Power gathered in her right hand, surrounding Hauteclaire’s blade with blue lightning. The Beastbane Azurebolt, a technique that only the Champion could use, would burn all that bore malice toward humankind to cinders. Even the greatest dragon stood no chance against a direct hit.

Champion: Final Strike.

Repent for your sins in hell! Akira thought as she thrust her sword with all her might.

“Is that all? You hit me, all right. Was something supposed to happen?”

“Impossible...”

The sword that was supposed to pierce the dragon’s mighty frame had been halted by its utterly unburned scales, which had perfectly deflected the blade’s azure charge. The weapon that had laid waste to countless foes was completely ineffective against this beast.

It was only thanks to her recent taste of defeat that Akira was able to quickly adapt to the situation. Had it not been for her contest with Allen, she likely would have frozen in place and lost her life then and there—though what actually happened was not far removed from that outcome. Immediately following her failed attack, Akira’s body was wracked by a massive shock as she was thrown violently to the ground.

“Agh!”

It felt as though she had been torn to pieces. She couldn’t move a muscle other than to hack up a mouthful of blood. Her body refused to battle the dragon any further.

“Hmph. What’s this? Is a Champion not strong enough to withstand a single counterattack? You are even weaker than I’ve heard.”

Try as she might, she lacked the strength even to cry out from the pain she was in, let alone form the words to respond to the dragon’s taunt. Any interest in her had evaporated from the creature’s eyes, though it still showed no intention of allowing her to escape.

As the dragon opened its jaws, Akira saw a ball of fire contained within. She couldn’t believe she was going to die with such little fanfare, but her body refused to move. All she could do was watch and wait for—

“Hmm...I feel like if I interrupt now, it’s gonna come off like I planned it this way...but I guess now’s not the time for that. Besides, that’s not entirely wrong.”

Oh, right, thought Akira, the situation feeling almost unreal as she heard that familiar, easygoing voice. She had to admit she had completely forgotten. Now that she had learned the dragon's true power, she had doubts that even Allen would be any match for it—but what happened next quickly disabused her of that notion.

“Huh?”

Though the pain that coursed through her body had abruptly disappeared, all Akira could muster was a confused mumble. She was sure that the expression of her face must have betrayed her utter bewilderment. None of that mattered, though.

“Huh?!”

Akira heard the same groan come from the dragon itself. Though she couldn't read its expression, it certainly *sounded* bewildered. Of course it did—one of its wings had just disappeared from its body; the same body that her best efforts had failed to leave a single scratch on.

But “disappeared” wasn't quite right—the wing was now falling to the ground. Then, in a delayed reaction, the stump where the wing had been began spurting blood.

“Impossible...”

The dragon now uttered the very same words Akira had moments earlier, as its balance faltered and its huge frame came tumbling to the ground.

The Former Hero Slays the Dragon

As he watched the dragon fall, Allen let out a sigh. There were many reasons for that, but right now, there was one thing he had to do. Seeing Akira, who had collapsed, and the state of the girl nearby, he called over his shoulder, "I'll leave Akira and the kid to you, Riese! You too, Beatrice!"

"I know," said Beatrice. "I'm not foolish enough to attempt to oppose the dragon. This was always my role."

"Understood," added Riese. "You don't have to ask, Allen."

"Well," he replied, "it's just that I'm gonna have my hands full with this guy."

That was not false vanity; nobody but Allen would have any chance against the dragon, and even he could be finished off in an instant if he let his guard down. It may have been a foul beast, but it was nonetheless highly competent. Or perhaps it was its competence that made it so foul.

Allen called out to the creature; "Hey, are you gonna play dead forever? You're not gonna catch me off guard with that lousy act."

"Hmph. I was simply reflecting on my own foolishness. To think I allowed a worm like you to hurt me... I have evidently been too restrained," the dragon answered, climbing to its feet as it stared daggers at him. Its words seemed to be sincere, and there was some truth in them. It had been struck by Allen and sent crashing to the ground only because it had exposed itself to attack.

Though the dragon had acted like it was far from being hurt, it seemed to Allen that it had barely managed to defend itself against Akira's attack. If Akira had been any stronger, her blade would have pierced through the beast's scales and into its body. Recognizing Akira as a danger, the dragon had thus been anxious to finish her off. The fire it had been about to breathe had taken its attention away from its surroundings, enabling a standard slash of Allen's sword to slice off its wing and send it hurtling to the ground.

In fact, the dragon used magic rather than its wings to fly, since the wings

could never support its giant frame. There was no reason for the loss of a wing to cause it to fall to the ground, yet fall it did, meaning the shock was what had caused the fall. The dragon's current predicament was the consequence of its own mistake.

"You might be right, but it sounds like you're being a sore loser to me. 'This never would've happened if I hadn't let my guard down.' Excuses, excuses."

"Do you mean to claim that your own power is sufficient to force me to the ground? Do not overestimate yourself, you inferior life-form!"

Allen's body was rocked by a great shock as the dragon roared. The feeling was merely a sensory illusion, but now that it was enraged, its response could soon become physical. In its current state, a mere swing of its arm or tail, or even an exhalation could be a devastating attack. The dragon's pomposity was no show of bravado—it was reflective of its true power. That was clear from its level and stats.

This world was loved by the gods and spirits. Not the *people*, but the world itself. Even monsters and dragons had levels and stats that could be compared to those of humans. No matter a being's physical constitution, someone with a higher Strength stat would always win out in a test of strength. Or to be more precise, that was why their Strength stat was higher.

Akira was Level 13. The average person's limit was understood to be Level 5, and the limits of humans as a whole, Level 15. This made Akira one of the most powerful humans in the world. Even discounting that she was a Champion, this level of power at only fifteen years of age meant that she had incredible future prospects. Provided she grew up healthy, she might even exceed the very limits of humanity. That the dragon had so soundly defeated her was a testament to its level: 52. All of its stats exceeded 40 as well, with its Strength stat exceeding 50.

In this world, level and stats were absolutes, fundamental truths that could not be contravened by conventional means. All were subject to this principle, and Allen, having been born and currently living in this world, was no exception, which meant that what the dragon said was true: if it had not been distracted and was at full power, Allen, at Level 1 and with no stats higher than 5, would

have stood no chance of victory. His Eyes of Akasha offered nothing more than a visualization of the inherent truths of someone's levels and stats. Even without such an ability, a sufficiently powerful being could sense those truths, as was surely the case for the dragon. However...

"Hmm...I wonder who's really overestimating themselves here? Wanna find out?"

Whatever the dragon thought of Allen's statement, it had nothing to say in return. Instead, it nonchalantly swung its arm. Without warning, everything in a ten-meter radius around Allen was blown away except for the very spot on which he stood.

Sword of Cataclysm: Beast Cleaver.

A beautiful circular afterimage was left on the ground, as if that spot alone had managed to avoid the dragon's attack. Moments later, fresh blood spurted from the beast's arm.

"Hrk... You?!"

"What's wrong? Have you already learned where you stand?"

"Ghk!"

Allen couldn't read the dragon's expressions, but he assumed that its countenance must have been one of sheer rage. Narrowing his gaze, he let out a performative sigh.

"It's pathetic, you know, lashing out at me now that you've realized you're not as tough as you thought."

As Allen swung his sword, the air before him erupted. With the dragon enraged as it was, even its breath could become an attack, and this had been a roar. Its target would be hit by no less of an impact than that of the previous strike. But...

Sword of Cataclysm: Beast Cleaver.

...only if it reached its target.

The invisible onslaught was unmistakably cleaved by the swing of Allen's sword, which inflicted a gash on the dragon's face. Blood poured forth as it

emitted a cry somewhere between pain and anguish.

“Guh... Agh... Impossible... How?! To not only defend against my attack but somehow injure me?! And with such a lowly blade!”

“Hey, that’s a little rude, no? This is my faithful old weapon. Sorry it’s not a legendary sword.”

The dragon was not wrong, however. Allen’s blade was the one item he had brought with him from his family’s estate. When he had been told he could take one thing with him, it had been the obvious choice—but it was also true that he was attached to it simply because he had used it since he was five years old. That was the extent of it. It had been made for him during his time as a child prodigy and was accordingly expensive, but the priority had been its durability. As a sword, it didn’t come close to any famed blade, especially not Akira’s Hauteclaire.

“I guess that just goes to show the strength you’re so proud of doesn’t compare to mine, huh?”

“Ggh... I am a dragon! My power is close to that of the gods! How could a mere human compare to me?!”

“Talk like that is exactly why you got blindsided.”

Allen was not merely close to being as powerful as the gods—he wielded the very power of the gods themselves. So this outcome was inevitable. The slash that had managed to rend the dragon scales that even Akira could not pierce was the product of one of the techniques bestowed upon him in his past life: the Sword of Cataclysm. As the name implied, this technique could bring out a level of power in any sword far in excess of its natural capabilities, and allowed the user to wield that power as an extension of their own body. In fact, with this power, even a mere infant could be victorious over a master swordsman.

The technique’s benefits did not stop there. It also enabled the user to wield the qualities of any given sword to absolute perfection, ignoring the level, stats, or Gifts usually required. The reason for this was simple: Allen’s powers were, in fact, natural laws of the world itself. If the requirement of certain stats, levels, and Gifts to produce specific effects was a natural law, then so were his techniques. Natural laws did not conflict with each other—if they did, the world

would not function. Thus the Sword of Cataclysm didn't invalidate other laws, it recognized and then ignored them.

All that remained was the simple question of whether a sword was capable of killing. This was equivalent to the question of whether the sword was capable of wounding, since any wound, given enough time and effort, could kill. Since Allen's power was a natural law, he could ignore the process and directly bring about the end result, which meant there was almost nothing he could not kill with a sword, and the dragon was no exception. True, he had no experience with fighting dragons, so there was always the possibility that what he knew wouldn't work, but...

"Looks like this sword's working fine. Must seem like a nightmare to you, though."

"No! I won't accept it! I will never accept that a mere human could—"

"Don't accept it, then. See if I care. Doesn't change a thing. You'll be forced to accept it in death, right? Maybe in hell, you'll learn how stupid you were. That's good enough for me."

"Nonsense!"

The dragon slammed its arm to the ground, but the shock waves it released didn't reach Allen. Instead, Allen slashed at the dragon again, further compounding its injuries.

"What?!"

The dragon's attempt at an attack had changed nothing. Allen had reciprocated with a slash of his own without incurring so much as a scratch. Black-red liquid flowed from and smothered the dragon's red scales. It was as though Allen were painting the dragon itself out of existence.

Although he appeared to be easily handling the beast, the truth was quite the opposite, just as it had been the case for the dragon when it had defeated Akira. This was a closely fought battle with a razor-thin margin between the two. It was only thanks to the Sword of Cataclysm that Allen was able to outstrip his opponent. Under his own power, the Level-1-versus-Level-52 battle would have been hopeless. Even the slightest scratch from one of the dragon's

attacks could have been fatal. It was only by cutting through all of them that Allen had survived. It was not simply that he *hadn't* been hurt; he couldn't have *withstood* being hurt.

Regardless, there was an overwhelming difference in the level of skill between the two. The dragon was well aware that it had been mercilessly toyed with by Allen, despite the fact that it could have ensured its victory with a single scratch. It was this alone that kept it from admitting defeat, even as Allen continued to make sport of the creature. That it had failed to secure victory despite its advantage was evidence of the difference between them.

In a way, this outcome had been inevitable, not only because of Allen's Blade of Cataclysm, but thanks to the opportunity Akira had afforded him to fully examine the dragon using the Eyes of Akasha. Knowing that this was one of the purposes of her diversion, Akira had readily risked death to fulfill her role...and had been seriously wounded as a result. Allen owed her a true debt of gratitude. For her sake, he couldn't lose now.

Avoiding the dragon's descending talons, he stepped forward and thrust his blade downward, deep into its trunk. If he had continued his slash along its current trajectory, it would likely have reached the dragon's heart. But...

"Tch."

Allen abandoned his attack and swiftly retreated. Moments later, an incredible impact burst forth from the dragon, spreading a wave of destruction around it as it roared. The indiscriminate destruction of this attack would even injure the dragon itself—and if Allen hadn't moved, it would have surely killed him in the process. From that perspective, the dragon's decision wasn't a bad one. Although the creature had wounded itself in order to avoid further danger, Allen was confident that he would have been able to inflict much worse damage if he hadn't been forced to retreat.

Nevertheless, it was no small price that the dragon paid. Its own attack had added to its injuries, and the wound inflicted by Allen now poured with blood...and yet the dragon laughed.

Allen gasped, understanding its intentions and jumping forward—but the dragon was faster. Beating its remaining wing against the ground, it leaped

backwards.

“Wha?!” cried Beatrice.

“Eeek!” exclaimed Riese.

Allen simply clicked his tongue. Their enemy had taken position directly behind Riese and Beatrice. The battle couldn't continue without involving the two of them. Allen had assumed that the dragon's pride wouldn't allow it to use human shields, but it seemed he had been mistaken.

“Be proud, human. I recognize you as a worthy foe. I will use any means necessary.”

“My god. I knew you were a scumbag, but I didn't know just how much.”

Allen's incessant taunting had been another means with which to distract the dragon and prevent it from meddling with the others, but it seemed that ploy had ended in failure.

“Well, this is kinda convenient, in a way,” he remarked.

“What?” asked the dragon.

“Akira's already done her part, and I didn't want to put Riese and Beatrice in danger, so I've been avoiding doing anything that could get them involved. I never thought you'd do me the favor of moving over there by yourself.”

“Hmph. Perhaps such a pathetic bluff is sufficient to calm the nerves of your comrades, but it is hopeless nonetheless. I will destroy you all at once!”

“I'm glad that's what you think. Works for me,” Allen said with a shrug.

In lieu of a response, the dragon simply opened its mouth, apparently intended to burn them all with its breath.

As their fundamental power level was so high, dragons used only a small number of techniques. Striking with their arms and tail and rending with their claws was effective enough. While their ability to fly showed that they had the option of using magic, they tended to refrain from doing so, which seemed to be a point of pride among their kind.

The one nonphysical attack that was common for dragons to use was their

breath. Serving as their trump card, their breath was powerful enough to kill even a fellow dragon, so a human was no match for it at all. Dragons were said to be able to regulate the power of their breath, but this particular dragon had been charging its attack for a considerable period of time. This was an attack with murderous intent. The aftereffects alone would be sufficient to kill Allen, and even if he moved, the others would still be hit.

Right now, Riese and Beatrice couldn't flee, occupied as Riese was with healing Akira and the girl. Akira probably couldn't move, and the girl was right next to her. Riese wouldn't simply abandon them, and neither would Allen.

Nevertheless, while the two had been shaken when the dragon landed by them, Beatrice and Riese now showed no signs of nervousness. Even as the dragon steadily prepared to unleash its breath from its gaping maw, the pair wore steely expressions on their faces, broken only by a glance toward Allen.

Brief as it was, Allen couldn't help but smirk at what he saw in their eyes—it was a look of trust. A look he had rarely seen since he'd been labeled a good-for-nothing, and never in the past five years. Even the looks he'd received in his past life hadn't been quite like this.

He let out a small sigh. For better or worse, it seemed he only had one choice.

"Now," said the dragon. "Any final words before you die? I am, in fact, a compassionate being. I may even grant you one last request. For example, to spare the life of one of you..."

"Compassionate, huh? Even if you choose not to kill one of us with your breath, you'll kill them soon after, right? You can't fool me. Besides, you should be the one offering your final words. Come on, let's hear them."

"Very well. It is time you accept the inevitable. Die."

"That's my line!"

The dragon released its scorching breath.



Blade of Cataclysm: Final Flash.

The next moment, Allen appeared behind the dragon. He had passed entirely through both the creature and the breath it had unleashed.

“Impossible!” said the dragon.

“Ah, I see. Since you can communicate telepathically, it doesn’t matter if I’ve torn your vocal cords to shreds, huh? I learned something today,” said Allen as he looked over his shoulder at the dragon, who had been bisected before its breath had managed to reach anyone.

“I have been defeated?! Those villagers never spoke of this... No, it is impossible! I will not accept this! I will not! I, I...”

“You really are a sore loser. Just die already.”

Blade of Cataclysm: Sundering Slice.

The dragon’s head was sent flying into the air. Then, as if suddenly remembering to do so, its body separated into two halves. Its head followed gravity’s path, hurtling toward the ground.

“No, I won’t!”

With those last words, the voice finally went silent. With a great thud, both halves of the dragon’s body fell to the floor. Seconds later, its head hit the ground, rolling beneath Allen’s feet. Confirming that the assorted parts were no longer moving, he breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Man...I’m pretty tired.”

Then, following the demands of his body, he collapsed on the spot.

The Former Hero Embarks on His Next Journey

“Well, you really helped me out. In fact, all you did was help me out. I didn’t do anything at all,” said Akira.

“Come on, that’s not true,” Allen replied. “I couldn’t have defeated that dragon without you fighting it first.”

“I’m glad you think so, but... Damn it, I’ve really lost my confidence. Wouldn’t it be better to call *you* the Champion from now on?”

“Nah, not at all,” Allen smirked. She was joking but seemed at least half-serious. “Well, good luck.”

The group was parting ways. Behind Allen, Beatrice, and Riese stood the mountain where they had met the dragon. The carriage was to their side. They had descended with Akira and the child, but this would be as far as they went together. Akira would now return to the village with the child, while Allen and the others headed to their next destination.

“Yeah, you too. Although I guess you don’t need luck, do you?”

“Oh, please. None of us know what might lie ahead.”

“I was hoping you’d enthusiastically agree with her,” said Beatrice. “I guess that’s where I come in, although I get the feeling you won’t need me.”

“That isn’t true,” said Riese. “I have always relied on you, Beatrice. Anyway, Akira, are you sure you don’t mind us leaving the rest to you?”

“I was the one who undertook this responsibility. If I don’t at least finish the job, I genuinely won’t have done a single thing. Besides, there’s a lot to deal with, such as this little one...” With a bewildered expression, Akira turned her gaze toward the tiny figure that clung to her legs, the child she had found who had almost been a sacrifice to the dragon. “To be honest, I’m still not sure what to do about this.”

The child’s injuries had been grievous, yet now she was in perfect health and

in full possession of all her limbs. But, presumably due to the horrific experience, she refused to leave Akira's side—another reason Akira had decided to travel with her.

Akira was on no particular quest at the moment and was simply traveling the land as she pleased. She hadn't yet decided if she would find a spot on her travels where she could leave the child, so for now, she would take her with her.

The girl herself was happy with this decision. Though the village was her hometown, it was also the place where she had almost been sacrificed. Her parents were probably still alive, but it made sense that she wouldn't want to return. At any rate, since she was content with this decision, there was no reason for the others to interject.

Normally, traveling with a child in tow would be tantamount to suicide, but with Akira, there was no need to worry. For all she grumbled about losing her confidence, she was more than capable of handling herself. If anything, the awkward relationship between the two was likely to be the bigger problem, but that was nobody else's business either, and besides, they'd surely come to grips with it in due time.

The child embraced Akira's legs with both hands, as if imploring her not to go away.

"Damn it. It's not like I'm just gonna leave you, you know."

Beatrice giggled. "You're like a mother and daughter."

"Huh? Give me a break. I'm not cut out for motherhood. Besides, I'm not even old enough."

"It does suit you, though," said Allen. "Anyway, it's rough out there, so take care."

"Please tell the villagers that no harm will befall them," Riese added. "I daresay they'll be able to continue with their everyday lives undisturbed."

"I'll try," replied Akira, "but I dunno how they'll react. I guess if they get crazy, I'll just have to shut them up by force."

“Try to avoid violence,” said Beatrice. “They’ve been repressed by force for a while. Now that force has been dealt with, so they’re sure to run somewhat wild. If you must stay in the village, it may be worth considering it a temporary measure.”

“I know. I don’t feel much obligation toward those folks anyway.”

Despite her words, it seemed Akira was likely to stay in the village if necessary, even if only temporarily. The fact that she had decided to return to the village at all only increased that likelihood.

The others had thought it unnecessary to return. If they simply disappeared now, the villagers would assume they had failed. Though this might cause them some concern about how the dragon would act, they would have to assume that nothing had changed if there were no repercussions.

Returning to the village and informing the locals that they had defeated the dragon, however... As Akira said, it was impossible to know what the response would be. Fearing reprisal from the duchy, they might flee the village or even attack the party for their unwanted help. In fact, there was precious little benefit to stopping by the village at all, but Akira had stated her intention to go nonetheless. Although she had never technically accepted responsibility for defeating the dragon, she had stated her intention to slay it and therefore felt that she had a responsibility to report the outcome—and accept whatever the consequences might be.

The others had suggested that, if she insisted on going, they would accompany her, but Akira had declined, saying that she was the one who should take responsibility. The others understood; after all, she *was* the Champion.

“Okay, I’d better get going for real now. I dunno how long this is gonna take. See you again somewhere,” Akira said before turning and heading for the village. Judging by the shortness of her stride and her slow pace, she was still thinking about the people she was leaving behind.

“I really do think it suits her,” Allen remarked.

“Agreed,” said Riese. “Now, should we be on our way too?”

“I guess so. You’re sure about this?”

“Of course. It’s no different from you accompanying us up until now. We were able to bring this matter to a favorable conclusion thanks to you. We owe you both our gratitude and apologies.”

Allen was heading deeper into the Frontier, and Beatrice and Riese had decided to accompany him. The map of the area they possessed was sure to be a help to Allen, who had intended to navigate the region on intuition alone.

“We can’t exactly let you go wandering around unarmed, can we?” said Beatrice. “Neither Akira nor myself have any spare swords on hand.”

“I suppose that’s true...” he answered.

Beatrice was right—he was completely unarmed. While he *did* still have a sheathed sword at his side, it was nothing more than a decoration at this point. The blade had been broken when he had cut through the dragon’s breath. Or to be more precise, it was the slash severing the dragon’s head that had finally caused the sword to give up the ghost, but it had already been severely damaged even before that point.

Unleashing the Sword of Cataclysm had been all Allen’s weapon could take. At the user’s discretion, the skill could not only invoke the maximum power a sword could muster, but actually exceed its natural limits. For a sword with no special qualities like Allen’s, this would inevitably destroy the weapon in the process.

“Still, there are always ways of getting by,” he said.

“That doesn’t change the fact that it’s a problem, though, does it?” Riese replied. “Besides, we asked a lot of you and then ended up getting in your way. That’s why your sword is broken now. We have a duty to repay you. When I say we owe you our apologies, that’s part of it.”

“Hmm. The revelation has been fulfilled, though, right? I feel like you’re better off going home. Don’t you have to report back about the village?”

“Oh, that’s no problem. I brought a magical artifact that will allow me to communicate from here.”

“You sure are well-prepared. I guess it’s no surprise given your background, though.”

Magical artifacts were tools that worked through magic, but artifacts that allowed one to instantly communicate with a distant partner naturally went for a high price. It could take months—years, even—for an alchemist to create such an item, requiring a volume of coin that blew away even the cost of potions. Typically, it would be nearly inconceivable for such an item to be possessed by a single individual, but in the case of a princess, it was more inconceivable that she would travel without one.

Regardless, Allen—much to his chagrin—was forced to admit that with such an artifact in tow, the matter of reporting home was no problem. It wasn't that he disliked the idea of continuing to travel with Riese and Beatrice, but surely the firstborn princess of the kingdom must be busy. And she had been attacked. Returning to the safety of the capital seemed wiser than spending even longer in the harsh, desolate environment of the Frontier out of some sense of obligation or concern for him.

"Well..." Allen mused, "considering the earlier surprise attack, maybe it's safer for you to stay here. For a lot of reasons."

"Indeed," replied Riese. "Besides, I am not particularly busy. I don't foresee any problem with me spending a while longer here."

"Thinking about it," added Beatrice, "being around you is perhaps the safest place to be."

Allen was less sure of that. In some ways, he felt he was more dangerous to be around—after all, he was still a man. On that front, however, he kept his mouth shut, lest he create an awkward atmosphere for the rest of their journey. It seemed that the matter of traveling together had been settled, so there was no sense in talking about it further. For that reason, he refrained from asking for details about the Clay Wolf's attack. Beatrice and Riese clearly had a lot on their plate, and they would explain things to Allen when they deemed it necessary.

He sighed. "Okay, understood. It's true that you'll be helping me out by coming with me. I'm counting on you."

"I feel like we're more likely to end up depending on you," replied Riese.

"Nah, I'm the one who needs help. You two are the ones with the map, the

carriage...and what's inside it," he protested, glancing at the vehicle. It was impossible to see inside from where he stood, although it was fortunate too, since the sight of its contents would cause most people's legs to buckle in surprise, if not prompt them to pilfer all they could carry. Within, they had stored all the materials gathered from the dragon's corpse.

"Well, you could have carried that without us, couldn't you?" asked Beatrice.

"Some, but not that much," he answered.

They had taken all they could, descended the mountain, and loaded everything into the carriage. They still had to leave most of the materials back on the mountain, but they had brought the most valuable parts with them—enough to live in luxury for several lifetimes. Even a fraction of what they had left behind would fetch a pretty penny.

They had instructed Akira to communicate this to the villagers so that if the mood took them, they could gather it themselves. Akira had only taken a small amount with her, saying it would only slow her down. In fact, claiming that she hadn't been any help in the endeavor, she had tried to leave it all behind, but the others had insisted that she take at least a little with her. Though the quantity was small, she had taken particularly valuable parts—enough to sell for so much gold that she, too, could bask in luxury for the rest of her days. Knowing Akira, however, she would never do such a thing.

"Well, should we get moving?" Allen prompted his companions. They would have plenty of time to talk on the journey ahead. In fact, with the next populated region being ten days away, they were in real danger of running out of things to converse about. There was no reason to increase that possibility by standing around and making idle chatter.

The three were climbing into the carriage's driver's box when Riese called out, "A-Allen!"

Her voice sounded different than it had before. Turning around and tilting his head, Allen saw Riese wearing a brooding expression.

"Um...about...you know..."

He understood what she was trying to say without her having to put it into

words. He, too, had chosen not to speak of the matter while thinking it over. It was not just Allen—Akira had also chosen not to address it.

Why was Akira now in perfect health despite her serious wounds? Why was the child, having lost all of her limbs, now in perfect form? Akira and Allen both knew the answer; it was also the explanation for the earlier attack. As Riese's circumstances became clear, both had made the conscious decision to not inquire further. Thus Allen's response to Riese was obvious: he simply shrugged his shoulders. That was his only answer.

"Ah..." said Riese, appearing both relieved and guilty. Relieved because Allen hadn't pressed her to explain, guilty *because* that was a relief.

With a bemused smile at Riese's tendency to overthink things, Allen simply repeated his earlier statement. "Let's get moving."

"Yes, let's," Beatrice agreed. "There's no need to hurry, but we *do* need to start thinking about where we're going to sleep tonight. We don't have time for idle banter."

"Yes, you're right. Let's be on our way," Riese replied.

So the three took their seats, and the carriage slowly began to move.

Allen looked over his shoulder at the mountain as it faded into the distance. "*The saint...*" he thought to himself—words he had never spoken out loud.

He sighed as myriad emotions flitted through his mind.

Twisted Smiles

The moment he had finished reading its contents, Craig reflexively crumpled the parchment with his fist. His expression betrayed not a hint of regret as the sound reverberated throughout the hall. But, his face colored by vexation and hatred, he spoke in a voice that revealed those very emotions.

“That worthless puppet of the gods has gotten too full of herself.”

He did not speak loudly. As deathly quiet as the room was, there was no need to. The sharp-eared Brett looked up from the parchment he was absorbed in and at his father with eyes that in many ways resembled the older man’s.

“Is something wrong, father?” he asked, partly because of the older man’s words, but mostly because of the foul expression on his face. It was all the more concerning since recent events, particularly the banishment of that good-for-nothing, were supposed to mark the arrival of many happy days for them.

“Right, this does concern you, so allow me to share it with you. The dragon has been killed.”

“What? I must have misheard. You can’t be talking about *that* dragon, can you? The Crimson Dragonlord is said to be almost as powerful as a god?”

“Indeed I am.”

“What...”

So great was Brett’s shock that he could not even cry out in surprise. It had been three years since they had encountered the dragon known as the Crimson Dragonlord. The sight of the creature had made Brett keenly aware of how small he was. At the same time, he had been deeply moved by the realization that living beings could be so magnificent. Looking back on it now, he believed that experience had been the impetus for him to assent to his father’s plans. But now he had been told that this awe-inspiring creature, a dragon that even a god could fall to if not careful, had been killed. By who? And how?

“Father, who was it who slew the dragon?”

“That is not mentioned here, but as you know, the Crimson Dragonlord had just done battle with the Champion. It seems clear that she was somehow involved.”

“Huh... Of course! I’ll do anything to get my hands on her!” said Brett, his anger inflamed as he understood the meaning of his father’s words. Then he suddenly frowned. “But father, how could the Champion even slay the Crimson Dragonlord? After all...”

“Indeed. We had planned for them to do battle and allowed the sacrificial child to escape at the exact time the Champion was close by.”

“Yes. Using common knowledge that the Champion was traveling throughout the land, we were able to anticipate when she would be in the area. We were well aware that she would try to slay the dragon, which is why we made sure we were as prepared as possible.”

“So scrupulous were we that we even accounted for the Beastbane Azurebolt. Nothing should have gone wrong. This document holds the answers, however,” said Craig, brandishing the crumpled parchment.

Brett tilted his head in confusion. His father had just told him that the letter made no mention of who had slain the dragon.

“This letter came from the king. It states that the dragon was slain three days ago.”

“What?!”

This was inconceivable in many ways. First, it was absurd that even a duke would receive a communique directly from the king himself. And if he *did*, it was even more unlikely that the news could reach them in three days. No matter how much haste was made, delivering the letter in such a short time frame would be difficult. Brett had assumed the letter was merely a report from the village.

But at any rate, what did this letter from the king say? Recognizing his son’s puzzlement, Craig snorted, still wearing the same vexed expression.

“In addition to the slaying of the dragon, the letter also discusses the village located near the mountain where the dragon resided. We are instructed that,

while the death of the dragon is likely to cause disorder in the region, we are not to do anything to disrupt the lives of the villagers.”

“No... Surely they don’t mean...”

Brett’s suspicions were correct. The letter was effectively informing them that a blind eye would be turned to the purpose for which the village was created and how its inhabitants had been treated. In exchange, they were forbidden from interfering with its inhabitants any further, allowing the villagers to live in safety. It was a warning that the game was up and not to press their luck.

But this knowledge should never have been leaked. Upon observation, the village looked like any other desolate village. The dragon, too, had been instructed not to speak to anyone other than the Champion, who had no means of instant communication. There was only one option.

“Impossible...” said Brett. “The villagers leaked the information? They ought to have known better than anyone what would happen to them!”

“No, that cannot be the case,” said Craig. “Our rule has been absolute. They have not leaked anything, but someone must have deduced it from their words.”

“You mean...the Champion?”

“No. As I told you, after reading this letter, I understand how she was able to slay the dragon. She moves throughout the land as she wishes and for that reason does not enjoy a good relationship with the king. There is only one person I know of to whom the king would freely lend his ears.”

“Ah...the princess? The saint? But why... No, surely not?!”

“Indeed. We were wondering how she managed to escape. It seems she was assisted by the Champion. Considering the timing, it is likely that is when the Champion learned of the dragon.”

“So the saint heard the Champion’s tale and assisted her in slaying it... I see.”

It was a rational and perfectly plausible explanation. While the House of Westfeldt did not fully comprehend the saint’s power, she seemed to share something in common with the dragons.

“In that case,” Brett continued, “our failure to kill the saint now stings all the more. Should we not cease overthinking this and kill her as soon as the opportunity arises?”

“It is easy to think that way after the fact,” said Craig. “If she had not had the Champion’s help, we would have her head by now. Doing nothing would sting all the more, would it not?”

“That is...certainly true.” Brett nodded, his expression contorting in frustration at the same time as his father’s. “But even so, they truly are an aggravating lot.”

“On that we agree,” Craig replied. “But they will not enjoy such fortune much longer. Besides, from a different perspective, perhaps this outcome is not so bad after all.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I expect the Champion will take that child with her, which is a clear hindrance to her. She will not venture much farther into the Frontier.”

“I see. Indeed, she will soon come across *that* place.”

“Mm. We may not know how the saint will act, but so long as the Champion does not accompany her, we will find a way to deal with her. And then...checkmate.”

Craig’s words were not wrong. But the look on his face betrayed the true intentions behind them—or rather, the lack of intention beyond the deaths of both the Champion and the saint. There was no true benefit to either outcome, but this meant nothing to the duke. Consumed by anger and hatred, he would find a way to make such results beneficial.

Besides, if the next step went well, it was true that they would no longer have any issues. The General was already in their hands. If they captured one more piece, victory would be theirs, and not even the Champion’s involvement could see them defeated. The letter from the king had caused some consternation, but it didn’t seem they had caught on to what the father and son were truly trying to accomplish, or else they would have dispatched the First Knightly Order, if not all the knights at their disposal. They certainly wouldn’t have been

content to simply send a warning.

Nevertheless, Craig could not help but feel enraged when he considered that all of this was thanks to *them*... But ultimately, these were trivial details. If he could not endure such trifles, he would never be able to accomplish anything. Dealing with *them* and clearing up this humiliation would have to wait until later.

“I will leave it to you, my son. Ever since I realized that good-for-nothing could not be depended on, you have been the only one I can trust.”

“I will not disappoint you, father. I will accomplish my duties so perfectly that you will realize you erred in expecting anything of that good-for-nothing for a single second. I will avenge mother and show them that we are in the right.”

“Indeed. I look forward to it,” Craig replied as they exchanged looks with their dark eyes, their expressions contorting into twisted smiles when they envisioned what was to come.

The Former Hero Focuses on the Future

A light impact to his body caused Allen to awaken. Feeling no sense of danger, he did not immediately become alert, and upon seeing what had awoken him, he quickly realized there was no need to be on his guard. In his lap lay Riese's head.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”



Turning in the direction of the voice, Allen saw Beatrice holding the reins, wearing an apologetic expression. Smirking, Allen shrugged lightly so as not to awake the sleeping Riese.

“Nah, it was about time for me to be getting up anyway. What are you apologizing for?”

“I could see Riese was about to fall asleep. I was trying to bring her over this way, but I ran over a stone at a bad time...”

“And that made her fall this way, huh? So it wasn’t your fault after all. Just happenstance, right?”

It seemed unreasonable to Allen for Beatrice to feel responsible, but her expression betrayed that there was something she felt she couldn’t say.

“Hmm. Well, if you say so.”

“You’re being a little reserved. Is something wrong?”

“No, not particularly. It’s just that you’ve done so much to help us already. I wanted to at least help you get a proper rest, even if it is about time for you to be getting up.”

“I think you worry too much.”

Beatrice and Riese had helped Allen just as much as he had helped them. They had all just happened to be in the right place at the right time. It was natural to help each other accomplish their goals.

“Anyway,” Allen continued, “what you’re talking about mostly applies to nighttime, right? Riese and I sleeping together could cause various problems, so it makes sense for me to stay up then. After all, it’s not like I’m not getting any sleep. I can sleep while we’re on the move just like this.”

“But you won’t really get rest like that, will you?”

“Sure I will. We might be attacked by monsters from time to time, but I can borrow your sword, so there’s no problem there. Besides, I’m still young. I can handle ten days of this without getting worn out.”

“Hmph. I suppose you are much younger than me.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Allen had only meant in comparison to his previous life, where he had sometimes done similar things—but of course, that only made sense to him and not to Beatrice. Recognizing the misunderstanding, Beatrice’s slight pout shifted to a smirk.

“Besides, you and Riese can’t exactly say that you’re getting a good rest either, can you?” he continued. “Even if we take out the dragon parts and air the carriage out, the smell of blood won’t completely go away. That can’t make you want to be in there. And it might be fairly roomy, but it’s hardly big enough to sleep in.”

“I am used to it, although you are right that Lady Riese hardly seems well-rested either.”

“Better make up for it by letting her sleep like this, then.”

“Hmm. Regardless, that isn’t all I was talking about. Being able to bathe on our travels was also unthinkable until you came along, Master Allen.”

“Maybe so, but it’s not like I do anything special.”

Allen simply used his Parallel Wisdom to dig a hole in the ground, fortify the surrounding earth, and fill it with water to bathe in—a simple task that could easily be copied by anyone.

“Well, *I’ve* never heard of anyone doing that before,” Beatrice answered. “And that’s not all. I’ve never heard of anyone using their Gift to clean their clothes simply because being dirty was bothering them either. *And* while finding food is a fundamental skill, it usually means hunting for game, not entering the forest to pick wild vegetables.”

“I guess cleaning your clothes is just too mundane to be worth mentioning? And if you go picking the wrong vegetables, you could end up being poisoned. If you don’t know what you’re doing, it’s probably best not to bother.”

“You really do have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

Allen couldn’t help it; he was only saying what he believed. None of the things he was doing were all that impressive. If nobody else had done them, it must be

because they were too set in their ways. Those given a proper knightly education tended to be. Allen's background, on the other hand, was different—he was completely self-taught and had arrived at these ideas through the many hardships he had endured on his travels in his previous life.

“Well,” Beatrice continued, “I don't much care how you think about yourself, but you should at least be aware that you come off as more unconventional than you realize. Take it as advice from an old lady if you like, but pay heed nonetheless.”

“You're too young to be calling yourself an old lady,” Allen told her. “I appreciate the advice, though.” He didn't agree, but it would be impolite to say as much in response to well-intentioned guidance. “Hmm,” he continued, “does that mean I should stop doing things like this from now on?”

“No, that isn't what I meant. Lady Riese has gotten quite used to the current state of affairs, after all. So much so that she even let slip that she feels scared when you are not around. It may be rather late to say this, but you may as well continue these activities for as long as we're together.”

“Hmm. You say that, but I wonder how you really feel.”

“I've gotten quite used to the current state of affairs too. It would be inconvenient for you to stop now.”

“Thought so.” Allen smirked. Beatrice coolly looked straight ahead. Their exchange was half in jest, but the fact that they could joke with each other like this was a testament to how at ease Beatrice—not to mention the princess currently sleeping in his lap—had become around him.

True, the words they exchanged might soon be irrelevant. It seemed their journey had proceeded well and they could expect their destination to come into view at any moment; that was part of the joke.

With a groan, Riese began to stir, opening her eyes and meeting Allen's gaze.

“Oh, good morning, Riese. Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Hm? Allen? Good morning... What are you doing th—”

Riese froze as she understood the situation. She sat upright with a jolt, her

face beet red.

“U-Um, f-forgive me, Allen!”

“Hey, you aren’t that heavy. Don’t worry about it. Hell, if anything, it was my pleasure.”

“N-No, regardless of that... I must have woken you, didn’t I? You’ve been such a great help to me, Allen... I wanted you to get some rest.”

Allen burst into laughter at Riese practically repeating Beatrice’s earlier statement. On the other side of the puzzled princess, Beatrice smirked.

“U-Um...Allen?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking that it’s true what they say about a lord and retainer resembling each other.”

Still failing to understand, Riese tilted her head, but Allen was content to turn away without explaining further. *These ten days really have been fun*, he thought to himself. While he couldn’t exactly say the experience was a suitable repayment for having been banished, it had been a truly enjoyable and rewarding time. He still had no idea what he was going to do next, but, for no particular reason, he felt sure that things would work out.

Allen smiled and narrowed his gaze as signs of humanity finally came into view once again.

The Former Hero Arrives in Town

A look of surprise emerged on Allen's face as he saw where they were. He hadn't asked what kind of place they were going to—Beatrice and Riese had told him to wait and see for himself. From that, he had assumed it would be something surprising, but even so, he had never expected this.

"This isn't a village... It's a town," said Allen.

The Frontier was supposed to be made up entirely of small villages. It wasn't that Allen had a low estimation of the Frontier, but it was called a "frontier" for a reason—it was primarily an uninhabited land. Of course, some sought the region out for exactly that reason, and in some ways, Allen was one such person. Since nobody could survive alone, settlements naturally formed.

But most misfits would not venture to the Frontier. Living within the confines of society was still a better proposition for all but the most extreme social outcasts, and there were few of those. In terms of both numbers and disposition, forming a small village should have been the best the locals could muster. At least, that was what Allen had always heard. And yet the settlement before him was much larger than that. Compared to the village where they had been ten days ago, it was bustling with life.

"I suppose you're right," said Beatrice. "This place has an Adventurer's Guild, so you wouldn't be wrong in calling it a town."

"Huh? An Adventurer's Guild?" Allen replied. "It really is a town, then."

When it came down to it, adventurers were jacks-of-all-trades. Wherever there were people, they would find work. But earning a healthy living was another matter entirely. It was more a matter of supply and demand than skill. There was no point in adventurers gathering anywhere that didn't have a surplus of demand, and even then, location was key. A surplus of demand didn't necessarily mean that adventurers would show up to fulfill it. There were plenty of other places one could make a living without resorting to traveling to the Frontier.

An Adventurer's Guild in this place meant that someone had realized there was real money to be made here. The guilds were not charitable organizations. Someone had identified the presence of a demand for adventurers, the supply to meet that demand, and value in bringing them together.

"Hold on a sec," said Allen. "Why do I feel like I heard about this somewhere before?"

"Shall we do what we came here to do before getting lost in thought?" asked Riese.

"What we came here to do? Oh, right. Now that you mention it, yeah," Allen replied.

"Don't be forgetful now," added Beatrice. "This is important to you, after all."

"Yeah, I guess," said Allen.

The group hadn't ventured deeper into the Frontier without purpose. They had come to find a new sword for Allen. The fastest route would have been to head straight back to a town in the duchy, but Allen was reluctant to do so, having come so far into the Frontier already. So Beatrice and Riese had proposed an alternative, saying they knew a good place—and now there they were. The fun of the journey and the unexpected grandeur of the landscape had made Allen completely forget the reason for their visit.

"Hmm," he thought aloud, "I wasn't sure how I was going to get my hands on a sword, but looking at this place, I suppose I can expect something good."

"You certainly can," replied Riese. "I daresay it will meet your standards."

"Huh?"

She seemed to be hinting at something. Perhaps she knew someone in the area. But it was a little surprising that *Riese* was saying this. Beatrice would have made sense, but why would Riese have acquaintances here? Still, inquiring further could wait until he'd seen the place for himself.

"All right, I'm looking forward to it. Show me around, won't ya?"

"Leave it to me," Riese replied. With an unexplained spring in her step, she began to guide Allen and Beatrice around the town.

The group left their carriage—with all its dragon parts—at a carriage stable. They were not concerned about the parts being stolen, since they were altogether too valuable. Any thief attempting to sell them would immediately be caught, and there was no other place in the vicinity that had merchants with the money to buy them. Besides, materials of any kind required treatment before they could be used; as-is, they were simply useless treasures, and the most valuable materials were not only rare but difficult to handle. With dragon parts being the most valuable of all, it was unlikely there was anyone around who could process them into usable goods.

Allen's thoughts were occupied by how surprising all of this was. "Hmm...I'd never have believed this town was in the Frontier. I guess that's just my own prejudice talking, though. After all, I only saw that one little village before."

"Well, I'd say this place is rather special," Beatrice told him. "You're not wrong to feel that way—every other settlement *is* a desolate village. Although that said, I suppose I'm not too familiar with other places in the region either."

"Huh. I kind of figured my old family was up to something here, but it sounds like maybe the royal family is involved?"

"That's a secret," said Riese. "Well, to be accurate, they're less 'involved' and more providing tacit support."

Allen once again looked over his surroundings and understood. He'd thought the buildings here seemed sturdily built—too sturdy to have been constructed without outside help. If Riese meant that the royal capital was quietly sending manpower to the area, that would make sense.

At the same time, Allen remembered something that had been on his mind before. "Come to think of it, rumors of a profitable but dangerous place have been floating around adventurer's guilds. Something about a town where few people visit, where you'll do things you can't tell anyone about, I think?" Allen said. As strange as it sounded, that was one of the things that immediately came to mind.

The Frontier was essentially unexplored territory. While the nation and its lords were content to leave it alone, that didn't mean that they saw no value in the area. If someone else was willing to explore it, it made sense that others

would be happy to provide support. As for why it might be done in secret...there were various rules and obligations that could explain that.

“Hmm. Knowing the Guild, I suppose it’s possible that they deliberately leaked such information,” said Beatrice. “But my concern is why *you* would know of this, Master.”

“You can hardly control how a rumor changes once it’s out, right?” Allen answered. “Besides, I had a lot of time to kill. Gathering all sorts of information was one of the ways I spent it.”

“This *is* Allen we’re talking about,” Riese interjected. “I don’t think I’d be surprised by his possession of any secret knowledge.”

“Now you’re going too far,” said Allen.

As they talked, Allen took a look back at the building they had just passed, which they had been discussing.

“I see. So there really is an Adventurer’s Guild. Looks like there’s lots of unusual folks there too. I guess it’s not that surprising when you think about it.”

“Oh, you mean them?” asked Beatrice. “The same thought occurred to me, but at present, towns like this are the best place for them to carve out a living in this country.”

“True,” said Riese. “Some Elves and Dwarves do live in the royal capital, but many leave. Perhaps they find it difficult to live there.”

“Yeah, that’s tough,” said Allen.

Many races lived in this world—humans, forest-dwelling elves, mountain-dwelling dwarves, and demihuman beastfolk—but Adastera was a human country. Nonhumans made up less than a hundredth of the population, and of course none could be found among the royalty or nobility. Nevertheless, nonhumans were not explicitly discriminated against. Held in high regard for their proficiency in magic and their skill at smithing, respectively, many elves and dwarves were employed by the royal family and resided in the capital. Any discrimination that occurred was of a less conscious nature. Simply being different from one’s neighbors was enough to make many feel unwelcome. If the kingdom were to do something about this state of affairs, however, they

could be accused of giving nonhumans preferential treatment, which would become a problem in itself.

At the moment, there was little that could be done, so it was not surprising that such people came to more remote areas and took up occupations like adventuring.

“There are those among them that don’t become adventurers too,” said Riese.

“I guess that makes sense,” Allen replied. “They can take advantage of their skills to earn a living. Elves with their magic and dwarves with their smithing.”

The Frontier was no stranger to discrimination and prejudice either. In fact, such attitudes were in some ways encouraged here. Hard as it was to survive, anyone seeking to make a living through their special skills had to be extremely talented. Their presence in the Adventurer’s Guild was a testament to the fact that their own estimation of their ability was not mistaken.

Riese giggled.

“What is it?” Allen asked.

“Oh, nothing. I just know you’re going to be shocked.”

Allen had no idea what she meant, but he didn’t have time to ask—they had reached their destination.

“Here we are,” said Riese. “This is where we wanted to take you, Allen.”

As he beheld the building, Allen narrowed his gaze at the sight of a sword standing right before him. Perhaps due to his skills from his past life, he knew he had a great eye for blades. Although this sword had been casually placed in the entranceway, he could tell it was a fine weapon—at the very least, far superior to the one that had been destroyed.

There could only be two reasons for why such a sword would be left standing there: this was either a weapons shop or a blacksmith.

The answer was soon provided in the form of a repeated clanging.

“I see,” said Allen. “Looks like this will be worthy of my expectations.”

“Indeed. Expect away,” Riese replied. And with that, the three of them stepped into the building.

The Former Hero Meets the Blacksmith

Allen's eyes widened with astonishment. Standing before him were an assortment of swords of such great quantity as to make even a weapon-seller blush. What was more, each and every one of them was worthy of being a sword of great renown, and each had the same idiosyncrasies. Each of these hundred or so swords had clearly been forged by the hands of the same person.

Allen gulped as he wondered what kind of person could have produced such a magnificent array of weaponry. Just then, the clanging finally ceased.

"Ah, the noise stopped," said Riese. "I wasn't sure how to call for her attention, but it seems that will not be necessary. That said, was this just good timing or did she notice she has a customer? I'd like to believe that Noel has matured a little, but..."

"There's not much chance of that," said Beatrice. "Not to be mean, but I don't think she is capable of maturing in that regard."

"You may be right," Beatrice replied.

As Allen had suspected, it seemed the two of them were acquainted with the blacksmith here, and quite friendly with her to boot. Who could this person be?

"I can hear you talking about me, you know."

As the three looked farther inside the building, a figure appeared in the direction of the voice.

"Noel? You were quick," said Riese.

A young girl was standing there. While the strong-willed gaze of her golden eyes left an impression, the most interesting thing about her was her ears. Longer and more pointed than those of any human, they were the ears of an elf.

"My workshop is right there," the elf replied. "I could hear you quite clearly."

"Hm. So you're saying you stopped working when you realized we were

here?” asked Beatrice.

“As if. That was just a coincidence. I’d finished my work and was just taking a breather when I heard your voices.”

“Then we were not wrong in what we said,” Riese replied.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to speak badly of people, even if it’s true?” asked the elf.

“You really haven’t changed. It’s rather shocking, actually.”

“Right back at you. You look different, but you’re still the same on the inside. Anyway, aren’t you going to introduce me to this fella?”

“Hm? Oh, that’s right!”

Three pairs of eyes trained themselves on Allen, who had been watching the conversation between the three—and the elf girl in particular—with much interest. The elf peered at Allen as if inspecting him when Riese bowed her head.

“F-Forgive me, Allen! I didn’t even bother to introduce you...”

“It’s fine,” said Allen. “But...Riese, you made a friend, huh?”

“Why do I feel like you just said something quite insulting?” Riese asked as she peered at Allen with a resentful gaze, but Allen simply shrugged. Perhaps the way he’d said it wasn’t the best, but he had meant it sincerely.

“You always told me you couldn’t make friends,” he protested.

Riese was the first princess. As such, it was hard for her to make friends since she wasn’t permitted to do so. Allen, as her betrothed, had been the only one permitted to approach her during their engagement, which he believed explained why, even now, she was unusually at ease around him. But the dynamic between these two—or rather, these three, including Beatrice—was clearly friendly. They regarded each other as only friends would. Thus, while the reasons and circumstances remained unclear, it was obvious that Riese had made a friend.

“Well,” Allen continued, “it’s great that’s no longer the case.”

“Um...you really remember things from that long ago?” asked Riese.

“It left a real impression on me. That was when I decided that I alone would be your friend and supporter. Of course, that hasn’t changed even now, you know.”

“Um...thank you?”

Allen wondered why she was using a questioning tone, but he simply smirked and shrugged once again. He was just doing what he wanted to do—he didn’t expect any thanks.

“You alone?” Beatrice remarked. “Do you not consider me a friend of Lady Riese?”

“I didn’t really know what kind of person you were back then,” Allen replied. “It’s just a figure of speech.”

“Could you quit flirting in my house?” the elf interjected. “And did you come here for some reason or just to shoot the breeze? Because there’s the door.”

“I-I am not flirting!” Riese replied, her face bright red. “And I have a very good reason for being here!” Clearing her throat and composing herself, she continued with the introductions. “Um...Noel, this is Allen. Allen, the girl over there is Noel. As I’m sure you already realized, she is a blacksmith.”

“Kind of a clumsy introduction,” said Noel.

Allen had thought so too, but it did the job. Giving a more detailed introduction when the individuals involved were standing right there could be awkward in its own way.

“It’s okay. It’s not like we need to formally introduce ourselves. We can interrogate each other later if it proves necessary,” he said.

“I guess you’re right,” Noel agreed. “So what do you want?”

Riese responded, “I want you to make a sword for—”

“Absolutely not.”

“—Allen, and...wait, what? Um, Noel?”

“Your ears clogged or something? I said no,” Noel stated definitively. Not only

had she not hesitated, she had declined before Riese had even finished speaking. In a way, it was more of a rejection than a refusal.

Riese looked befuddled, as if she hadn't expected this outcome. "U-Um...could I ask why?"

"Hmm...you've always been fussy about whose business you would accept, but I've never known you to refuse a customer without good reason," said Beatrice. "True, this is a request from a friend, but we are quite serious about it. To refuse us so bluntly... Knowing that you were busy working a moment ago, I take it you're all booked up right now?"

"You're gonna throw me off with those coolheaded responses. You're much harder to deal with than Riese," said Noel.

"I'll take that as a compliment. It is a retainer's duty to provide what her liege lacks."

"Oh, spare me. Anyway, it's like you said. I barely have a free moment right now. I can't accept any other requests."

"Hmph. Then why didn't you say so from the start?" asked Riese.

"Ugh, you're so annoying. It doesn't make a difference, does it? Not like it changes anything."

"It *does* make a difference!"

With that, the pair once again forgot about Allen and began to argue. Allen watched with great interest. From this exchange, it was quite clear that the two were friends. Allen had begun to understand Noel's personality, and it seemed like she was friends with Riese precisely because they were so different. It was refreshing to see this new, different side of her, different from the way she treated him and Beatrice.

"Besides, what do you need me for?" asked Noel. "There are other blacksmiths here, and if you just want to buy a sword, there are places you can do that too. The guys who feel the need to come to a place like this—one's weirder than the next. It's way simpler to just pick something out at a weapons shop, you know."

“That’s quite the sales pitch,” said Allen.

“Oh, give it a rest. It’s called being self-aware. I strongly recommend you go elsewhere.”

“Hmph. That won’t do!” said Riese. “I want Allen to have the finest sword there is, and you’re the best blacksmith I know, Noel!”

“I’m not sure if you’re trying to praise me or show off loverboy here,” Noel replied.

“I’m being serious!”

“Well, so am I. Besides, doesn’t he have a sword already?” Noel looked toward the sheath that hung at his waist.

Allen realized that was probably another reason Noel didn’t feel particularly enthused about their request. She was right—he had kept his broken sword at his side, hoping it would discourage any unwanted attention. It seemed likely that some blacksmiths wouldn’t care for someone searching for a new sword while they still had a perfectly usable one in their possession.

“Oh, this one’s damaged,” Allen explained. “Actually, it’s broken in half.”

“In half?” said Noel. “All the more reason for me to refuse. I don’t know what you were doing with it, but anyone who’d break their sword in two—” Midway through her sentence, Noel stopped sharply, as if she had suddenly realized something shocking. Her wide-eyed gaze on the sword at Allen’s side intensified.

“Um...Allen, was it? Could I take a look at that broken sword?”

“Huh? Sure, I guess,” Allen replied, handing over the still-sheathed sword. He had no reason to refuse.

Noel took the sword with surprising care, reaching out with both hands to receive it, then held the sword by the handle and drew it from its sheath. The blade was cracked right through the center. There was no way that even the finest smith could repair it; it was useless now.

Staring at the sword for a moment, Noel closed her eyes as if uttering a silent prayer before returning it to its sheath. As she once again turned her attention

to Allen, he could sense determination and passion in her eyes.

“I’ve changed my mind. I’ll forge a sword for you.”

“Really?! You will?!” Riese cried.

“Yes. But I have a question for you first.”

“What is it?” said Allen.

“Are you interested in a weapon even stronger than Hauteclair?” she asked, staring straight into his eyes.

The Blacksmith's Thoughts

Noel carefully watched the young man as he looked around the room, inspecting the hundred or so swords she had forged over the past month. To be more precise, these were all failed attempts, good for nothing.

"Hmm. You really made all these in one month?" the young man said. "It doesn't seem like you cut any corners."

"Of course I didn't cut any corners," she replied. "And I'm not lying either. Did you forget which race I belong to?"

"Ah, I see. So you were aided by magic?"

"Noel is held in high regard not only for her skills, but for her incredible speed in fulfilling orders," said Riese.

"That's why I couldn't believe it when I heard she'd left the royal capital for the Frontier," Beatrice added. "I heard that incredible efforts were made to stop her wherever she went."

"Not to brag, but it really was incredible. They were practically blackmailing me," Noel replied.

"I think I remember hearing something to that effect," said Beatrice. "I believe the Knightly Order was even deployed. Oh well. You'll find fools wherever you go."

"So that's true even in the royal capital, huh?" asked the young man, still continuing to inspect and handle each sword even as he spoke. He was the picture of seriousness.

Noel gulped nervously.

"Anyway," he continued, "you *can* use magic, right?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Well, Riese and Beatrice introduced you as a smith, as if that wasn't clear from the moment I set foot in here. I didn't think you'd be an elf. Not to say

that dwarves have a monopoly on smithing, but their Gifts certainly give them an advantage, don't they? The same way elves' Gifts make them excel at magic."

He wasn't wrong. For whatever reason, or perhaps no reason at all, dwarves tended to receive smithing-related Gifts. Naturally, they were thus understood to be smithing specialists. Similarly, elves tended to receive magic-related Gifts.

"So the only reason an elf like me would become a blacksmith is because I can't use magic? Is that what you're asking?"

"Well, it would be a little odd to become a blacksmith for that reason alone, but I wondered if there was some explanation. At least, *I've* never heard of an elf blacksmith before."

"Well, other than thinking I can't use magic, you're pretty much on the mark. There is an explanation, but it's nothing that major. I'm a wanderer, and the person who took me under their wing happened to be a dwarf wanderer. She still had that dwarven affinity for smithing, though."

As a rule, elves resided in the Elven Forest, and dwarves in the Dwarven Mine, but this was not universally true. Some were separated from their native lands for various reasons, or else left due to a personal distaste for living there. Those who never returned were termed "wanderers."

The circumstances under which Noel had become a wanderer were rather unique. Even she didn't know what the reason was. Her first memory was of suddenly waking up inside an unfamiliar mountain. She didn't even know what her parents looked like. However, for Noel, this was no cause for concern, since a wanderer dwarf had taken responsibility for her upbringing. Why the dwarf had done this, whether for some specific reason or simply because it had tickled her fancy, Noel had no idea, and she had never exchanged so much as a word about it with her teacher. In fact, she could count the number of times they'd had a real conversation on the fingers of one hand. More than anything, she remembered the older woman silently smithing swords, day after day.

"Anyway, that's enough about me," said Noel. "What matters is what *you* think."

It was clear why Allen was inspecting her work—or rather, why she was

showing the swords to him. She was demonstrating her ability, and he was assessing it.

“You’re right. Well, you’re clearly quite skilled,” he replied. “*Incredibly* skilled, actually. All of these blades merit renown in their own right. Most swordsmen wouldn’t even be worthy of wielding them. I can see why someone might resort to blackmail to retain your services.”

“Is that right? Thanks.”

“But on the other hand, that’s as far as I can go. I can’t say any of these compare to Hauteclaire.”

It was an unreserved, unforgiving statement, but one that Noel had asked for and of which she was more aware than anyone. She could hardly remain unfazed upon hearing it put so bluntly, but she quelled the frustration welling up inside of her with a single sigh. Then she asked what she really wanted to know.

“Well, what do you think? Can I forge a blade even better than Hauteclaire?”

“I’ve gotta say, I don’t think so,” Allen admitted. “I mean, that’s what you’ve been trying to do, and this is the result, right? In which case, with your current approach, no matter how many times you try, you’re gonna end up with the same outcome.”

“I see,” she replied. She’d be lying if she said she didn’t feel discouraged. This was why she’d shown Allen the swords she had made. If she wasn’t strong enough to coolly accept the claim that it was impossible, it only showed how strong her desire to accomplish her goal was. Still, he wasn’t wrong, and she had no choice but to acknowledge it.

It wasn’t simply because he was Riese’s friend that Noel had such faith in Allen’s judgment. In fact, she had been extremely suspicious when he’d told her that he had broken his sword. Blades were not so easy to break. In fact, if used correctly—given proper care and wielded responsibly—it was almost impossible to break them. Almost every instance of a sword breaking was the result of some fault of its user. Either they wielded it carelessly, or tried to do things that were beyond their abilities, or simply lacked the necessary skill. Hence Noel had felt disinclined to even *give* Allen a sword, let alone *make* him one—but that

had all changed after she had examined the broken sword in question.

She had mainly been curious about how sloppily he had wielded it, but perhaps she also had some kind of hunch that all was not as it seemed. Regardless, she had carefully inspected the sword and learned the truth: it had been carefully maintained and lovingly used for the past ten years. At that moment, her suspicions had vanished, and her opinion had completely turned around once she'd seen the blade itself.

She was entranced by the way the sword had broken. It was completely dead, with no chance of repair by any blacksmith or any manner of Gift. The reason was that it had been completely used up. How that could be done, Noel couldn't say, but her examination made it clear that every last drop of power in the sword had been wrung out of it.

Noel would never have done business with Allen if he had only been capable of artlessly wielding a blade, swordsman or not—but after seeing that sight, she was the one making requests of him. Her dream was to craft a sword more powerful than Hauteclaire, and she had to do it as soon as possible. Though there were many things she lacked when it came to achieving this goal, chief among them was someone capable enough to wield the weapon. Even the finest blacksmith could not make a sword of superlative quality without knowing who was to use it. A suitable wielder was essential for the creation of even mass-produced blades, let alone truly great swords.

Until now, Noel had been unable to find someone qualified to fill such a role—not in the royal capital. And even after traveling to the Frontier in search of such a person, she had found nobody. She didn't have much time left. While she was happy to see Riese again after a long while, the encounter was also something of a nuisance; she didn't have the time or energy to spend on idle chitchat. But now realizing that they had brought along the very subject she was lacking, she was glad they had shown up.

Noel believed Allen's words, but that, of course, didn't mean she was simply going to give up. For one thing, all her swords had been made without considering the one who would wield them. Allen understood that too, which was why he had specified "with this approach." But now, unlike before, she had a bearer of the sword in mind. How close she could get to creating the specific

sword she envisioned would be a test of her skills as a blacksmith.

“Well then...I’d better get to work,” said Noel.

“Huh? Right now?” Allen asked.

“Weren’t you smithing until we showed up? Shouldn’t you take a break?” Riese added.

“I’m fine. This is how I usually do things.”

“Like I said, you really haven’t changed a bit,” said Beatrice.

“It pains me to hear you compare me to my old self. After all, now I’ve got someone to prove myself superior to.” She looked in Allen’s direction.

Allen simply smirked and shrugged—but then immediately narrowed his gaze as if to say “bring it on,” responding to her gentle taunt in kind. *Gladly*, she thought to herself as she smiled and turned toward her workshop. And in that moment, the image of the dwarf doggedly, ceaselessly forging ran through her mind. Her face contorted with frustration, yet also reflected a kind of happiness.

The Champion and the holy sword...

“Has it really been three years?” she muttered to herself. It felt like so long ago, and yet the time had passed so quickly. Nevertheless, her duty had not changed. She would make a weapon that surpassed even the holy sword.

With newfound resolve, Noel set to work.

The Former Hero Learns What's Happening

Needless to say, forging a sword took time. Various procedures were involved, each of which required skill and concentration—all the more so now that Noel was to undertake her task with a newfound resolve. Ten days was the amount of time Noel gave, not to finish the sword but to come and see how things were going. Even mass-produced and decorative swords required some degree of fine-tuning, and that was especially true for a special sword designed for a particular person. The basic sword should have been ready after ten days.

This was considerably slower than Noel's supposedly usual pace, which Allen presumed showed how seriously she was taking this endeavor. There was no great rush, so he was happy to let her work until she was satisfied. He was not particularly fussy about his swords, but if Noel was prepared to make a fine blade for him, then so much the better.

At any rate, since the weapon would not be ready immediately, there was no sense in him hanging around waiting. Instead, the three wandered through town.

"What should we do now?" asked Allen.

"Ten days... I've never seen Noel so determined before," said Riese. "I daresay if we visit her before then, we won't even get a response."

"There's no harm in taking it easy, then, is there?" said Beatrice. "Isn't that what you wanted to begin with, Master?"

"You're right about that," Allen replied. While he'd imagined spending his days in a quieter place, he didn't dislike bustling towns...although, more people meant a higher chance of trouble, especially since there was an adventurer's guild.

Adventurers tended to be rabble-rousers and the source of much trouble. At the same time, their presence meant they were available to deal with any trouble that occurred. It was unlikely that any trouble adventurers weren't

equipped to deal with would surface, and, at least at a glance, the townspeople seemed tolerant of strangers. Now that they were here, taking a chance to relax while appraising the atmosphere and lifestyle of the town was not the worst idea.

“Come to think of it, what are you two gonna do?” asked Allen.

“Good question,” Riese answered. “It would be irresponsible of us to say our job is done now that we’ve introduced you to Noel. I intended to remain here at least until your sword is finished—”

“Oh, that’s not what I meant. I mean, you two have some business here, right?”

Allen’s assured tone momentarily left Riese at a loss for words. Beatrice stiffened up. Allen shrugged, smirking at how easy they were to read.

“I know you’re both kind and loyal, but I knew you wouldn’t come here out of kindness and loyalty to me alone,” said Allen.

No matter how much free time she had, the first princess of the kingdom was still a princess. The king was not such a soft touch as to let her do as she pleased. What was more, Allen was officially considered “a person of unclear origin” by the country. He would typically not be permitted to accompany the princess, but according to Riese, her report on the events of the past few days had resulted in his existence being recognized. In short, the women clearly had some business in this town, and it was significant enough to warrant turning a blind eye to such an indiscretion.

“I see,” said Beatrice. “I didn’t think we could deceive you forever, but I suppose you had our number all along.”

“Hmph. How mean,” said Riese, puffing her cheeks. “Keeping quiet when you knew the whole time.”

“Mean? Oh, please.” His smirk widened. He supposed it was a little mean to pretend to be deceived while knowing all along exactly what they were up to, but he wouldn’t have phrased it like that. “Anyway, the only reason I guessed is because I knew you were traveling on some kind of business. I’m not even asking you to tell me what you’re up to. I’m just saying you can go ahead and

get it done without worrying about me.”

“Right. Well, since you know, I might as well explain,” said Beatrice. “We did indeed come here with a purpose in mind. The truth is, some three months ago, the General was struck down.”

“Wait,” said Allen. “I just said I’m not asking you to— Wait, what? You’re kidding, right?”

The General—the person bearing the Gift of the same name—was said to be as capable as the Champion, if not more so in certain situations. Their Gift increased the capabilities of everyone under their command. The General had once been able to lead a group of regular infantry from the royal capital to a time-limit draw in a wargame against the Duchy of Westfeldt’s finest soldiers, and many said that if the battle had continued, the General’s side would likely have been victorious.

But this increase in the power of the General’s soldiers came at a cost: they would become so exhausted that they fell fast asleep for a whole day to recover. The General’s Gift was not one to be used lightly, but he was considered one of the most powerful people in the kingdom. While the General’s own strength in battle was only equivalent to that of any seasoned soldier, when placed in charge of an army, he displayed military might capable of instantly reversing even the most hopeless of situations—a nightmare for their enemies.

While Adastera enjoyed positive relations with most of its neighboring countries, it was understood that this was thanks to the General’s presence. Before the General had come to prominence, half of the countries in question had been enemies. The loss of this figure would be a massive hit to the kingdom’s military might, which could easily result in a worsening of relations between the nations once again. The kingdom boasted many fertile lands and mines flush with valuable minerals. To count on the continued amity of their neighbors would be a mistake—if they seemed vulnerable enough, their neighbors would have no reason not to target them.

The kingdom would surely be unable to withstand such aggression, since its ability to intercept an invasion was much weaker than before the General had

emerged. One reason for this was that the House of Westfeldt could not move their forces from the south of the kingdom—at least, not for the period of time required to stave off an invasion.

The south of Adastera bordered the only nation currently antagonistic to the kingdom: the Demon Kingdom, a warlike nation with a powerful population. Only the Duchy of Westfeldt was capable of dealing with them. In fact, they had already toppled several lords and swallowed their territories before Westfeldt managed to stave them off.

The Demon Kingdom had not originally bordered the duchy, but while Adastera had built amicable relationships with the other surrounding countries, it had steadily conquered nations, and was now uncomfortably close. Before, Westfeldt could have committed its forces to stave off an invasion, but now it had to keep a constant watch over its neighbor to the south, lest the south of Adastera became part of the Demon Kingdom.

The death of the General left the kingdom with a dilemma—surrender to either the Demon Kingdom or the neighboring nations.

“I guess you’re not kidding,” Allen muttered bitterly. That was clear from the expressions on the women’s faces.

“Beatrice,” said Riese with a reproachful look.

“I know what you’re trying to say, and I would usually agree. But this matter is too much for just the two of us. Surely you must understand that, Lady Riese.”

“Well...” Riese replied, at a loss for words. She glanced at Allen with a look that both asked him for help and pleaded with him to refuse. Clearly, they had been ordered to keep silent about this matter, as the royals did not want this information falling into the hands of the nobility. It was knowledge that Allen was not meant to be privy to, and if the conversation continued, there would be no turning back.

Ironically, now was the last chance to back out. Riese could still get away with claiming they had been joking, and Beatrice would not force the matter. That would avoid involving Allen in this difficult affair and forcing him off his path to the peaceful life he sought. Both Riese and Beatrice would be happy to avoid the guilt that would accompany getting him wrapped up in their affairs.

Allen shrugged. *Here goes nothing*, he thought, then said, “Hmm. So when you say he was struck down, I take it you don’t mean with a cold.”

The statement was sufficient to demonstrate his intentions. Beatrice nodded. Riese looked at him with an expression of combined guilt, thankfulness, and happiness.

Allen simply shrugged once again. He hadn’t inquired about their business despite knowing they were up to something, because he hadn’t been able to tell if they would permit him to get involved. While he did seek a quiet life, he wasn’t prepared to sacrifice friendship to achieve it.

“Yes, you are correct,” Riese answered. “Although, those who need to deal with him have been told that he has contracted a communicable disease and cannot see others.” As she spoke, she hung her head for a moment, but quickly raised it with a determined look in her eyes.

Allen nodded. So, this was highly confidential information after all. That Riese had chosen to share it showed her trust in him, but perhaps even more, it showed that she didn’t know where to turn.

“But it’s been three months,” said Allen.

“We left the royal capital a month ago, so we only have a vague idea of the current state of affairs,” Beatrice explained. “But yes, I imagine many people suspect that something is amiss.”

“No kidding. I get the impression he’s not just sick either, right?”

“One morning three months ago, the General’s wife, thinking it odd that he hadn’t awoken early as usual, went to check on him. She found him missing his head.”

“Whoa.”

Allen had heard that the General was in his fifties, so his wife must have been around the same age. Nevertheless, such an experience had to be traumatic.

So...the General had been killed.

“Then what are you doing here?” he asked.

“The culprit and their goals remain unknown,” said Beatrice. “While the most

likely possibility is that a nearby country sent an assassin to kill him, we have no idea how they did it. We're at a standstill."

"You don't know how they killed him?"

That seemed strange. Overcoming the security that was doubtless afforded to a man of the General's station would require the help of a Gift. Such power would be impossible to defend against—but a great use of force would inevitably leave evidence behind. In fact, the kingdom employed those who possessed Gifts that specialized in the collection of such evidence, so it was hard to comprehend what Beatrice was telling him.

"You mean you only found traces of Gifts that wouldn't be used for assassinations?"

"Not quite," said Riese. "We found no traces of any Gifts other than those used by the security team. Not at the scene itself nor within a hundred-meter radius."

"I see..."

It was not inconceivable that this was the work of some formidable assassin who did not use a Gift, but if such a person existed, there would have at least been rumors about them. Taking all that into account, there was one thought that sprang to mind.

"Sounds like it's probably the work of a demon," Allen remarked.

While "demons" were so named for the sake of convenience, their true nature was not well understood. They were varyingly said to resemble beasts or horned humanoids, or to look no different from other people. Of the few facts that were actually known about them, one was that they possessed powers that resembled (but were not) Gifts. No matter how much power they wielded, they never left any traces of it, so it was easy to believe that the General's murder had been carried out by a demon.

"I've never heard of a demon performing an assassination, though," said Beatrice. "They openly and brazenly trample their victims."

Demons fought so directly and fiercely that they were said to harbor a hatred for all beings. They would indiscriminately kill humans, elves, and beastfolk

alike. One reason that the true nature of demons was mostly unknown was that so few people had ever survived a battle with them.

People were not outstripped by demons in all aspects of warfare, but that was only because demons were somehow able to use monsters to wage their battles for them. Thus, doing battle with demons largely meant doing battle with monsters—often ones that had never been seen before, making it impossible to tell which were truly demons. Word had it that even if an attempt was made to capture what seemed to be a demon, they would self-destruct, leaving no trace.

“There are those who say it is only because they have never had a need to use assassination techniques before,” said Riese.

“If they were capable of that, they would’ve already used it against the people in charge of keeping them at bay,” Allen replied. The House of Westfeldt had been responsible for dealing with demons since before he was born. While it was possible that the enemy had only recently devised an assassination approach, there was a more realistic possibility. “Any inkling of who might have joined forces with them?”

“If anyone is a suspect, then everybody is,” Beatrice noted. While it was important to be able to trust others, trusting everybody and trusting nobody were equally unhealthy. Unfortunately, Adastera’s friendly relationships with other countries were founded on mutual benefit. If one of their allies found that greater benefit was to be had elsewhere, they would readily betray the kingdom.

“I guess the biggest suspects are the border countries, then,” said Allen. “But surely you’re already monitoring them.”

“True amity between nations is impossible,” said Riese. “Our border guard is accordingly strong.”

“And that’s why you’re here...”

Indeed, this place offered a great opportunity. That there were such conflicting reports regarding the actual form of demons meant that they surely hid their true selves. If they were able to take multiple forms, a demon taking a shape similar to that of a person could scarcely hope to find a better place to

infiltrate: this abandoned location was close to where they dwelled and was populated by many races. Better still, although officially unrecognized, the town had connections to the royal capital.

While the capabilities of the demons were unknown, there was no doubt that they could easily infiltrate the capital should they choose to do so. That this place was not better guarded was a testament to the fact that nobody had ever considered demons might use such methods. Nobody could be blamed for that.

“You know, I can think of a suspect. My old family,” said Allen.

“You say the most uncomfortable things with such ease, Master,” said Beatrice. “Of course, we had our suspicions and already investigated them.”

“We did?” asked Riese.

“Yes, although only the duke himself, and in secret. We investigated whether he was planning any manner of insurrection or treason, and of course used our men’s Gifts to ensure that he was not telling any lies. We found him innocent.”

“I see. He’s such an obvious suspect, it makes sense that you’ve already looked into it. So, I suppose since it’s hard enough to directly investigate suspects in this country, let alone those from other nations, you decided to search for traces of demons here?”

“Demon involvement is still only conjecture,” said Beatrice. “If we can confirm their involvement, it will make our next moves much easier. There was no reason not to come.”

What Beatrice said made sense, but Allen still had one question. “Why are you the one doing the searching, Riese?”

“A fair question,” she answered. “I suppose it was convenient in a number of ways. I did receive a revelation, so you might say my coming here was already decided for me.”

“Ah, so you received the revelation before the General was killed?”

“Immediately after, to be precise. For that reason, I thought the revelation must have something to do with the General’s death. That is another reason I came here.”

“Hmm. And how do you feel about all this? I *did* think you seemed a little off.”

“Um...do you mind if I answer that later?”

“Uh... Ah, I get it. You don’t want to talk about it here, right?”

“So you *do* understand.” Beatrice smirked.

“I guess.”

He shrugged. Having been ordered to keep quiet about the matter, it made sense not to conduct a conversation about it while surrounded by people. While it was unlikely that anyone would be able to discern what they were discussing in the midst of the town’s hustle and bustle, there was always a chance.

On the other hand, even if the news reached every citizen in town, this was still the Frontier. Any news would be unlikely to spread to other regions, and even if it did, it would be far too late for the capital to contain the secret. Thus there was no real problem, except...

“You want to use it as bait, right?”

“Well, we have almost nothing in the way of leads,” Beatrice admitted. “Of course, it all depends on whether those involved are still here.”

It was possible that the perpetrators had remained in town to plan their next move, or that their collaborators were here, at least. Confirming this one way or another was better than not doing so, especially given the lack of leads.

“All of this depends on us having your help, though, Master,” Beatrice continued. “My apologies for getting you involved. And thank you.”

“Yes,” Riese agreed. “I am truly in your debt, Allen. Please forgive me.”

“There’s no need to apologize or thank me. I haven’t even done anything yet. Hell, we don’t even know if I *can* do anything to help.”

It had been Allen’s decision to get involved in the first place—another reason he didn’t need their apologies or thanks. He wouldn’t need those until something actually happened that he could help with.

Allen shrugged as he communicated this to the others. “Anyway, this should make for a perfect way to kill time,” he muttered.

The Former Hero Heads for the Adventurer's Guild

Their plan was set, but the group could not simply leap into action. Allen wouldn't have minded either way, but they had to remain in town for at least ten days. It made sense to establish a base of operations—that is to say, figure out where they would be staying.

This, however, caused another problem: Allen had no money.

"I suppose I should have known," said Beatrice.

"I never thought I'd need money here," he admitted.

The Frontier was where lawless people gathered. Allen had assumed this meant there was no currency; but of course, in a town of this size, that would be impossible. Or perhaps the need for currency was due to the presence of the Adventurer's Guild. Adventurers would likely not accept payment in goods, and payment in currency would be useless if there was nowhere to spend it. Adventurers tended to be profligate spenders and a great source of income for tradesmen. Moreover, any place that had the support of royalty, however discreet that support and however remote the location, was sure to have a means of exchanging money for goods.

"What were you planning on doing, exactly?" asked Riese.

"I guess I thought I could barter. I figured as long as I could hunt animals and monsters for their meat, I could get by," Allen replied.

At worst, he could at least eat the meat, and his Boundless Knowledge could find wild vegetables, so he would never want for food. Boundless Knowledge could be used to ascertain which flora and fauna were edible, although using it in that way might displease its original owner.

Similarly, Parallel Wisdom could bring forth unlimited water, so starvation and dehydration would never be a concern. There was even a forest not far from town, where—since it was not currently the cold season—he could sleep without risk of freezing. Even without money, he could always eke out a

reasonable life for himself.

On the other hand, now that they were in a real town, Allen didn't feel any particular inclination toward a survivalist lifestyle.

"Since you're helping us, we'd be happy to pay you," Riese offered.

"That's right. You deserve a sizable payment for all the help you've lent us already," Beatrice agreed.

"Nah, I can't take advantage of you like that." Allen might have wanted a peaceful life, but that didn't mean he didn't want to work. And he definitely didn't want to be dependent on Beatrice and Riese. Besides, he might not have had money, but that didn't mean he had nothing in mind.

Taking care not to let anyone else see, Allen produced a hidden object. The women's initial looks of surprise quickly turned to smiles.

"Ah...*that*," said Riese.

"I see. You've got this all figured out, eh?" Beatrice commented.

Allen shrugged. This should help him make some money.

"Hmm. This place looks like more of a professional operation than I expected. I thought there'd be a much rougher vibe here," Allen mused.

"To be honest, I did too," said Riese. "I expected a much scarier place."

Scanning the room as they talked, the group saw several wooden tables and chairs, a corkboard on the wall with a number of parchment notices attached, and a reception counter. There were few people around, and the unoccupied woman behind the counter observed them with great interest.

This was the Adventurer's Guild.

"Mm. I suppose this is the first time for both of you. Nobles wouldn't normally visit a place like this," Beatrice observed.

"But you have?" asked Allen.

"All the time back in my Academy days. Most knights-in-training did—it's good experience and a way to earn money. Even after I became a knight, I

sometimes needed to hire adventurers for jobs. And now that I serve Lady Riese, I'll occasionally come on my off days."

"You get time off?"

"What do you mean by that, Allen?" Riese interjected. "Do you think I'd never give Beatrice a day off?"

"Not at all, but I guess I *did* assume the royal guard were always on the clock. Especially for your personal escort."

"I might be Lady Riese's only escort, but my Lady is not always out on business. When she is residing in the castle, I am free to leave her in the care of the royal guard. On those occasions, I have time off," Beatrice explained.

Going to the Adventurer's Guild doesn't seem like much of a vacation to me, thought Allen, *but I guess everyone unwinds in different ways. Exercising is kind of like a hobby, after all.*

"Is the guild in the capital like this one?" he asked.

"No, the guild there is rougher. There are always rabble-rousing adventurers causing a ruckus," Beatrice answered.

"I suppose this place is much calmer, then," said Riese.

"Or those sorts of adventurers simply aren't here at the moment."

The first order of business was to earn some money. Scanning the room again, Allen saw only the one counter. It seemed like all business was conducted there.

Adventurer's guilds were essential to any adventurer, performing a wide range of roles: introducing adventurers to clients, brokering the delivery of items from adventurer to client and payment from client to adventurer, and paying for materials stripped from dead monsters. However, any services that did not involve clients were also open to nonadventurers.

Allen had never visited an adventurer's guild before, but having heard a lot about them, he had assumed they would have specialized sections for each of their roles. On the other hand, perhaps this particular guild was unique.

There was only one way to find out. He headed for the counter.

“Welcome to the Libera branch of the Adventurer’s Guild. What can I do for you today?” the young woman behind the counter asked. The dog ears on the top of her head piqued Alan’s interest. They were no decoration—she was beastfolk. That in itself was of no great interest, but beastfolk being able to work a normal job here was an interesting symbol of the town’s uniqueness.

Setting that aside, Allen looked at the woman’s face and found a kindly smile that seemed almost excessive. She had probably been trained to put customers at ease with a polite greeting and manner. Nobody would be upset about being dealt with courteously. It was undoubtedly an approach informed by the sorts of ruffians that tended to frequent this place.

“Um...we’d like to exchange materials for money,” said Riese. “Is this the right place?”

“Oh, yes, that will be fine. Although...since you had to inquire, I take it you are not adventurers?” the receptionist asked.

Exchanging goods for money at the guild incurred a large fee for nonmembers. The guild was, after all, for its members. While outsiders could use some of its facilities, there were, of course, benefits to joining.

But Allen had no intention of becoming a proper adventurer just to trade goods. That sounded about as far as possible from the peaceful life he sought. Besides, considering what he had to trade, even a large fee was no big deal.

Just as Allen was about to confirm her suspicions, however, someone lightly placed their hand on the counter. Beneath the hand was a silver plate. Realizing what was happening, Allen tilted his head toward the person standing beside him.

“Are you sure about this, Beatrice?”

“Why not?” she replied. “It’ll lower your fees, and half of the fees I pay go toward my guild dues anyway.”

Beatrice had produced a card that designated her as a member of the guild. Allen would be allowed to conduct his business through her and would thus be afforded the same benefits as any other adventurer. Neither Beatrice nor the woman behind the counter seemed to have any problem with this, so he

supposed it wasn't an issue. If all it meant was a reduction in the fees he'd be charged, there was no reason to object.

Allen gratefully accepted and produced a palm-sized red scale from his breast pocket, placing it next to the silver plate. It looked fairly large sitting there, but it was, in fact, the smallest of the items they had collected.

"All right. I'd like to trade this for cash," he announced.

The receptionist looked at the two items on the counter and smiled. "Understood, sir. Thank you very much. I shall appraise this now. Just a moment, please."

Interesting. So, she can appraise things too, Allen thought. He had assumed she would take the items to someone in the back instead.

Appraisal involved the use of a Gift to assess the value of an item. While the level of detail available depended on the power of the Gift, he assumed the receptionist should at least be able to tell where the scale came from. Then again, upon further consideration, he realized that it was hardly impossible that she might not possess a Gift capable of truly understanding the worth of the item he had presented.

"Let's see... So, this is... Oh?"

Any such concern was quickly abated. It seemed the receptionist understood exactly what the item was. She stood there, eyes wide and mouth agape, her voice reverberating throughout the guild hall.

"This is a dragon scale?! And not only that, but it belongs to the Silver Valkyrie?!"



The Former Hero Meets a Suspicious Person

I guess this was bound to happen, Allen thought, as if it was somebody else's problem. Upon hearing the unfamiliar appellation, he tilted his head.

"I suppose this was bound to happen, wasn't it?" said Riese out loud.

"Indeed," Beatrice answered. "Allen's gone and shocked her with the dragon scale. But when you pull out something like that, it's to be expected."

"Do you have to go blaming me?" he asked. "Besides, there was someone else that shocked her, and I'd like to know more about it."

Beatrice averted her eyes as he peered at her.

"To tell you the truth, I am curious about 'Silver Valkyrie' too," said Riese. "You don't even wear silver."

It was clear that the nickname wasn't one Beatrice particularly cared for, but she could not defy her liege. Although she hesitated for a moment, in the end, she couldn't resist the two inquisitive gazes that bore down on her. With a sigh, she began to explain.

"I daresay it refers to the armor and sword I use when acting as an adventurer."

"Armor and sword?" Riese echoed.

"Even during my time off, I am still a knight in your service. I decided to wear silver armor and carry a silver sword to remind myself of that fact...but it seems that in the eyes of some, I have become associated with silver itself. I suppose it's because I am always clad in armor head-to-toe, even covering my face with a helmet."

"I see," said Allen.

Of course, appearance was generally how people recognized others, and colors were particularly easy associations. It would be no surprise if Beatrice, wearing such a distinctive outfit, had acquired a handful of nicknames.

“Trust a royal’s personal guard to always remind themselves of their liege, even on their time off. Or maybe I should say, trust *you*, Beatrice.”

“Oh, I can’t take credit for that,” Beatrice admitted. “It wasn’t my idea.”

“Oh? Is it a doctrine of the Knightly Order? Or of personal guards in general?” asked Riese.

“Neither. I was taught this by Lord Alfred...” Beatrice hesitated before continuing. “By a friend of mine.”

“Ah. I see.”

Allen noticed the look that Beatrice shot Riese during her moment of hesitation, but he chose not to inquire further. He could guess what it meant. “Alfred” was Riese’s uncle and the former vice captain of the First Knightly Order. Although Allen had never met him, he remembered being told long ago that the man had been a good uncle to Riese.

From how Riese had reacted at the time, Allen had the impression that she loved her uncle like a second father. However, that was all in the past, as he had died five years ago. He wondered if Beatrice had avoided mentioning his name because Riese was still pained by his death or simply out of an abundance of caution. Either way, there was no need to mention him directly.

Pretending not to notice, Allen continued the conversation. “Well, if that’s the extent of it, you should just seem like a conspicuous person, shouldn’t you? Not someone who’d be deserving of such a fancy nickname or who would shock the receptionist so much,” he observed.

Looking back at Riese to see if she had recovered from her shock, he found her acting slightly strangely, glancing from the scale to the plate to Allen to Beatrice as if unsure what to prioritize.

“Not to brag, but despite how things may seem, I *am* aware that I’m fairly good at what I do,” said Beatrice. “There are few adventurers who are my superiors when it comes to attacks, let alone defense. And the adventurers in the royal capital aren’t of particularly high quality.”

“Huh? Why’s that? Talented people in all lines of work gather in the capital,” said Allen, pausing for a moment before continuing. “Oh, I know. It’s because of

the Knightly Order, right?”

“That makes sense,” said Riese. “It’s true, if somebody is in trouble in the capital, the Knightly Order will usually solve the problem.”

“Exactly,” Beatrice replied. “The adventurers spread out across the land, leaving a dearth of high-ranked ones in the capital itself. Whenever I go there, I find a bunch of unfulfilled requests waiting for me.”

“So you earned your reputation while fulfilling those?” Allen asked.

“I think the guild intentionally spread word of me. As I said, the capital is short on adventurers. Even the Knightly Order has its limits.”

“Come to think of it, didn’t you mention you’ve asked adventurers for help before?”

“There are things that only knights can do, and things that knights can’t do. Having more capable adventurers around would be helpful to us. That’s part of why I’ve left the guild to their own devices on this matter.”

Still, Beatrice’s acceptance of her reputation seemed no less reluctant. Of course, it was only reasonable to be uncomfortable with being used as propaganda.

As the group talked, the receptionist finally regained her composure. “Uh?! P-Please forgive me! I’m afraid I am not equipped to appraise this item. I will have to discuss it with my superiors!” she cried, her earlier manner of speaking slightly disrupted by the confusion that she evidently had not totally overcome.

Handling the plate and scale so carefully, as if afraid they might fall to pieces at her touch, the woman awkwardly carried them farther inside, where her superior presumably waited. Finding himself with nothing to do, Allen surveyed his surroundings.

“It’s a good thing we came when it’s quiet,” Beatrice remarked. “If there were more people around, we could have gotten into all sorts of trouble.”

“Get mixed up with some bad guys, you mean?” said Allen.

“Or just being gawked at from all sides.”

Allen shrugged in response to what sounded like payback for his earlier

prying. She was right; he could easily envision that happening. He suddenly regretted being so indiscreet with his inquiries about Beatrice's circumstances.

As the receptionist had observed, the scale belonged to the dragon. Allen had brought a single one with him when they had left the carriage, assuming they would need money while in town. One-third of the spoils belonged to him, so he had the right to take it. Still, he knew that if he sought a quiet life, he'd do well to avoid getting entangled in potentially troublesome matters like this in future.

As he ruminated, Allen's train of thought was interrupted by a voice.

"Could I have a moment, please?"

Allen knew he was bound to regret it, but of course, he couldn't simply ignore the speaker. Wondering who was talking to him and for what reason, he turned around. The person he found before him looked unlike anything he had imagined.

There stood a man wearing a silk hat and tails, with a long mustache and carrying a cane in his right hand. A gentleman. Certainly not the kind of person who belonged in a place like this. Allen couldn't have avoided noticing him if he'd tried. Nor could he avoid the quizzical manner with which he now beheld the man. The gentlemanly figure, whose entire appearance encouraged an air of suspicion, offered a friendly smile, as if wondering how to interpret Allen's gaze or perhaps understanding and choosing to ignore it.

"Oh, please forgive my impropriety. It's just...I couldn't help but overhear your earlier conversation—or rather, that lady's exclamation. I can't help but feel curious...and my friend here seems curious too."

The receptionist could hardly be blamed for having cried out in surprise. Still, Allen wondered if he should complain when she came back as he watched the man turn and call to his friend.

Beatrice gasped when she saw the woman. "Is that an Amazon?"

"How unusual. I've never actually seen one before," said Riese.

"Me neither," said Beatrice. "Have you come from the south?"

The woman's skin was a brown tone rarely seen around these parts—a tone possessed only by the race known as Amazons. Unlike elves and dwarves, Amazons didn't reside in a particular place, but they tended to live toward the south of the continent and were thus rarely seen in Adastera. Allen noticed Beatrice's and Riese's demeanors soften, presumably because they were well aware of the nature of Amazons.

Members of this race were always women. Whether for that reason or otherwise, they were a highly cautious and warlike group. However, they were equally astute judges of character and would only associate with those they determined to be sincere and trustworthy. Beatrice and Riese therefore let their guard down, realizing that the strange man must be someone this woman trusted.

Allen, for his part, was not so optimistic, but it seemed perfect to him. Between his suspicion and his companions' trust, they could strike a perfect balance.

"Yes. Well, something like that," the man replied. "Despite how I may seem, I am quite fond of the stories of adventurers. She is too, actually. But how should I put this? Such tales are hard to come by in the southern lands."

"Oh, really?" said Beatrice. "I thought the Amazons were famed for their strength."

"Oh, that is certainly true. In fact, one might say they are entirely *too* strong. To be blunt, they have a habit of rushing headlong into things, which doesn't leave much time to regale others with tales of their exploits. Hence I set out on my travels, seeking such stories."

"And that's why you've come all the way to such a distant kingdom?" asked Riese.

"As shameful as it is to admit..." the man answered.

"Oh, I don't find it shameful at all," Riese told him. "Although, I admit to being a little surprised."

"Me too," said Beatrice. "I thought Amazons were more interested in doing things for themselves than hearing the tales of others."

“Again, you are not wrong, as a rule. But my friend is a rather hopeless case.”

“So she seeks from others that which she hasn’t done herself?” asked Beatrice.

Allen saw the man nod out of the corner of his eye, but his gaze was focused on the woman. The man’s words seemed without fault. The woman’s strength and similar stats were all quite low. On the other hand, her dexterity and speed were unusually high. It was easy to imagine how she might find it difficult to live among other Amazons, if what he’d heard about them was true.

“So the dragon’s scale has piqued your interest, although it’s not the scale itself you’re fascinated by,” Beatrice continued.

“Well put,” said the man. “Indeed, a dragon’s scale is not something easily acquired. I suspect there must be quite a tale to go along with it.”

“And you’d like to hear that tale?” asked Riese.

“Of course, I am not demanding you tell me all the details. In fact, I only have two questions. What say you?”

“Well...” said Riese, looking at Allen with a look that conveyed her desire to tell the man what they could.

Allen smirked and shrugged.

“That depends on the questions,” she continued.

“Of course. Well, my first question is this: did you acquire that scale from someone else, or did you retrieve it with your own hands? My next question depends on your response, but assuming it is the latter...were you able to accomplish this by yourselves?”

Allen thought, then shrugged again. There didn’t seem to be any harm in answering. They were going to use the dragon materials in this town anyway, so it wouldn’t be long before the story of them slaying the beast began to spread. Considering the volume of materials they had taken, there was no other outcome. It made little difference if they told the man what had happened.

Beatrice nodded as Allen communicated this to her, then began to speak. “Hmm. I’m happy to answer your questions, but could I ask you something

about the second one? I understand what you're asking, but it almost seems as though you're confident we must have had help from someone else."

"Indeed. You are not mistaken. While I have heard of the Silver Valkyrie before, I must admit..."

"You don't think I could take on a dragon by myself, right?"

The man neither confirmed nor denied this statement, which was a clearer response than anything he could have said. Recognizing but unbothered by this, Beatrice simply smirked.

"I see. Well, your analysis is on the mark. I could never have defeated the dragon on my own."

"Ah...so you people *did* slay the creature, then? I would love to hear that story, but...no, I do not mean to be pushy. By the way, before I hear your answer to my second question, I have a theory. Is it possible that you were assisted by the Champion?"

"Wow...good intuition. I guess hearing all those war stories gave you a good sense for this stuff, huh?" said Allen.

"I take it that means I am correct. Well, it is a shame not to be able to inquire further, but...this alone is ample fodder for the imagination. That is enough for me, and I imagine my friend will be most satisfied too."

"If that alone was enough to please you, then I guess it was worth our while to tell you."

"Yes, thank you very much. I don't intend to waste any more of your time, so I will take my leave now. Until we meet again."

With a somehow suspicious smile, the man walked away. Tracking him with his gaze, Allen saw him return to the woman and mutter something to her. She stood up and bowed in their direction.

Riese and Beatrice hurriedly bowed in response, as if they, too, had been observing the man. Finally, the man himself bowed, then lifted his head and left the guild with his companion.

Allen peered at him as he left the room. Sensing eyes on him, he saw Riese

looking in his direction with a dubious expression.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just wondering why you phrased it like that,” she replied.

It was true that Allen had implied it was Akira who had defeated the dragon. But that didn’t bother him—it was important for him to remain cautious of the stranger. Rather than explain this to Riese, however, he simply shrugged.

The man continued to smile as he left the Adventurer’s Guild and walked down the street. Even in this place, his appearance was conspicuous—all the more so given the Amazon he had in tow. Strangely, he did not attract the attention of those around him. In fact, none even afforded him a passing glance.

Continuing at a leisurely pace and seemingly unseen by those around him, he began to speak. “Hmm...to be honest, they weren’t quite what I expected. When I consider the kind of ability it would take to upset our plans... Am I to believe the dragon was defeated by the likes of them? I find it hard to believe.”

He talked rather too loudly to be speaking to himself, and yet nobody even looked at him. He continued his soliloquy as if completely cut off from the throng of people that surrounded him.

“Perhaps the Champion is simply that strong? Or perhaps we placed entirely too much faith in the dragon? I suppose we should have gone to see it in person at least once. Oh well, it is too late for regrets now.”

The Amazon did not utter a single word in response. She was conscious of the man’s presence—that much was clear from how she followed directly behind him. Yet both continued on as if utterly unconcerned with the other. These were merely the man’s private mutterings.

“I daresay there’s no harm in leaving them be, anyway. True, they numbered one more than we had heard, but... Well, he is only Level 1. Hardly any threat to us,” the man continued.

For the first time, he turned around. As he beheld the woman behind him, his

smile deepened.

“Besides, your talents have proved more useful than I ever imagined. Indeed, a marvelous find you have turned out to be. I believe we will be able to carry out our plans much more quickly as a result.”

Still the woman offered no word of a response, continuing to trail behind the man, staring downward.

“I suppose this calls for a reward, doesn’t it? However it may seem, I do believe in repaying those in my service, although I suppose we will be quite busy for the next ten days. But after that, I would be happy to provide some manner of recompense, depending on what it is you desire.”

Again, the woman offered no response. As if nevertheless satisfied by this, the man’s smile widened further. The strange pair continued to make their way somewhere, never once attracting the attention of the town’s inhabitants.

A Gray Future

“Damn him! How dare he?!” came the cry, accompanied by a dull thud as the chair hit the wall and shattered into pieces. Craig let out a small sigh at the sight of the wooden fragments scattered about the floor. Brett had often been in a foul mood as of late, but there was a reason behind his present fury: a certain servant had resigned.

The servant was by no means one of Brett’s favorites. In fact, as far as Brett was concerned, he was nobody; he did not even remember the man’s name. However...

“That insignificant *servant!* I *warned* him that there would be trouble if people continued to resign, and what did he say? ‘Go ahead and try!’ How dare he make a fool of me!”

Brett trampled the wooden shards beneath his feet. When that failed to relieve his frustrations, he kicked the splintered remnants into the wall. Craig sighed at the sight of the increasing mess. If Brett simply wanted to spew bile, he ought to have done it in his own room. That he was doing it here was, Craig supposed, a testament to how much he had spoiled his son. While Craig couldn’t say if Brett was aware of this himself, his son’s outbursts were an attempt to extract his father’s sympathy for his own frustrations. He sought his father’s affirmation that he was right to feel the way he did.

Understanding this, Craig chose another approach. “That’s enough, Brett.”

“But Father!”

“I am not telling you not to be angry, but at least refrain from throwing things. Who do you expect will clean that up?”

“Well, obviously it will— Oh, I see. Forgive me, father,” Brett said, dampening his rage in an instant as he remembered the current state of affairs. Usually, such a mess would naturally be handled by the servants, but at present, this was not the case. The estate simply didn’t have the manpower to waste on such

trifling matters. While the servant who had resigned was only one man, others had been continually resigning in recent days, which was one reason Brett had been so enraged by the latest loss.

Craig had to admit that he could understand how his son felt. However, unbeknownst to Brett, he himself had influenced the spate of resignations. It was only necessary to retain enough staff to maintain the estate—any more was simply a surplus, and it was common sense to rid oneself of them.

Thus, Craig expressed his sympathy for his son not because of the servants, but because their well-laid plans had not proceeded as expected. They had believed that once they got rid of the good-for-nothing, the sky would be the limit—and yet they had come up against one setback after another. It was almost as if that good-for-nothing had placed a curse on them, a fact which only served to further anger Craig, especially seeing what it had done to his son.

“Damn them! To think those fools preferred that good-for-nothing to me! Those dullards know nothing!” Brett raged. Though he had gotten himself under control, he was no less angry.

Craig snorted as he coldly watched his son continue to mutter furiously. He was well aware that such talk was shared among the servants. He, too, thought them fools, but he had not expressed as much to Brett.

It was clear that Brett felt a sense of inferiority to that good-for-nothing. Why, Craig could not say, but he assumed it must be some trivial reason. It was nothing worth worrying about. Nevertheless, Brett was his beloved son, his most beloved of all beloved things. The son whose failure to fulfill his role would cause great difficulty for Craig. He could not afford to simply leave him to his own devices.

Besides, it would be simple enough to distract him. He held in his hands a way to do just that—but for precisely that reason, while he could understand his son’s feelings, Craig could not act while the boy was still enraged.

“I know you are frustrated, but you should calm down. I have received word from afar that our time has finally come,” he announced.

Brett’s anger immediately vanished from his countenance, replaced by a beaming smile. “Oh! You mean... Finally?” he asked.

Craig responded only with a smile of his own—, not with any intention, but because he felt the same relief as his son. Yes, finally. Yes, this time... This time, they would not fail. And what was more...

“I have received one other piece of news. It seems another puppet of the gods has appeared in that region,” Craig told him.

“Huh...you mean the saint? Well, that certainly is good news, but...” Brett trailed off. It seemed their prior failures prevented him from feeling too happy about this development. This time, however, his worries were unwarranted.

“I understand your concerns, but there is no need for them.”

“Why is the saint in that region, though?” Brett paused. “I suppose we did already know she is friendly with that elf. Do you think perhaps—”

“Come, now. They are hardly sharp enough to have fathomed so much. She is likely only there to investigate the matter of the General.”

“I see. Yes, considering the situation, that makes a good deal of sense. I had wondered why she would leave the royal capital, but...that I can comprehend,” Brett nodded with a look of approval.

The thought had not occurred to Craig just now. He had already assumed it to be the case but had not voiced it earlier because it did not seem necessary. The business of a foe he intended to put to death was none of his concern.

“It may also have something to do with the girl’s uncle. The reason really does not matter, though.”

“Quite right you are, father. Anyway, we now have both of them in our clutches, don’t we? And this time the Champion won’t get in the way?”

“Worry not. The Champion has been sighted in a different location some distance away. Even if she begins making her way there, our work will be done by the time she arrives.”

According to reports, the Champion was on her way to the royal capital. This time, she would not interfere with their plans, which finally seemed to put Brett at ease, and he began to smile.

“I see. So that means the saint is now alone... No, she still has her guard with

her, doesn't she?"

"According to reports, there are two others accompanying her. They do not seem worthy of our concern. I imagine it is the one remaining member of her guard and some other nameless comrade of hers."

"Right. To be honest, my concern was in the other direction."

"The other direction... You mean that we might go too far?"

"Yes," Brett said, a different kind of concern now playing across his face. "Since our goal was to kill the Champion, we did not fret too much about the details. But judging by the approach you intend to employ this time..."

Craig snorted at his continued, unwarranted worries. "What? That is no problem at all. Despite its large frame, our 'friend' is said to be capable of rather precise movements. I am sure it can bite off only the lower half of her body."

"That is good news, if true. We are very fortunate that the saint has traveled where we want her. Even in the unlikely event that we fail on some level, it is impossible that we will fail to capture *both* of them."

"Certainly."

Craig did not care for Brett's insistence on second-guessing after he had reassured his son that there was no need for concern. Nevertheless, he could not help but laugh at himself. Brett had always been a small-minded thinker, and Craig had never paid that aspect of his personality any mind. That it bothered him now was only because he had been forced into a situation where there was no room for error—but that, too, was a state of affairs he would not have to endure for much longer. Soon enough, the puppets would be his, and then everything would really begin. When he was done, he would have no need for this second son of his either.

"Yes...I eagerly await that moment," Craig said with a twisted smile as he saw the future he envisioned drawing ever closer.

The Adventurer's Guild Receptionist

Nadia Vendichs reflexively looked in the direction of the light noise she heard. A new customer had just entered the Adventurer's Guild—but that was not why she now stood so eagerly in wait. It was because she knew exactly *who* had come through the door.

Despite her youthful appearance, Nadia had been visiting the Adventurer's Guild for a long time. Though she had only begun to work as a receptionist about a year ago, she had moved from guild to guild across the land for the past ten years. She was well-versed in guilds and their adventurers, and proud of it. Most of this knowledge came from experience—that was how she had realized how much could be learned simply from the sound of a door opening.

Adventurers who boisterously swung the door open tended to be of wild dispositions, while those who slowly and carefully opened it tended to be timid. Of course, this was by no means unconditionally true, and exceptions did exist. Nevertheless, the sound of an opening door was a valuable piece of information in assessing someone. It contained so much information that she could sometimes identify an individual from the sound alone. The fact that she was beastfolk, with dog ears, likely had more than a little to do with this capability.

What came through the door—it opened in the most natural, quiet manner she had ever heard—was a young man. His appearance was such that it was hard to say whether he had come of age or not, but this fact did not mark him as unusual in the Adventurer's Guild. Many had been active since immediately after or even before coming of age, including Nadia herself. So at a glance, he blended perfectly into his surroundings. But Nadia knew that he was no ordinary young man.

"Still, I suppose it *did* take me a while to realize that," she said to herself. So unassuming had the young man seemed, it had taken her three days since he first showed up to notice that there was something strange about him.

He approached her without hesitation, and Nadia greeted him with a smile.

“Welcome, Master Allen! I’ve prepared all the documents you need to become an adventurer. All you need to do is sign here!”

“What are you talking about? Why don’t you start by doing your job properly?” he asked.

“Hm? What are you talking about? Have I done something wrong?”

“Don’t look so confused. I’m sure anyone who overheard this conversation would agree that I’m in the right.”

“I see. You came for a different purpose today. Is that correct? In that case, excuse me. Would you like to see the manager? I believe he is free right now. Please go right ahead!”

“I don’t need to see the manager. I didn’t come here for anything like that.”

The pair smiled at each other as they exchanged jabs, but Allen’s expression soon changed, leaving only a smirk.

“Besides, he doesn’t have a chance.”

“Well, the manager told me directly not to let you get away.”

It had been ten days ago, when the young man in front of her had first shown up at the guild, that Nadia’s manager had given her an instruction. The commotion that day had been so great that she remembered it clearly. It was the day the young man had walked in with a dragon’s scale.

Dragon parts almost never appeared on the market, and ninety-nine percent of those that did were fakes. Considering even many royals had never laid eyes on the genuine article, it was reasonable to assume that any such item presented as a “lucky find” or a “special offer just for you” was a counterfeit. And nobody would ever sell such a find to someone they didn’t even know.

Dragon fangs and claws could make the finest weapons, and scales and bones the finest armor. Their blood and flesh were used as ingredients in the finest alchemical elixirs. At times, a mere trace or fragment of any of these materials could not be had for all the money in the world. And if someone *were* to sell such a find, they could make a vast fortune by selling it to someone who deeply desired it—otherwise, it would be vastly more beneficial to simply use the item

for themselves.

It was thus unimaginable that someone would simply bring such treasures to the guild to trade for cash. Yet, as suspicious as she had been, Nadia had already confirmed that the scale was the real thing. Her Rank 4 appraisal Gift could not be fooled, and besides, the Silver Valkyrie had been right there with him. She would never try to perpetrate such a fraud.

In fact, the Silver Valkyrie's presence had only worsened the commotion. There was nobody who had served as an adventurer in the royal capital who did not know who the Silver Valkyrie was, and all admired her. Her accomplishments made her a shining light of inspiration to all of the royal capital's adventurers.

Furthermore, all the workers at this guild had once been adventurers in the royal capital. Adventurer's guilds had long been staffed by current and retired adventurers. The dangerous nature of this particular region meant that only the most enthusiastic applicants had been deployed there. As a result, the name of the Silver Valkyrie had quite the impact on the guild's staff, and they quickly established that she was the genuine article as well.

Then, the problems surfaced. The Silver Valkyrie's combat prowess was already well understood, and the town was currently in the midst of a difficult matter. The idea of requesting her assistance was thus raised, and all were in firm agreement. For many, however, this was less a matter of their confidence in the knight's abilities than it was of their simple desire to fight alongside someone they so admired.

As one such person, Nadia quickly drew the impromptu conference to a close and marched triumphantly to report its decision to the Silver Valkyrie's party—at which point she was rebuffed, not only firmly, but angrily. Who had she been telling about the items they had provided? Who had she been telling about who they *were*? Nadia had no response; she knew they were in the right.

Adventurers tended to be wild individuals and never knew what might lead to trouble. For that reason, some chose to hide not only the spoils of their exploits, but their very identities. The Silver Valkyrie had always covered her face with a helmet for precisely this reason. The guild should never have let

anyone know who she was, let alone that she had gotten her hands on a dragon's scale.

While Nadia had hurriedly apologized and was forgiven, she was not so daring as to attempt to ask again simply because she had been let off the hook. Though it was a shame, it had been her own fault. She had quietly resolved to accept the rebukes of her fellow guild workers and seen off the Valkyrie's party as they quietly left. And that was when she had realized something.

"Isn't Beatrice the one you're 'not supposed to let get away,' though?" asked Allen. "I've got nothing to do with any of this. I'm just here to trade items for cash."

"Understood, Master Allen," said Nadia. "But since you are not an adventurer, the handling fee will be doubled. It would be simple for you to register now."

Allen placed the item on top of the counter, silently demonstrating that he had no intention of repeating himself. Nadia sighed. While she had already known she had no chance of success, that didn't stop her from feeling disappointed. Besides, Allen was right. The manager had only been referring to the Silver Valkyrie, not him. Nadia was acting of her own volition, motivated by what she had suddenly noticed before—that it seemed as though Allen was the center of his party.

From the standpoint of combat proficiency, the Silver Valkyrie should have been the leader. Again, Nadia was an adventurer too. At Rank 6, she was among the top ranks of mid-level adventurers. Based on what she could see, Allen couldn't have been higher than Level 1, but there was no level requirement for the ability to bring people together. While there was a tacit understanding among adventurers that the highest-level adventurer among them would govern the group, it was not a universal rule. It was clear that the other two depended on Allen, which cast doubt on the idea of him truly being weaker than the Silver Valkyrie. Nadia had already confirmed with Allen himself that he was Level 1, and yet...

"Hmm...so this is what you've brought us?" she asked. "This is classified as Rank 8. We concluded that none of the adventurers here would be capable of defeating such a monster..."

“Then your conclusion must have been off, huh?” said Allen. “The thing attacked me and I turned the tables on it. It wasn’t that tough.”

“That cannot be true. Your standards are clearly simply very strange, Master Allen.”

The reality didn’t square with Nadia’s intuition based on her experience. However, faced with the reality, she had long since thrown in the towel. It had happened when, the day after her realization, Allen had showed up with a Rank 6 monster in tow, saying he had slain it after being attacked while exploring the area.

Monster ranks were equivalent to adventurer ranks, and an adventurer’s rank was roughly the same as their level. They could not be said to be exactly equal, since a monster’s rank meant that it could be slain by multiple adventurers of the same rank, and an adventurer’s rank also accounted for knowledge and Gifts. An adventurer who lacked knowledge could not achieve a high rank, and a powerful Gift could allow an adventurer to wield power beyond their level, all of which the ranking system took into account.

The highest-ranked adventurer in town was Rank 8: the Silver Valkyrie herself. Aside from her, there were no adventurers above Rank 6, and thus the monster Allen had slain was considered undefeatable. Yet somehow the young man had done it. Since he had made no mention of a Gift, Nadia’s fellow workers assumed that he must have had the assistance of the Silver Valkyrie, but Nadia was not so sure. It was true that even the most powerful Gift could not account for a deficit of more than two levels, and word had it that even the Champion was only able to wring such power from her Gift precisely because of how high her level was. Her coworkers’ appraisals would be on the mark the vast majority of the time, but Nadia still disagreed.

She had no reason to believe this, but something instinctive inside her whispered that Allen was not like her and her friends—different from the Silver Valkyrie. Based on the reality before her eyes, it was impossible for her to deny this feeling. In fact, she had tried saying all sorts of things to draw the truth out of Allen, but these attempts had all met with failure.

At that moment, the town was overflowing with discomfiting matters. In a

way, the corpse of the monster that Allen had dragged in counted among them. The appearance of monsters like this could not be tolerated; it would mean the end of the town itself. However, perhaps there was something they could say to Allen to secure his cooperation.

Thinking about it, although he had declined Nadia's offer to become an adventurer, Allen had been slaying monsters on a daily basis that, left unchecked, would have posed a great danger to the town. While he claimed that he just happened to run into these monsters, if Nadia wished that he would just come out and speak the truth.

But whether the appearance of these monsters really was a coincidence or there was some deeper reason behind it, she couldn't say. For now, she would just have to be satisfied with the status quo, she thought as she dragged the lifeless creature Allen had brought along with him into the back room for assessment.

The Former Hero Discusses the Situation

Leaving the guild behind, Allen walked the streets, now familiar after ten days in the town, a little faster than usual. He was running a little late, not due to the exchange at the guild—that was a daily occurrence—but because he had strayed farther than usual on his stroll. Being attacked by that monster as well had only made things worse.

“Guess I’d better get back before they get worried,” he said, “although I get the feeling they wouldn’t worry anyway.”

While that thought had occasionally occurred to him before, lately he was convinced that his friends believed that he would be fine no matter what happened to him. He didn’t want to worry them, but he did feel somewhat disappointed by their lack of concern.

Smirking at his self-indulgent thoughts, he further quickened his pace. The inn was just ahead.

At a glance, this town seemed like any other, but a longer look revealed that it was different in a variety of ways. One such way was the location of the Adventurer’s Guild—adventurers generally had a poor reputation, and it was only thanks to the efforts of a handful of high-ranking members that their reputation was not even worse. Ruffians and rabble-rousers often became adventurers, so that image often accompanied them. It was even worse among those who had no direct experience with being helped by an adventurer.

Allen had heard at the guild that adventurers in the royal capital thus tended to feel rather abashed by their occupation—hence why Beatrice was so respected. Regardless, the fact was that adventurer’s guilds were rarely found on main streets. In this town, however, people seemed to appreciate their value. The Adventurer’s Guild was located in the center of town and appeared to be accepted by the residents.

The standing of the nearby inn was correspondingly different too. Inns close to adventurer’s guilds tended to be unwelcome and would find few lodgers. In

fact, anticipating this, few were even opened to begin with. The public's perception of adventurers, of course, also played a role. After all, who would want to stay in a place where all manner of scoundrels frequented?

In this town, though, not only was there an inn close to the Adventurer's Guild, but it had a lavish exterior and interior that one would expect of a lodging on the main street, with prices to match. That Allen's party had rented not one but two rooms there was a testament to their group having more money than they knew what to do with. This wasn't a snide observation; it was simply true. While they had expected the dragon's scale to fetch a high price, they had not been prepared for exactly how much it was worth.

Although materials could be sold at the guild, they sold for relatively lower prices than could be found elsewhere. The guild was not in the habit of lowballing adventurers, but it did take a suitable fee for its services as a middleman. Considering the variety of duties required of the guild, from ascertaining the quality of the goods to verifying that they were genuine, a lower sale price was inevitable.

Understanding how difficult it would be to find a buyer outside the guild, Allen had chosen to sell the dragon's scale there regardless. Or rather, while using the guild might involve him in trouble, attempting to sell to somebody else was *sure* to. Besides, he had no need for that much money to begin with. As long as he could manage for now, he could always get by with hunting monsters in the area later. Thus, Allen had chosen to sell the scale at the guild, where he knew he could unload it right away.

The price had been one hundred gold coins. One gold coin was enough to support a family of four for three months, with money left over, so even a single coin would have been more than they needed, and now they had a hundred. They intended to sell the other dragon parts as well before long. They did not necessarily intend to sell everything to the guild, but they would surely use it for some items, and the item Allen believed to be the least valuable had already fetched a very high price. When he thought about what they had stowed inside the carriage, it seemed perfectly reasonable to splurge on their lodgings.

Moreover, Riese's station did not allow her to sleep outdoors or at a cheap inn. This demanded even finer lodgings—thus the decision to stay at the visibly

high-class inn that now stood before him.

Allen navigated the familiar halls of the place that had become their home base, heading for the inn's finest room, which made extravagant use of the entire top floor. That was where Beatrice and Riese were situated, while Allen stayed in a room on the floor below, a step down from Beatrice and Riese's accommodations, but still luxurious.

Renting both rooms cost them a total of three gold coins per night. Allen had initially wondered if the inn even had customers who could afford such prices, but apparently the rooms were regularly occupied, although not every night. Even in a place like this, there were folks with money hanging around—not that Allen's party had any room to talk, having made a ten-day booking.

"Hey, I'm back. Sorry I'm late," he said. Predictably, the others were already waiting for him, not irritated, but merely bemused by his predictability.

"Oh, don't worry. We haven't been waiting that long," Beatrice answered.

"That's right," said Riese. "I imagine you have a good reason for being late, anyway, do you not?"

As expected, neither showed the slightest sign of worry. As he wondered whether to be pleased by their trust in him or lament their lack of concern, Allen searched for a place to sit. As soon as he had selected one of the excessive number of chairs found in the absurdly large room—the chamber seemed to be geared toward holding important discussions—Beatrice began to speak.

"I'm interested in what you have to say, Master Allen, but allow us to finish first." She turned back to address Riese. "So, in summary, you found no clues and have nothing unusual to report."

"Correct," said Riese. "I am sorry."

"As I've told you, there's no need to apologize. It would be one thing if you weren't trying, but it is a fact that our searches will not always succeed."

Allen smirked and shrugged. They didn't even know what they were looking for. It was hardly surprising that they hadn't found anything of note.

"I take it you've been busy, Allen?" Riese asked.

“My role always keeps me busy,” he replied. “But all I really ended up doing was fighting monsters.”

“Hmph...” She puffed her cheeks with dissatisfaction.

Allen smirked again, knowing that she couldn’t say anything more since she had fared no better. She still had an odd habit of blaming herself for the strangest things.

Their current meeting was something like a debriefing session, a chance for the group to discuss what they had learned that day and what progress they had made. Ten days ago, upon establishing their base at the inn, the group had discussed their future plans. Assuming there must be some clue in the vicinity regarding the assassination of the General, they had begun their investigation.

Unfortunately, they might as well have been searching for a needle in a haystack without being sure it was even there. It was less a question of persistence than whether there was anything to discover in the first place. Nevertheless, for the past few days, they had done nothing but inquire if people had seen anything unusual or suspicious.

They couldn’t be sure that any clues lay within the town itself; there was a good chance that evidence might be found in their surrounding environs instead. Thus, the party had divided into two groups: Riese and Beatrice chosen to handle the town, while Allen investigated the outskirts. He had also decided to look into the Adventurer’s Guild, since nobody would be more familiar with the town outskirts than adventurers, and the guild was where they congregated. It was a necessary destination if he wanted to gather information.

Besides, Beatrice’s presence would have more of an impact on the guild than was desired. The group hadn’t forgotten the commotion of that first day. Although Beatrice could likely encourage people there to talk, there was a much higher risk of her getting involved in matters she would rather avoid. That was another good reason to leave the guild to Allen.

As a result, Allen himself had begun to attract some curiosity at the guild, but that was inevitable to some extent. Besides, he felt that he was getting more than enough in return. Under the guise of making small talk, he would occasionally turn the conversation toward matters that seemed like potential

sources of clues and had been privy to some surprisingly useful information.

“I guess it’s my turn now. Well, as expected, there’s definitely something in that forest.”

There was a forest located some ten kilometers south of town, which was suspiciously convenient. Unexplored as it was, its full scale was unknown, but it was large enough that it almost seemed to go on forever. That might have changed with some exploration, but the town had no intention of doing so at present—they simply did not have the manpower, and the forest was extremely dangerous. It had apparently always been host to powerful monsters but also held corresponding rewards, both in the bodies of those monsters and in the plants that grew along the forest paths.

These plants had first appeared to be run-of-the-mill weeds but were actually new species of flowers. Adventurers had happily headed there, and the forest likely inspired the very construction of the town, as well as the secret support it received from the royal capital, so tantalizing were the spoils that could be found there.

But this was all in the past. At the moment, the forest was a dangerous place. While Rank 4 and 5 monsters had always wandered there, adventurers could trust that they would not encounter anything more dangerous than that, provided they did not venture too deep. Over the past twenty days, however, Rank 6 and 7 monsters had begun to appear without warning.

Adventurers might have possessed a tendency toward foolish recklessness—those eccentric enough to come to this town even more so—but they would not go marching off to certain death. Still, after resolving to explore other areas around the town, they found them disappointingly ordinary, with monsters that didn’t warrant coming to such a remote Frontier region. As a result, the number of active adventurers had dwindled, and the number of new arrivals had slowed to a trickle. Hence the almost deserted Adventurer’s Guild that Allen’s party had found upon their arrival.

This town was only able to exist thanks to adventurers. The goods they harvested secured the favor of the royal capital, and the money they spent fueled the economy. While the issue had not yet become a crisis, Allen had

been told that another month of the current state of affairs would begin to have an impact on many aspects of the town. In fact, the place was noticeably less lively than it had been just ten days ago.

Allen had received this information at the guild, but it would be more accurate to say it had been granted to him rather than obtained. It was clear that people hoped Allen would agree to help them if they explained the situation. Despite the town's considerable size, it was not governed by anyone. Owing to the influence that adventurers held here, the guild had assumed the role of provisional ruler, and it surely wanted to avoid losing the town.

Yet Allen had no reason to assist them. He didn't particularly care if the town continued to exist. He *did* want to investigate the forest, though, not out of any concern for the locals, but because it was so obviously suspicious that he could hardly afford not to. Although the events of twenty days prior had taken place after the assassination of the General, it was close enough that he couldn't say with confidence the two were unrelated.

What was more, he had some idea of what the cause might be. If monsters that had lived deeper within the forest were now appearing on its outskirts, chances were high that they had no other choice. Monsters were often treated as a single entity, but there *were* different species. Conflicts between them were common. Their dispositions were no different from animals, and just like animals, the strong preyed on the weak. It seemed likely that a stronger monster than those already dwelling deep within the forest had appeared. Allen had already explored the outer regions, but today, he had finally ventured farther inside.

"Hmm. I assumed as much when I heard about it," said Beatrice. "But are you saying you found traces of exactly what it is?"

"More like an aura, I guess. I sensed something unlike the other monsters, something so powerful it can't fully conceal itself. If you want to be negative, you could say I couldn't figure out anything beyond that, though."

"Even you couldn't discover more, Allen?" Riese asked.

"I'm not omnipotent or anything. There are limits to what I can ascertain from a feeling."

Technically, Allen *did* have a way of gathering information from his feelings. He simply had to wield the full power of his Boundless Knowledge skill, but doing so would utterly fry his brain. As the name implied, the Boundless Knowledge skill allowed him to learn *everything*, for better or worse. Using the full extent of that power would expose him to not only the information he sought, but the complete knowledge of everything in the area—every single stone and blade of grass. It would be too much for his mind to handle.

Realistically, Allen needed to clearly identify a target in order to effectively use his skill. After seeing a target even once with his own eyes, he could narrow down the information he received to that which was pertinent. In fact, after first seeing what he was looking for, he could pick up additional information about it later on, even if it was no longer in view. Considering the potential of Boundless Knowledge and the fact that it was the most potent of all his skills, it seemed reasonable that there were *some* meager limitations placed upon it.

“Were you at least able to figure out roughly where it is, or how strong?” Beatrice asked.

“Hmm...I don’t really have any idea about its location,” Allen replied. “I tried searching the area, but it wasn’t too clear. You know, I should have been able to sense something with such a strong aura from outside the forest. It must be hidden somehow.”

“I *have* heard that the more powerful monsters are correspondingly skilled at concealing their aura,” Riese observed.

“True, but it didn’t seem like that.”

Allen had only become aware of the aura in the form of a strange feeling following days of investigation. In hopes of finding some answers, he had employed Boundless Knowledge and finally succeeded in sensing that aura, vague as it was. If the thing was simply concealing itself, he would have found it much easier to grasp and would not have been unable to establish its location.

“Hm. So we can assume from its aura that it must be something pretty powerful?” Beatrice asked.

“Yeah. About as powerful as the dragon, if not more so,” Allen replied. “That’s why I didn’t follow it too deep inside and just stuck to exploring the area I was

in.”

“Stronger than the dragon?” said Riese. “Then I think it’s for the best that you didn’t do anything hasty.”

“Well, I didn’t want to break something that doesn’t belong to me,” Allen answered with a shrug, before patting the sword that hung at his side—not his old, broken blade, but one that Noel had loaned him until the sword she was smithing was finished. It was thanks to this sword that Allen was able to conduct his investigations. But while it was a much finer weapon than his old one, in terms of robustness, his old blade had been superior. He didn’t want to risk breaking Noel’s sword by doing something rash.

“Hmm. I don’t like the idea of leaving something even more dangerous than that dragon to its own devices if we don’t have to,” said Beatrice, “but it doesn’t have anything to do with our current mission, does it? Perhaps we should casually warn the guild and go about our business.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Riese. “And we should not expose Allen to any further danger.”

“Oh, I think I’m gonna continue my exploration of the forest,” he replied.

“But why?” asked Beatrice. “I can’t imagine you’re too concerned about this town or the guild.”

“You’re not wrong, but saying it like that makes me sound like a real piece of crap. Anyway, I guess I’m just curious about how that thing’s aura is being hidden.”

Allen had picked up the monster’s aura by using Boundless Knowledge, but he had only used that skill in the first place because of the vague sense of unease he had felt, which must have meant it was simply too great an aura to hide completely. Without that sense of unease, Allen would have never thought to use Boundless Knowledge, meaning that if the aura had been less pronounced, he likely wouldn’t have noticed it at all. While he couldn’t be sure, depending on what the thing was, he might not have even seen it right before his eyes.

“You mean...” Riese interrupted.

“Yup. I dunno if someone’s using some kind of Gift to hide it, but if they are,

we can't say with certainty that it *doesn't* have something to do with why we're here, right?"

Something strange was going on, something that could well have been used in the assassination of one of the kingdom's most important subjects. That couldn't be ignored, even if it ended up being unrelated.

"Besides, if we can help people out in the process, that's all the reason we need, isn't it?"

Riese paused. "Yes, that's right." Her gloomy expression instantly transformed into a smile.

Allen smirked; she was so easy to read. "Anyway, if tomorrow goes poorly we'll have to pause our investigation for a while."

"Oh, that's right, we have to visit Noel. I hope she's doing all right," said Riese.

"I won't be surprised if she collapses—or if she's already collapsed on the floor when we get there," Beatrice noted.

"That's exactly what concerns me, though I hate to think you're right," said Riese. "I wouldn't be shocked if she's forgotten to eat and sleep."

Neither seemed to be joking about the possibility that Noel had neglected to eat and sleep for ten days and was now on the brink of death; in fact, they looked deadly serious.

"Has that happened before or something?" Allen asked.

"Not for ten days, but for two or three, plenty of times," Riese answered.

"She said she has some way of using magic to delay the need to eat or sleep," Beatrice explained. "But she pays for it in exhaustion once everything's over."

"Sounds like it shaves years off her life," Allen mused, though he supposed that went to show just how motivated Noel was. While he sympathized with their concerns, he was excited. Staring into the distance, he imagined the sword that Noel was forging for him.

The Former Hero Visits the Blacksmith Again

Noel brought down the hammer one final time with the metallic clang and shower of sparks to which her eyes and ears were well accustomed. At this point, she was barely half-conscious. Even the magic she used to delay her exhaustion had its limits, and ten days went far beyond them. Nevertheless, aware of that as she was, Noel wouldn't allow herself to collapse on the spot, not because doing so would cause her a grievous injury, but because the sword was still unfinished.

Noel thought *she* would have done the same thing. *She* forged swords without rest for days on end, regardless of the concern Noel showed her. And *she* didn't have the benefit of magic. True, it was probably the benefit of her Gift, but...

"No, that was just a rumor. She could do it, so there's no reason I can't," Noel said to herself.

Noel had always watched the elder swordsmith from behind as she worked. Saying she herself couldn't do it would be a lie. Shaking off her hesitation, Noel stood, ready to add the finishing touches. Swaying slightly, she bit her bottom lip, enduring through sheer dedication. Gripping the object that could not yet quite be called a sword, she carried it to where it would be turned into a finished weapon.

She was walking—with a wavering gait, but nevertheless sure-footedly—when she suddenly wondered why she was doing this. What was the point of pursuing something she was not even sure she could accomplish—and to the point that she could barely stand, no less? The thought lasted only a moment before she resumed her stride, realizing she did not have time for foolish distractions. Besides, there was no point indulging in such notions now that she had come this far.

"There probably *is* no point. This will all end in failure. I don't even know how many times I've thought that."

At times like this, she simply muttered, “Who cares?” She had never considered the point of it all. This was simply what she had to do—all she *could* do. And besides, this was the closest she’d ever felt to her goal. It was as though she had almost grasped something, and that was all the more reason she couldn’t afford to collapse now.

Noel grunted. She had bit her lip so hard that blood now flowed, but the pain was merely a distant sensation. As if reaching out to the woman in her memories, she stared ahead, taking the final step.

“Noel? Sorry for barging in, but we didn’t hear any noise and you didn’t respond—wait, Noel?!”

Allen watched indifferently as Riese disappeared into the workshop with a cry. He could tell from sensing Noel’s aura that she was fine; the weakness of that aura was likely because she was sleeping.

“You don’t seem too worked up, Beatrice,” Allen observed.

“I expected something like this would happen the moment she said it would take her ten days,” Beatrice replied. “Lady Riese did too, but I suppose that doesn’t stop her from getting flustered.”

“I see. Yeah, that makes sense.”

As they spoke, they made their way into the workshop. Witnessing the scene within, Allen smiled. He could understand why Riese had cried out. The princess held Noel in her arms, giving them a clear view of her soot-covered face, and burns and other wounds that covered her body. At a glance, it looked as though she had been robbed and beaten up, but Allen knew she had simply injured herself and collapsed. It would be cruel to expect Riese to maintain her composure, seeing her friend in such a state. The warmth Riese felt from Noel’s body as she held her seemed to offer some measure of reassurance. A mixture of relief and irritation appeared on her face.

“Goodness! You kept on pushing yourself in this state? You’ll never stop, no matter how many times I tell you, will you? I’m going to lecture you once you wake up.” Riese continued to mutter to herself as she gently patted various

parts of Noel’s body.



Each area Riese touched was surrounded by a faint light that healed the other's wounds in an instant. Although Riese went about her task quite casually, there could be no doubt that what Allen was witnessing was a miracle: a person healing a wounded body with their own hands, a feat that was supposed to be impossible in this world.

"She really hasn't changed," said Beatrice, shaking her head.

"You mean this has happened before?"

"It happens every time. She collapses as soon as she sees Riese's face, as if she's waiting for her to arrive."

"That's even crazier than I thought."

"Actually, the first time was different. Well, not that different. She was just reeling as if she might collapse at any moment, and then a little later, she did. But ever since then..."

"Sounds like it's become a habit," Allen replied, unsure whether to view this behavior as exploitative or a sign of how much trust Noel had in Riese. He assumed it was the latter, but looking at the scene before him, it didn't seem like a very kind way to treat a friend.

"Lady Riese always gives her a sermon when she wakes up," said Beatrice.

"And she still doesn't listen, does she?"

"Not exactly. One time—I don't know what she was thinking—Noel picked up a blade she had just forged with her bare hands, without even cooling it. Her skin was so badly burned that it couldn't even be pulled from the blade. Lady Riese was furious, of course. Noel never tried anything like that again."

"Whoa...that's awful."

"I was quite distressed too. That wasn't the only cause, but her face was the most deathly shade of pale I've ever seen it. She might well have died if we hadn't arrived." Beatrice paused. "Now that I think about it, I believe that was what awakened this power in Lady Riese."

"I see," said Allen. In a multitude of ways, the story sounded typical of Riese. Noel had been saved as a result, but it had also made her unconcerned about

sustaining minor injuries. Allen could imagine the way Riese and Beatrice must have grieved.

“Don’t breathe a word of this to Lady Riese, of course,” Beatrice muttered. Turning to face her, Allen saw Beatrice looking at him with an unexpectedly severe gaze.

“You mean how devoted she was to helping her and lecturing her? I guess that’s not very princess-like, but it *is* very Riese-like.”

“No, that’s not what I meant...”

Allen understood what Beatrice was trying to say, but he was content to leave it at that and shrug. It was a matter they had not addressed until now, and even now only obliquely. There was no need for him to break their implicit understanding, even if he *did* fully understand what was going on.

Allen had surmised that Riese might be the saint at an early stage when he had first heard the rumors. He did, after all, know about her Gift, which she had held since even before her blessing ceremony—in fact, since her birth. That Gift was the reason she had been considered a prodigy.

Riese’s Gift was unique. As she grew, it grew with her. As a rule, the capabilities of Gifts did not change; while they might accomplish more feats according to how they were put to use, they remained fundamentally the same. However, Riese’s Gift acquired capabilities over time. To begin with, her Gift had, like many others, been capable of raising the potential of other people. At first, it had been able to temporarily raise someone’s stats by ten percent. Then she’d gained the ability to raise a given stat of another person to the same level as her own. She’d gone on to gain abilities that could not be reflected in stats, such as the power to heal herself.

While that was as much as Allen knew, it was enough to bring Riese to mind when he heard the rumors of the saint. If she had continued to advance at that rate, it was no surprise that she had gained the ability to do something as incredible as healing others.

The kingdom’s search for the saint had to be nothing more than a bluff. If Allen had been able to figure this out, it was unthinkable that others hadn’t. They had simply made a show of searching for her, knowing how strange it

would seem if they didn't.

None of this meant much to him either way. Saint or not, Riese was still Riese. Knowing that she was still the same woman he had known back then was enough for him; after all, he knew better than anyone how wretched it was to have a title change how you see yourself.

"Anyway, there's something I'm more interested in..." Allen said. And while he was consciously changing the subject, that was true.

Three swords stood behind Noel, presumably the reason that even now, she wore a smile on her face; one which only widened as Allen beheld them, wondering exactly what she had made for him.

The Former Hero Inspects the Finished Sword

Allen's eyes widened as he turned his attention to the three swords that stood there. The fact that there were only three was in itself deeply interesting. Noel had said that she'd made the hundred swords he had seen before in only thirty days, but now, in a third of the time, she had produced less than a thirtieth of that amount. That said a lot about how much time each sword must have taken.

Of course, this wasn't simply a matter of time invested. Noel had said she'd put her all into the forging of each of those hundred swords. Whether or not she had approached each with the same intent, however, it was clear that the three swords that stood before Allen now were the products of a far more motivated smith. He couldn't help brimming with anticipation, but he could hardly take the liberty of inspecting them without approval, even if they had been made for him.

Unfortunately, the creator of those blades was currently deep within a dream. Just as Allen had decided there was nothing to be done at present, he saw something stirring out of the corner of his eye.

"Wha... Riese? Oh, I fell asleep. I guess I lost consciousness the moment I was finally finished. It's been so long since I fainted before you two showed up, I guess I forgot how to time when I collapse."

"You shouldn't learn how to do something like that! Ugh, you really are incorrigible," Riese replied before pausing. "Are...you trying to get up? Even I can't take away your exhaustion and make up for the lack of sleep, you know. If you don't rest properly, you'll faint again."

"Doesn't matter what you say now, I already *did* learn how to do it. Anyway, I can't just go to sleep without showing my customer the finished product, can I? I bet he wants to check it out as soon as possible."

Allen didn't interject. He *did* want to inspect the swords, after all. Riese sighed, seemingly recognizing the logic in Noel's words, as well as what Allen

was thinking. She pouted, shooting glares in their direction, but said nothing further. Allen could only grin—he could hardly help feeling eager.

Noel got to her feet, looking surprisingly composed. Allen let out a sigh of admiration as he tracked her with his gaze. Whether out of humility or to stop Noel from overexerting herself, Riese had not been entirely truthful when she'd said she could not relieve exhaustion.

Just like when she gave that kid her arms and legs back, this is more than simply healing wounds, he thought as he watched Noel gather the three swords and carry them over.

"Thanks for your patience," she said.

"Oh, I wasn't waiting that long. So, these are..."

"Yup. My finest work."

"All three of them?"

While there was no reason that there should only be one, Allen had understood the type of person Noel was in his limited contact with her. When she spoke of her finest work, he would have expected her to produce only one sword.

"That's right. I guess I should have only made one to present to you as my finest work, but I realized something when I started forging: I don't know the first thing about you. Not what kind of sword you specialize in, or what style you fight with. I saw your own sword, but the fact that you made good use of it doesn't necessarily mean it's the most well-suited to you."

"You've got a point there."

Noel would have had to make a choice regarding the overall design of the sword. No amount of fine-tuning after the fact could make a greatsword suitable for someone who preferred a rapier, so she at least needed to ask what kind of sword he preferred and how he liked to use it. Allen had assumed that she understood him so well that there was no need, but it seemed she had simply forgotten.

"You really can be absent-minded about the strangest things," Riese

remarked.

“Quiet, you! I make up for it with everything else, so there’s no problem!” Noel replied.

“I see. So that’s why there are three,” Beatrice murmured.

Looking more closely, it was clear that each sword differed in not only width and thickness, but even the finer details of the design. It seemed that Noel intended to make up for her failure to ask Allen about his preferences by creating a greater variety of swords and allowing him to try them for himself.

“I didn’t put any less work into each of them, you know,” she stated.

“I never doubted that for a second,” said Allen. “I could tell from the start how talented you were and how serious you were about using those talents.”

“Heh. Of course you could.”

“Well done maintaining a composed expression, Noel,” Riese interjected, “but your lips can’t quite hide your happiness.”

“Sh-Shaddup, you! I don’t care what you think you can see—just keep quiet! Anyway, here!” She spoke at a rapid pace as she foisted the swords upon Allen, her turned head unable to hide her flushed face.

Allen smirked, then redirected his attention to the swords he had been handed. At a glance, there was one thing he noticed immediately. “Huh, these handles are based on my old sword, aren’t they?”

“Yup. Given how much you used that thing, this won’t be hard to wield, right? It seemed like the length was tailored to their assumption of how much you’d grow, though, so I’ve adjusted it for your current size.”

“I can tell it’s a fine piece of work without even looking at the blade. I’d say you clearly haven’t lost your touch, but it seems you’ve gotten even better.”

“Of course. I enjoyed making these much more than the others. So, what do you think?” Noel asked with a challenging gaze.

In response, Allen chose one of the swords and quickly drew it from its sheath. The blade shone with a faint light, provoking gasps of wonder from the others.

“That really is magnificent,” said Beatrice. “I almost wish you’d give it to me instead.”

“Well, I won’t,” Noel replied.

“I know that. I’m well aware I could never meet your standards.”

Allen smiled at Beatrice’s envious gaze. A typical knight, she couldn’t help but covet fine weapons. Then again, so fine was this particular weapon that even someone who was not in the business of handling swords would likely covet it regardless.

“Hmm. To be honest, I’m not quite sure about this,” said Allen.

“What? It seems to be a superb sword to my eyes,” said Beatrice. “Are you saying it’s no good?”

“Oh, no. Not at all,” Allen answered with a shrug, his smile widening as he realized how his statement had been misinterpreted. In fact, he had meant quite the opposite. “I meant that it seems like such a fine piece of work that I can’t quite tell *how* fine just by looking at it.”

He had felt no need to try any of the hundred swords he had seen before. While they had all been quality blades, he had been able to recognize their limits simply by inspecting them. That was not the case here—until he actually tried these blades, he couldn’t be sure.

Riese gasped. “You did it, Noel!”

“Heh. Of course I did.”

Noel’s smile was once again clearly visible despite her composed expression. This time, Riese, seemingly understanding that this was intentional, chose not to point it out.

“Although if I’m being honest, the real test is yet to come,” Noel continued. “How they feel to use is what really matters. Speaking of which, would you mind trying them soon?”

“Fine with me,” said Allen. “All three of them?”

“Yes. They all have slight differences in their center of gravity and such, so I’d like to know which one you find most comfortable to use.”

“Got it. I’ll try them out while paying attention to all of that. When should I come and tell you what I think?”

“No need. I’m coming with you right now.”

“Huh?” One look at Noel’s face told Allen she wasn’t joking. But before he could speak further, Riese interrupted.

“Weren’t you listening to me, Noel? If you don’t rest, you’ll faint.”

“I know, but please,” said Noel. “To a blacksmith, everything is like smithing; you’ve got to strike while the iron’s hot.”

Riese sighed. “Very well. But if you faint again, I won’t help you.”

“Don’t worry. Trust me. I’ve been just fine without you these past two years.”

“Trust you? The person who works herself into collapsing the moment I show up?”

The quarreling pair both cast sideways glances at Beatrice to resolve their dispute. Beatrice shrugged. Clearly, this was a common argument. Noel seemed to be envisioning Riese healing her, complaining all the while, if she fainted again. Beatrice smirked, seemingly thinking the same thing as Allen.

“Don’t worry,” said Allen. “Even if you faint, I’ll carry you.”

“I’m sure she will be fine so long as you’re there,” said Riese, “but are you sure that doesn’t present any sort of problem?”

“What’s the problem?” said Noel. “Doesn’t bother me, at least.”

“I think you’re the one she’s worried about,” Beatrice clarified.

“Let’s just say you’ll get back here before you faint,” Allen interjected.

“Anyway, to really try out these swords, I need to get into a real fight, don’t I? Do you have any suggestions for which monsters I try them out on? I don’t know the area that well, so there’s a good chance I won’t know whatever place you direct me to.”

“No need to worry about that,” said Noel. “Like I said, I’m coming with you, and besides, it’s an easy enough place to find.”

“Easy to find? Do you mean it’s right near town?” asked Riese.

“Hmm. Master Allen will need to fight a fairly tough monster to properly gauge these swords,” Beatrice added, “but do any such monsters exist in the vicinity of the town?”

With all eyes on her, Noel smiled. “What are you talking about? Did you forget who—or rather, *what*—I am? Where else would an elf go but the forest?” she said, brimming with confidence.

The Former Hero Encounters a Strange Person Once More

Allen and Noel walked the streets of the still-bustling town. From their appearances, nobody would have been able to tell that they were heading for the forest. Allen was lightly dressed, equipped with no discernible armor, and Noel was much the same—in fact, she seemed even less armored than she had been before changing out of her smithing gear. Allen knew she was capable of holding her own to some extent, but still...

“What’re you staring at? Something on my face?” asked Noel.

“I was just thinking that you’re dressed awfully light and seem awfully calm considering where we’re going,” Allen replied.

“Oh please, I don’t want to hear that from you. Riese looks like she’s dressed light at a glance too, but her clothing is high-grade stuff with all sorts of magical barriers placed on it. Of course, with her ability in battle, I guess she’d be in real trouble without it... But aren’t you just wearing regular clothes?”

“True.”

Even if Allen had owned any armor, which he didn’t, he wouldn’t have been able to take it with him when he was banished. And before coming to town, he’d had no way of acquiring any gear. While he *could* have gotten hold of something in town, he hadn’t felt it necessary, and it hadn’t been. He’d gotten by just fine fighting in his normal attire.

“That’s all you’ve got to say for yourself?” Noel replied. “Well, I guess I’m in the same boat. I don’t need armor, so I don’t wear it. I don’t really need this breastplate either, but Riese and Beatrice insisted I wear *something*. A fellow elf would probably laugh at me for wearing armor in the forest...not that I’ve ever run into one.”

“I’ve heard it’s a bad idea to fight elves in the forest, and that they never get lost there. I thought that was limited to the forests where they live, though.”

“I can’t speak for other elves, but I can move three times faster when I’m in this forest.”

Allen considered saying something about how that was impressive, considering the forest was more green than red, but realizing Noel wouldn’t get it, he simply shrugged.

Elves were known as forest spirits. In fact, it would be more precise to say that forest spirits had at some point become known as elves, but regardless, as the name implied, the blood of the forest spirits ran through their veins. It was said that this was the reason for their affinity for magic and their adaptability when within the forest.

There was one major piece of evidence for this: the life span of elves was much longer than that of humans. While humans were said to have lived for three hundred years with the aid of magic, the elves’ life spans naturally surpassed a thousand years, while those of elvish royalty known as high elves were said to be even longer.

“By the way, Noel, how old *are* you?”

“How rude! Not that I actually mind or anything...”

“It’s just that I’ve totally seen you as the same age as us, but now I’ve remembered that elves grow up much slower.”

“Right. I’ve heard that based on how long we live, our childhoods are about ten times as long as yours.”

“You’ve heard? You mean...”

“Yup. As far as I can remember, my childhood wasn’t any longer than a human’s. That is, so long as time wasn’t distorted in the place where I grew up, moving at incredible speed.”

“That would be a pretty wild discovery.”

Allen wondered what this revelation from Noel could mean. He *had* heard that those of mixed human-elf parentage, the so-called half-elves, were more similar to humans, but they were still said to live for around five hundred years, with similarly long childhoods. And besides, she had all the other traits of being

a pure elf—her ears immediately identified her as such.

Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.

Indeed, Allen saw “Race: Forest Spirit” among the information. Whether or not she was a pure-blooded elf, her constitution was extremely close to one.

Allen’s Boundless Knowledge skill could view all the information that existed in this world. Using it, there was nothing that was unknowable—not just past and present information, but even future information that could be surmised from the present. The skill was limited by Allen’s consciousness, but that didn’t change its fundamental nature. The information acquired from the skill reflected the world’s understanding, and could not be warped by Allen’s personal understanding of things; hence Noel being described as a “forest spirit.” The name of the race was thus “forest spirit,” and “elf” was just a nickname. No matter what names humans invented for them or how many people called them elves, or even if the name “forest spirits” was forgotten entirely, the world would continue to recognize them as such, and the Boundless Knowledge skill would never call them by any other name.

Thus the world clearly recognized Noel as a forest spirit. This offered no explanation for her description of her childhood, however. Allen paused to reconsider; perhaps he’d been giving this entirely too much thought. Noel didn’t seem bothered by it and hadn’t asked for his advice. Wasn’t it enough to recognize that while he didn’t understand, there could be any number of reasons for her position and leave it at that?

Suddenly, he heard something.

“Oh! Fancy running into you here.”

Allen looked in the direction of the voice, familiar and yet not immediately identifiable. A moment later, he saw the silk hat and understood. The gentleman.

Allen shrugged. “It’s not that surprising. This forest might be pretty big, but there are only so many places to go. Not that unusual to run into someone when you’re walking around, is it?”

“I suppose you are correct,” the man replied. “Forgive me; it is just that I have

not caught sight of you for the past ten days.”

“Well, we won’t run into each other if we’re not out and about at the same time.”

“Is this an acquaintance of yours?” asked Noel. “Should I go on ahead and leave you to talk?”

“I guess you could call him an acquaintance,” Allen replied. “We only talked a little once before.”

“That is correct. My apologies. I did not intend to inconvenience you,” said the gentleman.

Allen didn’t feel particularly inconvenienced, but he *was* surprised. Granted, his thoughts had been focused on Noel, but he hadn’t even sensed the presence of the man, let alone recognized him. Even Allen wasn’t above being shocked when called out to by someone unexpected.

“Well, I suppose I’ll take my leave before I inconvenience you further,” said the man.

“You sure? We’re not in any kind of hurry,” Allen replied.

“No, I can tell I am getting in your way. I do not have any particular business with you. Until we meet again.” The man bowed and walked away.

Allen watched the Amazon follow silently behind him. Noel watched as well, puzzled, as the pair walked away.

“You sure know some strange people,” she remarked.

“I guess he is pretty strange.” Allen couldn’t deny that, simply based on the man’s outfit alone. At first, he had thought perhaps such attire wasn’t unusual in this town, but that wasn’t the case.

“Anyway,” Allen continued, “let’s head for the forest. Beatrice and Riese won’t be happy if we don’t take this seriously.”

Since Allen was heading to the forest as usual, Beatrice and Riese had gone about their normal activities, continuing their investigations around the town. Allen had tried to convince them to accompany him just this once, since he was not pursuing his usual duties in the forest, but it seemed both Riese and

Beatrice were both feeling frustrated by their failure to find any leads. To Allen, this seemed unwarranted—figuring out where information might be hiding was mostly a matter of lucky guesses—but if leaving them to their own devices would make them feel better, then so be it. In fact, simply walking the streets, he felt the atmosphere of the town slowly changing. He wouldn't have been surprised if today was the day they finally found something.

“By the way,” Noel suddenly began, “the gist of it is that you three are looking for suspicious people, right?”

Allen tilted his head. Since Noel was a local resident, they had shared a certain degree of information with her. Believing her to be trustworthy enough, Beatrice and Riese had told Noel about the assassination of the General. But this, Noel had already figured out for herself.

“You really are frank, aren't you?” said Allen.

“What? It's not like it was hard to tell. Anyway, if we're talking 'suspicious,' don't you think that guy fits the bill?”

“Yeah, I guess so, huh...”

It would be one thing if Noel had accused the man of something specific, but he could hardly blame her for saying he seemed suspicious. With a knowing look, Allen glanced over his shoulder, only to shrug when he saw that the man had already disappeared.

The man suddenly stopped and turned in the middle of the crowd, squinting as he peered through the throng.

“Hmph. I thought they must have cottoned on to us if they were sniffing around those parts, but they gave us no sign of that. Nothing worth worrying about, I suppose.”

Standing motionless, deep in thought on the bustling street corner, he appeared utterly unconcerned with his surroundings. For some strange reason, nobody collided with him, as inevitable as such a collision seemed. Paying that no mind, he muttered something to himself and turned his gaze from the sky to the girl who stood beside him.

“I suppose I ought to leave this to you. That seems like the safest approach, no matter the occasion.”

The girl stiffened for a moment—whether at the man’s words or his gaze, it was unclear—but immediately returned to normal. The man nodded as if satisfied by the lack of response.

“I do not imagine there is any need to worry, but I suppose we should be prepared for all eventualities. To fail here would be a disgrace to demonkind,” he said, smiling as he began to walk again.

The girl followed wordlessly, and the pair vanished as if disappearing on the breeze.

The Elf and the Forest

Noel monitored the falling sword with intense focus, as if she couldn't afford to miss a single moment. She watched, unmoved, as the sword she had forged effortlessly pierced the skin and rent the monster's flesh. For her, this much was expected and was nothing that any of her other swords couldn't have done. Nothing she had yet seen was enough to please her, even if the monster being cut down turned out to be Rank 9 or higher.

"Phew."

Allen was now the only moving thing within her view. Exhaling gently, he scanned the region for further threats but sensed nothing. Flicking the blood from his blade with a single swing, he returned it to its sheath, the clear, metallic sound reverberating gently.

Noel jumped down from her vantage point and headed over to him. "Nice work. What do you think?"

"It's just as fine and easy to use a sword as I'd expect from you."

"I see. And compared to the others?" Far from being bashful in response to praise, Noel's curt response showed only how unconscious she was of flattery. Besides, she already knew it was a fine sword—what mattered was how it performed. Anything else was, at present, irrelevant, and went in one ear and out the other, especially since this was the third blade. Now that Allen had finished trying each of them, she was supposed to use his input to add the finishing touches to one sword, making it more to his liking. But...

"Hmm...to be honest, I don't think I can feel that much of a difference," said Allen. "They're all just about as easy to use as each other."

"I see..." Noel replied. She had half expected this; after all, he had already said as much when she had asked him to compare the second sword to the first. These responses, had they been mere flattery, would have angered her, but that was not the case here.

“Could I take a look at that for a second?” she asked.

“Huh? Sure. I mean, it belongs to you, after all. I’m just borrowing it,” Allen replied.

Ignoring his chatter, Noel took the sword and abruptly drew it from its sheath. The blade reflected the sun’s rays with a gentle glow, as brilliant as if it were brand new. Noel was not singing her own praises; Allen had told her himself that any customer would assume the sword had never been used.

It was true that it was a fine weapon, perhaps even deserving of being called Noel’s masterwork. But ultimately, swords were consumable goods that would become increasingly worn the more they were used, accumulating nicks, scratches, bends and fractures until finally they were no longer of any use. No sword, no matter how skilled its smith or how fine its materials, could escape that fate. All manner of diligent care for one’s weapon was only a matter of delaying the inevitable. Admittedly, it *did* also depend on the skill of the swordsman. Noel sighed.

“What’s wrong? Wasn’t I using it properly?”

“The opposite. I don’t understand how you’re doing this.”

Even if he *had* taken each monster out with one swing, Allen had felled dozens of them by now. Noel would have expected the blade to have acquired a number of scratches at this point. What was more, the blade wasn’t only superficially perfect.

Spirit Sight: Appraise.

Focusing all her energy into her eyes, Noel sighed again as she examined the sword. Her sight allowed her to see things that were invisible to the naked eye. When used on weapons, it allowed her to gauge not only their strength and cutting ability, but even how they had been used.

This sight was at least half responsible for her skill as a blacksmith. When combined with her long history of watching *her* smithing away, Noel’s sight told her exactly where to strike next to forge the best possible weapon. Half of her job entailed simply swinging as her sight instructed her. The remaining half depended on her own experience and intuition. Thus, overall, it was not a skill

she had simply been born with.

Though Noel hadn't learned the term "Gift" until later, blacksmiths who relied on their Gifts were not uncommon. Thus Noel was proud to use her sight in her smithing. Perhaps due to how extensively she had made use of it in her work, her sight was capable of telling her incredibly precise details about weapons in particular.

Yet she could see that this sword bore not a single scratch, that Allen had used it with absolute perfection. Having noticed how keen his slashes were, Noel had climbed a tree to better observe him using the sword, as well as to avoid being seen by monsters. Within the forest, an elf's aura was one with the forest itself, so no monster could sense her up there.

But Noel was a smith at heart, and while she had been in her share of scuffles, she was no warrior. Although she could tell that Allen was incredibly skilled, she could glean nothing more precise than that. However, when combined with the information she had obtained from examining his sword, she could tell that was hardly the extent of it.

The optimal method of using a sword varied depending on a multitude of factors: its materials, weight, length, center of gravity, cutting ability, durability, and countless other points. Yet Allen had been able to use this sword absolutely perfectly. His speed, power, positioning, and angle of attack were utterly without fault. He had identified each enemy's weakest point and delivered the most optimal strike possible. As a result, the sword remained in brand-new condition—as had the previous two.

Noel therefore knew that Allen was being sincere. And while this was, on the one hand, incredible, it also put her in a difficult position. How was she supposed to fine-tune the sword now? She had forged these three blades with the understanding that further adjustments would be necessary. Though she had intended to create her finest swords yet, she had taken certain creative liberties with the understanding that she would add the finishing touches to one of them later. It was those adjustments to suit Allen's preferences that were supposed to truly make one sword in particular her masterpiece.

"Hey, Allen, I have a proposal for you. Why don't we keep heading deeper

into the forest?”

“Deeper in?” Allen echoed, offering only a shrug in response.

Venturing farther into the forest meant a greater chance of running into more powerful monsters, meaning there would be better opportunities for Allen to judge the merits of the three swords. That he had thus far been able to use all three swords in the same way indicated that the monsters in this area had simply not required him to use the weapons to their fullest potential. So talented a swordsman was he that such effort that would allow him to distinguish between the swords had been unnecessary. His attacks were so flawless that he had not needed to utilize their true power. The only solution was to find a worthy foe.

Noel had heard that there was something dangerous lurking deeper within the forest, but not exactly *what*. Of course, they could simply stop before that, whenever they met a sufficiently strong foe.

After considering her proposal, Allen nodded. “Now that I think about it, I guess you’re right. To be honest, I’m still not satisfied anyway. I mean, that’s a pleasant surprise, actually. I never expected you to produce something this well-made.”

“Of course I did! Besides, you were thinking of heading farther in eventually, weren’t you? You know, the forest is like home to us elves. You’ll probably be able to figure out things you wouldn’t be able to by yourself.”

“You’re pretty persuasive,” he replied with a smile.

Noel had piqued his interest. In fact, she had already been aware of the thing hidden within the forest before Allen and the others had informed her of its presence, but, peering at him slightly, she hid that fact from him with a smile.

The Former Hero Heads Deeper into the Forest

Allen and Noel wordlessly advanced through the forest's dense growth. Both recognized that to chitchat now would only serve to alert anything in the vicinity to their location. Still, thirty minutes had passed since they had decided to move on, and to spend such a long time without speaking so much as a word was somewhat unusual. But this was simply because they had not yet encountered a single monster.

While Allen had no knowledge of what the forest had been like before, it now seemed to be in a state of confusion. Venturing out from the spot where they had been, let alone walking for as long as five minutes, ought to have been sufficient to encounter a monster attack. That they had walked for thirty minutes without such an encounter would only have been possible if their enemies were deliberately avoiding them—a feat of which Allen was incapable, even if he had wanted to try. Since his Boundless Knowledge skill was not well-suited to ascertaining small details, he could not use it to sense the presence of monsters in the area. Besides, Noel was the one leading the way.

“You’re quiet,” Noel remarked.

“Huh? What would I talk about?” Allen asked, tilting his head. It was a reasonable question, considering how out of the blue her statement had been, and he shrugged. He hadn’t spoken because he didn’t think there was any need. “We’re searching for a suitable foe for me, right? That’s what we were talking about before?”

“Well...yes, so you already understand what we’re doing here. Does that mean you don’t have to say a single word to me? That’s kinda mean.”

“Riese and Beatrice said something similar to me recently,” Allen answered with another smirk and shrug. That hadn’t, in fact, been his intention with Riese and Beatrice; he had simply been quiet because he’d had no real proof of their activities, even though he had guessed what they were up to.

As he watched from behind, Allen quickly figured out that Noel was looking

for some place in particular. If she had simply wanted to find a sufficiently powerful monster, all she had to do was keep walking, but she headed this way and that, occasionally pushing her way through the trees to advance farther. These were clearly the movements of someone making their way to a specific location while trying to avoid something at the same time. It almost seemed she was trying to avoid the *thing* that lurked somewhere in the forest, yet Allen had gradually begun to feel its hidden presence becoming stronger and stronger, and they hadn't run into a single monster.

Considering these two things, it wasn't hard for him to guess what Noel was up to. In fact, he was almost positive that he was correct, although he didn't have any real evidence. And there was no reason to bring it up anyway, but...

"You know, you could've just told me what you were doing from the start. I wouldn't have complained," he commented.

Noel turned and peered at him, but soon faced forward and frowned again. "Easy for you to say that now," she replied. "You could have been against it for all I knew."

"True," Allen admitted. It was perfectly reasonable for her to assume that her idea might be going too far, even if he *was* conducting an investigation.

"Why are you so easygoing about this, anyway? I pretty much lied to you, didn't I?"

"I don't really feel lied to. Besides, I don't think you had bad intentions."

If he'd thought she did, he would have handled it differently. He actually *would* have asked what she was planning. But all Allen sensed from Noel was impatience. In fact, he'd sensed impatience from her since the moment they first met.

"It was obvious that you had some reason for all this," Allen continued. "And it's not too hard to figure that this whole thing is somehow related to how eager you are to forge a sword more powerful than Hauteclair."

Besides, this all worked out pretty well for him. While he could have gotten to this point by himself, it would have been a lot of effort. How could he begrudge her helping him ease his workload?

“For whatever it’s worth, I think I understand now why Riese and Beatrice place so much trust in you,” said Noel.

“Oh yeah? Maybe you could fill me in some time,” said Allen, surveying the scenery as he talked. “Anyway, is this what we’re looking for?”

Ahead was a clearing some fifty meters wide. Right away, he could tell that the thing they were seeking was there. Bereft of trees, this was nothing more than empty space—at least, as far as the naked eye could see.

“At this point, I’d be shocked if it’s not,” Noel replied.

“No kidding.” Nobody in their position could possibly think otherwise. The *thing* would surely try to flee at a moment’s notice, although the fact that it hadn’t yet was the reason the forest was in its current state. As if the empty space itself wasn’t evidence enough, a sense of pressure that the monster couldn’t completely hide alerted Allen to its presence.

“How did you know it was here, though?” asked Allen. “Now that we’re on top of it, it’s obvious, but until now, its aura felt so widely dispersed that it managed to hide its exact location.”

“I told you, for an elf, the forest is like their backyard. We can’t *not* notice an invasive species sneaking in.”

“Still, you didn’t hesitate at all. I guess you already knew about this thing before we told you about it, huh? I kind of figured.”

“Well, this forest has a lot of useful materials for a blacksmith. Most weapons are made out of monster claws and teeth, right? And I might not be on your level, but I *do* know how to handle myself.”

“Makes sense.”

“Anyway, what do we do now? I kind of thought everything would work itself out once we made it here.”

“Yeah, we still can’t see whatever it is. If we don’t figure something out, we might not even be able to touch it.”

All the pair knew was that *something* was there. They conversed freely because there was no longer any need—or any point—in hiding themselves.

“You mean it’s not just concealing its aura, but its presence?” asked Noel.

“I think that’s the point. Hiding its presence has the effect of hiding its aura. I was confused about why it was doing such a poor job of fully hiding its aura, but now I get it.”

“That makes a lot of sense. But that must mean it’s using a very high-ranking Gift...”

“You know, I’m not so sure about that.”

“Huh? What do you mean? What else but a Gift could do something like this?”

Allen simply shrugged. There were only two things he knew. First, it wasn’t just Gifts that provided such powers. Second, the power being used in this place was called “Invisible.”

“This does seem like it has something to do with the General,” said Noel.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. That’s why I wanted to look into it to begin with.”

“You’ve got to admit it’s not exactly normal to be completely unsurprised...although I’m starting to realize it’s pointless to expect you to be normal.”

“Gee, that almost sounds like an insult.”

“You’re reading too much into it. Anyway, that just makes the situation all the more helpless. I barely know the first thing about demons. Let’s just—”

“Not so fast. There’s gotta be something we can do now that we’ve come all the way here.”

“Huh?” Noel gave him a puzzled look.

In lieu of a response, Allen unsheathed one of the three swords and swung it.

Sword of Cataclysm: Beast Cleaver.

No great noise was forthcoming—only the sound of a small crack forming in something.

“Correction,” Noel began, “‘pointless’ isn’t the word for expecting you to be normal.”

“In a good way?”

“Yeah. I’ve realized that you at least mean well.”

“Oh, how cruel,” Allen replied, unconcerned.

Before him, where there had been nothing a mere moment before, a giant wolf some ten meters tall now lay on the ground.

The Former Hero Encounters a Huge Monster

The great wolf seemed fast asleep—a fact Allen had already understood, since it hadn't responded in any way to his conversation with Noel, and the aura he had sensed showed no signs of movement. But judging from the fresh wounds scattered across its body that were just beginning to heal, perhaps it was entirely focused on repairing its injuries. Whatever the case, it didn't seem likely to suddenly attack them.

There were two potential ways to approach the situation: take advantage of the opportunity and slay the beast or retreat for the time being. On this matter, Allen and Noel were in total agreement.

"Let's head back," he said.

"Right. I would like to see you try at least one slash at it, though," Noel replied.

"Hope you'll forgive me for declining," said Allen with a shrug. He knew that in his current position, he stood no chance of emerging victorious over this monster. Having inspected the creature with Boundless Knowledge, he knew it was a Fenrir and had one special property. "Any attacks below a certain level of strength will just bounce right off it," he continued. "I knew barriers like that existed, but I've never heard of them being applied to a single being before. And judging by the effects, it's a top-class barrier too."

"So you're saying there's no way through it other than attacking? And it has to be an attack that nothing can withstand..." Noel replied. "In short, nothing but an attack from the very finest weapon will get through, right?"

"Must be a Gift. I *have* heard of monsters having them before."

Indeed, there was no logical reason monsters couldn't have Gifts; like levels and stats, Gifts were not exclusive to people. However, as a rule, unlike levels and stats, they had to be granted at a blessing ceremony. Since most monsters could not hold such a ceremony, they generally didn't have Gifts. Nevertheless,

incredibly rare exceptions such as the monster before them meant it was impossible. Allen and Noel might not have understood how it could happen but they were well aware that it *could*. Riese herself had received such a Gift without a ceremony, after all. It wouldn't be all that surprising for the same thing to happen to a monster.

Whatever the case, this monster seemed to have a Gift, and a terribly effective one, at that. If only they had access to Hauteclair...but unfortunately, Akira wasn't with them. Still, perhaps there was something they could do.

"These swords are really incredible pieces of work," said Allen. "They're not enough to break through the barrier now, but once they're refined, they might just be."

"I take it you have an idea for how to improve them?"

"Well, so long as you'll trust me."

"Of course I will. Why would I doubt you at this point?"

"Wonderful."

Allen had no shot at challenging the creature right now because the swords Noel had forged were not truly first-rate, but if they retreated and she had a chance to further refine them, they might reach that level yet. Boundless Knowledge had already informed him of these facts.

The monster, for its part, seemed to be simply resting, with no intention of doing any harm. There was no particular need to go and slay it. Still, regardless of its intentions, it had become harmful in reality. They couldn't simply leave it be. Besides, there was still the fact that somebody had hidden the monster here. Interpreting that as a well-intentioned move was entirely too optimistic.

Allen and Noel faced each other and nodded. After quietly surveying the area, they quickly took their leave.

As the young man and woman left the forest clearing, a figure appeared. For a brief moment, the brown-skinned young woman peered hesitantly at the departing pair before turning her attention back to the clearing. Her business

here seemed a more pressing matter. At any rate...

“Hm?”

She tilted her head. She had just seen with her own eyes that the Fenrir she had ensured was undetectable had become visible, but it was, in all other respects, just as it had been before. Its aura was still being sufficiently suppressed. It should have been undetectable to anyone who wasn't in its precise location.

“But that's impossible...” she muttered.

It was the creature's invisibility to the naked eye that allowed them to hide its existence. At first, she had thought the young man had found some means of breaking through the barrier, but upon further inspection, he had simply disabled its invisibility somehow.

“Impossible,” she repeated.

That was the foundation upon which this entire phenomenon rested. What this pair had done was impossible. It *had* to be. Yet no matter how much she insisted, she couldn't deny what she had witnessed.

“Should I report this?”

He had told her the visitors were insignificant, and she had agreed. But now it appeared they might have been mistaken. To her, it was of no great concern either way. Perhaps she ought to keep quiet about it, but again, she didn't really care. In the end, she decided to report it. After all, that was her role right now. She would go along with the expectations of her role, even if it was of no real concern to her. Briefly hesitating over whether to restore the power to this place, she decided to simply walk away. She got the feeling it didn't matter what she did.

The sight of the pair leaving the clearing floated through her mind. As the boy had casually surveyed the scene, she'd had the feeling their gazes had met. Again, impossible; she had been concealing her aura from this world. A great being like the Fenrir was one thing, but there was no way the boy could have discovered her. And yet as she had hidden, he had looked her right in the eyes. That was...

“But that’s impossible,” she said again. No, there was no doubting that. Not that she would have minded if he had killed her; while she didn’t want to die, she would be content to accept death. But for now, her duty lay elsewhere. And so...

Copycat: Invisible.

Utilizing the power she had become experienced in employing, she disappeared from the spot.

The Former Hero Worries about What Is to Come

“All right, come and pick it up tomorrow. So long as nothing comes up, I should have it for you by morning.”

Upon returning to town, Allen and Noel had immediately set about the next order of business—or rather, Noel had, since only she could perform this task. On the walk back to town, Allen had explained the necessary improvements to the sword that he had worked out from his encounter with the Fenrir and from what he had gleaned from his Boundless Knowledge skill. The sword he had used the most was chosen as the candidate for refinement. While there were slight differences between the three, this was the one with which Allen had become most familiar.

In truth, he didn’t much care about such details, but it was impossible to be too prudent when it came to preparing to take on such a monster. After all, whatever special skills he had, he was still human.

Allen’s examinations told him that the Fenrir was Level 40. From that standpoint alone, it was less powerful than the dragon, but to presume as much would be a mistake. He couldn’t afford to be reckless. All he could do was communicate these facts to Noel. Until the sword was completed, he couldn’t go any further. Thus Noel had delivered her parting words instructing him to stop by the next day.

“I don’t mind coming as early as possible,” Allen replied. “Are you sure about this, though? I just requested a lot of pretty detailed alterations.”

“No problem. In fact, you’ve made it easy for me. If you hadn’t decided for yourself, I would’ve had to figure out how to adjust the sword on my own, but since you’ve given me such detailed instructions, all I have to do is alter it exactly to your specifications.”

To Allen, it seemed easier said than done, but that just went to show how confident Noel was in her abilities—and he’d seen nothing that would make him doubt her. In truth, Noel had already produced three swords finer than

Allen had ever expected, regardless of how long it had taken. They might not have been first-rate, but they were damn close to it. It was inconceivable that he could fail to recognize the skill, the passion involved in producing such marvels in only ten days.

“Got it. Well, if you say it’s no problem, I guess I’ll have to take your word for it. I take it there’s no chance you’ll tell me you couldn’t manage it when I show up tomorrow?”

“You said it. I won’t let you down,” Noel replied with a confident smile.

Allen shrugged, told her he’d see her the next morning, and departed. Having left Noel’s workshop, however, he found himself with nothing to do. Just as he was wondering how to spend the rest of his day, he noticed something.

“Huh?”

“Oh...”

“Hello there.”

There in the middle of the street were Riese and Beatrice. All three of them stared at each other with surprised expressions, then smiled.

“What a coincidence,” said Allen.

“Indeed,” said Riese. “Just coming back from trying out your swords?”

“In a way, yeah. But not exactly.”

“Oh? How curious,” said Beatrice. “Did you perhaps travel to the middle of the forest and run into whatever it is that dwells there?”

Allen once again gave them a look of surprise. He hadn’t intended to hide it, but he hadn’t expected Beatrice to guess it in one. At this interesting reaction, the women exchanged an amused glance.

“Uh, excuse me? What’s with the knowing looks?” asked Allen.

“Oh, we were actually just talking about that,” said Riese. “We agreed that knowing you, you wouldn’t be content with simply testing the swords.”

“That’s right,” Beatrice continued. “And just as we were wondering if you’d really be reckless enough to go to the center of the forest, you showed up.

Typical, Master Allen.”

“I dunno what’s so typical about it,” he replied. “Anyway, you’re being kinda rude, aren’t you? Accusing me of being reckless and all.”

“I think you’re imagining things,” said Riese.

“Indeed,” added Beatrice. “People of our noble standing shouldn’t even *dream* of saying anything impolite about a friend.”

“‘Shouldn’t,’ huh? I think you gave yourself away with that one.”

Allen and Beatrice locked gazes as both struggled to contain their laughter.

“Ha ha. Anyway, this isn’t a matter to discuss in the middle of the street,” she said.

“No kidding. Are you two gonna continue your investigations?”

“No, we were just thinking about returning to the inn,” said Riese. “We were just talking about what you and Noel were up to.”

“Got it. Hey, shouldn’t you be asking me if Noel is okay?”

“Well, she told us she would be. And she was with you, Allen. To be honest, we weren’t that worried.”

“Ah. Well, why don’t we go back to the inn together?”

With that, the trio returned to their lodgings, discussing what had happened to them since they last parted ways.

“I still haven’t found any leads,” Riese admitted, “but the atmosphere in town is bothering me.”

“The atmosphere?”

“I’ve noticed it too,” added Beatrice. “The place has clearly gotten less lively since we arrived. It seems the effect of the thing in the forest has been greater than we expected.”

“I see...” said Allen. “Well, I don’t think we need to worry about that too much.”

“So you really did go to the middle of the forest?” asked Riese. “Are you

saying you dealt with the cause?”

“Not exactly. I’ll explain later, but it seems like this monster can only be dealt with by a first-rate weapon. And unfortunately, the swords Noel made weren’t quite that good, so we had to retreat for now.”

“This is making less and less sense,” said Beatrice, cocking her head. “I’ve never even heard of... Wait, no, I *have* heard of something like this before.”

“Allen,” said Riese, in a firm tone that caused him to blink in surprise. Her voice sounded as though she was trying to keep her feelings in check, while her downturned, shadowed face bore signs of trying to endure some strong emotion.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” he asked, making a conscious effort to maintain his casual demeanor.

“A first-rate weapon means something like Hauteclaire, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“I see... Well, did you ever ask Noel why she wanted to make a sword more powerful than that?”

“I wasn’t sure how far into it she was willing to get, so I didn’t ask.” Still, it was clear to him that Noel had some reason for wanting to do so, and it was equally clear that she was likely hiding something; too many things lined up.

“I see. Well, I can’t go prying either,” said Riese.

“Maybe we should leave it alone. Our concern is unnecessary anyway.”

“Oh? Are you saying those swords will become first-rate after she’s refined them?” asked Beatrice.

“I think so. Noel said the job will be done by tomorrow.”

“Indeed. So, tomorrow you’ll be able to slay that monster. That would certainly solve the problem, which is why you feel there’s no need to worry about it.”

“I’m still not confident about that. I might be able to hit the creature, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll be able to kill it.”

“It’s you, Master Allen. There’s no way you’ll fail.”

Allen was happy to hear such praise, but all he could do was smirk. With a foe like that, he couldn’t be confident that he would be victorious. He had every intention of defeating the monster, but he couldn’t predict the outcome before he had done battle with it.

Besides, it seemed like the monster wasn’t his only concern. Riese looked at him, her eyes quivering with unease. She was clearly worried about him. Allen peered up at the sky as if trying to see beyond the clouds and let out a small sigh as he wondered what was to come.

The Elf's Feelings

A shadow moved through the darkness that covered the town. Anyone who had seen her would have been suspicious, but for better or worse, nobody was around. In a town like this, which lacked the ability to dispel the darkness, night was a time of rest. Right now, ebullient adventurers and barking merchants alike dreamed deeply in preparation for the coming day. Not a single light disrupted the darkness, and on this particular night even the moon was hidden. With nothing to light the way, the shadow somehow advanced to its destination without hesitation.

This was unsurprising—elves were forest-dwellers, after all. The nighttime forest was blacker than any flatland, and this darkness was nothing in comparison. So the shadow—Noel—had no difficulty navigating the streets. Although she remained alert and conscious of her surroundings, that was only out of an abundance of caution, as nobody else in town had the ability or cause to move about at night like this. Still, even if the likelihood was slim, she could not afford to be obstructed.

Swiftly advancing, Noel reached the outskirts of the town. Adjusting the fabric she carried in her arms, she finally let out a sigh.

“Phew...I should be safe now. She won’t follow me all the way out here,” she muttered to herself as she looked forward. For anyone else, the place ahead would have been where caution was truly required, but for an elf like her it was nothing.

Most monsters, like humans, were inactive at night. Besides, if powerful monsters could be found on the town’s outskirts, people wouldn’t have been able to sleep at night. The town had been built here precisely because no such monsters were close by. So she walked the fields more at ease than in town and soon arrived at the forest, which she entered equally breezily.

In contrast to the settlement, the forest was even busier now than it was during the day, being home to monsters that were active at night. This didn’t

concern Noel, who deftly avoided encounters as if she understood exactly where her foes were—because, in fact, she did. That was no Gift, just a property of her elvish nature. As soon as she entered the forest, everything she needed to know about its present state filled her mind. No fellow elf had taught her this skill; she had always assumed she possessed it instinctively. At first, it had surprised her, but she had now become quite comfortable with it.

“Since the beginning...although living on a mountain, I guess the first time I entered a forest would have been when *she* took me there.”

Her escort having been who it was, the memory was more bitter than nostalgic. The fact that the experience had ultimately taken her to the royal capital did nothing to dull those feelings, despite her understanding that this was nothing more than venting. Those feelings hadn’t faded because the memory of that time was still crystal clear in her mind, a fact she knew she ought to be thankful for. Although it had ended before she knew it, it was for precisely that reason that she wanted to carry those feelings with her.

“As painful as that time was, it’s the reason I have everything I have today,” she mused.

Without that experience, she was sure she would have already given up along the way. She couldn’t even be sure that she would have ever left the capital. While her time there had been plagued with difficulties, it was a pleasant enough place that she would have been content living there for the rest of her life.

“At any rate, knowing this will all be over soon is stirring up all sorts of emotions...even if I still don’t know how it will turn out.”

As she mumbled to herself, she stopped in her tracks. There it was: a great ash-colored beast some forty meters long. There was no doubt it was the monster. She inhaled sharply, all sorts of emotions threatening to burst forth. She quelled them with a clenched fist, ignoring the pain that resulted from her nails digging into her palm. Better to endure it than to see all her efforts come to naught. In Allen’s estimation, the monster’s wounds should be mostly healed by now. One wrong move might be all it took to awaken it.

That’s right, she thought. Those were the wounds from three years ago. It was

already strange enough that they hadn't healed until now. It wouldn't be any more strange if the beast suddenly sprung into action. She traced the freshly healed wounds with her gaze. Surely she was just imagining how familiar they seemed? She hadn't had time to get a good look at such things back then—back when this thing had battled the Champion. The attack on her home had been sudden. She would never, *could* never, forget that day three years ago, when the way of life she had believed would continue forever was brought to an abrupt end.

Only by sheer chance had she survived. None of the swords *she* had forged had been able to wound the attacking monster, even though her Gift of sight told her that each one was worthy of becoming a famed blade in its own right.

Nevertheless, *she* should have been able to escape. While she hadn't known it until that day, *she* was a capable swordswoman in her own right. If she had been content to abandon Noel, she could have gotten away. But no matter how capable with the sword she might have been, it was worthless if her attacks couldn't connect.

And so Noel, pinned underneath the rubble from the initial attack that had destroyed her home, could only watch as *she*, for some reason, continued to challenge the monster. Could only watch as she struggled wordlessly, fruitlessly, failing to inflict a single scratch, until she finally exhausted her energy and was devoured by the beast. Before the very end, too exhausted even to lift a finger, she had worn a satisfied smile on her face.

Then the Champion had appeared, and in an instant, with one swing of her sword, the newcomer had managed to wound the monster, which, until that point, had seemed utterly invincible. It was clear this was not due to her skill with the blade; while Noel, at that point, was no expert in swordplay herself, it was clear that *she* had been more capable than the Champion. The difference was only in the sword itself. Only Hauteclaire, wielded by the Champion, could wound the monster.

To Noel, that seemed absurd. It didn't make any sense. It felt like a denial of all the work *she* had put into forging swords. It was on that day that Noel had resolved to become a blacksmith. As an apology for failing to show up in time, the Champion had accompanied her to the capital, and it was there Noel had

sought to become a smith. While *she* had never taught her a thing, Noel had always been watching her. Replicating her work was no trouble for Noel, not least because of her special sight.

Before she knew it, Noel's service was being sought by the royal family, and she had met and befriended Riese. And yet Noel had remained in the capital for less than a year. She knew that no matter how long she remained in the capital, she would never forge a sword that outstripped Hauteclair there, and that was the very reason she had become a smith in the first place. She was determined to prove that *her* efforts hadn't all been for naught, that if she had lived she could someday have accomplished this task.

Seeking to escape from troublesome distractions, Noel had headed to the Frontier. Even there, however, it had proven impossible...until, after various twists and turns, she had found herself presented with this opportunity.

The Champion had been unable to defeat the monster back then. Although grievously wounded, it had escaped. Noel had only become aware of its presence by sheer coincidence. She had merely been visiting the forest to gather supplies. Whether due to her elven powers, her sight, or simply her obsession, she couldn't say, but she had noticed the monster, and that was enough. Knowing that as long as it dwelled close by, it might attack the town, she was eager to do something about it before she lost her chance to prove herself. More than anything, she was concerned about the town itself—she couldn't stand to lose her home for a second time. And so...

"I've found a capable bearer and forged my finest sword. The only problem left is whether my work is really good enough."

Noel had come here to judge that. The means of proving herself lay here. She uncovered the cloth she was carrying, revealing a single sword. In truth, there was no need to wait until morning for some simple revisions to the blade. There were two reasons she had made Allen wait: first, to finish a second sword, and second, to test it for herself.

Just in case, she had asked Allen if he would have any use for the remaining two swords if she refined those too. The blade she now carried was the one she found most to her liking. She had already placed Allen's sword in clear view in

her house; if she did not return home, he would have no trouble finding it. True, if something went wrong, the awoken monster might attack the town, but that seemed like undue concern. Monsters that were active during the day were rarely active at night, and vice versa. It had been daytime when the monster had attacked her old home, so even if it awoke, it would be unlikely to spring into action. Nothing to worry about there.

In truth, however, Noel was not confident in her success. While Allen had expressed his faith in her abilities, she had yet to dispel her own self-doubt. Nevertheless, even if she was merely a pale imitation of her master, she still had the pride of a blacksmith. She could hardly hand over a piece of work she wasn't sure was truly first-rate and have somebody else test it in battle.

No, that was just an excuse. In truth, she simply wanted to wound the monster with her own hand. While she knew she would probably be killed shortly thereafter, once she had realized that she could leave the rest to Allen, she could no longer contain her desire. She knew that this was an act of pure self-indulgence but had no interest in controlling herself. That was why she was here.

She drew the sword from its sheath. Its blade was lighter and more slender than Allen's. As she prepared to strike, their gazes met.

Will and Resolve

Noel didn't cry out—she was stunned into silence. Confusion and suspicion raced through her mind. Fundamentally, it wasn't that strange that the monster would awaken in this situation, but that it would awaken now, when it hadn't during the day? That made no sense. Had it instinctively recognized that it was at risk of injury? In that case, it seemed that her visit had paid off...not that that was truly why she had come.

Again, the idea of testing the weapon was nothing more than a convenient pretext. If she didn't thrust the blade into the beast with her own hands, it would all be for naught. But Noel was frozen in place by the monster's glare. It had to be instinct; she simply knew that she'd be dead if she moved a muscle. She gulped, half unconsciously. If she had known she would manage nothing more than standing there and running for it, she never would have come to begin with.

Controlling her fear, she took a step forward as she gripped her sword.

"Ack!"

She didn't know what had happened, only that the scene before her was different from what it had been a second ago, and that she felt an overwhelmingly oppressive feeling behind her. With a grunt, she belatedly felt a sensation so agonizing that she could not even writhe in pain. It felt like she had been torn to pieces.

Finally, she understood what was happening. She had been sent flying somehow. Coughing up blood, she realized she had been wounded internally. There was a good chance her outer body was in just as rough shape, but she was too scared to check. She was still unable to move, but in a very different way than before. A single blow from that monster had put her in this state. As pathetic as that was, she had no intention of giving up, but it seemed like her body had already made the decision for her. Besides, her hands were empty.

She saw her sword on the ground before her; she must have dropped it when

she was knocked into the air. Rising to her feet, picking up the sword, and facing down the monster once again seemed, at this point, inconceivable.

That was when she heard it. The sound of footsteps—not the monster’s, but a *person’s*, drawing closer and closer. She couldn’t help but feel hopeful that it was one person in particular. They walked up to her sword and picked it up.

“Hm. Yes, a fine piece of work indeed, this blade. I daresay you could have wounded the Fenrir with this.”

It was a familiar voice, but not who she had hoped. This was none other than the man they had encountered earlier that day while walking to the forest. He was still dressed in the silk hat and tailcoat that ill suited these environs.

Gazing upon the sword, he muttered as if deeply moved. “I only came just in case, but seeing this, it seems it was worth my while. I don’t *think* you’re about to die, but you’re certainly quite wounded. And your dying here just wouldn’t be very interesting.”

Noel had no idea who this man was. Allen hadn’t seemed to know either. Based on his words, however, she could make a guess. In fact, his mumblings seemed designed to enlighten her. Gritting her teeth, she glared at him with hatred in her eyes.

“Y-You!”

“Oh, you can talk? How surprising. I’m sure great pains were taken to ensure that you remained conscious, but I was quite clear that nothing more was necessary.”

Noel soon understood what the man’s words referred to, as a huge being silently appeared behind him. It had to be the giant wolf. The man, however, showed no sign of panic and remained calmly standing in place. As he turned around, the monster bowed its head in an apparent show of reverence.

“Goodness! What am I to do with you? You performed well above expectations before... Why so far below this time? Well, at least you achieved the bare minimum, so I shall let you off the hook for now. But you understand what will happen if you continue to perform like this, don’t you?”

The man’s tone was gentle, but the monster was visibly shaking in fear. Lifting

its head, it looked toward Noel, its intentions clear.

“Anyway, this was all simply playing it safe. I don’t see this as much cause for celebration, nor was the last time. Nor, for that matter, is the fact that *you* came to *us*.”

Noel was confused. “What do you—”

“What do I mean? Exactly what I said. Do you think I brought this monster here to destroy the town? Please. How would I stand to benefit from that? You have been my target from the start.”

Noel gasped. She didn’t understand. She couldn’t imagine any reason someone would target her—if the man was even telling the truth. In that case...

“It was you three years ago too?!”

“Three years? True, I deployed this creature three years ago, but the target then was a dwarf. Yes, she could have turned out to be a real menace if left alone...”

“I knew it!”

“Hm? Were you there back then? I see... Now that I’ve taken a good look, I *do* feel like I’ve seen a sword like this before. So, you were the dwarf’s apprentice, were you? Well, that certainly *is* a coincidence. To think that both student and master alike will be killed by the same monster.”

Noel breathed heavily. More than anything, she wanted to take back her sword and cut this man limb from limb. At the very least, she wished she could get one good punch in. But her body still refused to move. All she could do was glare hatefully.

“Anyway, this sword really is magnificent. More than magnificent, even. Hmm...I had planned to deliver you to them, but perhaps it would be safer to finish it here? Not that you can do much without the use of your body, but... Well, best to be on the safe side. In the worst case, we would only be adding to their strength.”

Noel had no interest in deciphering the meaning of the stranger’s ramblings. No matter what he said, only one thing was on her mind.

“No, perhaps it would be more interesting to keep you for myself? Considering they’ve fallen for it so far, I’m sure everything will work out. So long as I give them the monster, they should have no complaints,” he said, looking toward Noel with an eerily wide grin. “Yes... Will you become mine?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll treat you well, you know. I am renowned for richly compensating those who do my bidding. Don’t worry, I already have one like you in my service.”

“You’re saying you want me to join you?”

“Something like that. Oh, and there’s no need to worry about the Fenrir. You won’t be treated as its subordinate just because you joined up later. You will be treated as equals.”

It wasn’t the worst proposal. At this rate, death was certain. Any way of ensuring that she could go on living was preferable to dying.

“I am happy to give you time to consider my offer,” the man continued.

“No need. I already have my answer.”

“Oh? You mean...”

“Yeah. I’ll be looking down on you, praying for a painful death for you.” She would have spit if she could, but her venomous words would have to suffice.

“I see. Most unfortunate. I truly thought you would make a wiser choice.”

“Don’t make me laugh. You killed my mother! How could I ever join you?”

“Hmm. I see... Oh well. Fenrir!”

With a snap of the man’s fingers, the giant wolf opened its gaping maw, letting out a monstrous cry. Noel refused to look away. Even if there was nothing she could do, she could at least die with pride.

“Feeding time. Eat up.”

The monster’s mouth was right before her eyes now. She wouldn’t avert her gaze or try to avoid it. She knew that a show of will was pointless, but nevertheless, she would oppose them until the very end, just like *she* had.

Still, I wish I didn’t have to die, she thought. Suddenly, she heard a roar.

“Huh?”

The view abruptly changed, and a young man, eyes wide with surprise, was standing there.

“Sorry I’m late,” said the familiar voice.

The Former Hero Rescues the Elf

Allen stood and looked over Noel, then breathed a sigh of relief. While the wounds were by no means shallow, they didn't seem life-threatening. It was only the ongoing shock that was preventing her body from responding to her commands. She would soon be able to move again.

"A-Allen? Why are you..." Noel moaned.

"Now then...I'd love to explain what happened, but I think that ought to wait. Looks like we don't have time," Allen replied, turning to face the gentleman, whose shocked expression changed to one of great interest.

"And now you've shown up too?" said the man. "Well, this is even *more* surprising."

"Is that right? I can't say I'm at all surprised to see *you* here."

"Oh? And why might that be? I don't recall doing anything to make you suspicious."

"What? Seriously?"

The man's outfit alone was practically begging to be regarded with suspicion before he even opened his mouth. Yet he cocked his head in confusion. It seemed he really meant it.

"Hm. I was told that dressing like this would avoid suspicion. You humans certainly are a puzzling lot. Evidently I still have much to learn."

"It's great that you're eager, but I don't think you need to learn any more. Besides, you won't have the chance."

The man laughed. "Not at all. I am learning even as we speak. That won't change in the future."

Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.

Parallel Wisdom: Dimensional Edge.

As the man finished speaking, Allen turned to his left and casually waved his arm. A roar erupted from the empty space in front of him. At the sound—no, at the *sight* of this, the man's face twitched.

From Noel's direction came a bewildered, "Huh? What was that sound?"

"Huh? Oh, don't worry about it," said Allen. "A needy doggy was begging for attention while the adults were talking, so I had to give him a little discipline. I'm not sure if he's learned his lesson, though."

As he spoke, he glanced sideways, using the Eyes of Akasha to examine the great wolflike monster he had sent flying. Although it did not surprise him, he sighed upon confirming that he had not damaged the creature.

"Impossible... How can you see it?! It should have completely disappeared!" cried the man.

"Yeah. It has."

Indeed, the Fenrir was invisible to the naked eye, and even its aura was only hazy. However, once Boundless Knowledge detected something, he could never lose his awareness of it, even if it was able to temporarily render itself invisible to the world.

"Is there something wrong with the crystal? No...it should be working perfectly. Then how?" the man muttered to himself, producing something from his breast pocket and fumbling with it before groaning in frustration. "No, it doesn't matter. Evidently he can see the Fenrir, but I have no real need for it in this place. I simply thought it would prove useful in dealing with the Champion, but it is not wounded. No indeed, no problem at all."

The man was clearly trying to convince himself of something. Allen said nothing—it was to his advantage to allow the stranger to continue letting useful information slip. The fellow soon stopped himself, however.

"You are most interesting. Both in somehow being able to see the Fenrir, and in how you dealt with it earlier... Those were not the movements of someone at Level 1. I suppose this must be a result of your Gift? Yes, most interesting."

"Sorry, but I'm not exactly thrilled to hear that some guy finds me interesting," Allen replied.

“Hah. I suppose such power affords you the leeway to taunt me so. Of course, for that very reason, you must understand that even you cannot wound the Fenrir, eh? So how about it? Will you become mine?” he asked, the look in his eyes conveying how serious he was.

Allen kept his focus on the Fenrir, which had remained poised to attack him ever since he had sent it flying, affording the gentleman only a sideways glance and a shrug. “Shouldn’t you do something about that thing before you ask me? I get the feeling I’m gonna be torn to shreds the moment I agree.”

“I daresay it feels it’s been made a fool of. Indeed, while you are showing some degree of caution, you evidently feel you are safe enough to speak with me. That is difficult for the Fenrir’s pride to endure.”

“That’s great and all, but it doesn’t really help me, does it? You’re saying I’ve failed to teach it a lesson?”

“Unfortunately. Please forgive me—I will be sure to discipline it properly later. And be sure I will not allow it to attack you.”

“So there’s nothing to worry about, huh?”

The man smiled at Allen’s words. He seemed to have recovered his composure after his earlier agitation. In fact, his eyes bore a look of confidence, as if he still hid one last ace up his sleeve—and Allen could guess just what it was.

“Of course, I imagine it won’t be so easy to sway someone of your stature,” said the man. “You could easily escape from this place with that young lady in tow if you saw fit. If you were content to leave us to our own devices, that is.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, no. Nothing more than an observation of fact. I wouldn’t *dream* of threatening you.”

“I’ve gotta admit you’ve got a point. I *would* feel uneasy just leaving without handling this situation first.”

“Oh my. That is just why I was trying to tell you that I have no further designs here, but it seems I have expressed myself poorly. Well, how about this? You

become mine, and I will guarantee the safety of that girl, as well as those other friends of yours. Agree now and there's probably still time."

"What are you—?!" Noel cried, but the man didn't flinch.

This seemed even more of a threat, which of course the stranger was well aware of. While he maintained a cheerful smile, he couldn't hide the sadism in his eyes.

Pretending to think for a moment, Allen replied. "Hmm. Can I ask you one question?"

"Oh? Of course, provided I can answer it."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you can. How should I put this... Why do you assume I had no idea you'd try something like this?"

"Hm?"

While the man was certainly suspicious, it was true that Allen couldn't have predicted his aims—it was for exactly that reason Allen had allowed him to act freely, although he had considered the possibility that Beatrice and Riese might be attacked.

"I could hardly afford not to be cautious when you have a power so well-suited to assassination in your grasp," Allen continued.

That sense of caution was the same reason Allen had been late arriving. Although he had guessed that Noel would come to the forest at night, the various preparations he had to make had held him up. It had been Riese who had helped him predict Noel's actions. While she hadn't been able to explain what was going on in public, she had later mentioned the risk of what Noel might do. Still, in the end, he had still been late, which was hardly something to be proud of.

"Hm...no, no manner of Gift could allow you to accomplish anything in places where you are not present," the man refuted. "Thus you cannot possibly know my plans for those two."

"Go ahead and believe that if it makes you happy," said Allen. "But that's exactly why I have no reason to accept your offer. Besides, why did you assume

I couldn't kill that puppy of yours in the first place?"

The man gulped as Allen turned to face him—not at the intensity of Allen's gaze, but at the fact that Allen had taken his eyes off the Fenrir, which had wordlessly demonstrated that he didn't consider it necessary to pay the Fenrir any mind.

"I see," said the man. "I didn't think you were quite so foolish. Very well. I have no need for fools, no matter how useful."

"Anyway, a beautiful girl is one thing, but who's gonna go along with a weird old man saying 'Be mine'? Even if I really had no other choice, I'd still turn you down."

"How you talk! No need to restrain yourself any longer, Fenrir. Devour him!"

Allen shrugged. It hardly seemed like the Fenrir had been restraining itself before.

Sword of Cataclysm: Sundering Slice.

Allen drew his sword and slashed at the great body of the monster as it pounced, slicing it in two. He nodded in satisfaction at the sensation that vibrated through his arm.

"Yeah...you're even more talented than I thought, Noel. It's even better than I asked for."

"Is that..." Noel began.

"Yeah. I felt guilty about it, but I stopped by your place and borrowed this on the way here. You don't mind, right? I *was* supposed to pick it up, even if I was a little early." Allen flicked the blood off his sword and returned it to its sheath. A crackling sound reverberated throughout the forest, and, as if taking the sound as its cue, the two halves of the monster's huge body hit the ground with a great tremor.

Two Endings

“Th-This can’t... He felled a Fenrir with one blow?! That’s imposs...”

For a few moments, the man gazed dumbfoundedly at the Fenrir, now a silent carcass, but then he took swift action. After hurling his sword at his opponents, he immediately chose to flee.

Though he had thrown the sword accurately at Noel, who was still unable to move, it was rendered ineffective by an effortless swipe from Allen. By the time they had returned their gaze to the man, however, they found that he had vanished, as if lost within the darkness of the night.

“That man, he—” Noel choked out.

“Right, that was a good decision,” said Allen. “As soon as he realized he had no chance of winning, he chose to make himself scarce and ran for his life. A little basic, but everything up until a moment ago was a tough guy act. That sudden shift in attitude was impressive. I hope you don’t mind me saying so?”

“But, Allen, you can surely still see him, right?! If so...”

“Well, if I felt like going after him, I could do it, but there are more important things to do first. Healing you, for one.”

Though Noel’s wounds were not immediately life-threatening, they were not harmless enough to be left untended. The only reason Allen had not treated her wounds yet in spite of the severity was that there had been no time. Although he had been acting like he had all the time in the world, they had, in fact, been left with little leeway. And right now, there was nothing else for him to prioritize.

“I’m fine... Earlier, I was thinking that I might die if things continued as they were, but now that I’ve had time to think, I understand my situation. True, my wounds do need tending, but I shouldn’t be your top priority, should I? Instead, you should worry about those two girls!”

“Nah, I assure you they’ll be fine. That’s no bluff.”

Of course, he could not say for certain that there was no need to worry. Making sure the others were safe was another thing he'd have to deal with, but right now, Noel came first.

"Even though it hasn't been long since we first met, I already consider you a friend, Noel," he told her. "I can hardly leave a friend in a spot like this. Besides...if Riese ever found out I'd done such a thing, she'd get mad at me."

"Well..." It seemed Noel could imagine that scene playing out very clearly.

Noting that she seemed to be at a loss for anything more to say, Allen shrugged. "I get that you're worried, but why don't you hurry up and let me heal you? That'll mean we can get back all the quicker."

"I know...but how do you expect to heal me? You're not carrying a potion or something, are you?"

"Hm? Why would I need anything like that?"

Parallel Paradox: Healing Light.

"Wh-What's this?" Her eyes opened wide, Noel stared at the pale light that enveloped her body. However, perhaps because she was so used to being tended to by Riese, she seemed to quickly realize that her wounds were being healed. "I pretty much knew this already, but you really don't make much sense, do you?"

"Well...you could say that I can do a lot of things pretty well? At least, I think so."

"How can you say that with a straight face?" Noel turned to look at Allen in disbelief, but he simply shrugged again and continued the healing process.

If I keep this up, I'll be done healing her in no time at all, and then we can head back and meet up with the others. But...even though they're probably fine, I can't help but wonder...

Suddenly, his eyes met Noel's. He could detect impatience and unease in them—apparently, she had been thinking much the same thing. Noel must have realized this too, as Allen saw a wry smile creep onto her face.

"If you're worried, you're free to leave me and head back, you know?"

At those words, Allen allowed himself a smile as well, before giving her a shrug for the third time.

She arrived at her destination without any difficulty, although there was nothing too shocking about that. *He* had already investigated this location and, more importantly, it was night. Taking her special ability into account on top of that, there was no chance of her failing to reach her destination.

With all that in mind, the girl, having come as far as the street outside the inn, advanced without displaying any profound emotion. Though it was nighttime and the doors were naturally shut, she showed no sign of being deterred.

Paying the door no mind, she stepped forward, passing straight through it and entering the inn. As expected, it was gloomy inside, such that she could not clearly inspect her surroundings. But she felt fortunate to find herself in deep darkness.

After all, she reasoned, given the circumstances, there'll be no problem with me unleashing this ability.

Copycat: Clairvoyance.

Her ability was not originally meant for seeing in the dark, but since it revealed what was happening around her, achieving the desired result, that was not an issue.

As soon as she found the stairs, she headed toward them, before employing another ability.

Copycat: Invisible.

Once she had erased her own existence once more, she started walking up the stairs, heading for the next floor. The girl suddenly thought to herself, *Why exactly am I doing this?* But no sooner had the thought occurred to her than it receded from her mind again. There was no point in thinking about it. For the time being, the girl was *his* property—nothing more, nothing less. And if she did not wish to die, she had no choice but to do what the man told her to do.

Using her abilities, she could probably run away, but she couldn't believe he'd

failed to consider such a possibility. She could easily imagine dying if she tried. Besides, even if she did get away, what would she do next? She had no home to return to; it had been lost. The town where she was born had been destroyed—by *them*.

It was only a stroke of luck that she had survived. Since she possessed a rare Gift, she had attracted their attention, and not wanting to die, she'd become the man's property. She was certain that the moment she bowed her head to one of those responsible for killing her comrades, her friends, her family, her fate had been sealed.

In any case, it was far too late to do anything about it. If she was going to run away, she ought to have done it much sooner. There had certainly been many chances. But in the end she had failed to choose her own path, insisting to herself that nothing mattered anymore. She knew that nothing would ever change if she stayed where she was, but she was too tired to maintain her own will, to do anything about it.

Although she still found herself wondering why, it was already much too late. She knew that what she was preparing to do was wrong, but still she took the final step.

She had reached the top floor of the inn. With her feet firmly planted on the floor, she remembered what the man had said to her: "Cut off the young girl's head and bring it back to me."

Though she did not understand the purpose of this command, she knew that she had only to do what she was told.

"I don't care anymore," she muttered to herself, before wondering where the young girl in question was and taking another step. Suddenly, she realized that she could see her own feet.

"Huh?"

It was impossible. She had activated her ability at maximum strength. She knew she had to worry about *that boy* as well, so to avoid any chance of discovery, however remote, she had deliberately made it so that she couldn't even see her own body.

So, how...

“Wha—?!”

She felt her entire body freeze from the sudden doubt and confusion. A moment later, she thought she felt a breeze blow past her, and immediately after that, she felt weak in the knees and crumpled to the floor.

I’ve been struck, she realized only moments before her head hit the ground.

It was only then that she finally became aware of a girl standing in front of her. Most likely, this was the girl she had been sent to deal with. So gloomy was the corridor that she could not make out her foe’s expression. Even so, she could tell that a strong light resided in her eyes. It must have been the sight of those eyes that convinced her to give up on fighting back.

There’s no way someone like me, who’s given up on everything, can match someone with eyes like that, she thought to herself.

If she closed her eyes now, she knew the chances were high that she would never open them again. However, in spite of this realization, she found that she did not mind.

Accepting everything, she closed her eyes, along with her mind.

Looking down at the girl she had struck with her sword, lying unconscious on the floor, Beatrice let out a sigh. Allen had told her that there was a possibility this girl would come their way, but at the time, she had hoped his prediction would miss the mark.

Unfortunately, Allen’s prediction had come to pass, so Beatrice could not help but sigh. It was fine that her own eyes had been too clouded to see the truth...

No, it wasn’t fine, and she ought to reflect on her mistake, but that wasn’t what she should be focusing on right now. Throughout her career as a knight, Beatrice had certainly felled all manner of opponents with her sword. Not only monsters, but a fair number of people as well. However, she could not help but feel uneasy at the thought of having struck down a young girl, who was around the same age as her liege. And there was one other thing...

“Lady Riese...what are you doing out of your room? You were told to retreat to another location, to Master Allen’s quarters at the very least. Not only did you brush off that warning, but now you’ve stepped outside your room...”

“I cannot in good conscience wait in a safe location by myself, knowing that you and Allen are expending every effort to protect me.”

Beatrice was sure that these words expressed Riese’s true feelings. And the reality of the situation was that Riese had come to this town partly to serve as bait. Though Allen was probably beginning to figure this out, there was one thing they still hadn’t told him about the matter of the General’s death. That, and the true reason she and Riese had journeyed so far in the first place.

It was not as if they had told him any lies...but they were caught up in somewhat complex circumstances and could not carelessly discuss them with others. If they were going to reveal the truth to Allen, they could only do so once they obtained more information about *someone else* entirely.

Though the secrecy bothered Beatrice, she felt there was no other option. At any rate, this was also related to the reason Riese had chosen to stay here. Most likely, she had been rendered restless by the thought that they might be able to elicit some information from their visitor.

Under normal circumstances, Beatrice would have been duty bound to remonstrate with Riese. But she was unable to do so, feeling obligated to ensure not only her liege’s physical safety, but her emotional well-being as well.

That was why Beatrice decided that she had no recourse. With the young girl sprawled on the floor in front of her, she let out yet another sigh. As she crouched down to tie the girl up, she looked at her liege to beckon her over so that she could heal the girl’s wounds.

After confirming the intense will present in Riese’s eyes, Beatrice thought to herself, *Now then, just what are we to do?*

The Former Hero Ties Up Loose Ends

Allen walked alone along the town's sunlit streets. Then the bustle of the local inhabitants entered his field of view. He knew the town was not this lively simply because it was daytime; it was probably due to the announcement that had come from the guild three days ago, saying that the forest was back to normal.

At first, the adventurers had not been sure if they could believe this report, but once they actually came and confirmed it with their own eyes, a sense of liveliness began to return to the town.

Allen had no idea exactly how lively the town had been before, but there was definitely a stark contrast between now and three days ago. That the town had been so revived in such a short time showed just what the people living on the frontier were capable of, for better or worse.

Moreover, although it may seem obvious, Allen's party had had something to do with this change. Rather, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he was the sole cause of it. After all, the announcement had been directly thanks to his dumping the Fenrir's corpse at their feet. Allen had gone to the guild first thing in the morning and announced that he had a monster carcass too heavy for him to carry, requesting their help in transporting it before leading them to the spot where it had fallen.

He had led them much too far into the forest for their comfort, to the point where one guild member even piped up and said, "I cannot help but wonder if you might be tricking us!" But that was hardly Allen's fault.

In any event, once they had seen the carcass for themselves, they decided that the Fenrir had been the cause of all the unrest in the forest. But they must have been anxious as well, given that they proceeded to put out the announcement without delay.

Though the beast's presence was certainly the reason for the unrest, there was no guarantee that the forest would return to normal as a result of its

defeat. They probably should have waited at least a week to see how things went, but it wasn't Allen's place to criticize them, and in the end, their swift action had resulted in the lively town he saw before him.

He did not mind if anyone thought of this as being the fruits of the guild's bold decision-making. And that same guild looked to be extremely busy for the time being.

Allen had more or less realized this the instant he had examined the Fenrir's level, but it was quite an impressive specimen, to the point where the guild was having a hard time finding buyers for the resulting materials. The more valuable something was, the less inclined they were to hand it over to the wrong people.

That was part of the reason Allen had not, in fact, received his compensation for handing over the beast. Until the monetary value of those materials was determined, they would be unable to decide how much to pay him. On top of that, they had told him that they simply didn't have enough money right now. Of all the rotten luck, apparently something of equal—or even greater—value had been brought in at around the same time.

Then again, it was Allen's party who had brought in the other haul as well. Supposing that this was the perfect time to do so, they finally handed over the as yet unprocessed materials from the slain dragon.

"I must inform you that this is not the perfect time for us at all!" were the words that greeted Allen, but that was hardly his concern. He had let them off with only half the haul, so he had hoped the guild would cut him some slack.

Allen considered as he saw the guild, still enjoying a day of roaring business, out of the corner of his eye, but he carried on walking. He had no particular business with them today. His business would be conducted a little farther up the road.

Finally, he arrived at a location that had recently become very familiar to him and remarked to himself that the sword standing upright next to the front door looked to have been newly forged. After taking a good look at the weapon, he walked through the door.

No sooner had he done so than a familiar sight entered his view.

“Welcome...”

Allen was greeted by a voice lacking much intonation, and a face with a matching attitude. Recognizing the voice that he had grown used to hearing, and that expressionless brown face, which he had begun to grow used to seeing, Allen let out a wry chuckle.

“Yep, I think it’s great that you’ve learned how to greet people. As soon as you’ve learned how to smile too, you’ll have it down pat, I guess?”

“Smile?”

“Erm, I don’t think I said anything that warrants such a puzzled look?”

With a grin of his own, Allen thought to himself, *Well, I guess perhaps we shouldn’t expect too much.*

He had no intention of forcing these customs on her, and there was nothing wrong with her learning them little by little.

As Allen continued chatting with the youngster, a familiar face emerged from the back of the shop.

“My, Allen, you’ve come once again. Are you already so fond of this young lady?”

“I don’t want to invite any misunderstandings, so could you stop talking like that? Anyway, aren’t you the one who’s grown so fond of her?”

“Well, sure, maybe you could say that.”

More accurately, Noel was concerned about the girl, but she saw no reason to come out and say so.

“You...like Mylene?” the little girl asked slowly.

“Let me think...” Noel pondered. “At the very least, it’s not unpleasant having you here? Thanks to you, I can spend all day cooped up in the workshop without worrying.”

“I see... Good?”

“Are you looking for confirmation, or is that your opinion of what I said? Well, which is it?”

Allen watched the exchange unfold between the two, and with a small sigh of relief, he thought that things seemed to be going well enough for now.

When Noel had announced that she intended to take the child in, Allen had wondered how things might turn out, but no problems seemed to have arrived so far, and perhaps he could stop coming so frequently to check on them.

Though there is hardly a need to state this more plainly, it was Noel's shop that he was standing in right now, and the young girl—Mylene—was the same girl who had previously traveled with the man who had brought the Fenrir to town. This was also the same girl who had infiltrated the inn where Riese and Beatrice were staying, only to be beaten back.

According to her, she had come with the intent of killing Riese, so one might call it a failed assassination attempt. It goes without saying that, even in this world, that was a serious crime, and considering the intended victim was royalty, a capital sentence would not be out of the ordinary.

The only reason she had avoided such a fate was that they had considered her extenuating circumstances. Riese did not want it, and they had therefore arranged a sort of plea bargain. While the agreement was both informal and irregular, considering they were in the Frontier, that was unlikely to be an issue.

Regarding the extenuating circumstances in question, it appeared that Mylene had been forced into servitude to the strange man. He had not simply enslaved her, but rather using his Gift or some other ability, he had applied sufficient coercion that her own thoughts were rendered irrelevant. Therefore, they had come to the decision that Mylene could not be considered entirely culpable for her crime.

This is what led to their quasi-plea bargain, the main upshot of which was that they had managed to extract information from the girl. That being said, the man hadn't told Mylene all that much. Still, they were able to learn two fairly important pieces of information.

The first was that the man was actually a *demon*. There was no record of anyone interacting with a confirmed demon before, so this was fairly significant news. Purely as a piece of information, it had value, and the realization that a demon had walked the streets of this town with such an unremarkable face was

important to know. That was more than enough to diminish the girl's crime in their eyes.

The second thing they learned made it almost certain that a demon had been involved in the case of the assassinated general. Mylene testified that she had heard the man talking about that very incident. Though her testimony was the only evidence they had, it was not as if they were about to indict the demons themselves. Just knowing that such beings were involved was more than enough.

And (although including this in fact made it three pieces of information) they were able to get Mylene to tell them that the man appeared to be in regular contact with someone else. The matter with the General had already strongly suggested that the demons had formed an alliance with another group, but this simply reinforced their suspicions.

And so, having obtained this much information, they did not decide to clear Mylene of all charges, exactly, but Allen's party determined that there was no need to make her answer for her crimes. As for whether or not Mylene was spouting lies...not a chance. If she had been lying, Allen would have known.

From his life experience, Allen usually had some idea of whether or not people were lying, but he had only to use his Boundless Knowledge to be sure. This involved using Boundless Knowledge to tell whether or not a piece of information was true, rather than judging whether someone was lying, but having checked, just to be safe, he had found nothing amiss with anything the girl had told them.

Mylene, too, had displayed an interesting ability, allowing her to make herself invisible, but she had copied this from the demon using her Gift. When the demons had learned such an ability existed, they were shocked and prized Mylene highly as a result. But that was no longer important.

Although Mylene would not be formally charged for her crime, however, the question of what to do with her remained. They could hardly turn her out onto the streets, for a number of reasons. In that moment, Noel had unexpectedly nominated herself for the task of taking the young girl in.

"I've been looking for someone to help me mind the shop," said Noel at the

time, although Allen couldn't help but think that she might have another reason.

Later, Noel herself explained the reason she had insisted on making a weapon to surpass Hauteclair. She made it clear that this explanation was not meant to serve as an apology for getting them caught up in this perilous incident, but having successfully questioned Mylene, they had heard something of the Amazon girl's past, if only a rough outline, and it seemed to Allen that something in her story had resonated with Noel.

Only Noel herself knew her reasons, yet Allen did not think that his guess was likely to be far off. Anyhow, it transpired that, from that day onward, the two would live together.

"Excuse me. Sorry to intrude... Wait, Allen?"

While Allen was watching the shop's two residents, reminiscing on the events that had brought them together, Riese and Beatrice walked in. They had probably come for the same reason as he: to see how Noel and Mylene were doing.

Since Mylene had moved into the shop, Allen had found himself coming every day, only to bump into Riese and Beatrice, so there was no need for them to state their purpose.

"Today as well... Quite the coincidence," Riese observed.

"No kidding," Allen replied. They shared a wry smile and he gave them a shrug.

Of course, in Allen's case, it would have been better to say that he had come to make sure that nothing was out of the ordinary with Mylene. It has already been stated that Mylene was previously bound in servitude by the power of a demon, which resembled a Gift. And it was clear that she would not be able to break that off unilaterally.

Strictly speaking, it was not a Gift but a demonic power, but the principle remained the same. Allen had broken the connection himself, by force, employing his Parallel Wisdom skill. But there was no guarantee that this would not lead to side effects, which was why he had been coming to check on her

every single day.

“Well, it is starting to look like we might not need to come all the time,” he noted.

“Hmm...” Beatrice murmured. “There certainly seems to be no cause for concern.”

“I suppose not...” Riese agreed. “When Mylene first arrived, it definitely seemed like they were still feeling each other out, but now they appear to be getting along quite naturally.”

“Hold on a second,” Noel interjected. “Could you maybe stop observing us and giving your opinions right in front of us?”

“Mylene...doesn’t really mind,” said the girl.

“I do mind,” Noel protested, with a truly chagrined look on her face.

Allen and the others all cracked a smile, but then he remembered something. “Come to think of it, what about the materials I gave you, Noel? I haven’t heard your thoughts on those.”

“My thoughts? I don’t really know what to tell you. Let me see... They certainly looked like the highest-class materials, so it’ll be worth it to try working with them. But at the same time, they’re just as hard to work with as people say, so nothing’s taken shape yet. Once I have something to show you, I intend to... Well, all I’d like to say now is to expect great things.”

“I see. Then I’ll wait for the moment, but I’ll expect a lot.”

The materials in question were those harvested from the dragon. Half of them had been handed over to the guild, but Allen had given the rest to Noel. He had thought that the guild would be unable to manage the whole lot, but he was sure Noel could make use of whatever was left over, so he was speaking from the heart when he told her his hopes were high.

“Now then...I’ve checked that you two are doing all right, so I think I’ll be on my way,” he announced.

“Really?” said Riese. “I thought we could all relax here a little longer.”

“This is actually my place, you know?” Noel remarked. “But I won’t really stop

you if you want to stay.”

“I’m happy to hear that, but I’ve got one or two errands to run. I only remembered them just now.”

“Hmm...do you need any help?” asked Beatrice.

Allen smiled. He had to admit that she was as perceptive as ever, but he genuinely didn’t expect his plans to take any more effort than an errand. He was grateful for her consideration, but in the end he shook his head.

“No, I don’t think I will.”

“Hm, right. Well, see you later, then.”

“Yep. See you both later. Noel and Mylene, I’ll see you another day.”

“Indeed. Next time you come, I’ll make sure to have something to show you,” Noel promised.

“I’ll be waiting...until the next time you pay us a visit?”

“If you can remember not to phrase that as a question and not tilt your head in confusion, you’ll have that down perfectly. Well, see ya. Next time I hope I’ll be greeted with a smile.”

Having said that, Allen left Noel’s place behind. He walked for some time until he found himself outside the town. After casting his eyes over his surroundings, he got the feeling that he would have looked quite foolish if anyone had been watching him.

“All right...looks like no one’s around. In that case...”

Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.

Sword of Cataclysm: Dimension Slash.

He casually swung his sword through empty space. That was all. After exhaling briefly, he slowly placed his sword back in its scabbard.

“So, what to do now?”

He turned on his heel and returned to town. Surrendering himself to the hustle and bustle, he began making plans for the days to come.

The man continued moving at full speed. Three days had passed since *the encounter*. Although a fair bit of time had elapsed, his pace had not slowed for one moment. He was already quite a distance away from the scene, and he had looked back a number of times to confirm that no one was following him.

Even so, he was unable to feel so much as a shred of relief. He couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been watching him the whole time, so he kept on running.

"Really, though..." the man muttered to himself. "What was that, exactly? The very thought of it makes me tremble uncontrollably..."

The Fenrir had been killed with just one blow. That fact alone was certainly threatening, but what the man had detected was far more inexplicable—or perhaps "unfathomable" would be a better word. Instinctively, he had felt that it would be better not to get any closer to the being he had encountered.

"For now, I have to report what I saw. We should retreat from that place. No, for safety's sake, perhaps we ought to withdraw from the kingdom entirely."

The truth was that he was supposed to go straight back to make his report anyway, but he wanted to get away as soon as possible. Besides, once he reported to his kingdom of origin, his people would probably choose to withdraw. If something happened before then...unfortunately, they would have to reap what they sowed and then give up.

"Still, I probably shouldn't have left *that* behind. I've already taken preventive measures, so I wouldn't expect any leaking of information. Ah, come to think of it, I haven't made contact with them yet, have I? I tend to think I can probably just ignore them from now on... No, was anyone else on the move? If so, perhaps I'd better say something, which will also serve as a warning."

While muttering all this to himself, which also served to organize his thoughts, the man found that he had finally regained his composure and was able to reflect on his actions up until that point. He smiled wryly to himself.

"No matter how dangerous a being I was faced with, I was far too lacking in composure. Good grief, that really isn't like me. Now then, having fled this far, I

no longer need to worry about anyone pursuing me. It's about time I..."

What left him suddenly puzzled was the fact that his feet had stopped moving. Certainly, he had just been thinking of stopping, but he had no memory of having actually done so.

"What?" A foolish utterance escaped his lips as he looked down at his own body.

His response was understandable. Nothing of him existed below the waist any longer, having fallen to the ground some distance behind him.

Perhaps noticing this allowed him to finally react naturally, as he coughed up a mouthful of blood, and his upper body plummeted to the ground.

"Im...possible. Was I...attacked? But...there was no sign...of anyone around..."

Even as he told himself that, in reality, some part of the man had known instinctively that someone had launched an attack at him. He knew how far outside the realm of possibility it might lie, yet his instincts told him that this was the work of the boy.

"Just how much...can you..."

Really...who or what did I mess with?

As that hazy fear set the man's heart trembling, his consciousness was overtaken entirely by darkness.

On the Brink of a Frenzy

A shiver passed reflexively through Brett's body at the sound that echoed through the room. Normally, he was the one making such noises, which was why he felt something so unreasonably close to fear.

No, on the other hand...it might actually have been that his father, always the model of composure, was the one making this noise.

"Damn it! You've got to be joking!"

Though his father's words were similar to those Brett often spoke, they carried a totally different kind of menace. Even though Brett knew that his elder's rage was not directed at him, he could not help but shudder when his father slammed his fist down on the desk. He knew the reason his father was so infuriated. It was not because he had just received some sort of report—quite the opposite. Nearly ten days had passed without the regular reports they had come to expect, and Craig's patience had reached its limit.

"That worthless scum! In moments of truth, they're no use at all, are they?!"

He did not seem at all bothered by the unpleasant sounds emanating from his desk. Another dull thud reverberated through the room as he slammed his fist down once more.

"Bah! Bah! Bah!"

If there was a difference between Craig and Brett, it was the vast gap in life experience. Without needing anyone else to tell him to calm down, once he had got some of his frustration off his chest, the duke's breathing slowed and he began to regain his composure. He knew that if he remained in this fit of rage, it would not lead to anything.

"I'm sorry, Brett. It's not like me to fly off the handle that way."

"N-Not at all! I think your reaction is to be expected. Anyone would be furious."

Though Brett still felt a little frightened when his father finally spoke to him, seeing that his father was mostly back to his normal self, he was able to reply with a relieved expression on his face.

After peering at Brett's face out of the corner of his eye, Craig nodded in acknowledgment of what his son had said, but his mind had already turned to another matter: the matter of what to do next. Considering they had still received no word, Craig was forced to conclude that their collaborator had failed.

Though he was vexed, there was nothing to be gained from discussing it further. He would not only have to give up on capturing the saint, but most likely the Elven Monarch as well. He wondered why the demon had failed, considering he had been brimming with confidence at first...

"The Elven Monarch is not supposed to be that adept in combat. That being the case, should we infer that this was the work of the saint?"

"Father? What in the world are you talking about?" asked Brett.

Apparently, Craig had unwittingly blurted out his thoughts. However, deciding that this was a perfect opportunity, the duke resolved to explain himself. While he did not really think that Brett would be able to offer any constructive insight, it would still serve to organize his thoughts.

"Hm? Ah, sorry... I was just wondering how our plans have failed yet again. After so many failures, it's only natural to think about what caused them. The saint has been involved in every one of our failures so far. I assumed at first that the Champion was the cause..."

"But with all that's happened, you're saying there's a possibility that the saint was behind it? Surely she wouldn't be capable of making such an impact, though?"

"I guess not. Even if she has raised the level of her abilities, that shouldn't be enough to allow her to contend with an opponent so many levels above her. Although her restorative powers do pose a threat, it is in a different way than offensive abilities would. However, now that I think about it, compared to the other four players, the saint is far too ordinary, in which case..."

“You’re saying it wouldn’t be at all unexpected for there to be a much greater influence at play?”

In the end, Craig was only building hypotheses one on top of the other. It was rather like working backwards from the circumstantial evidence they had, but this inference did explain a lot. It was almost like... Yes, it was almost like, there could be no explanation for everything that had happened so far unless some kind of hero was present on the opposing side.

“Perhaps if we assume that the saint has such a quality in her as well, that could explain everything.”

“It certainly could. But in that case, what should we do?”

Craig did not answer. Or it would be more accurate to say that he *couldn’t* answer the question. If he could have, his mind would not have been working along these lines in the first place.

Frustrated that he was not even beginning to approach a solution, he nearly tutted in irritation but managed to restrain himself. It was more important to decide what to do next. At the very least, there was no chance that they would be giving up. Their plan was already in motion. He wouldn’t allow anyone to stop him now—he couldn’t even stop himself. His patience had run out, and he would not tolerate any more failure.

While Craig was mulling over the possibility of all-out war should it come to that, *it* suddenly appeared in his hands. He gasped.

“Father! Is that...”

It was a black piece of parchment. At a glance, it might seem a little ominous, but it was the method of communication favored by *them*—the demons. Craig didn’t know how they did it.

Finally, he thought, somewhat bitterly, as he was certain that this would be a report of their failure. He didn’t know what excuses they had come up with this time, but he could hardly leave it unread either.

Before he could voice his complaints, however, he would have to check what the message said. As he felt his anger surge once more, he took care not to crumple the parchment in his fist and began reading. He was only able to feign

composure at the start of the letter. With his emotions welling up inside him, he felt his arms, his whole body, start to tremble against his will.

“Father? What in the world does it say?”

Craig heard Brett’s voice, but he could not bring himself to answer. He proceeded to read the letter all the way to the end, then slammed the parchment down on his desk. With his emotions overflowing, he began to laugh uproariously.

“Heh, heh heh hee...bwa ha ha ha!”

“Father?!”

Brett looked at Craig as if he were a madman, but this did not bother the duke in the slightest.

“Brett, it begins. Prepare yourself.”

“Uh...okay? What in the world am I prep— No, you don’t mean...”

So, you’ve finally realized what’s happening, thought Craig. As an expression of shock fell over Brett’s face, a wild grin spread across his own.

Indeed, the contents of the parchment could be summarized in just one line. In other words...

“The archbishop is ours.”

Their desired outcome had finally come to fruition. Having recovered from the shock, Brett understood what this news truly meant, and with a gasp, he gave a smile to match Craig’s.

“You mean that, having already dealt with the General, we can make the archbishop do whatever we want? Is that what you’re saying?!”

“Yes. Quite literally, at that. Now, then...we can begin, after all this time.”

It truly had taken a long time, but as long as they could have their revenge, whatever followed was of no consequence.

“So...shall we begin to exact our revenge?” *Against this kingdom—against God.*

With a grim smile, Craig murmured these final words to himself, as if making a

declaration.



A Bouquet for the Moon, a Faithful Heart for Thee

The moon was beautiful that night. Looking up, it was almost like a perfect circle had been cut out of the sky.

It was shockingly silent, with no sound besides that of the campfire crackling at his feet. So quiet was the night that he suddenly thought that extinguishing the fire would remove all sound from this place, although he knew that was nonsense.

“Come to think of it, this might be the first time I’ve spent a night outdoors like this since I was reincarnated, maybe?” Allen muttered to himself while gazing idly at the night sky.

Strictly speaking, he had spent a night outdoors before, only he had been sleeping in a horse-drawn carriage that night and hadn’t been allowed to venture outside.

He hadn’t before experienced a night without a roof over his head, where he was able to gaze up at the night sky. He now realized that this was what night had always been in this world. Though the moon and the stars were beautiful, their light was not enough to illuminate the overwhelming darkness that surrounded them.

The darkness and silence were so profound that Allen felt like, if he extinguished his campfire, he would be swallowed up by it. The night was the only thing that had not changed in any respect when he came to this new world. It provoked a primal fear in Allen that he had not yet been able to shake off. No matter how people might try to deny it, everyone had to contend with death. That must be why people sought help from one another and cooperated. Of course, it was very important that there was trust between people to make that possible...

“Of course, I know someone who’s a little too trusting—or should I say far too vulnerable?” Allen almost grumbled as he turned to look to his side.

He was now facing a lone carriage. Only, this was no normal carriage, as one could easily tell from the cloak of darkness that surrounded it. If bandits were to happen upon it, its cover would be almost too obvious, to the point where they would likely hesitate to attack it.

Before considering whether or not they might find anything of value inside, they would come to the realization that if they weren't careful, things could end badly for them. But it so happened that a certain someone—the first princess of the kingdom, in fact—was fast asleep inside. Accompanied by her good friend and personal bodyguard, Allen alone had been left on guard duty, so he would not get to sleep.

In spite of repeating himself, Allen thought again that she was too vulnerable. To be fair, he had suggested this arrangement himself. It was enough to have one person stay awake and on guard duty, and Riese might get lonely if she had to sleep alone.

That was exactly the problem, though. Belonging as it did to the royal family, not only was the exterior of the carriage quite magnificent, but it was very spacious inside, enough that one could sleep lying down. With all their luggage outside, there was more than enough room for Riese and Beatrice to both sleep within...yet as roomy as it might be, it was still just a carriage. If an attack came from outside, those inside would not be able to mount a robust defense.

Simply put, if Allen felt like it—no, even if he were to lead someone else here with an attack in mind—those two would be in extreme danger. Despite this, neither of them had worried about their own safety and had instead worried about Allen, saying that they couldn't leave everything to him. It was clear from their words that they were being genuine. It *is* possible to be too good-natured, after all.

Allen knew that this stemmed from the trust they had in him, and he had no memory of ever being trusted so wholeheartedly before. Once upon a time, they had met each other frequently enough, but there had been no communication between them for the past five years or so. For the sake of convenience, the old days would have to remain the old days. And yet, he really couldn't remember being trusted so deeply before. In the old days, things were a bit more... A bit more...

“Nah, at the same time, I feel like things were pretty much this way from the start,” he said to himself.

It was not as if Riese had no concept of doubting other people. She had been educated as a member of the royal family, and he was sure that, at least the first time they had met, she’d been a bit more cautious, more distant.

“Come to think of it...”

As he looked up at the sky once more, a thought suddenly occurred to Allen. The first time he had met Riese was on a night much like this, with the wind blowing and a beautiful moon in the sky.

The moon had been so beautiful that night, though Allen landed on that thought mostly to escape what was bothering him. He’d looked up at the sky to distract himself from troubling thoughts; there was no other reason than that.

First of all, he was entirely out of place here, no matter how important he was considered as the eldest son of a duke...

“Having said that, one mistake had already occurred at that point in time.”

Why on earth is this happening to me? he wondered as he let out a sigh.

This question carried two meanings: how had he ended up where he was at the moment, and why had he been reincarnated as the eldest son of a duke in the first place?

The latter question bothered him in particular, enough so that he felt he could interrogate someone about it for the better part of an hour. Of course, there was no one in this world to interrogate, so there was no point even thinking about it.

This was all just part of his effort to escape from reality, but no matter how desperately he struggled, he could not ultimately flee, especially because he could not help but pick up every sound within ear shot, almost like it was a habit.

Whether he liked it or not, this forced him to comprehend his current situation. On top of that, the majority of what he heard were words of approval or disapproval for him, so he could not help but cringe.

Prodigy.

Allen let out another sigh at the sound of that word, which he overheard more than any other. The worst part of it was that they were not using the word sarcastically. They really meant to praise him from the bottom of their hearts.

It was this that made Allen cringe. If he were a normal child or simply had a personality that allowed him to take pride in his own abilities, he might have felt differently. But neither option applied to him.

Memories from his past life swept through his mind. The title of “hero,” words of acclaim. And yet...he just wanted them to stop.

“I’m not a prodigy at all” was something he had no intention of actually saying. In fact he did not conceive of himself in those terms, but on his fifth birthday...that is to say, just the other day, it had been made obvious as a matter of objective fact: his stats all numbered 5.

Truthfully, this did not seem quite so incredible to him, but it was more than enough to justify an extravagant event. When he turned his head slightly, the ceiling entered his vision. A chandelier was hanging there, making it obvious at a glance that he was in a place of luxury.

The place Allen found himself right now was usually called a ballroom. And it would come as no surprise that the event that was being held was a ball. Not only that, but it was meant to be Allen’s debut. When he complained about an extravagant event being held, this was what he referred to.

If it had merely been the result of his parents being stupid, that wouldn’t have been so bad, but that was almost certainly not the case here. He knew that much, at least.

When he returned his gaze to what lay in front of him, he immediately regretted it. A gaudy ballroom, people in resplendent clothing, the exchange of conversation and laughter... But what resided in their eyes and hung heavily over the whole room was their murky, oozing desire.

Allen was the eldest son of a duke, and expectations for his future had increased in accordance with his identification as a prodigy. The fact that they

all praised him wholeheartedly spoke to the value they recognized in him. As the majority of those in attendance were either nobles or wealthy merchants, this was only to be expected.

Allen had spent his time sitting and gazing at the moon to distract himself from the constant praise directed at him and ignore any attempt by others to approach him. His father would consider that to be disobedience, but unfortunately for the duke, Allen didn't care. If his father thought he was going to deal with their flattery for his sake, he had another thing—

“Um...isn't the moon pretty?”

Just as Allen was about to return his gaze to the sky, a voice beside him made him reflexively turn, and he could not help but be surprised.

There were two reasons for that. The words that had been spoken, along with the very young, lisping voice that had uttered them, and the sight of the little girl, around Allen's age, whose appearance did not match her voice, although her face very much fit her overall appearance. It was almost terrifyingly refined in its features.

Her silver hair was translucent in the bright light, and her golden eyes turned to look at him even as they trembled. If he had met her directly beneath the night sky, illuminated only by the moon, he might have taken her for a fairy or something. Her appearance was just that perfect, and he couldn't help but think such nonsense. Even her childishness seemed almost calculated.



It was possible that, had he not known who she was, he might have fallen in love with her on the spot. Perhaps it was fortunate that this was not the case. Given who she was, however, Allen realized that he had just made an error. He shouldn't have reacted to her words at all.

"Although...how could I have predicted that I would receive a *confession of love* from a little girl?" he murmured to himself.

It's important to clarify that Allen knew this wasn't actually what had happened. He *understood* it, but...

"Um...I'm only asking this to make sure I understand you, but what did you mean by what you said just now?" he inquired, seeking confirmation.

The girl responded with a puzzled look.

"Huh? Well...you kept looking at the moon, so I thought you must be fond of it..." *Am I wrong?* her expression seemed to say.

Allen could not stop a slight smile from crossing his lips. The girl's assumption was correct; or rather, Allen had deliberately acted in such a way as to give that impression, so it was sensible for her to think that.

He had put this strategy in place in order to evade troublesome interactions, but the result was that he had ended up suddenly thinking peculiar thoughts and reacting accordingly. This was entirely a mess of his own making.

Good grief, it's not as if she actually spoke those words to me. I mean, in fact, no one ever has.

On top of that, the fact that he had realized who was speaking to him the moment he heard her voice had made matters especially difficult. The words themselves... Strictly speaking, it was a matter of how Allen interpreted the meaning of those words, and who had spoken them. With the two factors combined, he had been unable to suppress his reaction.

The reason he had been able to identify the speaker by her voice alone was not, in fact, because the two of them knew each other. It was simply the fact that, including Allen himself, there were only two children present at the ball.

This was also the reason Allen immediately bowed his head.

“It was inexcusable of me to ask such a peculiar question. Allow me to apologize for not introducing myself sooner as well. I am Allen Westfeldt, eldest son of the Duke of Westfeldt. I hope we can be better acquainted in the future, Princess Riese.”

Riese Adastera.

That was the name of the little girl standing in front of him, which meant she was the kingdom’s first princess. Imagining that he had received a confession of love from someone of such importance, even for an instant, was inexcusably disrespectful.

Once he had announced himself, without showing a shred of the mortification he felt, the girl, fretting, spoke as well.

“Oh...not at all... You see, I’ve also been introduced to all sorts of people and simply had no opportunity to greet you until now...”

Though this was no doubt the truth, it was not quite right for her to apologize. This was a party being held in Allen’s honor. If others had tried to prevent the princess from greeting the guest of honor, they were the ones at fault. Or to put it more precisely, they had clearly prevented her from doing so. This was because some people did not relish the idea of the eldest son of a duke and the first princess growing close, even on a small scale.

If anyone had made too obvious an attempt to detain the princess, they would not have been able to complain if they were subsequently escorted off the premises. In fact, some of them had probably already been removed, and that was why she had finally come to greet him.

With that in mind, Allen swiftly cast his gaze across the hall and spotted some of the guests who had been impeding her. It looked like they hadn’t been escorted away after all...so what was going on? Allen thought he spied something in their eyes... Shock and resignation?

Out of a mild sense of curiosity, he paid close attention to them and thought he perceived those emotions in their eyes. There was really no mistaking what had happened...

“Umm...well, in that case, I should say that I am also late in introducing

myself. I'm Riese Adastera. I hope we can get along, Lord Allen."

Her words snapped him back to reality. He returned his prying gaze to the young girl and narrowed his eyes as he fixated on a whorl atop her head of hair. He felt like her choice of words was slightly off, but regardless of her status, he was still dealing with a five-year-old girl.

Taking that into account, it was probably fair to say that she was quite precocious for her age, given she could carry on a conversation as well as this. Was that thanks to her education or her own innate qualities? Allen didn't know, but it didn't matter.

Another reason it had taken so long for them to greet one another was that Allen himself had deliberately avoided her. Considering his position, he could not expect to avoid the royal family entirely, but since he was not overly fond of them, he wanted to avoid dealing with them whenever possible. Though they had just exchanged greetings, he could not be sure whether or not they would ever speak again, so surely it didn't matter why the girl seemed so precocious.

"The thing is...you and I, Lord Allen, seem to now be betrothed."

"Huh?"

Faced with this bombshell, which the girl had delivered while blushing ever so slightly, Allen could not help but respond with a foolish interjection.

"No...in hindsight, I don't think she was overly cautious or distant, was she?"

Thinking back on the night he had first met Riese, Allen cocked his head in puzzlement. Though Riese had called him "lord" at the time, he felt like her overall manner toward him was not so different. Perhaps she tended to stutter back then not due to a sense of cautiousness, but nervousness. Though she had certainly acted more distant back then, he thought it was surely natural for a person to be even more distant upon meeting someone for the first time.

"I was totally distant, after all..."

At the time, Riese had been much too composed for her manner to be explained by the fact that she was only a child. It was difficult to imagine that

was the case. If it wasn't that, the most likely reason for her nervousness was that she had already learned that she and Allen had been betrothed. However...

"That hardly matters now, does it?"

One thing was certain: tomorrow, once Riese and Beatrice were awake, he was going to have to tell them exactly what he had been thinking. He was sure that they knew already, but they could not let their guard down so easily just because they were with an acquaintance. Of course, they probably wouldn't want to hear that from a man they regarded as nothing more than an acquaintance they had met for the first time in several years.

"But it wouldn't be true for me to say that I regard her as a mere acquaintance either..."

As far as Riese was concerned, surely this was a matter of no consequence. But for Allen, that was not the case.

"Well...I could say that it isn't a big deal; it really isn't."

With a wry smile, Allen looked up at the sky once more.

Come to think of it, what did the sky look like back then?

The eldest son of a duke, a prodigy, was betrothed to a princess. Not only that, but the one who announced this fact to the young boy was the princess herself. That this event sparked a commotion surprised absolutely no one. From that day, five years seemed to fly by.

Though the betrothal had caused quite the stir at the time, at the end of the day, people's interest was fickle. Nowadays, even if Allen attended a party, no one would make the same fuss that they used to. There was no need for him to gaze up at the sky to escape attention. Therefore, Allen was only looking skyward right now in order to pass the time.

"I guess you could say this is exactly what I was hoping for, or at least a desirable outcome."

As those words, which he meant sincerely, tumbled from his lips, he couldn't help wondering what might come next. The fact that he was attending a party

was enough to ensure that those around him would not remain entirely silent. Thanks to the fact that no more words and actions had been issued to needlessly elevate Allen, a wide variety of topics bloomed among the conversations around him.

Just as he always had, Allen could not help but pick up that noise, almost like a bad habit. *This or that family is in trouble, this or that family made a big mistake...* The conversations of the nobility seemed to tend along those lines. Indeed, it was just like the nobility to talk about such things. In other words, being a noble was about seeing how well you could avoid saying what you truly felt. There was no meaning to the words themselves, but behind those words were the speakers' true feelings, which heavily decorated everything they said.

And yet, no matter how well they might hide their true feelings, it couldn't change what they felt. These words also described them: "The eyes are windows to the soul."

While involuntarily letting out a sigh, Allen felt the other guests train their eyes on him even as they carried on their conversations. There was no way Allen could not pick up on the emotions that were so blatantly contained within, though he noticed something in their eyes that was different from years before.

No, perhaps it would be better to say that in another way, it was no different from what he had observed back then. There was no need for them to even look his way.

The chandelier Allen could see out of the corner of his eye made it very clear that the same murky, oozing desires were once again swirling throughout the room. It was in some sense inevitable that he would overhear a certain word as he eavesdropped on those in attendance. In fact, one could say it was remarkable that no one had spoken it until then. The word was just that fitting.

Good-for-nothing.

Once he finally heard it, Allen sighed thrice.

I see, so you finally went there...

As if that first utterance had served as a trigger, he soon heard similar words

pass the lips of guests all across the hall.

Good-for-nothing, the shame of the duchy—no, the kingdom.

It was like the guests were finally getting some long-held anger off their chests, each new invective in the swarm of words bringing a new one to mind, to the point where Allen was actually quite impressed. But he kept his mouth shut and listened. It was not as if they were saying anything he ought to take issue with. He had no grounds to do so.

Though he had once been identified as possessing sufficient talent to be called a prodigy, his level had not advanced even once. What on earth was wrong with him being called a good-for-nothing? He was not the kind of person who enjoyed being insulted, but this was simply not enough to bother him.

At the very least, it was preferable to being burdened with people's hopes and achieving exactly what they expected, only for them to turn to him with eyes clouded with fear before expelling him from society.

Well, if it wouldn't do to meet people's expectations or to fall short of them, one was already doomed the moment things were expected of them. Therefore, disappointing everyone fairly early on would surely end up being a plus in the years to come.

The thought that both hope and disappointment eventually came to much the same thing did somewhat interest Allen. It was while he was considering this notion that the evening took a turn. As the guests were beginning to no longer conceal the insults or sneers directed his way, a slight shift occurred.

If he had to describe it, the mood was one of bewilderment. He reflexively cast his gaze back down from the ceiling and instantly understood the reason for the change as a new sight greeted him. The guest of honor, who had been running late, had finally arrived.

It was Riese, and today was her birthday. Though there was a change in her appearance that demonstrated the passing of the last five years, at the same time there was something about her that hadn't changed at all. At the very least, her beauty, without a single imperfection to be found, gave Allen exactly the same impression he had been left with back then.

The reactions of those around Riese proved that Allen's assessment was not merely favoritism. As if their own hearts had been seized in an instant by her beauty, sighs of admiration overflowed through the crowd.

Riese seemed to pay this no mind. Just like a princess, with her manner, she allowed no one to linger on her late arrival as she cast her eyes around the room.

When she finally found Allen, she started to dash toward him with a smile on her face. While this behavior did not befit a princess or guest of honor, Allen could only smile back. After all, such behavior from Riese was not at all uncommon, although that night was likely the last time he would see her act that way.

No, returning to the point...

"Please wait one moment, Princess Riese," said a man, who stood in her way to prevent her from approaching Allen.

Allen was quite sure this was the present head of a certain earldom, which placed him squarely in the upper half of those gathered in the hall according to rank. More to the point, that was precisely why he had decided to stand in Riese's way. Impeding a princess might be considered disrespectful, even uncouth. It was not an act that someone of lower rank could even contemplate, not even if it seemed to be the right thing to do.

"Um...what seems to be the matter? I was just thinking, I should probably greet Allen, my betrothed, first..." Riese made no attempt to conceal her confusion as she addressed the man.

Considering nothing like this had ever happened to her before, her response was understandable. But just as Allen had noted, the man was in the right. As for why...

"No, that will not be necessary. Rather, I should say that you mustn't. That good-for-nothing is no longer your betrothed."

"Huh?"

Seeing Riese blink in surprise, Allen exhaled slightly. Yes, this was why the man happened to be in the right. They were no longer betrothed. The situation

was the opposite of five years prior in that she was now the last person to know. In fact, Allen was in attendance for that very reason. He had only been brought here so that the dissolution of their engagement could be announced, with both of them present.

“Excuse me,” said Riese, “could I ask you to say that again?”

What she had just been told was not at all difficult to understand, and as the others gathered there did not feel empowered to take part in impeding Riese, or even test the waters, they all went deathly silent.

There was no way that she hadn’t heard the man. She had clearly only asked because she didn’t want to understand him. Though Allen and Riese had been betrothed at an early age, it went without saying that they had not yet spent a night together. On the contrary, they only met about once a month, and only at parties much like this. Each time, they would talk to each other for about an hour, but that was about.

Frankly, their relationship could be best described as a friendship. Or something even less than that. But it seemed that Riese quite enjoyed the time she spent with Allen. Perhaps the mask she wore as a princess was just that impenetrable, such that even Allen could not tell how she truly felt...or so he sometimes thought, but right now that did not seem to be the case.

Seeing Riese hang her head, her shoulders trembling, Allen began to feel quite certain. While he felt sorry for Riese, he also found her sorrow a little bit comforting.

Their engagement was dissolved, and considering Allen’s current circumstances, they would probably not so much as meet again. But the time he had known Riese had been quite enjoyable for him as well. Just knowing that those fun times had not been a lie made attending this event worthwhile...

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Of course, it is only natural that you should wish to hear such happy news more clearly. Indeed, please rejoice, Princess Riese. You are no longer betrothed to that good-for—”

A moment later, a muted sound echoed throughout the hall. The man had extended his hand, Allen knew not for what reason, but Riese had slapped it away. This was such an unbelievable scene that the last vestigial murmurs

remaining in the hall were blown away. Even Allen could not help but goggle.

Riese had a bit of a stubborn side, yet she was fundamentally a gentle girl. At the very least, Allen had never seen her strike anyone. The man had certainly misread the situation and said a number of things that were quite off the mark, but nothing so major as to warrant such a reaction.

In conversations between nobles, they always concealed their true feelings, so it was not at all uncommon for misunderstandings to pass between them. Most merely rattled off whatever words were convenient, taking those words to be the truth, and this man was a textbook example of that behavior.

On any other occasion, Riese would have decided that this man was welcome to his own misunderstandings and responded with a smile. But when she raised her head again, there was a look of unfiltered fury in her eyes.

“Please apologize.”

“Eh? Huh? F-For what?”

“Please apologize to Allen, for calling him a good-for-nothing!”

“Eh, but...why? Ah, no, I see. Come to think of it, Princess Riese, we hid the fact that he was a good-for-nothing from you, didn’t we? We had no wish to trouble you.” A bewildered look had fallen over the man’s face, but as if everything finally made sense, he nodded to himself. For an instant, he turned to look at Allen. With a sadistic glint in his eye, the man started to speak slowly, as if addressing a child, in order to justify his actions. “Do listen, Princess Riese. That boy is a good-for-nothing. We’ve known that now for many years.”

What the man said was by no means incorrect. Allen’s time as “a prodigy” had only lasted a year. Once it was discovered that his level had not risen in that first year, he was regarded with suspicion. By the time the next year had passed, those around him had started to call him a good-for-nothing.

Even so, no one had actually said it during a party until today, since he was still engaged to Riese. To deride Allen before now would have been tantamount to deriding the princess as his betrothed, but now that they were no longer engaged, there was no need for such reservation.

“Yes. You see, even though *he* belongs to a duchy, he still hasn’t—”

“I know. I know that his level has not yet gone up, and I know that you’ve all been calling him a good-for-nothing. I’ve known this whole time,” Riese interrupted him.

“Huh? What?!” The man started to look anxiously around the hall, probably searching for someone else to blame.

He had just learned that, while he had been speaking ill of royalty behind her back, she had known the whole time. It was understandable that he would try to pin it on someone else.

If Allen had only told Riese himself, this backbiting would have been uncovered in an instant; he just hadn’t thought to do so. Of course, although Allen had not told her, the nobles of this kingdom were simply not superior in every way. The fact that everyone in the room now averted their gazes did not signify that they knew something about who was to blame, but simply did not wish for the earl to involve them.

As if to censure those gathered there, Riese looked around the hall before speaking up once more. “What does any of that matter? Allen is still Allen. Whatever reason you may have, it’s wrong for you to call him a good-for-nothing!” As she spat those words out, her voice seemed to indicate that she had been storing them up for a long, long time.

If what Riese was saying were true, that impression was exactly right. Riese had known everything but had deliberately chosen to stay quiet. Allen could guess her reason for doing so.

Given that Allen hadn’t made the announcement, and everyone else around Riese had been careful not to let her know, she must have resorted to some method to find out. Then again, it was not as if Allen had tried to hide the fact that his level never increased. It would not have been strange if Riese had happened to overhear that fact for some reason, and she certainly could have found out if she had chosen to investigate.

She had chosen to restrain herself all this time because she was in the wrong. According to the values of this world, at least, what the man was saying was right.

Allen understood that as well, which was why he hadn’t chimed in. Still, no

matter how well one understood that intellectually, how one felt about it was another thing entirely. And so Riese had shouted like that—shouted for Allen’s sake, he thought.

With the altercation between her and the nobles still visible from the corner of his eye, he suddenly looked up at the sky. It was not as if he felt particularly bothered, nor did he have to kill time. Only...as an unwanted expression came over his face, he simply preferred that no one see it.

While he was reminiscing about those events from who knows how long ago, something occurred to Allen. Obviously he wouldn’t remember how the sky looked that night. Something had happened that night that was far more important, and that memory had been painted over whatever view he had seen of the sky.

But he remembered all too well what had happened. It would be an exaggeration to say that he felt saved on that day, but Riese’s words had certainly lightened the load on his chest.

“Yeah, well, even so...what happened couldn’t be helped.”

Allen had resolved to live however he pleased from now on. He would remain on the Frontier and enjoy a peaceful existence. And yet...he had, by sheer coincidence, been reunited with Riese and Beatrice, and if they should find themselves in any trouble, he had no alternative but to rescue them. It couldn’t be helped. So Allen thought to himself once more. They were still much too vulnerable, and nothing could change the fact that he would need to speak with them about it later on.

Although...

Looking up at the moon, Allen half-closed his eyes. A lot had happened today, but he had been reunited with old friends and had even managed to help them out. He had to admit that he’d had a good day. And even if he couldn’t recall the moon from back then...more likely than not, it looked much like the moon tonight. Thus...

“Isn’t the moon beautiful tonight?” Allen murmured to himself, with a similar

expression to the one he wore so many years ago.

Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Kouduki. Whether this is our first time meeting or not, I would like to sincerely thank everyone who was kind enough to pick up this book.

The truth is, this work was written at least in part as an experiment, and I honestly never thought it would become a book. It was conceived to be the length of a single paperback, and I thought the story would be complete with only one volume.

To be honest, roughly two-thirds of the events recorded here did not exist in my initial plot. However, as a result of the encouragement I received from so many people, I felt inspired to continue my work. It's also thanks to TO Books rating my writing highly that this novel became a reality.

But it goes without saying that this completed volume is the result of the hard work of many people. For always assisting me in so many ways, I would like to thank the editors S and F. As for my illustrator, Chocoan, when I first saw the cover art, I was honestly concerned that readers would cry “cover fraud”—your artwork is just that wonderful and I can't thank you enough.

And to everyone else involved in the publication of this story, thank you so much.

More than anything else, from the bottom of my heart, I want to express my gratitude for everyone who has supported me up to this point and decided to pick up this book and buy it.

For now, I will take my leave, praying that we meet again in volume 2.



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The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases: Volume 1

by Shin Kouduki

Translated by bedi and Joshua Douglass-Molloy Edited by Tess Nanavati

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