



**Shin  
Kouduki**  
Illustrator: Chocoan

# The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases



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## The Adventurers

### Allen Westfeldt

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

### Riese Westfeldt

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

## Viktor Empire

### The Black Wolf Knights

#### Lisette Belwaldt

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

#### Oswald Hyurandell

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

### The Elven Forest

#### Percival

The representative of all elves who dwell in the forest and the Elven King's viceroy.



#### Anriette Linkvist

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



#### Noel Leonhart

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



#### Mylène Hagestadt

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

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## A Nostalgic Dream

It was a tale as old as time: the fate of a hero who had grown too powerful for his own good. After the beasts were slain and the day was won, the people he had saved met him only with fear and rejection. Indeed, a tale as old as time.

“Even so, I am sure that wasn’t what you were hoping for.”

Allen shrugged. That much was obvious—he was no masochist. Of course he hadn’t *wanted* to be reviled by the people for whom he had risked his life.

“Indeed. Yes. Forgive me.”

The apology puzzled Allen. His interlocutor had only been asking for confirmation. Hardly cause for an apology.

“Oh, it *is*. We— *I* never meant to cause you such hardship when I made you a hero. Though I know that must be little consolation.”

That wasn’t right. True, there had been no other choice for Allen, but the decision not to run from that fact—to *embrace* it—had been entirely his own will. This was true of every single chapter of his past. Had he hesitated for a moment, he would never have been able to free himself as he had done.

“But your freedom will bring loss that could have been averted, sadness to those who should have been full of joy. Is it not your abhorrence for such tragedy that caused you to do all that you did, and all alone?”

It was nothing so magnificent. He had simply been granted the power to act, and not acting would have troubled his conscience. He had never acted for the sake of anyone but himself. If another suitable candidate had presented themselves, he would have happily passed the torch.

“And yet you acted. That fact alone proves you deserve the title of hero. But this world could not accept you, and for that I must again ask your forgiveness as one of those who chose to make you a hero. And above all, as one who always longed for a hero like you.”

Allen squirmed at his interlocutor's sincerity. He already understood how sorry they were. He would rather skip the apologies and get straight to the granting of his wish.

"Are you sure? You will..."

Allen answered with a look that silenced his interlocutor. He had already made up his mind.

"Understood. I shall respect your will. I would wish you well, were that not a rather odd choice of words."

It *didn't* quite seem a fitting phrase with which to send someone to their death, but nor was it inapt.

"Oh? Well then. I wish you well, our hero."

The last thing Allen saw was a teary-eyed, smiling face.

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"That old dream again," said Allen, smirking as he gazed up at a familiar ceiling. He hadn't expected to ever have it again. Though still clear in his mind, they were now the events of fifteen—no, *sixteen*—years ago. A little late for looking back to be of any use, in more ways than one. "From my point of view, at least."

The dream had been a memory from his past life—the moments right before his death. Perhaps "death" wasn't the most accurate term, but he *had* been reborn moments later.

"Anyway..."

The nostalgic dream *had* knocked a few memories loose, but they were memories of a world in which Allen no longer lived. Perhaps ten or so years ago he would've felt a stronger attachment to them, but too much time had passed. The only thought of any significance was why he'd had that dream *now*. Allen shook the thought from his head and got out of bed. It was still early, but he didn't have time to laze around. He dressed quickly and left his room.

It had been almost half a year since the incident in the royal capital. Even in the remote Frontier, occasional word of the subsequent turmoil in the capital

had reached him, but far away as he was, he could only extend thoughts of sympathy and support as he continued to search for his quiet life.

Thus far, that life still eluded him. Not that the past six months had been marked by further strife; with no requests for help from Riese and the others, his life had been comparatively peaceful. But what Allen sought were truly uneventful days of sitting on the porch, basking in the sun, and drinking tea. His current life, easygoing as it was, was still far removed from that.

Boring? Old-mannish? To Allen these were terms of praise. Sure, the hearts of many young men of his age burned with a lust for adventure. They could all go to hell. Of course, he couldn't say he'd never enjoyed a single moment of his life as a hero, but what had awaited him at the end of it?

"Man, that dream's really gotten to me."

He'd tried to shake the memories, but still they lingered. The here and now was what mattered, though. He couldn't afford to dwell on his past life, even if it *was* what had brought him here. Though on the other hand, there wasn't much harm in it now that he was simply searching for a peaceful life.

"Anyway, my current life isn't exactly ideal either."

It was nothing so chaotic as the events of six months ago, of course. But as if in exchange for bringing that episode to a close, a series of minor incidents had occurred since. The sudden appearance of deadly monsters and malevolent acts from a variety of powerful entities had been...well, not exactly a daily occurrence, but definitely once every three days.

Allen didn't feel any closer to his tranquil existence—especially since he always seemed to end up enlisted to help with these kerfuffles. The reason was clear: he had attracted the attention of the guild. Besides, he knew that whatever catastrophes occurred if he declined to get involved would inevitably come back to bite him too.

Things didn't change when he ventured out of town. Every time he came across a seemingly peaceful village that might be a viable place to start his new life, he somehow ended up in some kind of trouble.

Well, there was no "somehow" about it—it was the guild again. They didn't

mean any harm. It was just that the Frontier, though sprawling and open, was in some ways quite contained. Important information spread fast, and that clearly included information about him, specifically that he was a capable fellow who could be counted on to resolve any problem quickly. Wherever he had gone, he'd received requests for his assistance with whatever was troubling the people.

Technically, there was nothing stopping him from refusing to help, but he had traveled to each of these places searching for a potential home. His first act couldn't be something that left him ostracized. If he was content in isolation, he could have gone to live deep in the mountains. He wanted a peaceful life, but that didn't mean avoiding other people.

For the moment, though, Allen had given up on searching for a suitable landing spot. It just seemed like deliberately poking his nose into trouble. Unfortunately, trouble danced to a steady beat here in the Frontier's biggest town too.

So Allen decided to leave the kingdom entirely.

# Departure

Allen left his room and headed through the hallway and down the stairs into a spacious living room. As expected, there were already people there, despite the early hour.

“Hey, Riese. Always the early bird.”

Riese turned and smiled. She must have heard him coming. “Good morning, Allen! No more so than you, am I?”

“I mean, I get up pretty early, but you’re always earlier. Besides, even if we were the same, that would make us both early birds.”

“I suppose so!”

Allen looked Riese up and down during their small talk. She looked different. She had always favored practical attire but seemed even more dressed down than usual, as if she were planning to go somewhere.

“You’re well prepared, huh?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t be right for us to slow you down, would it?”

Allen grinned at her prideful expression. “You’d think so, right?” He looked over his shoulder. “Hey, you could stand to learn a thing or two from her,” he said to the golden-haired girl who stood on the stairs he had just descended.

She was a familiar sight—too familiar, in fact. The languid Noel stifled a yawn. “I’m not a morning person. In fact, you should be thanking me for getting up this early. I mean, I’m not even smithing anything.”

“I seem to recall it was *you* who said you wanted to come with us, Noel.” Riese answered.

“Your recollection is correct. But have you ever heard the expression ‘that’s neither here nor there’?”

“Yes, but I hardly see how that applies,” said Riese with an exaggerated sigh that failed to faze Noel in the slightest.

“I wish you would at least change out of your nightclothes,” said Allen. Noel was easy on the eyes, but this was a little much.

“Bashful all of a sudden? You’ve seen me in much more revealing outfits than this.”

Riese gasped. “What?! Allen, since when were you and Noel so close?!”



“I don’t know what you’re imagining, but I know you’ve got the wrong idea,” said Allen. “It was back in the forge. She was sweating up a storm and was all ‘I’m sooo hot!’ and ripped her shirt off.”

“You don’t have to put it like *that*,” said Noel. “I don’t let just anyone see that much skin, you know.”

Allen shrugged. They had more important matters to discuss. “Yeah, yeah. I’m honored. Now, back to our original conversation...”

“What was that again? Right, that you would prefer a more revealing outfit than this.”

“I don’t recall us ever talking about that.”

“Is that true, Allen?!” Riese cried.

“Don’t you get involved in this.” Riese was prone to believing Noel’s needling. For a former princess, she could be pretty ditzy. He glanced at Noel. “Anyway, are you packed and ready to go?”

“Of course I am. That’s what I was doing last night. You know, instead of *sleeping*.”

“We *all* had to get ready, Noel.”

“But you didn’t have to go all the way to my workshop!”

That was true—Noel’s former home and workshop was right at the edge of town, about as far as possible from where they were staying. It was a long trek there and back.

“And yet there’s another girl in the same position who’s ready to go and full of energy,” Allen remarked.

“Mylène?” asked Noel, casting a brief glance at the brown-skinned girl. She shrugged shamelessly. “She isn’t as sensitive as I am. I can’t sleep in an unfamiliar bed. That’s not so unusual, is it?”

“Hey, no need to insult Mylène like that. Anyway, you’ve been sleeping in that bed for half a year now, and you’re still not used to it? That’s not being sensitive, it’s something else.” Specifically, it was Noel’s sassy nature, a

property that familiarity had brought to the fore. Allen had now had half a year to become acquainted with it.

The group was not staying in an inn, but a residence on the edge of town—the home Allen owned. Upon returning to the town half a year ago, he had decided to stop staying at the inn. He planned on staying in town for a while, and with the significant reward he'd received for his role in the incident in the capital, he had more money than he knew what to do with. Money presented no obstacle to staying at the inn, but the house offered greater peace of mind.

As for how Riese, Noel, and Mylène had ended up staying with him, even Allen wasn't quite sure. It had happened before he'd realized it. After he had let them know that he'd bought the house, they had insisted on being shown around and observed that the house was much too big for one person. He had agreed.

"In that case, there's no problem with us staying here," Riese had told him. And then, before his eyes, they had ended up living together.

It was particularly confusing that Noel had chosen to live with Allen, since she already had a house. He didn't have much of a problem with it, though. The place *was* too big for him alone. A few extra bodies could only liven up the place—and what man would say no to living with three beautiful girls? He'd known it wouldn't all be sunshine and rainbows, but that was inevitable whenever you dealt with other people. He'd accepted that there might be problems and would deal with them if and when they came up. And now here they were, roommates for the past six months.

"Anyway, just showing my face," said Noel. "Now lemme go get dressed. Otherwise why did we bother getting up early?"

"Right," said Riese. "We're always up at this time, though."

"Yeah, yeah. Just give me a minute. I'll never forgive you if you leave me."

Allen and Riese exchanged a glance and smiled. They would have never dreamed of it. "These six months have really changed my impression of her," said Allen.

"Really? They showed me that she hasn't changed a bit. She's as self-assured,

obstinate, and stubborn as ever. Sometimes surprisingly honest, sometimes lonely. She's just a normal girl."

"I know. I mean, I saw that in the time she's been living here."

"You know, Allen, I've realized you haven't changed either."

Allen shrugged. He felt the same way about her, and like her, the past six months had helped him to notice it.

"What about me?" Mylène asked as if asserting herself.

Allen grinned widely. Of Mylène he was even more sure than Noel. "My impression of you has changed least of all."

"I feel the same," said Riese.

"In a good way?" asked Mylène.

"Of course," said Allen.

"Yes, in a good way," Riese agreed.

"Hm," said Mylène. "I suppose that's fine then."

Mylène *had* seemed somewhat wary at first. When exactly had she realized she could relax? It had definitely been some time before she had begun living in Allen's house, at least. Since then she hadn't changed a bit. Despite her laconic and expressionless manner, she was a very easygoing person—the most easygoing in the house, in fact. Even Riese had her stubborn moments, but not Mylène.

"Anyway, there's no need to ask you two if you're ready," said Allen. "We've just gotta wait for Noel."

"Should I help her?" asked Mylène.

"I'm sure there's no need," said Riese. "She must be hurrying already."

"Got it." Mylène nodded.

Allen sighed. It was much too late to object, but he couldn't help but wonder how he had been roped into bringing the others along with him. Still, there was no time to reflect on past events now. They were just about to leave, and not just on a day trip. All four of them were leaving the kingdom. Technically it was

still an excursion of sorts—each of them had their own goals in mind. In Allen’s case, since he hadn’t found a suitable place in the surrounding area, why not try his luck in another country? He had never chosen to come to this one to begin with.

Still, while he had every intention of settling down somewhere if he found an ideal spot, from what he knew about where they were heading, he suspected the chances were slim.

As they waited for Noel, Allen thought about his destination. He didn’t know all *that* much about the place.

“The empire, huh?” he mumbled as he stared into space.

# Toward the Empire

There was only one empire in this world: a sprawling land called Viktor that, due to its military conquest of numerous neighboring nations, was home to a large populace of many races. Some would call this diversity a testament to the nation's open-mindedness, others its thirst for territory. Whatever the case, it was no normal nation.

The empire shared a border with the Kingdom of Adastera. Relations between the two lands were extremely poor. The empire was the very last nation with which Adastera still warred after establishing friendly ties with all its other neighbors. So long and so fiercely had the conflict raged that putting an end to it and restoring peace was said to be the General's greatest achievement.

Given the empire's national character, it was widely assumed that should they learn of the General's death, they would soon attack again. The kingdom had been unable to keep that news under wraps—it had already reached neighboring countries six months ago. But despite all the preparations Adastera had made for such an eventuality, they had found no signs that the empire planned to attack.

There was no chance that the empire had changed. The ongoing frosty "peace" between the two nations was ample proof of that. The empire's diverse population was an inevitable consequence of its desire to see the entire continent under its yoke. There was no reason to senselessly slaughter the people of other nations when absorbing them would suffice. This was the empire's strength—to assimilate talented people, regardless of race.

The powerful Beastfolk Corps were a renowned symbol of the empire. Beastfolk tended to specialize in melee combat, but in the heat of battle they could often fall into an uncontrollable blood frenzy. For this reason, beastfolk nations tended to avoid war, as a conflict could easily turn into unrestrained carnage in which friend and foe alike suffered monstrous casualties.

Of course, beastfolk would still defend themselves if they were attacked—

that was another reason the Beastfolk Corps were a symbol of the empire. The empire was able to capture frenzied beastfolk and make them follow orders. It had annexed not just one beastfolk nation, but many, and was also host to many more elves and dwarves than other countries, fueling speculation that it had even annexed the elven territory.

That most elves lived in the Elven Forest was a widely known fact, relayed by the elves themselves. But nobody knew where exactly the forest lay. Elves specialized in magic and lived very long lives, which meant that of all the world's races, they were the fewest in number. For their elegant appearance, they were often hunted by heartless individuals, so the location of the Elven Forest was a secret, or so rumor said. The truth was unknown. Whatever the case, it was true that the empire had the most sightings of these rarely seen beings.

The rumors were an illustration of the strength of the empire's desire to conquer the continent. Even when it suspended conflict with the kingdom, it still waged war on other fronts. And yet not only had it not shown any indication of *planning* for a war with Adastera, it had not waged war on another neighboring nation for the past year. Riese was traveling to the empire to investigate the cause of this phenomenon.

"You're not a princess anymore, though," said Allen. "You're the Duchess of Westfeldt, even if only in name. Are you sure about just waltzing into the empire?"

"Surely that's what *allows* me to do so? In fact, if the official position changes, there might be times when I'm the *only* one who can."

"Quite the situation you're in, huh? Both your house and your country."

By replacing the top leadership only, the kingdom had done what it could with the New House of Westfeldt. Few would have objected if they had destroyed the house entirely, and even given the axe—literally—to anyone remotely involved. But the kingdom didn't have that kind of leeway. Instead, after an exhaustive investigation, the House of Westfeldt had been reconstituted in an almost identical form.

This approach had caused problems of its own. The House of Westfeldt had

already been short on personnel; since Allen's banishment, a significant number of servants had either resigned or been made to resign. The estate in particular was running on a skeleton crew. Allen had been shocked to hear that about eighty percent of the staff had left since he had lived there. To ensure that the estate could still run, the workforce had been supplemented with soldiers, but their lack of experience caused other issues.

Based on what he'd heard, Allen surmised that at some point, the demons had ceased attacking. Imperceptibly slowly but surely, the soldiers' training had become correspondingly less intense, leading to an overall weakening of the force. The Duke of Westfeldt had always been responsible for training and commanding the soldiers.

"Beatrice really has her work cut out for her," said Allen.

"Indeed," said Riese. "You know, recently she was complaining that this isn't why I came here."

Allen shrugged. He could imagine that. It sounded like Beatrice had had no trouble quitting the royal guard after her responsibility to accompany Riese was fulfilled. Her difficulties had come later when, after arriving in the Duchy of Westfeldt as one of the strongest warriors in the land, she had been tasked with whipping its enfeebled military into shape.

Of course, she could have refused. But regardless of the many factors at play, the fact remained that Riese was the Duchess of Westfeldt. The real duties may have been performed by a delegate dispatched by the royal family, but Riese was still duchess. And while the demons might have ceased their attacks, there was no telling when they might begin again, and the army as it currently stood was woefully unequipped to deal with such a threat. Beatrice couldn't pretend to overlook that.

Allen knew all this because his small talk with the duchess sometimes turned to such matters. He might even have to offer her a little help himself.

"I'm not sure if it's the best idea either," he said. "Didn't she give you permission to go, though?"

As soon as Allen had announced his intention to travel to the empire alone, Riese had said she was coming with him. It was perfect timing, she'd argued;

the kingdom needed someone to go and check on the empire directly.

“She even said she felt better about me going than doing it herself,” Riese insisted.

“I guess I’m glad she has faith in you,” said Allen. “I suppose Beatrice would know. It’s a lot of a responsibility, though.”

With Beatrice’s endorsement and no reason to say no, Allen couldn’t turn her down. Sure, he could *try*, but knowing Riese, she would then insist on going by herself, and that would be dangerous. Better to let her have her way and avoid any undue risk. Provided they played it safe, there shouldn’t be much in the way of direct threat from the empire anyway. True, their sudden peacefulness was suspicious, but if things seemed about to turn sour, they would just have to retreat before it got too hairy. And Riese *did* have a good reason for going. Why should Allen say anything before he’d gotten the lay of the land himself?

Following Riese, Noel had also declared she was accompanying Allen. Her motivation was related to the sporadic appearance of dwarves in the empire. She’d always planned on visiting, hoping to learn some valuable smithing techniques. This was the perfect chance. Noel could forge elite swords, but they still didn’t compare to Hauteclaire. She would exhaust any avenue that might help her smith a sword that outstripped that holy blade.

Noel would be accompanied by Mylène simply because she couldn’t leave her all by herself. It was the flimsiest reason any of them had to travel to the empire, but a reason it was.

So all four had decided to go together. They now sat in a horse-drawn carriage that rocked them gently.

“Shouldn’t we be arriving soon?” asked Noel.

“I was just thinking that,” Allen replied, looking at the driver’s seat. “What do you think, Mylène?” Rather than hiring a carriage driver, those from their group who could drive the carriage were taking turns.

“Not far now, I think,” Mylène answered.

They were right. Before long, ramparts came into view ahead. A citadel, one of the jewels of the empire. They had already ventured into foreign territory.

“Hmm,” Allen murmured.

“What is it, Allen?” Riese asked.

“Well...isn’t the empire supposed to be a dangerous place?”

“Um...I suppose that depends on what you mean by ‘dangerous.’”

“Guess so. Anyway...” Allen redirected his gaze from the far distance to what lay directly before them. “I swear I remember hearing that monsters inhabit this area.”

A moment later, the ground before the carriage cracked open, and *something* showed itself.

# The Death God of the Desert

The sight of the thing that leaped forth from the fissure in the ground opened Riese's eyes in more ways than one. "A monster? And it's..."

A monster attack in this general area wasn't all that strange; the region wasn't thought to be free of them. But this close to the citadel, practically within reach of its walls? That was unthinkable. People accepted that the comings and goings of monsters, as widespread as they were, could not be completely controlled by mankind. But that didn't mean they were helpless. Monsters were just a kind of animal, after all. They each had their territory. One could predict where and when there was a risk of running into them.

But a monster's territory wasn't set in stone. Though it took great effort, they could be forced to move. That method was rarely employed, though, since monsters tended to keep each other in check—the food chain saw to that. Carelessly exterminating or forcibly relocating a type of monster could cause that delicate balance to crumble, and nothing good would come of the potential results; for instance, a growing population of some other species, or even more fearsome creatures gravitating to the area.

As a result, people generally stuck to culling the monster populations, and these creatures usually weren't found around human settlements. Even, or perhaps especially, the smallest settlements were the end result of careful investigation to make sure the location was safe from attack. Ensuring that no monsters appeared within viewing distance was the bare minimum when selecting a site. Otherwise the people wouldn't even be able to sleep at night, let alone raise crops. This isn't to say that monsters never drew near—that was unavoidable for all but the larger towns, which could erect magical force fields that nothing could cross.

In short, monster sightings this close to a settlement were vanishingly rare. But that fact alone wasn't enough to explain Riese's astonishment. This was a citadel with a large population and many people coming and going. A monster

appearing so close to its walls was inexcusable—a failure of both the city’s administrators and the nation’s rulers. This sort of incident was a hallmark of failed states with insufficient military might or resources to control the monster population, neither of which could be said of the empire. The whole situation seemed impossible.

“No way. Is that a Sand Wolf?” asked Noel.

“I’ve never seen one before, but it has to be,” said Riese.

As Noel muttered in astonishment, Mylène remained as cool as ever. The look on her face was almost impatient.

With its pitch-black wolfish form, the creature certainly looked like a Sand Wolf, so named for its usual desert habitat. What was it doing here, amid these featureless plains? It was something that shouldn’t be possible, or so Riese wished.

“Sand Wolf, huh?” said Allen. “The Death God of the Desert, right?”

“Yes,” Mylène answered. “The monster that almost nobody’s survived an encounter with.”

Riese nodded. What were they going to do? The monster embodied its nickname. Even in the sole desert in which they were known to reside, encounters were said to be rare. But Riese doubted that, since perhaps those who laid eyes on it simply didn’t live to tell the tale. Even the handful of survivors attested to barely escaping with their lives. Each had returned alone, having thrown their partymates to the wolf—literally—to ensure their own survival.

Everyone standing there knew the story of the sole lone traveler who had survived a Sand Wolf encounter. Only by somehow redirecting the beast’s focus to another group of monsters had they made it. That person had been the Champion before Akira, said to have been the greatest Champion in history—and even they could only flee from a run-in with the beast. That encounter was responsible for at least some knowledge about the creature, for what it was worth. In the end, it all amounted to “run, and fast.”

According to the Champion, the monster’s combat ability was not

overwhelming, but the creature never went down. Though it *looked* like a wolf, it wasn't one. Nobody knew exactly *what* it was. It regenerated like a slime; lopping off its head or severing its limbs did no good. Presumably there was a core somewhere within that pitch-black body, but good luck finding it—the body absorbed any attempts to blast it open with magic.

After battling the monster for half a day with it still showing no sign of fatigue, the Champion had decided to retreat. The Sand Wolf fought only by charging and swallowing its victims whole, but it moved at great speed, so the Champion's only hope had been to redirect its attention.

Some said that the monster's unvaried means of attack should have made it easy to read, but it was unclear how true that was. It was widely accepted that it must be at least as fearsome as the Champion's account suggested; otherwise, there would have been more survivors. Thus it must have been quite capable in combat. At any rate, the only conclusion reached was that escape was the only option.

"There's no escape," said Riese. She didn't know why. It wasn't logic, but intuition that told her it was hopeless to try to flee. She'd heard all the stories, but none had managed to capture the terrifying reality. She trembled, and sensed Noel and Mylène doing the same. Now she understood. All but one of those who had escaped the Sand Wolf's wrath had said the same thing—that to confront it was to perish. That it was death incarnate. The Death God of the Desert.

Only the Champion had felt otherwise, but the Champion was no normal person. If Akira had been with them, she would have understood. Some comfort that was. When she heard the story, Riese remembered Akira proclaiming that she would prove she was the greatest champion in history by slaying the beast. Why was she recalling this now? She was only trying to escape reality. But the reality before her was inescapable.

She heard a contemplative "Hmm." Unthinkingly, she looked at Allen and was struck by two conflicting sensations: relief upon being reminded of his presence, and despair that surely even he couldn't defeat this monster. She had faith in him, a firm conviction that he could handle whatever the world threw at him. But in that moment there was an air about him that shattered her faith. It

was indescribable, but similar to a revelation. Vague, but unquestionably accurate. She didn't know which of the two, Allen or the wolf, was stronger—only that Allen would certainly be killed if he chose to fight.

Her unease was compounded by Allen's behavior. All this time, he had remained motionless, staring at the Sand Wolf, as if considering his chances. Noel and Mylène both shot him uneasy looks. They must have been thinking the same thing.

Allen slowly began to speak. "Little big for a pet, isn't it?"

"Wha?" said Riese, blinking and cocking her head, trying to make sense of what she'd just heard.

Noel put Riese's thoughts into words before she could. "What on earth are you talking about?!"

"Never mind," said Allen. He observed the Sand Wolf with a puzzled expression. "Monsters don't usually show up in places like this, right?"

"True," said Riese. "Not just outside of a town."

"It's impossible," said Noel.

Allen had to agree. "Yup. But here's this fella. So I figure maybe it's somebody's pet. You know, out for walkies."



“No matter how impossible this is, *that* is even more impossible,” said Noel.

Allen responded in his usual nonchalant manner. “I guess you’re right. To be honest, I thought so too. But if it *were* true, and I killed it, that would really start us off on the wrong foot here in the empire. But since you’re so confident, I guess there’s nothing to worry about.”

So offhand was Allen’s response, it took Riese several seconds to even comprehend what he had said. By the time she and the other girls had returned to their senses, he had already hopped down from the carriage.

“Wha... I... Allen!” Riese cried. His demeanor showed that he expected a typical easy victory.

Riese wasn’t so assured—the aura of the Sand Wolf was like nothing she’d ever experienced. She instinctively extended a hand toward Allen, but he had already moved out of reach. He didn’t even turn around. Riese was helpless to stop him as he walked toward the jet-black beast. It was then she realized that the monster stood some distance from the carriage. The Sand Wolf had shown itself, but it was as though it were frozen to the spot.

How strange. Bolting the moment you laid eyes on the beast was supposed to be your only hope for escape—and even then, a slim one. What was going on?

Noel broke the silence. “Hey, do you think maybe it’s...scared?”

“Wha?” said Riese. She looked again but could see nothing but the Sand Wolf waiting menacingly for Allen. Or...no, there *was* something else. The monster was slowly, almost imperceptibly retreating. As if *it* was the one trying to escape from *Allen*.

“Don’t you think it looks scared?” asked Noel.

“Yes, now that I look,” said Riese. “But...it’s a Sand Wolf!”

“Right, but Allen can handle it,” said Noel.

“Don’t you agree?” said Mylène.

“I...suppose I might, but...” Riese trailed off.

In response to her words, Noel shot a puzzled look at Mylène, who turned her

head and responded in kind.

“Hm? Why the confusion?” said Riese.

“Oh, nothing,” Noel replied. Then, to Mylène, “Right?”

“Mm-hmm,” Mylène answered. “I thought Riese would be on the same page as us.”

“Yeah. She should’ve been the one saying ‘Allen can do it!’” Noel agreed.

“But...” Riese objected. Put like that, it was hard to deny. If the creature before them had been any other monster, even a dragon, she would have agreed enthusiastically, if not said as much herself. Of course, Allen had already defeated a dragon, but she would have said the same of any other monster. The Sand Wolf was a monster beyond compare, though. How could Noel and Mylène be puzzled by her reservations?

“I won’t deny it looks bad, but...” Noel paused to think. “I guess it doesn’t feel any *worse* than bad. I’m sure this thing’s even more dangerous than the Fenrir, but...I dunno, maybe it’s because of your Gift?”

“My Gift?”

“Yeah. Allen said your Gift makes you really empathetic.”

“I suppose I *do* find it easy to understand the emotions of others.”

A short while after Allen had bought his house in the Frontier town, the group had gotten to discussing their Gifts. Allen had theorized that it was her empathy that allowed her to receive divine revelations.

“So you’re saying I’m feeling an excessive amount of fear?”

“Seems like it to me. I’m confident Allen will figure something out, at least. I *did* think we were dead for a moment when that thing first jumped out of the ground.”

“I agree,” said Mylène. “If it was just us three, forget it. But I can’t imagine it killing Allen.”

“That’s why we aren’t too worried,” said Noel. “Actually, you’re the only one who’s worried at all, Riese. Aren’t you the one with the most faith in Allen?”

“Y-Yes, I suppose that’s true...” Riese felt some measure of relief. She’d found an explanation for her obscure sense of unease. That wasn’t enough to totally soothe her nerves, but she could at least feel calmer as she watched Allen approach the monster.

Soon the distance had closed significantly. Now it was clear that the Sand Wolf was retreating as Allen drew closer. Then, suddenly, the monster recoiled, as if preparing for the worst.

Riese couldn’t comprehend what happened next—she could only observe. The Sand Wolf disappeared and suddenly Allen was standing there with his sword drawn. Then came a rupturing sound. The Sand Wolf never reappeared.

“I guess he just killed it?” said Noel.

“I suppose so,” said Riese. “My sense of foreboding just disappeared.”

“Jeez. I knew he’d figure something out, but this is ridiculous. What did he even *do?*”

“Typical Allen,” said Mylène.

“You’re right there,” said Riese. Finally in agreement, the three could only smile in disbelief. Riese had been fretting over nothing after all. Part of her wondered if that was really all there was to it, but she couldn’t deny that the Sand Wolf was gone.

She pushed the lingering hesitation aside. She had simply been wrong. Now she could breathe a sigh of relief.

## The Attack's Motive

Having easily disposed of the monster, Allen felt nonplussed as he returned to the carriage. The monster itself didn't trouble him; yes, he'd felt a strange sensation, but he'd slain the beast easily enough. The question was what that thing had been doing here. It wasn't normal, obviously. He had a few theories on how that could happen, but there was no point keeping them to himself.

"We'll save time if we put our heads together on this one," he said as he climbed back into the carriage, greeted by three dumbfounded gazes. He didn't have long to wonder why they were so taken aback before he noticed something.

"Oh. I just realized the driver's seat *was* empty. When did you get into the back, Mylène?"

"It's easier to talk to her here," said Riese.

"Ah, I see." Clearly they felt they needed to talk too. Leaving the driver's seat unoccupied meant they couldn't make quite as hasty a retreat if necessary, but the back of the carriage still offered a good view of their surroundings. If anything happened outside, they'd know, provided it was above ground level. It seemed unlikely that there'd be *another* monster hiding in the earth.

The town was within reach, but the circumstances gave Allen pause. "It's probably safer to talk here rather than heading straight in."

"Yes," Riese agreed. "Now we have even more cause to be cautious."

"There's something fishy about this," said Noel. "We were just ambushed by a monster within sight of an imperial town."

"You think the empire did this?" asked Mylène.

"It's not impossible," Allen replied. "But it's only one possibility, and a pretty unlikely one."

An unusual occurrence like this could either be a coincidence or an

orchestrated act. Moving a monster to a specific place was difficult, but not impossible; countries with small armies had sometimes been forced to do so to defend themselves. Typically, though, the losses were not worth the benefits. It seemed unlikely that was the answer.

“It would be such a crude approach too,” said Noel. “That thing would attack anybody who came near town.”

“I’ve heard they roam a pretty expansive territory too,” Allen noted. “That could’ve included the town.”

Though the town itself was probably protected by a magical force field, anyone taking even one step outside that barrier would be at risk.

“Remember that the path we followed is the one route from the kingdom to the empire too,” said Riese. “If the empire did this deliberately, the kingdom would surely take it as a provocation.”

“You mean they’d declare a war?” asked Mylène.

“That would be a real possibility,” Riese replied. “It would certainly give them good reason to do so.”

There would be no justifying the beast’s proximity to the town. In fact, the kingdom would interpret it as a cover for premeditated action. But if the empire really wanted a war, they wouldn’t take such a roundabout route. A direct declaration would suffice.

Moreover, Allen hadn’t heard anything about strange monsters attacking travelers to the empire when he had been gathering information. Nor had he heard any talk of missing people, so it wasn’t that the monster had simply killed everyone who’d laid eyes on it. Perhaps it had only been placed there recently, but that would again imply that the empire had done it deliberately, which was a possibility they had already discarded.

If it wasn’t deliberate, it had to be a coincidence. “But it’s hard to believe this could be an accident,” Allen mused.

“Right,” said Riese. “Monsters are quite predictable. There *is* a desert south of here, but I doubt that thing would wander all the way here by chance.”

“It’s a monthlong journey, even by carriage,” said Noel.

“Is it too far to deliberately relocate its territory?” said Allen.

“I can’t say it’s impossible,” Riese replied. “After all, the things we *don’t* know about Sand Wolves outweigh the things we *do*.”

“I’ve never heard of them being seen outside the desert,” Noel added. “But maybe that doesn’t mean a whole lot.”

Sightings were rare to begin with, and there was no clear reason for the creatures making the desert their home. Based on public knowledge, there was no reason to believe they *couldn’t* be found elsewhere.

If that was all there was to it, they had nothing to worry about. Allen had already killed this one, so that should’ve been that. But they couldn’t afford to jump to that conclusion.

“Well, we established that we can’t prove it was intentional already,” said Noel. “We’re right back where we started.”

“Kind of,” said Allen. “So maybe we should see what other possibilities we can come up with. For example...” He pondered for a moment. “Okay, maybe it was someone going after Riese and the empire isn’t involved.” It had happened before and could happen again.

Riese considered the idea for a moment. “I don’t know. It seems unlikely to me. There’s nothing to gain from that now.”

“You really think so?” Noel answered. “You’re a duchess. You have more real power now than you did as princess. That could be relevant, right?”

“An attempt on the new duchess’s life?” asked Mylène.

“It’s true that I have more power now, but I’m still just a figurehead,” said Riese. “My death would change nothing. There may even already be someone waiting in the wings to replace me.” She paused. “No, that’s unlikely. Things are too chaotic at the moment. But in time they will surely arrange a successor.”

“We’ll put that one in the ‘unlikely’ column, then,” Allen agreed. “And you’re completely out of the royal line of succession?”

“I can’t say *completely*, but almost. I could only ascend to the throne if every

member of the royal family somehow disappeared.”

“Gotcha. So that’s even less likely.” For anyone so motivated, existing royalty would be a better target. Riese would be far down the list.

“And in that case, you’d come into power too, Allen.”

“Huh? Me?”

“As prince consort, you mean?” asked Noel.

“And Riese as queen?” Mylène added.

“N-No!” sputtered Riese. “Whatever gave you that idea?! I was referring to the fact that Allen is of royal descent too!”

“Oh, yeah,” said Noel. “I heard about that.”

Since dukes and duchesses also had a place in the line of succession, they all had royal blood. Since someone so far down the line of succession was so unlikely to become monarch, however, they were not recognized as royalty and were often very distant relatives. In fact, it had been five generations since a royal had served as head of the House of Westfeldt, and even then, a less important one. One of the reasons for Allen and Riese’s betrothal was to stem the further dilution of the royal blood of those who ruled that house. Riese stepping down likely had similar motivations.

“But you’re of much purer blood than me,” said Allen. “And besides, I don’t even officially exist.”

“Who would obsess over such particulars if the entire royal family disappeared?” said Riese. “By law, all qualified people have equal claim to a position anyway. The next monarch would be determined entirely on merit.”

“Wow, there are laws about that?” asked Noel. “I guess it must come up a lot then?”

“No, I don’t think it comes up much at all,” said Riese. “But I *have* heard about it before, so I can’t say never.”

“Do they do the same thing in other countries?” asked Mylène.

Riese pondered for a moment. “I wonder. I can’t say I’m too familiar with the

laws of other nations, but I imagine it's not too different. I've even heard of illegitimate children ascending to the throne after the entire royal family was wiped out."

Allen was impressed by Riese's knowledge but only let out a contemplative grumble. In short, there was little chance she would be targeted for that reason. Of course, Riese was the only one who would be attacked for political purposes, but if it was a matter of personal resentment, any of them could have been targets. Going down that road would only lead to endless speculation, though. Besides, where was the benefit in such a complicated means of settling a grudge?

Allen's eyes opened wide. "Wait. There's one group who wouldn't have such a hard time with that."

"What?" said Riese. "Thought of something?"

"I guess so. Listen—who can you think of who wouldn't struggle to haul a monster around?"

"Oh," said Noel. "Yeah, there *are* people like that, aren't there?"

"Demons, maybe?" asked Mylène.

"Exactly," Allen answered.

"I see," Riese murmured. "Yes, I suppose demons *could* have done this."

"But do they have a motive?" Noel asked.

"Just to get in our way?" Mylène suggested.

"That was the end result at least," said Allen. "Anyway, they *could* do it, I still don't think they *did*. It would be an unusually roundabout way for demons to behave. If they sought revenge, they would extract it directly. And if they did take an indirect approach, it would've been a much more dangerous plot than that small fry."

"Typical," said Noel. "Only you would say that, Allen."

"You really are strange," said Mylène.

"You sound unusually confident about that one," said Allen. As he finished

speaking, he realized Riese was staring at him. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she replied. “This is a little out of the blue, but...you’re not feeling sick, are you?”

“Sick?”

“You seem like your usual self, but since I couldn’t tell what was going on back there, I can’t quite get a handle on how you’re doing physically.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but it *did* seem like you were a little slower than usual to notice the Sand Wolf. Although it’s been half a year since I’ve seen you in action, so I might be misremembering. Sorry if that’s strange. It just struck me as odd.”

“Doesn’t bother me. Anyway, I don’t feel sick, but I guess I’m not quite at the top of my game either.”

In some sense, Riese had hit the mark. He wasn’t quite what he’d been in the past. For some reason, his perception had deteriorated to average levels. It was true that in the past he would have recognized the threat sooner. Still, the real problem had been how to act on that recognition. Attacking a monster still buried under the earth would have been far too grandiloquent a display. In the end, he still would have taken exactly the same approach. It made sense that Noel and Mylène hadn’t noticed that anything was amiss. Allen himself had felt the difference, but he was surprised that Riese had been so perceptive.

“You’ve got a good eye,” he told her. “What exactly was so different?”

“I’m not sure I could put it into words,” she replied. “I wasn’t even confident I was right.”

“But you were. That’s impressive,” said Mylène. “Allen looked the same as always to me.”

“Same here,” said Noel. “I guess that’s the power of love.”

“Ahhh, of course,” said Mylène.

“L-Love?!” Riese sputtered. “What do you mean, ‘of course’?! H-How ridiculous!”

“Is it?” Noel smirked.

“Hmph! Forget it! You idiot, Noel!”

“Whoa. You’ve never called me an idiot before. In fact, I’ve never heard you say that before at all. I never even thought you were capable of it.”

“Maybe she’s a big girl now?” Mylène suggested.

“Hey, why’re you looking at me like that?” asked Noel.

They were only teasing, but it was enough to turn Riese’s always-composed face beet red. Allen smirked. By giving the other two exactly what they wanted, she was inviting more teasing in the future. But that was who Riese was.

Allen got the conversation back on track. “Anyway, I guess we’re not going to figure out why that thing was here. But we can never be too cautious.”

“True,” Riese replied. “I never intended to let my guard down while in the empire.”

“All I wanna do is relax and check out how other blacksmiths do things,” said Noel. “Not that I’m being careless or anything.”

“I guess we have no choice,” said Mylène.

“Yeah, I know,” said Noel. “After all, if something had gone wrong...if Allen had *died*, I wouldn’t be able to relax much. I’m not *that* laid-back. Still want to visit some blacksmiths though.”

“No problem,” said Allen. “There’s no point changing our plans over something we can’t even explain. Besides, how will I ever find a peaceful life if I give up over a little trouble?” Unless he became a hermit, even the most easygoing life was going to throw up minor roadblocks from time to time.

“Only you would call that ‘a little trouble,’ Allen,” Riese quipped.

“Yeah, you make it sound like an argument with your neighbor,” said Noel.

“I guess that’s just Allen,” said Mylène.

Allen shrugged off their comments. It was perfectly natural to have different perspectives on things. He looked ahead. “I guess it’s time we got moving again.”

“Yes. I think we’ve discussed this as much as we can,” Riese agreed.

“I wonder what’s going to happen to us in town,” said Noel. “Hopefully nothing, but I wonder...”

“Well, with Allen here, they won’t stand a chance,” Mylène noted.

“It could give us a pretty bad reputation, though. Well, anyway, can you handle taking us the rest of the way, Mylène?”

“Leave it to me.” Mylène nodded and climbed out of the carriage. A moment later, it slowly began to move.

Before long, the town came into even clearer view, and a month after departing the Frontier, they arrived at their destination. Allen felt a deep sense of relief...*finally*.

Not long after that, however, at the first place they visited upon reaching the town, they were met with a demand that shattered that relief to pieces.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

# The Empire Town

Laurus was the easternmost stronghold of the empire, a town protected by magnificent walls, situated in the Viktor empire's Linkvist territory, which bordered the Kingdom of Adastera. Yet its history was a young one, having been built to serve as a front line in its war with the kingdom. Constructed as it had been by dwarves, there could be no doubt about the town's robustness, its wartime defenses still remaining to this day. But it had been decades since the end of the war. The way Laurus flourished today would have been unimaginable back then.

"Hmm. You know, looking at this, our kingdom doesn't seem so impressive," said Allen.

The landscape before them withstood comparison to the royal capital, if it didn't outstrip it entirely. There was so much life, so much activity, so many people and things to see. And this was merely a provincial town; the imperial capital, pride of the empire, was far away. What must that place be like when this town was already so vibrant?

"Well, people do say this is the *real* pride of the empire, despite its location," Riese commented. "It's no surprise to see it's like this."

"Guess you're right," Allen replied.

The town had not flourished simply because of the empire's vast size relative to Adastera. Laurus was located on a protrusion of the empire's territory that bordered four more countries in addition to Adastera. A confluence of circumstances meant it had become a meeting point for those nations—specifically, for their merchants, who regularly came and went, plying their trade.

The empire was home to an unusually large number of beastfolk, elves, and, particularly, dwarves. By the standards of other countries, an inconceivably large number of dwarves had set up shop in Laurus, and many travelers came there for that reason alone. In fact, Allen's party had recently arrived at one

such establishment, and one such person was currently grumbling in irritation.

“Damn it,” said Noel. “Those jerks! It wasn’t that big a deal.”

Allen could understand her frustration with being kicked out, but he was still exasperated by her.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t make it okay.”

Riese was similarly unimpressed. “How would you feel if someone had said that to you, Noel?”

Noel looked flabbergasted that Riese would even ask. “Huh? I’d kick them the hell out, of course!”

“We should be the ones giving *you* that look,” said Allen.

The first thing out of Noel’s mouth after their arrival had been, “Lemme try out your tools!” That was why they’d been kicked out. Allen wasn’t a craftsperson of any stripe, but he knew that such smiths valued their tools, sometimes more than their own lives. It wasn’t hard to anticipate this outcome. All the more absurd, Noel had admitted she’d do the same thing again.

“Wasn’t it enough to watch him work?” Allen asked. “I thought that’s what you came here for.”

“I was under that impression too,” Riese agreed.

Allen had only accompanied her out of curiosity. He was in no hurry, and in this life, he’d never seen anyone other than Noel work at the forge. He’d never expected she would do something so ill-advised—he didn’t think *anyone* in their situation would.

“There’s no point in just *watching*!” Noel protested. “I’ve already seen the greatest blacksmith at work for countless hours. It’s a hindrance if anything.”

“I wish you’d kept that to yourself back there too,” said Allen.

“Quite,” Riese agreed. “If you’d left quietly, I might have even felt sorry for you.”

“Forget *that*,” said Noel. “That jerk deserved a piece of my mind after what he said to me. It’s stupid to get so worked up about the truth anyway.”

“And if someone had said that to *you*?” asked Riese.

“Hmm...well, I *have* been meaning to try out that sword I tuned for my own use,” Noel replied. She was being unreasonable. But craftspeople tended to be stubborn, unreasonable sorts.

“Then was there even any point in coming here?” Allen asked.

“What? I told you I wanted to see their tools, didn’t I? I’ve already seen the greatest smith at work, but I don’t have access to the tools she had. I’m not saying I’ve already equaled her skill, but I need knowledge of better tools in order to keep improving.”

“In that case, it really *does* seem like you were asking too much of the poor man.” Riese sighed.

Noel, however, was unmoved. She was determined to do things her own way. Allen had lost any interest in accompanying her, but she didn’t seem too eager to head to the next spot either. Instead they would head to Riese’s destination.

“You know, I expected this, but I really couldn’t live here,” said Allen.

“Too busy?” asked Mylène.

He answered with a wry smile and a shrug of resignation. She was just about right. Not that he *couldn’t* necessarily enjoy a peaceful life in a busy place—just not here. War between the empire and the kingdom wasn’t out of the question, and its front line didn’t make for a very appealing place to stay.

“I’m still blown away by how lively it is, though. I half expected the people to all be on edge,” Allen said.

“Yes,” said Riese. “It hardly seems like a town at risk of being disturbed by war.”

The town’s bustling multinational economy wouldn’t stop the empire from waging war if their hearts were truly set on it, but there would surely be some sort of advance warning; even if not a formal declaration, at least a conscious change in the atmosphere would incite increased tension among the town’s denizens. But there was no sign of any such thing. Still...

“It doesn’t feel like war, but there *is* a weird vibe in the air, don’t you think?”

“A weird vibe?” said Noel. “You don’t think it’s related to *that*?”

Allen shrugged. He couldn’t say with confidence that it *wasn’t* related to the demon they’d encountered. All he knew was that a vague sense of unease hung over the place.

“I guess it’s more like...they’re on high alert?”

“You think so?” asked Riese. “I can’t say I’ve noticed that.”

“I dunno what it’s usually like here, but there’s a lot of security doing patrols. Seems like they’re being overly cautious.”

“I guess?” said Noel. “I just figured they ran a tight ship.”

“It’s not that strange, considering where we are, is it?” Mylène asked.

“Well, when you put it like that...” Allen could accept that maybe he was imagining things. Maybe he was just too afraid of missing something. Then, as his eyes searched the crowd, he missed what was right in front of him.

“Eek!”

An impact accompanied the voice. He’d collided with someone, sending them flying. Reflexively, he extended a hand to help them up.

“Sorry!!! I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Oh...no, it was entirely my—”

The moment Allen laid eyes on the person—a girl—she stopped mid-apology. Her mouth hung agape in an expression of shock, one that mirrored Allen’s own. He knew her. She was someone who shouldn’t have been there.

“Anriette?!”

“Allen?!”

It was Anriette Linkvist, first daughter of the Marquis of Linkvist, the house that ruled over this town and the territory that surrounded it.

# The Lady of the Empire

The lady had visited Adastera in the past. Though embroiled in a cold war, the two nations had nominally established a friendly relationship. Visits from the nearby Marquis of Linkvist had been part of the obligatory exchanges between two friendly nations—or so Allen had been told.

It had been ten years since he'd seen her. Back then, he had still been a child prodigy and had met Anriette at one of the parties to which he accompanied his father. That was the only time they had spoken. He had seen her a number of times since but never exchanged words. Rather, he had actively avoided speaking to her.

"It's been a while," said Allen.

"Sure has," Anriette replied. "What're you doing here, anyway?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking *you* that?"

The daughter of the governing house of a territory shouldn't have been wandering around a town so far from the Marquis's estate, and within sniffing distance of the kingdom. Pride of the empire or not, it wasn't a safe place for her. Especially with—at least as far as Allen could tell at a glance—no guards. "Careless" wasn't the word for it.

"You know each other?" asked Noel.

"Uh... Anriette, of the Marquis of Linkvist, wasn't it?" said Riese.

There was something in Riese's tone. Allen glanced at her and saw an indescribable expression. He tilted his head in confusion. Tracing the gazes of the two women, he realized he had been holding Anriette's hand ever since he helped her up.

"Oh. Sorry."

"Not at all," Anriette replied. "I'm not gonna sweat something like that when you just helped me out."

That might have been true, but the lady's dignity mattered. She was around the same age as Allen; for many reasons, he shouldn't have been touching her without good reason.

Allen composed himself. "Uh, anyway...as Riese said, this is Anriette of the Marquis of Linkvist. Do I need to give any more details?"

"Nah," said Noel. "Even I know whose domain we're in right now."

"Same here," said Mylène. "But I'm confused about what you're doing here."

"Yes," said Riese. "This isn't a place for someone such as yourself, even if it *is* your domain. Um...not that it's my place to say."

"Quite," said Anriette. "You should explain yourself before criticizing others. What is the princess—no, that's not right anymore, is it? Anyway, what's a duchess of the kingdom doing here with this motley crew?"

Riese was shocked. "What? You know about that, Lady Anriette?"

The news that Riese was no longer a princess had not been disclosed; nothing about the House of Westfeldt had. Now that news of the General's death had spread, there was no telling how Adastera's neighbors might react to further developments. The news was supposed to have been kept within the kingdom, yet here Riese was faced with a representative of the empire—the nation they *least* wanted to know anything about the goings-on in Adastera—who seemed to know all about her.

To Allen, it didn't seem too surprising.

"I try to stay in the loop," Anriette said curtly. "Oh, and you don't need to call me 'lady.' I'm not good with formalities. I'm sure you can tell from the way I talk."

"Wait, is this the first time you two have met?" asked Allen. He knew Anriette didn't like to be called "lady." She had told him the first time they met.

"No, not exactly," said Anriette.

"Our other meetings were little more than greetings," said Riese. "We've never had a conversation. She was from the empire, after all."

"Makes sense when you put it that way," said Allen. Even children couldn't let

their guard down. Any insult to the princess could be cause for war, which would be just what the empire hoped for. It was best to keep conversation to a minimum.

“Putting that aside, what are you guys doing here?” asked Anriette.

“Is that question coming from a representative of the Marquis of Linkvist?” Allen clarified.

“It’s just a question. Don’t read too much into it. It’s not like I don’t have any idea anyway.”

“Figures.”

Anyone from the Kingdom of Adastera so brazenly venturing into empire territory would be sure to raise curiosity even among common people. Nobody in Adastera was credulous enough to take the nominal amity between the two nations as an invitation to go marching into an empire town. It was reasonable to presume they had a good reason for being there, although Anriette probably hadn’t meant it like that.

“Well...if I had to say, I guess we’re here to see the sights.”

“*Sightseeing*, huh?” Anriette narrowed her eyes as she emphasized the word.

Allen shrugged. It wasn’t like he was lying, technically. Nor was he trying to cover anything up. She searched him with her eyes for a while before giving an accepting sigh.

“All right. As long as you’re not here to cause trouble. But if you want my opinion, I think you should run along home.”

“Oh? Something bad going on?” asked Noel.

“I guess that’s one way to put it. Hey, you guys managed to drive off the demons, right?”

Riese gasped. “How did you...” She trailed off as it hit her. “Of course. Even with the gag order, I never expected we could stop the spread of the news entirely.”

Any talk of the demon attack was sure to lead to the news of Riese becoming a duchess. As a result, it was to be treated as top secret until the duchy had

stabilized. However, most of the capital's population already knew about it. A gag order, no matter how quickly it was instated, could only do so much. Even so, the fact that the news had reached the empire was a problem.

"We couldn't possibly hide it," said Noel. "Is that an issue?"

"Not exactly," Anriette answered. "You know that demons harass the empire just like they do the kingdom, right?"

Both nations bordered the Demon Kingdom. In fact, as the larger country, the empire bore the brunt of demonkind's aggression.

"You're saying the empire wants to know how we repelled the demons?" asked Allen.

"Just that I can't guarantee they won't come asking if they find out you're here, and I doubt they're gonna offer you much in return. If you don't want trouble, I recommend quitting whatever you're planning. You're probably just gonna end up getting swindled."

Mylène cast a glance at Allen. "He doesn't seem too worried about that."

Allen shrugged. Even with his wealth of experience, he couldn't confidently say he'd never been duped by a veteran foe, and getting wrapped up in trouble would defeat the point of coming out here to begin with.

Anriette continued. "Even if you don't go offering them information, I can't guarantee you'll stay out of trouble. You're at risk for as long as you stay within the empire. I think you should head home right away."

She argued with conviction, but her words weren't much use to them. They didn't have a clue what the circumstances in the empire were like right now. In fact, figuring that out was one of Riese's goals. They couldn't afford to take Anriette at her word, and even if she was sincere, they couldn't do as she advised. Still, they couldn't deny that her speculations might come to pass.

Allen shrugged. "I guess I appreciate the warning."

# Truth and Misunderstanding

Having said her piece, Anriette made a hasty exit. “Do what you want; I’ve done my part” were the words she left them with as she disappeared into the crowd without so much as a goodbye.

Allen and Anriette were only the vaguest of acquaintances. As for the chance encounter, well, these things *did* happen. Her words might provide further food for thought, but the matter itself was over...provided it truly had been a chance encounter.

Allen stopped. “Sorry, I’ve gotta go do something. Can you three amuse yourselves for a while? I’ll meet up with you later.”

“Wha?! Allen!” Riese cried.

But he turned and ran, leaving her astonished noises behind. He’d already lost sight of Anriette, but if he was right...

“Leaving your friends behind to chase another girl? You’re awful.”

Allen came to a stop as he heard the voice. Anriette stood a short distance away. He’d been running for less than a minute, but having caught up to her in that time wasn’t strange. What *was* strange was that he’d had to run at full speed to do it.

“You make me sound like some kinda stud. Little weird,” he commented.

“You’re the one with a harem of beautiful girls following you around,” said Anriette. “And don’t you all live in the same house?”

Allen shrugged. “You figured that out, but not that nothing’s ever happened between us?” He scanned his surroundings. The scene was completely different from their earlier conversation. Now they stood far from the bustling crowds, deep in some back alley. Allen looked Anriette right in the eyes. “Enough of the nonsense. What are you up to?”

“Uh, isn’t that *my* line? What are *you* up to, dragging a pretty girl into a dark

alley?”

“Funny, I remember following you here. Anyway, I have no interest in you as a person. Only as a disciple of God.”

At that moment, something about Anriette changed. She was no longer a normal girl. She stood haloed by an overwhelming aura of holiness—an aura with which Allen was deeply familiar.

“Should I take this to mean I was on the mark?” he asked.

“Nah, to be honest, you’ve misunderstood. I told you that you were reading too much into it, didn’t I? That’s a bad habit of yours. I guess it’s not your fault, though, considering the life you had.”

“What, you mean you *didn’t* come to see me as a holy disciple?”

Allen had known the person before him since his previous life. Though his first meeting with *Anriette* had been ten years ago, he had known her—the *real* her—since long before. She was a holy disciple, a being who ensured that matters on earth were resolved as God saw fit. It was she who had made Allen a hero, offered him words of advice, and directly intervened to assist him. He’d known who she really was the moment he’d laid eyes on her. She was unmistakable.

But Allen was the only one who was supposed to be reborn. Her appearance in this world alone was odd, not to mention the fact that she had been given life as a human. Whatever this was all about, he had already concluded that reincarnation in another world hadn’t been enough to escape his hero’s duty. Her very presence in this world meant that day was sure to come. But from Anriette herself he’d heard nothing. He’d assumed their “chance” encounter meant the day had finally come, but judging from her response, that wasn’t the case.

“I told you that you’re overthinking it,” she said. “I didn’t show myself to you today in service of my holy duties.”

“But it wasn’t just a coincidence, was it?” Allen knew he’d never bump into someone in a crowd, no matter how distracted he was. He always kept one eye on where he was going.

“Weeell...I can’t deny that. I just wanted to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“Yup. But I’ve already done that.”

“Oh? You mean the whole ‘go home’ thing?”

“What else would I mean?”

“Man, I dunno.” Nothing for ten years, and then, out of nowhere, this. There *had* to be something more to it.

“I did think I’d probably accomplish nothing more than putting you on your guard for no good reason, but...well, this is all your fault to begin with.”

“Huh? What did I do?”

“Don’t play dumb. You don’t honestly think you can hide how weak you’ve become, do you?”

Allen smirked. Of course she knew. Riese had noticed too. Of course, it depended on what point in time he compared to, but he was at least half as strong as he’d been. He was weaker even compared to a little while ago.

“Especially your Boundless Knowledge,” the figure continued. “You must be wondering how it got so bad.”

“Nah, it was too powerful for me to handle before. This suits me better.” He could no longer acquire knowledge of any entity of which he was aware. Now he could only inspect things he could actually see. It was finally a power within his means. Since he could still use his other powers without issue, losing the tendency to see *too* much actually felt good.

“Seems like you’re telling the truth.”

“Like I could lie to you. Anyway, from what you just said, it almost sounds like you’re worried about me.”

“‘Sounds like’? Of course I am.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Jeez, why is that such a surprise? Is it that strange?”

“I guess not.”

She might have been a holy disciple, but she *had* offered him plenty of counsel in the past. So much that he couldn't believe it was *all* in service of God's will. But still, she was who she was.

"You have a fundamental misunderstanding, though. I'm not a holy disciple anymore."

"What? Really? But your powers—"

"Are just like yours. Your powers didn't disappear when you ceased being a hero. I am a human girl, Anriette. My authority to act as a holy disciple is highly restricted."

"I guess I can see that now that you mention it. But why did you come to this world anyway?" Allen had been reincarnated as a reward for fulfilling his duty as a hero. What reason could she have to accompany him?

"I'm here to... How should I put this? Provide any necessary after-sales service, given how you seem destined to attract trouble."

"Some destiny. I can't say you're wrong, though." He paused. "Wait, so how exactly did I misunderstand anything?"

"Like I told you, I only came to see you because I have a feeling you're about to get into trouble. I might have left something out, though."

"Oh yeah?"

"The 'trouble' in question is demons."

Allen was unsurprised. Actually, it made perfect sense. So *that* was what had motivated her to warn him.

"If I didn't tell you, you were going to end up in hot water again."

Allen smirked. He couldn't deny that. The events of half a year ago that had caused his Boundless Knowledge power to lose its potency had been a little *too* hot for his liking. He was sure his full powers would return someday, but the wait would be on the order of years. Who knew what might happen if a similar incident befell him? He could lose his Boundless Knowledge skill entirely or be the victim of other, even more damaging effects.

"And it seems you still have something of a destiny to fulfill," the girl

continued.

“You sure know a lot.”

“I *was* dedicated to assisting you when I was a holy disciple. That power didn’t just go away.”

“Got it. Well, I can’t say I don’t have any thoughts about demons, but I don’t have any plans to leap into action right now.” Though Allen had defeated a group of demons, he still knew precious little about them. He certainly had no ideas for taking on demonkind as a whole. Provided they left him alone, he was content to live and let live.

“I’m saying that they *won’t* leave you alone. Remember how you drove them off? I don’t know how far that story has spread, but I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve attracted the attention of the demons back home. Even if not, they’re constantly causing us problems here.”

“I had a feeling. Makes sense.” That explained the strange vibe in the town. “I take it you’re not gonna go into specifics?”

“That would only increase the chance of you getting caught up in this.”

“Sounds like it’s worse than I thought.” Maybe even as bad as what had happened to the General. That would explain why the empire had been so slow to take any kind of action against the kingdom.

She looked deep into Allen’s eyes. “In short, both Anriette and myself have only one piece of advice for you: if you still seek peace, go home at once.”

Allen could only sigh.

## Trouble in the Backstreets

After saying goodbye to Anriette for the second time, Allen brooded over what to do. He had little doubt that she was telling the truth. Maybe there were things she wasn't telling him, but she didn't seem to be lying. Still, he couldn't afford to obediently do as she said. Forget Noel and him—Riese had come here to look into something specific. Knowing her, the warning of danger would do nothing to dissuade her. "What are you talking about?! It's *always* been dangerous!" she'd say. *Any* encroachment upon imperial lands by a citizen of the kingdom was dangerous. Even the insistence of the person she had employed as some sort of escort wouldn't deter her.

Only two choices remained: drag Riese home kicking and screaming or stay with her. Leaving her here by herself wasn't an option. Noel would feel the same.

"Guess there's only one thing for it," said Allen, though he couldn't say he didn't feel conflicted. Noel would surely make the same choice. Then the only problem would be what to do next. "Priority one is meeting up with everyone," he mumbled as he made to exit the back alley.

He furrowed his brow in confusion. Nothing was particularly wrong, but he sensed a small change in the vitality of the town's bustling streets.

"I'm still pretty far off. Guess I could be wrong." Still, he listened carefully, and the streets seemed to bustle with an even greater commotion than before. It only became clearer as he drew closer. "Something's happened."

It didn't seem like anything severe enough to be called an emergency—more like the kind of disturbance that might be caused by a minor theft. An everyday occurrence, and yet...

"Hmm. You over there, do you know what's going on?" Allen shouted in the direction of an alley entrance that, from where he stood, was obscured.

A muffled gasp escaped from the alley. Allen had known someone was hiding

there—he could hear their ragged breathing. That didn’t prove they had anything to do with whatever was going on in the streets, though.

“Well now, this is unfortunate for both of us. I wasn’t gonna kill ya, but ya leave me no choice.”

A shady-looking man leaped out. He was unshaven, his hair unkempt, clad in dirty, tattered clothes. He looked like a simple slum-dweller, except for his wild, bloodshot eyes. The eyes of a man with his back up against the wall. A man who wouldn’t hesitate to kill if necessary.

“What do you mean?” said Allen. “I don’t even know what you’ve done. I’ve never laid eyes on you before. You could just give me a half-assed excuse and be on your way.” Of course, he wouldn’t necessarily *believe* any excuse, but now didn’t seem like the time to mention that.

“Shaddup! S-Stop it!” the stranger cried, producing something resembling a dagger from his pocket. It gave off a strange aura. It *looked* like a dagger, but it seemed to have more uses than a simple weapon.

Before Allen could confirm that, he noticed the black-red liquid dripping from the blade and narrowed his eyes. “Huh. You know, I didn’t plan on killing you, but I guess you’re not gonna shake my hand and wish me on my merry way, are you?”

“I t-told ya to shut up!” the man screamed as he slashed pitifully at the air in what seemed like a desperate display of intimidation.

*Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha - Sense Danger.*

Something surged out of the weapon. Allen leaped backward. It had pierced through the spot where he had been standing. He peered at the weapon.

“Y-You dodged it?! How?!”

“Whoa. I knew that was no normal dagger, but I didn’t expect a magical artifact, especially not one that can fire lightning. It’s pretty weak compared to Akira’s magic, but I can see how it would cause a commotion.”

Depending on the powers contained within them, some magical artifacts were more or less suited to offensive purposes. Clearly, the one the man held

was in the first category. It wasn't something a slum-dweller should've been able to get his hands on—not only would it surely command an exorbitant price, but judging by the feel of its blast, it could burn a regular person to a crisp with ease. Obviously there was more to this story, but Allen's first priority was to subdue the man. He didn't want to see a bunch of bystanders get hurt.

As if sensing his intentions, the man swung the dagger again before Allen could act. Lightning surged from its tip, blasting a giant dent into the wall behind Allen, who, having barely dodged the blast, lunged at the man, forcing him to the ground.

"Gah! Damn it!" From his back, the man continued to swing the dagger wildly.

Allen kicked the weapon out of his hand. "I can't let you use that thing anymore." He pinned the man's arms to the ground. The stranger wouldn't be able to resist anymore, no matter how he struggled.

"Why?! Who are you?!"

"Funny, I was about to ask you that. From my point of view, you're just some guy who tried to kill me out of nowhere. If anyone's gonna complain, it should be me. Anyway, how did you get your hands on that? My next action depends on your response, so choose your words carefully."

"Damn it! How did I get into this? This is all wrong! I had one job! All I had to do was not screw this up!"

"Hello? Are you listening to me? What's wrong? What job?"

It sounded like he was acting on orders. A sense of foreboding began to creep over Allen. Then, suddenly, the man's demeanor changed entirely.

"Gah! Ugh! S-Something's... Stop!"

"Huh? Hey, what's wrong?"

The man coughed up blood and writhed violently. All Allen had done was pin him down by his arms.

"No! I don't wanna die! Guh!"

"What the hell is going on? Guess I should calm you down first," Allen mumbled as he released him and drew his sword. The man continued to writhe.

*Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.*

*Sword of Cataclysm: Beast Cleaver.*

His sword pierced the man, pinning his body to the ground. The man seized up before collapsing limply. After confirming he was dead, Allen sighed.

The stillness was interrupted by a voice from behind. “Excuse me, but could you tell me what’s going on here?”

Allen looked at his hand, tracing a line down his blade to the impaled man. He remembered Anriette’s words—words with which he now vehemently disagreed—and sighed again. Trouble was guaranteed to follow him whether he tried to leave or not.

## Proof of Demonhood

The course of action Allen had chosen wasn't a bad one. True, the fastest solution would have been to ignore the voice, but he couldn't say it had been a bad decision, although he had to admit he would have preferred that nobody had seen him. Now that he *had* been seen, it made no sense to flee. He didn't want to end up being blamed for something he hadn't done.

So, obediently, he stayed, throwing his hands up in a display of submission and turning around. Before him stood a girl who seemed much like Beatrice—surely a knight or of some similar station. She hadn't drawn her weapon but was clearly ready to at any moment.



Hoping to relieve the tension, Allen deliberately relaxed and began to speak. “Let’s see... If I can explain, I’m actually a victim. This guy attacked me, and I defended myself. I didn’t even kill him.”

“Looks like he’s impaled on your sword to me.”

“Yeah, I had to calm him down. But look here.” He retrieved his sword and stepped aside so she could see. Allen had noticed a particular point on the man’s body and had impaled him through it. He had nothing to feel guilty about. That was clear at a glance, since the man wasn’t wounded and had shed no blood.

“I see,” said the girl. “Just one question. How did you do that?”

“Well...”

It wasn’t exactly taboo to ask what Gift a person had, but it wasn’t very polite. It was one thing if it was necessary, but this wasn’t such a situation. Of course, Allen hadn’t used a Gift, but it was only natural that she would assume so.

“No, excuse me. What I meant to say was, how did you do that without using a Gift?”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“Ah, forgive me for not explaining. You see, my Gift allows me to see traces of other Gifts having been used. But...”

“You can’t see any traces here.”

“Right. An explanation would be a great help.”

Allen felt like he’d been backed into a corner. He knew some people had such Gifts, but they were rare enough that he’d never expected to attract the attention of such a person here. “Bad luck” didn’t cover it.

Worse, as the girl pinned him down with her steely gaze, he could guess what she was thinking. He had just performed an incredible feat without the use of a Gift. There were ways to manage it, such as with the use of magical artifacts, but their power was limited. Only one group of beings could perform feats of this caliber without a Gift—and Anriette had just told him that the empire was having trouble with them.

“Sorry to change the subject, but could I ask if you’re familiar with demons?” she asked.

“I mean...who isn’t?”

“Right. I assumed you would be. Demons possess powers similar to Gifts that are not Gifts. Of course, those powers don’t leave any traces.”

It was clear where this was going. Agitated by the girl’s steely, inquiring gaze, Allen racked his brain over how to handle the situation. There was no way for anyone but him, with his Boundless Knowledge, to tell if someone was a demon.

“To be frank, I suspect that you *are* a demon,” she stated.

“I understand. I don’t have horns, though, do I?”

“That proves nothing. Demons having horns is little more than a story the people tell each other. In fact, it is rare for a demon to *have* them.”

What a futile gambit that had been. Allen knew his interrogator would know better than to fall for that. Having battled demons for much longer, the empire was better-versed in matters of demonkind than the kingdom. That demons typically looked indistinguishable from humans was basic knowledge.

The interrogation continued. “Now, for the record, what exactly *are* you?”

“I’m not a demon, if that’s what you mean. I guess that’s just what a demon would say, though, right?”

“Exactly. I’m afraid you’ll have to offer some kind of proof.”

There was no way of proving oneself to *not* be a demon, and the use of powers that weren’t Gifts was considered sufficient proof of *being* one. She had Allen dead to rights; he looked for all the world like a demon and was being asked to provide some nonexistent proof to the contrary.

“If you really aren’t a demon, I apologize. But in the interests of protecting this town and this nation, I can’t let such a suspicious character go free.”

As much as he wanted to, Allen couldn’t argue. He *did* look suspicious. But being hauled off for further interrogation would only cause more problems. As far as Adastera’s official records went, he didn’t exist. Besides, even claiming to

be from the kingdom would cause problems. Here he was, a resident of an enemy nation, up to suspicious activities in the backstreets of an empire town. He'd absolve himself of one charge and fall right into another.

Resisting would open a whole other can of worms. He could kill his detainer, and then what? He'd be a wanted criminal. He might even pick a fight with the entire empire. They hadn't had to pass any checkpoints or fill out any forms to enter the town, but he knew they were subject to some level of surveillance. The relevant forces would soon figure out that he'd arrived with Riese, and it wouldn't be too hard to establish her background. The worst-case scenario was more than just a pessimistic fancy.

There was only one choice: escape. But that would be difficult too, since his opponent was clearly competent. Beating her in a fight was one thing, but escaping was another matter entirely. Allen's skills lent themselves to offense. He had to admit that running away wasn't his strong suit. On top of which, he was at a disadvantage and could easily end up with reinforcements chasing after him too. A clean escape would be brutally hard to accomplish—and then he had to figure out how to meet up with the others.

*What the hell am I gonna do?* he thought as he sighed in exasperation.

# The Inscrutable Boy

Lisette Belwaldt could sense that the young man in front of her had made his decision. She tensed as she observed him, ready to move at a moment's notice. In her line of work she encountered all kinds of people. Some attacked her the moment she called out to them—some had almost killed her. One such case had been a young boy—a mere child. Ever since surviving that attack, she had never let her guard down during her duties. Now, though, her intuition told her she should be even more alert than usual.

With no proof, she didn't truly suspect him of being a demon, as he would have done something already. But her experience told her that this young man's power far outstripped anything she had ever encountered before. It was something altogether different from a high level or a Gift. Faced with a being that was unimaginably stronger than herself, she was afraid—an instinctive fear that rose from the pit of her stomach.

She had almost leaped at him the moment she first made eye contact with him. It wasn't reason that had stopped her, but her inability to imagine subduing him. Even now, she wanted to turn and run. She was prevented only by her sense of duty and a suspicion that fleeing was a losing proposition. She wouldn't be able to escape. She had to take the offensive. She was certain the young man commanded some power that wasn't a Gift and admonished herself to remain alert.

The young man looked over Lisette's shoulder and reacted involuntarily. "Oh."

Lisette peered at him. She saw through his bluff. There was nothing behind her that would provoke such a reaction. She was Level 8, and had trained her ability to sense her surroundings intensely. She could tell when someone in a crowd was watching her from a distance of a hundred meters. Yet, in an admission that her abilities surely paled in comparison to the figure before her, she looked over her shoulder just in case. She quickly turned her head in the

smallest possible movement. It was a fraction of a second. Yet when she turned back, the young man had disappeared without a trace.

She gasped, more in fear than surprise. All her caution hadn't stopped the person who had inspired it from disappearing. She sensed that death was at hand. Intensely alert, she scanned her surroundings, preparing for the worst...but nothing happened.

"Did he flee?"

She couldn't believe it. Why would he need to run? It was more plausible that she'd just died and was currently enjoying a convenient fantasy.

But facts were facts. There was only one thing to do. The boy didn't seem like a demon, but he was suspicious as hell. And he might not have resisted, exactly, but he hadn't followed orders either. Clearly there was *something* he felt guilty about. Most likely, he was a foreign agent. These days, a handful of would-be spies from Adastera were to be expected. True, he didn't have that look about him, but perhaps that simply attested to the importance of his mission.

She found it hard to believe that news of the recent incident could have gotten out, but perhaps—no. They didn't even have any information regarding the assassin responsible. This wasn't the time to give credence to remote possibilities.

Lisette nodded to herself. "I guess I should assume the worst. I can't just leave *this* unattended to either," she muttered, looking toward the man who lay motionless on the ground. It seemed like the boy had killed him, and yet he had no injuries to speak of. "Hmm. No stab wounds at all. How on earth... Well, I guess that sword could be a special one."

There were many armaments in the world that boasted greater powers than even magical artifacts—Hauteclaire the most famed among them. In fact, magical artifacts were the product of research into imitating the powers of such weapons, though the results couldn't hold a candle to the genuine article. Hauteclaire and other weapons had been granted by God, after all.

"More importantly, what do I do about this guy? Take him in, of course, but then what?"

Lisette had run into the alleyway in pursuit of the man who was brandishing a seemingly magical dagger and causing a commotion with its lightning powers. Fortunately, he hadn't hit anyone, but he'd slashed at a nearby woman and run. Lisette had been attending to other business when the disturbance had broken out before her eyes. She'd had to pursue him, but the man had been more fleet-footed than expected. Just when she'd thought she had him, that boy had appeared.

"He was probably just a diversion, but I'll have to leave that to my colleagues. *My problem is figuring out how the boy is involved in all this.*"

Lisette shrugged in confusion. None of this made sense. At least carrying the man's body away gave her something concrete to do. One last scan of her surroundings revealed the dagger the man had used. She felt its energy as she picked it up—it was definitely magical, and quite powerful. Dealing with a man wielding this would have been no picnic. "Almost feels like I owe that young man one," she muttered, although she couldn't go that far just yet, nor could she discount that he was a spy, though she hoped he wasn't.

She would have to report this to her colleagues and tell them to be on high alert. They might even have to close the main roads. They didn't have the manpower, but dealing with the kingdom took priority. If Adastera learned of what had happened, the consequences would be calamitous. They couldn't be allowed to find out. Of course, if they couldn't catch the boy—and she wasn't confident they could—then all this ruminating was for naught. Still, it was their job to prepare for, and defend against, the worst possible outcome.

Lisette hauled the dead man's body over her shoulder and walked away.

## A Proposal from the Marquis's Daughter

Having come within a hair's breadth of likely disaster, Allen breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the girl leave the crime scene.

"You really saved my ass, Mylène," he said, turning to the brown-skinned girl beside him.

She nodded. He would've never been able to pull off such a flawless escape by himself.

"What were you doing here anyway?" he asked. Clearly it was no accident—she'd shown up at the perfect time. Almost out of habit, he'd scanned the area for any interesting auras and noticed her. Knowing what she was capable of, he knew instantly that she was his best shot at escaping the situation without bloodshed. Of course, this hadn't really resolved anything, but at least it had bought him some time and avoided what was turning into a really sticky situation.

Mylène had shown herself, and Allen had nodded, subtly enough to avoid alerting his captor, signaling for her to come to his side. Then, in the blink of an eye, they were gone.

"Noel and Riese knew you'd go getting yourself into trouble," said Mylène.

"So you followed me?" said Allen.

She nodded. He couldn't help but smile. They had a funny way of showing trust in him. Then again, they'd turned out to be right.

"I guess I'll have to thank them both later."

But there wasn't time for that just yet. Allen's success in distracting the girl for a split second had mostly been a fluke. He really *had* been surprised. Suddenly an exasperated voice came from around the corner at the end of the alley in which Allen still stood, facing the same way he had faced this whole time.

"You never change, do you? Nice work getting yourself in hot water again." A figure stepped into view. It was Anriette.

"Didn't you tell me to do what I liked? I thought you left."

"I *was* leaving, until I realized you were about to create another fine mess for yourself. Clearly I wasn't needed, though."

"No, you really helped me out. Dumb luck or not, you showing up and surprising me like that created the distraction we needed." He'd never expected her to come back. "I oughta thank you."

"No need. All I had to do was stand there. Anyway, could you tell that chick next to you she can relax a little? I don't like being stared at."

"I wish I could, but I don't think she can help it."

Anriette shrugged as if to say "I know."

Mylène had been staring daggers at Anriette the whole time, out of nervousness and caution that would usually seem unwarranted, considering they had met just earlier. But Mylène had been invisible the entire time she had been in the alleyway, and she had turned Allen invisible too, facilitating his miraculous escape. They still hadn't moved from the spot they'd been in all along. But Anriette could see them and hear their voices without issue.

"She's right, Mylène," said Allen. "You can relax. She's a friend. I could tell you were here too, right? It's no different."

Mylène hesitated. "Got it."

"You understand?" said Anriette.

"I understand that Allen associates with people who defy logic."

"Aw, I'm not as bad as *him*. If there was another person like him, we'd be in real trouble."

"You got that right."

"All right," Allen interrupted, "now's not the time for 'Everybody Roast Allen.' I take it you have a reason for gracing us with your presence again, Anriette?"

There was no need for her to come back now that he was out of trouble.

Anriette wasn't the type to try to extract gratitude for a favor.

"Sorta, yeah," she answered. "But let me ask you something first—what are you gonna do now?"

"To be honest, I was *juuust* leaning toward staying, but now I'm thinking maybe I *should* get out of here after all. That girl didn't seem like a regular patrol guard. It's probably best to make myself scarce for a while."

"I should've known you'd pick up on that, but you still don't realize just how far up the creek you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Your path back to Adastera has probably already been blockaded."

"Huh?" said Mylène. "They can do that?"

Blocking travel to and from a foreign nation was liable to cause an international dispute—maybe even a war over who had claim to the road. Except in extreme circumstances, Adastera would have to approve any such decision, and their permission would take much more time to secure.

"They can," said Anriette. "That order of knights has the power to act independently. They can do almost anything they want. All the empire can do is disavow them, if it comes to that."

"I doubt that disavowal would mean much to Adastera," said Allen.

"That's exactly what the empire is hoping for. You know as well as I what their ultimate goal is."

"Makes sense. If this ended up in war, they'd welcome it with open arms. I swear, this country's always stirring the pot."

"I can't deny that."

"But what's the benefit to blockading the roads? As far as they're concerned, I'm just a shady character."

"You have to understand the situation. They can't give an inch right now, especially not when it comes to any intelligence getting into the kingdom's hands."

As inconvenient a reality as it was for Allen and the others, Anriette was confirming his suspicions that something was afoot in the town.

“So are you about to tell me there’s something you can do to help?”

“Absolutely not. I told you, those knights operate independently. But since you’re gonna get hauled in before long, I suggest you guys hide out at my place for a while.”

“I see...”

Allen appreciated the gesture, but it wasn’t strictly necessary. Escaping using Mylène’s invisibility seemed dicey, but if it came to it, he could use his instant transportation abilities. On the other hand, leaving the empire now would mean abandoning the reasons they had come to begin with, on top of which, it was clear that Anriette knew something about whatever misfortune had befallen the empire. Allen didn’t particularly care about that, but Riese would.

“Uh, but weren’t you just telling us to get out of here ASAP?” said Allen.

“So you didn’t get involved,” said Anriette. “You’re in it now.”

That didn’t seem like much of a justification, but Allen offered a nod of understanding regardless. Anriette operated according to her own logic. She’d wanted him to keep out of this. With that off the table, all bets were off.

When it came to what exactly was motivating all this, Allen was still in the dark, but he couldn’t see a good reason to refuse her offer. He and his friends stood to benefit from it too, and he owed Anriette a debt he could never repay. Anriette herself, of course, would claim she was just fulfilling her duty—a modest view that only fueled Allen’s sense of gratitude.

“I’ll have to consult the others first, but I think there’s a good chance we’ll accept your offer,” said Allen.

“I see,” said Anriette, turning away in a labored display of indifference. “I don’t care either way, you know. You can do what you like.”

“I will,” said Allen with a smile as he wondered how he was going to explain this to his friends.

## Leaving the Town Behind

Allen was almost disappointed by how easily he was able to reunite with the others. They hadn't arranged a meeting spot, but it seemed that Mylène's abilities extended to sensing auras within a wide area. Just as she had managed to locate Allen, she was able to quickly ascertain the whereabouts of Riese and Noel. After they had reunited, Allen explained what had happened.

"I suppose this is about what I expected," said Riese. "There you go getting yourself into trouble again."

"No kidding," said Noel. "Nice work making yourself the target of a manhunt. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if you did this on purpose."

"Charming," said Allen. "What would I get out of that?"

"Wouldn't it be even crazier if it was all a coincidence?" said Mylène.

"Exactly," said Anriette. "You'd have to be cursed to have such bad luck."

Allen didn't appreciate the criticism. If there was anything he could do to get them out of this bind, he would.

"Though if this has resulted in Lady Anriette inviting us to stay with her, then I must say I'm delighted," said Riese. "After all, it's already become clear I'll be unable to fulfill the purpose of my visit, but I don't intend to leave. I imagine we won't be able to do much for several months?"

"Right," said Anriette. "Well, I think things'll die down after ten days or so. The fact is, they just don't have that much time to dedicate to chasing you down, no matter how meticulous they're trying to be."

"Ten days, huh?" said Noel. "That works for me. I'm a little afraid of losing my edge not swinging a hammer for that long, but I'm sure I'll get it back quickly enough."

"You sure are confident," said Mylène.

"That's just how good I am," said Noel.

It seemed everyone was in agreement. “I guess we’ll take you up on your offer then,” said Allen.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” said Anriette.

From there, things proceeded quickly—they had to act fast, after all. According to Anriette, their room to maneuver was shrinking with each passing moment. “Right now, they’re busy dealing with that guy who attacked you, but they’ll take care of that in time. Worst-case scenario, they’ll end up blaming you for that too.”

“You’re talking about the man with the magical artifact?” asked Riese.

“Yup,” Anriette replied. “From what I’ve overheard, he was causing a minor panic in the plaza with that thing. Thankfully nobody was badly hurt, but he did cut one person.”

Allen could guess how she’d come across that information. She was free to use her divine powers in any way that didn’t interfere with the course of events in the world. Gathering intelligence was trivial for her.

“That girl said something about chasing him too,” said Allen. “And something about it probably being a diversion.”

“That’s the obvious conclusion,” said Anriette. “He didn’t accomplish anything other than wounding one person. The consequences are so trivial considering the magical artifact he had.”

“Shouldn’t you be concerned about that too?” asked Noel. “It happened in your domain right?”

“True, if it actually *was* a diversion for something else that was worse,” said Anriette. “But I think I’d better play this close to the chest for now.”

Noel raised her eyebrows. It certainly sounded like she knew exactly what had happened—in fact, Allen was sure she did. If she hadn’t taken action, it was because there was no need.

“Do you need any help?” he asked.

“Appreciate it, but you’re the ones who need *my* help right now.”

“Point taken,” said Allen with a shrug and a smirk. Clearly she wasn’t in an

immediate bind.

As they conversed, the group reached and boarded their carriage. Luckily, their pursuers hadn't tracked them so far, and they were able to leave without incident. Allen breathed a sigh of relief as finally made it out of town.

"Looks like we're in the clear for now."

"They're not gonna lay a finger on *me*," said Anriette. "They're not that powerful."

"I see," said Riese. "By the way, how far is it to your residence, Lady Anriette?"

"Let's see... If nothing goes wrong, we'll arrive before the end of the day. That's based on my uneventful journey here, though."

"Any villages on the way there?" said Noel.

"Nope. It's open plains from here to the town where I live."

One look out the window confirmed that. Judging by the lack of other travelers, they were cutting it close; if anything *did* go wrong, they'd be forced to pull an all-nighter. At least they had that option, though. There was no need to hurry out of concern that night would fall before they reached their destination.

"I guess the rest depends on you, Allen," said Mylène.

"Why me?" said Allen.

"Depends on whether you've gotten us into hot water or not, right?"

"Not like I can do anything about that now." Although if they *were* in trouble, he was sure they could figure a way out of most tight spots. After all, they had Anriette too. Even if she didn't wield direct influence, she could assist him—or rather he could receive assistance from her.

"By the way," said Allen, "you're sure we're not gonna cause any problems, suddenly showing up at your family's house?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," said Anriette. "I'm the only one who lives there."

“Huh?” said Noel. “How does that—”

“I guess I forgot to mention,” said Anriette. “My parents haven’t been around for a long time. They died in an accident. I don’t really know the details. The current heads of the family are my aunt and uncle. Of course, I’m the true heir, so it’s just a temporary arrangement.”

“That’s...” Noel trailed off. Whatever she’d been about to say hadn’t been too cheerful.

So the aunt and uncle who served as de facto marquis and marchioness didn’t live with the domain’s true heir. Allen didn’t want to think about it, but it seemed possible that her parents’ death was not so accidental after all. With an entire territory at stake, such things were known to happen. What he couldn’t explain was why Anriette wouldn’t do anything about it. Even as a child, and even unable to use her powers directly, there must have been something she could do.

As if reading his thoughts, Anriette shrugged. “That’s the nature of being a noble. Besides, I was only three years old. What could I do? I didn’t become who I am now until I was five.”

The others turned their heads in confusion. But she’d been answering Allen’s question, and he understood. He’d had the same experience. He hadn’t always remembered his past life—those memories had come at the same time as his first stat appraisal. Perhaps if he’d always had them, he could have done something to help his mother, and the fate that had befallen his family could’ve been different. There was no use speculating about that now, but it was interesting that he and Anriette had something in common.

The carriage moved on. Watching the landscape pass by, Allen sighed as he wondered what was next.

## A Familiar Face

Mercifully, there were no mid-journey mishaps, and the carriage reached Anriette's manor before the sun set. The surrounding city's scale was befitting of a place that the marquis's daughter called home. It certainly didn't compare to Laurus, but that was no slight; it would be absurd to compare anywhere to a city said to outshine the imperial capital itself.

They saw only a scattered handful of people as they passed through the streets. Considering the size of the town, the late hour seemed an insufficient explanation. It was impossible to envision how the streets might look in the day, but they'd have plenty of time to discover that for themselves.

In a casual tone, Riese gave voice to Allen's thoughts. "Wondering what it would be like to live here permanently?"

Allen nodded with a smile. "Am I that easy to read? Might as well, right?"

"Right, no reason to just treat it as a vacation," said Noel. "I wonder if any blacksmiths live here."

"I think there are a few," said Anriette. "No dwarves, though."

"I see," said Noel. "Well, that's fine. Maybe I can still learn from them."

"Just don't start openly coveting their tools again," Riese warned her.

Noel shrugged. Allen didn't get the sense she was taking this seriously. "Mylène, look out for her, okay? If she's about to get up to any shenanigans, haul her ass out of there."

"You got it," said Mylène.

"Whaddya mean, 'shenanigans'?" said Noel. "I only do what's absolutely necessary."

"I dunno what you're planning," said Anriette, "but don't make me have to bail you out again."

Finally, the carriage pulled up before the grandest building they had seen in

the town. The group alighted, and the carriage, the property of the estate, continued farther inside to where a carriage house presumably waited.

“There’s supposed to be this whole spiel before I invite you inside, but since you’re not official guests, I guess it’s not necessary,” said Anriette.

“Riese is the only noble here anyway,” said Allen. “I think you can get away with it.”

“Seems like a bad idea,” said Noel. “Since we’re hiding out and all.”

“It’ll only attract attention,” said Mylène.

“Yes,” said Riese. “There’s no need, for many reasons.”

So the group unceremoniously entered the manor. They were soon met by giant doors, far too large to open by themselves. Anriette rapped with the attached door knocker several times, and the doors slowly opened from the inside. There stood a young man, head bowed.

“Welcome home, my lady.”

“Hey,” said Anriette. “All that formality is really annoying.”

“Forgive me, my lady. Though I wish to fulfill your desires—”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it already. You’d bring my name and the name of the Linkvist family into disrepute. I’ve heard that enough to make my ears bleed.”

“Your own honor is particularly important, my lady. I do hope you understand.”

“I said I get it, didn’t I? Oh, I’m sure you realized already, but these guests—well, they’re not *guests*, exactly, but...go ahead and treat them as if they were.”

“Of course, my lady.”

It was a peculiar exchange, but every great house had their own way of doing things. There was something else that had attracted Allen’s attention. He peered with great interest at the manservant. As the man raised his head to attend to the visitors, his eyes grew wide.

“Master Allen?”

“I thought it was you. Silas, right?”

So he hadn't been mistaken. What was Silas doing here?

"You know this man, Allen?" said Riese.

"Yeah," said Allen. "Since I was born, in a way."

Silas had once been head butler of the Westfeldt estate. Allen hadn't had much direct contact with him, but he'd heard that he was held in high regard. It was good to know he'd gotten out of there. Allen didn't know what had happened, but clearly he'd resigned at some point after the banishment. What was less clear was what he was doing there—not only in the empire, but serving the marquis's daughter, and one who was a real nuisance, at that. This wasn't a role to be filled by someone from Adastera. He'd stand a better chance of being hauled off as a spy than being hired. Why had he come *here* to look for work?

"I know what you're thinking," said Anriette. "I invited him myself. And the others."

"That explains a lot," said Allen. "I was wondering where all our old servants ran off to."

Of the servants who left the House of Westfeldt, some—those who could be located—had been invited to return to their old jobs and had happily accepted. But it was unknown where most of them had gone. If they had ventured far, there was no chance of finding them.

"Well, they just dumped me here all on my lonesome, and I didn't know what to do," said Anriette. "I needed a capable servant, and badly. It was convenient for both of us."

"I understand it from Anriette's side," said Allen, "but you were brave to accept that offer, Silas."

"I *did* find it rather suspicious at first," said Silas. "But it was the best opportunity we could hope for. I am, after all, quite confident in my skills, but was refused many times for...other reasons."

"Oh. Right," said Allen. A name like the Duchy of Westfeldt on one's resume could be a detriment. What kind of enmity existed between him and his former employer? That fact alone would mean many houses would decline to hire him, lest they invite the duchy's ire. And it sounded like Anriette had hired not just

Silas, but many of the House of Westfeldt's former servants.

"That's a ballsy move, though," said Noel. "You must have at least considered that they were just trying to get information about the kingdom out of you."

"Is that how these things are?" asked Mylène.

"Just goes to show what an upstanding individual I am," said Anriette.

"Quite right," said Riese. "We're all most grateful that it was *you* who took on these servants."

"Jeez, you're gonna make me blush! It's not that big a deal!" said Anriette.

"No, you should be proud of yourself," said Allen. "You did a good thing."

"That's enough!" Anriette stammered. "This way! I'll show you around!"

"As you wish, my lady," said Silas. The way his shoulders trembled slightly as he bowed didn't escape Allen's notice.

Anriette surely noticed the same thing but said nothing, probably a sign of the friendly relationship they enjoyed.

Allen followed, eyes on Silas's back as the young man led them inside.

## The Empire's Predicament

The group first asked Silas to show them to the guests' quarters. As expected of such a magnificent residence, the rooms were lavish, more extravagantly furnished than Allen's own room back in the robust and austere Westfeldt manor, and worlds ahead of his home in the Frontier. Then, since it was the perfect time for dinner, they asked Silas to show them to the dining hall.

"I feel a little nervous about staying in rooms like those," said Noel. "Aren't they too big for one person?"

Riese agreed. "They *do* feel a little oversized after staying in that house for so long."

"Should we all stay together?" asked Mylène.

"There are enough rooms for all of you, but do whatever makes you happy," said Anriette. "Not Allen, though."

"I already said I don't wanna room with them," said Allen. "But I agree the rooms are too big."

The dining hall, too, was large in scale and elegantly furnished, but felt strangely empty with only a handful of its twenty places filled. It was clear that, servants aside, Anriette really did live here alone—the place barely felt lived in. Yes, it was kept clean and presentable, but nothing more.

Allen saw a number of familiar faces among the servants as they were shown around the manor, though he couldn't remember all of their names. The stress-free nature of their current positions compared to their time under the House of Westfeldt's employ was clear from their expressions, although Allen could have surmised as much without any face-to-face contact.

Something crossed his mind. "Oh, I forgot to ask. You haven't lived here long, right, Anriette?"

She'd mentioned something about being dumped here all by herself, and it couldn't have been a year since Silas had left Westfeldt.

Anriette nodded. "Since I became an adult. They aren't so cruel that they'd make a child live by herself."

"But then shouldn't you have been conferred your rightful inheritance?" asked Riese.

"Well, I'm barely an adult," Anriette replied. "Officially, I'm gaining experience by governing this town first."

"Officially?" said Allen. "So it doesn't really mean anything?"

"The role is real, and I *have* learned some things, but I don't really have any sense of duty to the position. The same thing goes for the whole country, really."

"*What* goes for the whole country?" asked Mylène.

"I mean that I'm happy to tell you whatever you want to know, to a point," said Anriette. "I know there's one person who's particularly interested, but I'm sure you're all curious."

The others looked at each other. Anriette was willing to discuss whatever issue was currently troubling the nation, at least to a point. Regardless of who she was before, in this world, she was a future marchioness of the empire, and what she was about to do was commit treason. Allen was surprised—true, he'd *hoped* she would be prepared to disregard her position and share that intelligence with them, but he'd never expected it.

Anriette continued. "Just so you don't get the wrong idea...I have my own feelings and my own things I stand to gain. The leaders of this country...well, they're doing their best, in their way, but at this rate, who knows when or even *if* a solution will be reached."

"Sounds complicated," said Noel.

"It *should* be quite simple, and the people working on it aren't useless or anything, but...as much as I want to believe there's a simple solution, it doesn't seem like the answer is just around the corner."

"So you want us to help you?" said Riese.

"I wouldn't put it that strongly. I *can't*," said Anriette. "But I *am* trying to

come up with something that could get us out of this standstill. I don't remember this country ever doing much for me, but I *am* still a noble. There are some duties I must fulfill."

"And the intelligence you have for us is within reasonable limits?" asked Mylène.

"As far as I'm concerned it is, yeah," said Anriette. "It's for the good of the country, after all, which at this rate, might not exist much longer."

"It's that bad? This must be worse than I thought," said Noel.

"No kidding," said Anriette.

It sounded like there'd be no going back once they'd heard what Anriette had to say. As citizens of Adastera, they were no more permitted to cooperate with the empire than Anriette was permitted to share information with them. Allen, Noel, and Mylène could handle that, but what about Riese? Tensions between the two nations ran high. If anyone found out about this, she'd be accused of treason.

Allen looked at Riese. She responded with a keen and determined gaze. Whether determined to accomplish her goal or resolute that the kingdom couldn't afford to ignore trouble in the empire, it was clear she had no intention of recusing herself. Mylène wore her usual blank expression. Noel shrugged nonchalantly. Allen smirked. They were in agreement.

Allen spoke for all of them. "So, what exactly is going on in this country? The weird vibe back in that town has something to do with it, right?"

"Yup," said Anriette. "Most of the people don't even know, but with those guys roaming around, even the slowest among them can tell something's up."

By "those guys," she had to mean the group to which the girl who had interrogated Allen belonged. With the power to blockade the roads, they had to be an important bunch.

Allen didn't have long to wonder about who they were before Anriette made him forget all about them. "Let me get to the point. The emperor was assassinated."

Everyone gasped. Even Mylène's eyes widened slightly in shock.

Anriette continued in a tone as if she had no personal investment in the matter, accompanied by an exasperated shrug. "They knew about your General, obviously. That's why the empire didn't take advantage of the opportunity to attack you. This country is in even more turmoil than yours."

## An Intimate Chat with the Disciple

Allen wasn't troubled as he idly watched the sun set over the town—he was just making sense of what he'd heard. Anriette's story had been shocking. The emperor was dead, killed by some as yet unknown assassin. As a result, his successor remained undecided while each candidate took the opportunity to point fingers at the others.

As shocking a revelation as this was, it was even more understandable; the empire had to get its own affairs in order before it could even think about launching an attack on Adastera. They had only been able to get one more piece of information out of Anriette, but it was the part that shocked Allen most of all. How long ago had it happened?

"About a year ago, I think," she'd said. With no official announcement, she could only guess. Even that approximation said a lot, though. A killing one year ago. It sounded awfully familiar.

"It has to be demons, right?" Allen asked the empty room, as if seeking confirmation.

"It's said to be a strong possibility."

Allen showed no surprise at the unexpected reply. He knew Anriette was capable of the same kind of sight as he was. He replied without even turning toward the presence he suddenly sensed behind him. "And speaking for yourself?"

"It sure seems like their work. As far as I know, they're the only ones capable of such things. Well, except for you, of course."

"Good to know I wasn't barking up the wrong tree," he replied.

"I told you information about demons was valuable, didn't I?"

"That's right, you did. I bet offering that information wouldn't work out well for us, though."

There were some among the imperial candidates who would be only too happy to prolong the confusion for as long as possible. That this would only serve to further exhaust the empire clearly didn't concern them or they would have already permitted the process of selecting the emperor to reach a peaceful conclusion.

"Exactly. That's why I stopped you," Anriette told him.

"I never planned on working with the empire anyway. I don't owe them anything."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"But there must be something you want from us, to tell us all this. You never explained that."

"I'm not going to have you work with the empire directly. For now, it's enough that you know exactly what they're dealing with," she answered.

That meant further information would be forthcoming at a later date. Allen wasn't worried about being deceived—he didn't think Anriette would engage them if only she stood to benefit. Besides, the information she'd already given them was useful to Riese, and she'd offered them sanctuary at a dangerous time. He didn't mind offering her a little help in return. "Forget about the empire. I'd be happy to help *you*. There are three things I want to ask you though."

"Things you can only ask me here and now?"

"Yeah. I mean, you wouldn't answer my questions about demons in front of the others, would you?" Allen asked.

Demons existed beyond even Allen's Boundless Knowledge, which could harvest information on almost everything in the world, with a few exceptions. In fact, as a holy disciple, Anriette herself was one. She'd once told him it was because she was close to godhood herself. The surfeit of information on such a being would be incomprehensible to the mind of a mere human like Allen, so she had placed limitations on him to prevent him from using the skill on her. He could conclude that the beings known as demons were similar. By human standards, they were incomprehensible.

“I think you’re the most incomprehensible of all,” said Anriette. “But you’re right when it comes to demons, in a way.”

“In a way?”

“They resemble us divine beings but are our polar opposites. They have turned against this world.”

“That’s a grandiose way of putting it. They’re all bent out of shape about something and they take it out on everyone by acting like little brats, right?”

Anriette smiled wryly as Allen cut to the heart of the matter. There was no levity there, though—it more resembled a look of pity directed at some distant third party. “You make them sound like they’re burning with rage. I suppose you’re not wrong, though. That’s why I wanted you to leave, by the way.”

“Huh? So I wouldn’t get mixed up with demons? I already am.”

“Exactly why you shouldn’t get any more involved. You have both the power and the right to behave like a demon yourself.”

Allen didn’t have to ask what she meant. Whether it was right or wrong, he had reasons to turn against the world. “But aren’t you overthinking it? Or just not having enough faith in me?”

“Can you blame me?”

“I get where you’re coming from, but I wish you’d believe in me a little more than that. I’m the hero *you* chose, after all. Former hero, I mean.” He shrugged.

Anriette was silent. Allen was hit by a wave of embarrassment. What was he saying? True, it was how he really felt, but still. He decided to change the subject before she could speak.

“Oh, I still have two other things to ask you.”

“Oh! Yes, what are they? I’ll answer if I can.”

“Hmm...I’ll take anything you know on this one. You’ve heard of the monster they call the Death God of the Desert?”

“Of course. What about it?”

“We ran into one just outside Laurus. I was just wondering if you had any idea

what it was doing there. I guess not though.”

Anriette said nothing; she didn’t have to. Her dumbfounded expression said it all. Clearly she’d had no idea that anything of the sort had happened. Finally, she spoke. “You must be jo— No, you wouldn’t joke about something like this. Where *exactly* did this happen?”

“Just as the town ramparts came into view.”

“Right under our noses!” she groaned.

Allen was confused. As dangerous as the monster was, this felt like an overreaction. “Do you think this was the work of demons or something?”

“Unlikely. Somebody would’ve noticed.”

“Hmm. The empire then?”

“Not the empire itself. Like I told you, they have their hands full right now. Somebody *from* the empire, though...that’s possible. That group you had your little run-in with, for instance.”

“Them? Could they really do something like that?”

“Who else *but* them? Anybody else would be inviting our wrath.”

“Makes sense.” Laurus was part of the Marquis of Linkvist’s domain. Anyone leading a monster into her territory wouldn’t be let off lightly by Anriette.

“That lot are a special case though. They call themselves the Knights of the Black Wolf. All that matters is that their power outstrips mine, although they’re limited in how they can wield that power.”

“You mean the current situation is what would give them the authority to bring a Sand Wolf to Laurus?”

“That’s the most likely possibility, but maybe I’ll come to a different conclusion once I look into this. At the very least, we can say that it didn’t just wander here all by itself.”

“You sure about that? It *is* a monster after all.”

“If it were any other monster, I’d agree with you, but not this one. In fact, it’s not really a monster at all.”

"It's not? Like dragons, you mean?" Dragons were not monsters, but magical beasts. But Allen hadn't sensed any intelligent thought from the Sand Wolf.

"Similar, I guess. They were both birthed by the world itself, but the Sand Wolves were born of the world's refuse, so I doubt any dragon would be too happy to be compared to them."

"Refuse? So they're like the trash of the world?"

"Not a bad way to put it. As time passes, the world accumulates more debris than it can easily dispose of. Rather than ignore that debris, it packages it into beings like the one you encountered."

To Allen, the creature had seemed awfully strong to be nothing but garbage, but it *was* still a product of the world itself, he supposed.

"By the way," Anriette continued, "they've taken it upon themselves to collect that refuse. Technically it's not true that they never leave the desert—it's just that the desert is their scrapheap."

"I see. So they'd never leave of their own accord."

"Right. So the idea of one moving at all is unthinkable...except if those guys made it. They must have been able to slow its digestion. You see, it never lets its prey go once it's begun digesting it."

"You mean..."

Anriette nodded. By escaping from the creature while in the process of being digested, they'd managed to lead it elsewhere. It sounded insane, but there was something even more strange.

"But they'd still need some kind of healing, right? Potions wouldn't be enough, would they?"

"They have ways of accomplishing that. They're so horrible I don't even want to talk about them, so I won't. You don't need to know anyway."

"Man, now you've really got me curious. I won't push you, though."

"Good. Now, the thing is, I have no doubt they *could* do something like that, but I still don't understand why they *would*."

“To avoid any possibility of other countries learning that the emperor was killed?”

“I can’t say it’s impossible, but it would be an extreme measure. There had to be something to warrant it, but I have no idea what it could be.”

“I guess we’re stuck then. If you don’t know, what hope do the rest of us have?”

Anriette blushed and turned away. “I think you’re giving me too much credit.” As if to hide her reaction, she quickly began to speak again. “Anyway, I take it you drove it away and walked out of there unscathed? Typical.”

“Huh? I killed the thing.”

“You did?!” Anriette muttered, seeming even more shocked than she had by the news that Allen had encountered a Sand Wolf to begin with.

Allen himself was even more surprised—he had no idea he’d done something that warranted such a reaction. “Yup, took it out with my sword. Sure felt like I killed it...”

“Huh. I guess it wouldn’t be that strange, knowing what you’re capable of. You’re as unbelievable as always.”

“What are you getting at? If I’m right, would that be a bad thing?”

“No, it’s a good thing. If you killed it, then you probably got rid of all the debris it collected too. Soon it’ll gather enough debris to regenerate itself.”

Allen had been worried about eliminating a being responsible for collecting the world’s garbage, but it seemed there was nothing to be concerned about. He was relieved until something else occurred to him. “So if you didn’t know about all this, does that mean you weren’t watching?”

Anriette averted her eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on. Don’t play dumb. That’s my last question, by the way—how long have you been watching me? Obviously since we met in Laurus, but even earlier than that, right? Otherwise you wouldn’t have been able to hire Silas and the others.”

Yes, it was a convenient arrangement, but that wasn’t much of an

explanation. What would a citizen of the empire know about servants from the kingdom? However badly they needed assistance, they would hire from within their own country. They couldn't afford the risks associated with hiring from an enemy nation—unless they had some means of knowing the staff were trustworthy.

"I'm not even blaming you," Allen continued. "In fact, I wanted to thank you for helping all those servants."

"I accept your thanks. But there's something I have to tell you."

"Hm? What is it? So long as it's not a complaint."

"I'm sorry," Anriette said with utmost sincerity.

Allen responded in kind. "It's okay. I understand."

This wasn't about Anriette peeping on him, but her witnessing everything that had happened and never doing anything to help. It wasn't her fault; she was a disciple, and a disciple's role was to watch over her charge, to relay the word of God, to offer indirect assistance—but never to directly intervene. Anriette was powerless to step in, however much she might want to. As a being that existed outside of human understanding, she was bound by a set of rules and wisdom utterly alien to mankind. Allen knew this troubled her—that was why it didn't trouble him.

"Anyway," he continued, "we've still got lots more to talk about. I said I had two things to ask you, but I still haven't gotten to the things I want to tell you."

"Isn't that splitting hairs?"

"Whatever."

It had been a long time since they'd had the opportunity to talk like this—a lifetime, even. With so much to discuss, there was no point worrying about the little things. Instead, they reminisced together deep into the night.

# Happiness and Relief, Envy and Gratitude

As she watched the smiling boy before her, Anriette privately sighed to herself—a sigh of happiness, relief, and envy. She had been watching Allen throughout his previous life, until its very end, and throughout his current life too. All that time, she had thought of him as someone who never smiled. Or, more accurately, had lost his smile.

She had known Allen a long time. In his past life, he had been a hero for ten years, and she had been with him throughout. She had bestowed upon him the role of hero, granted him his powers, protected him, relayed to him the word of God, offered him counsel—and, in the end, killed him. For a being as long-lived as her, it had passed in the blink of an eye, yet it had been the most profound time in her life. Compared to the time she had spent with Allen, the rest of her life felt lacking.

For most of that time, she had only quietly watched him, but she was *always* watching. She watched as he heard the pleas of the needy and fulfilled his heroic duty. As he rescued those who had never even requested his help. As he continued to help the innocent even as he was rejected, ostracized, even attacked by those who feared his power. For all of it, she simply watched.

It was some five years into that ordeal that Allen had lost his smile—or maybe it was better to say that for five years he had managed to keep it. Whatever the case, his commitment to helping those in need never wavered. Only one thing about him changed: the smile on his face became a falsehood, a construction.

She was sure Allen himself had never noticed. If he had, he would have stopped himself long ago. True, he was a hero; the most powerful being in that world, granted the role and its powers by Anriette herself. But the person who wielded those powers was still just a boy. Anriette realized that now. At first, she had thought it was his unbreakable spirit that made him a fitting hero. She was wrong. She'd profoundly misunderstood. Allen didn't help people because it was his duty. He helped people because they were in need and because he

had the power to help them. He was simply doing what came naturally. That was what made him a fitting hero—that he was nothing more than an ordinary boy willing and able to do what was right when most would not.

That was why the careless words of those he saved scarred him so deeply. Though nobody in the world could wound him physically, their fearful gazes and words of rejection were enough to steal his smile. Yet nevertheless, he put on a brave face and continued to help others. Because he was just a boy who would otherwise never be able to continue. But he no longer saved others. Instead, he helped them to save himself from regret. Then, finally, he saved the world itself. He was in many ways ordinary, commonplace—yet unquestionably, unequivocally a hero.

But even knowing all this, as a disciple, Anriette could do nothing to assist Allen. She had the power to stop those who ostracized him, but she did not—could not. Allen didn't want it. If only he had asked, she could have inflicted a suffering worse than death upon them. But when she had asked, Allen had responded only with a look of resignation.

The best she could do was to grant his final request, and even then, a true smile never once crossed his lips. But now here he stood, smiling once again. She couldn't help but feel overjoyed. Relieved, too, that she had made the right decision by allowing him to be reborn in this world. But she also felt envy. Yes, she felt gratitude to the girls who had finally brought back his smile, but it pained her that it hadn't been her.

“Anriette? Are you listening?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I got lost in thought for a moment.”

“Something bothering you?” Allen asked, looking deep into her eyes.

If she nodded, he would come to her aid without hesitation. Just like back then. But sadly, this wasn't something he could help with.

She smiled. “That's my hero.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Oh, it's nothing. All this reminiscing just has me feeling nostalgic.”

“Oh...I see.” He shrugged. “I guess I do always end up thinking about the past when I’m talking to you.”

Anriette was sure that, had they spoken just after Allen had been born into this world, their conversation would have been much different. Both of them were familiar with the events of his past life, but that didn’t make them easy to talk about. But now, Allen showed no signs that their talk was dredging up painful memories. He had overcome them. Whether Allen had realized it or not, it was thanks to the girls he’d met that he was able to reminisce like this. For that, as much as it hurt, they deserved her gratitude.

“That just shows how hopeless you are,” she said. “You should have at least one story that’ll make a girl happy!”

“Man...I dunno what you’re supposed to say to make girls in this world happy.”

“I can’t understand why. Aren’t you a former heir to the duchy?”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“Nothing in particular. It just seems to me that even though you were cast out, the role might come back to you in the end.”

“Now you’re being silly,” said Allen with a smile. It was just a joke between the two of them, but back then they couldn’t have even mustered that. In the end, she had to admit her gratitude outweighed her sadness.

The envy still remained, but she knew that she too had things that only she could do for Allen, though in the moment, all that came to mind was the ability to reminisce about his past life like this. But unlike before, now she was a flesh-and-blood person. Due to her holy powers, there were still limits placed upon her...but perhaps one day...

For this former hero, she was prepared to do anything. For now, they would continue to reminisce.



# The Town and the Elf

Allen yawned, unable to contain his growing sleepiness. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he sighed.

“Didn’t you get enough sleep, Allen?” Riese asked. “You’ve been yawning a lot.”

“I guess not,” he replied. Reminiscing with Anriette had kept him up deep into the night. He was starting to wonder if maybe getting half a night’s sleep was worse than getting none at all.

“And not because you weren’t used to the pillows, I bet,” said Noel.

“No, but I don’t know what you’re implying,” said Allen. “Hey, for someone as delicate as you claim to be, seems like you managed just fine.”

Noel was always a late riser, and when forced to get up early, she still seemed half asleep, but today she was full of energy. Of course, it was because her adventures in town yesterday had thoroughly exhausted her, and she’d gotten an early night for once.

“I *am* delicate, but there’s nothing wrong with trading up to nicer things,” she replied. “Who wouldn’t sleep well on *those* pillows? Who wouldn’t want to go to bed early?”

“I guess you’re right about that,” Allen replied. The pillows were befitting of a noble family; even softer than the ones in his former family home and worlds away from anything he’d slept on in the Frontier. It was probably true that even the fussiest person could get a good night’s sleep on them. Still, that didn’t change the fact that Noel was just making excuses.

Someone yawned again.

“Feeling sleepy, Anriette?” asked Mylène.

Anriette wiped her eyes and shrugged. “I didn’t get to sleep until late last night. *Someone* kept me up.”

For a split second, everyone stopped talking. All eyes were on Allen.

“Allen?” said Riese. “Don’t tell me...”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” said Noel, “but then again, it kinda does sound like you.”

“Agreed,” said Mylène. “With Allen, it’s possible.”

“What on earth are you all talking about?” said Allen. He knew what they were thinking. He could see how it looked to them, since he hadn’t told them about his past life. Still, he felt a little nonplussed that his friends didn’t seem to think it strange at all. “We were just talking,” he explained. “And since I was asking most of the questions, I guess you *could* say I kept her up.”

Anriette scoffed at Allen. “No need to get so flustered. You’ve got no sense of humor.”

“Sorry,” he replied. “To be honest, I’m more focused on observing our surroundings.”

“Right, we couldn’t make out much last night, could we?” said Riese as she surveyed the area. “It’s an interesting sight, though.”

The others said nothing, though it was clear they were thinking the same thing. The town surrounded them. Unlike yesterday, it now swarmed with people.

It was a little after breakfast. With little else to do, they were taking the chance to explore the town on foot, since the previous night it had been cloaked in darkness. Anriette served as their guide; not that they needed one, but she had little to occupy herself with either. During the previous night’s conversation, she had let slip that her presence there was a mere formality. With no actual duties, she spent most of her time reading. Her claim that this visit could double as an inspection was nothing but pretense. Still, the trip downtown turned out more interesting than expected.

“Is everywhere in the empire like this?” asked Mylène.

“I haven’t visited that many other places, to be honest,” said Anriette. “I’ve probably seen more of the kingdom than the empire. I don’t think so, though.

This place is home to far more elves than a typical town.”

That was exactly what Allen had found so interesting. There were elves walking the streets everywhere, which was inconceivable in any other town. And there was another, presumably related, point of interest.

“Doesn’t it feel like they’re all oddly focused on us?” said Allen. “I could understand them being curious about Noel, but they seem weirdly apprehensive.”

“Isn’t it because we’re with Anriette?” Noel suggested. “She’s still the lord of this region, even if only in name. Although...I dunno if elves would really care about that.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” said Mylène. “I think Allen’s right; they’re just looking at Noel.”

“Maybe, I guess,” said Allen. “Actually, why are there so many elves here to begin with? I think I can guess, but...”

“Oh yeah?” said Anriette. “I think your guess is probably on the mark. It’s because the Elven Forest is nearby.”

It was as Allen thought, but he’d never expected Anriette to blurt it out so casually. She had to know the location of the Elven Forest was a secret for good reason—to avoid visits from unwanted, troublemaking guests.

“Are you sure you should be telling us that?” he replied.

“What, you don’t trust my judgment? Besides... No, never mind. Trust me, as long as I don’t go into specifics, it doesn’t matter.”

“I wonder what she could mean by that,” said Mylène.

“No need to wonder,” Anriette answered. “You’ll find out before long. Actually, why don’t we go now?”

Noel paused. “You mean...”

“To the Elven Forest?” Mylène finished.

Anriette nodded. Everyone looked around at each other. They’d all heard that even if one managed to learn the Elven Forest’s location, it was impossible to

enter without the elves' permission. It wasn't the kind of place you just dropped by to say hello.

"I'd like to, but will they let us in?" Allen asked.

"No problem," said Anriette. "In fact, I think you'll be most welcome."

"Because we're with Noel?"

"I've heard that the elven society is quite exclusionary," said Riese. "But perhaps with an elf in our group, they'd be happy to receive us?"

"You're right, although your reasoning is a little off," said Anriette. "Close enough, though. So how about it?"

Everyone exchanged glances again, all eyes eventually settling on Noel. Her feelings mattered most.

Noel smiled, dismissing their needless concern. "I've got to admit I'm curious too. Why not?"

Nobody could object after that. The group's exploration of the town would have to be put on hold.

# The Elven Forest

Needless to say, the Elven Forest was understood to be situated within a larger forest—and this was the first problem. There were no forests anywhere near the town; they'd ascertained that upon their arrival. If Anriette's knowledge was a faint recollection from her days as a holy disciple, Allen mused, then the forest might be as far as a three-day carriage ride away. But it seemed that wasn't the case.

"Wondering why there's nothing that seems like it could be hiding the Elven Forest nearby?" said Anriette. "What did you expect? A great big bunch of trees with a sign overhead? That wouldn't stay secret for long, would it? Like I said, Allen was right in some ways and wrong in others. People who aren't qualified can't even *find* the Elven Forest."

It sounded like the Elven Forest was hidden by magic, which was fitting considering the elves' proficiency in it. To be qualified meant to receive permission from them. Any non-elves granted that permission would surely be few and far between.

"Supposedly the 'wandering elves,' those who live far from the forest, have their memories of the place erased," said Anriette. "That's how closely they guard the secret."

"They really go that far?" said Allen. "I guess if they didn't, it wouldn't be secret anymore."

"Right," Anriette replied. "And there's something funny about the erasing-of-memories part."

Allen saw Riese glance at Noel. Noel had mentioned that she had no memory of her childhood.

"And is it a problem if a wandering elf returns to the forest again?" asked Noel, seemingly realizing that nobody else felt comfortable asking the question. Of course, Anriette had just told her that they would not only be awaiting her,

but welcome her with open arms, so perhaps their concern was unwarranted.

“Well...on the whole, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. The memory wiping is just a precaution to minimize the risk of the forest being discovered. Actually, I think the fact that you don’t remember anything from your infancy is unrelated.”

“Right...” Noel nodded in vague understanding. She glanced at Allen. Riese had mentioned something similar but not infancy. If someone had told Anriette about Noel’s lack of memories, it had to be Allen. But while they’d talked about the past all night, Allen hadn’t—wouldn’t—have brought up the private affairs of others.

But Allen just shrugged, not bothering to deny it. In the end, it *was* because of him that Anriette knew. She’d probably been watching as Noel had told him. That it had been a complete accident would take too long to explain. Easier to let Noel believe that he’d blabbed and demand that Anriette make it up to him later.

“Sounds like there’s no problem, then,” said Mylène.

“Yeah,” said Noel. “But how exactly do we get there? From the sound of it, you have permission, Anriette.”

“It’ll be easier to show you. Oh, and as long as you’re with me, all of you should be able to go too. Although you probably don’t even need me.”

With that mysterious statement, she began to walk ahead. The others followed. Her path took them not toward the manor, nor to the town outskirts. At first, they seemed to be following the exact same route they had taken while exploring the town. It soon became clear that wasn’t the case, but their new route wasn’t much more remarkable.

“It seems like we’re just heading into the backstreets,” said Allen.

Anriette laughed. “You think you get to the Elven Forest through the backstreets?”

“Yeah, I don’t like the sound of that,” said Noel.

“Isn’t something off, though?” Mylène remarked.

“Yeah,” said Allen. “Wait, no. What—” His eyes widened, then narrowed as he surveyed their surroundings. He knew Anriette wouldn’t lead them into danger, so he hadn’t been too focused on exactly where she was taking them. Now he realized that this was no ordinary back alley. In fact, it wasn’t a back alley at all.

“The Elven Forest is quite simple to get to,” said Anriette. “In fact, it’s always right in front of you. You just have to want to go, and the elves must recognize and approve of your desire. Then the door will open before you. This isn’t the usual entrance, though. It’s more of an elven shortcut.”

With that, their surroundings distorted. The back alley disappeared, and a verdant forest spread out around them. Riese, Mylène, and Noel froze, eyes wide, unable to hide their astonishment.

“Huh. So that’s what you meant by ‘close by,’” said Allen. “Weird choice of words, but I guess we *are* in the same place. Am I dumb for not noticing before?”

“If you had noticed, I’d be in trouble,” said Anriette, “since I had a little something to do with putting up that barrier.”

“You did? How come?”

“Things just worked out that way. I didn’t plan on getting involved at first.”

“Wow,” said Allen with an admiring expression. She quickly looked away, as if he was being insincere. He *had* been smiling, but only because he’d just been reminded that Anriette was no longer bound by her duties as a disciple. Disciples were forbidden from any direct involvement in the world; to erect a magical barrier that even Allen couldn’t detect was about as direct as it got. She’d said she was a *former* disciple, but this was the first real proof of it. He was happy to see it; though he never understood why, Anriette had always seemed to be suffering during her time as a disciple. If she was free of that suffering, that was welcome news.

“Does this have something to do with how you ended up living in that manor?” asked Allen.

“The elves did encourage me, but it was my aunt and uncle who made the decision, and they couldn’t possibly know about this. They must have just

thought it was the perfect place to shunt me off to.”

“I see. I was thinking maybe the town was built to hide this place and you decided to live there, but I guess the town can’t be that new.”

“You’re not that far off. The town *was* built to hide it.”

“Oh, really?”

The town was just a decoy. Setting the people that lived there aside, it had no purpose other than to camouflage the Elven Forest. Who would expect to find the forest in the same place as an entire town?

“Nobody’s ever gonna find this place,” said Allen.

“It used to be hidden only by a vast plain. I’m sure you would’ve noticed it back then. The empire certainly did.”

Riese and the others seemed to come to their senses. Each gasped, stirred by the sight before them.

“That didn’t feel like instant transition, but I guess it must have been something similar?” said Noel.

“Something like that. We did move to a different place, but not along the usual axis.”

“I’m guessing there’s no way we can copy that,” said Mylène.

“It’s not really something I did,” said Anriette. “It’s more like the magical barrier sucked us inside.”

As they talked, Allen took another look around, again nodding in admiration. Somehow the great trees that made up the forest didn’t block the sun’s light. The forest was bright and cheery, not dark and gloomy. It seemed like a nice place to live.

From the corner of his eye, he realized that one among them had reacted differently. “Noel? What’s wrong?”

She seemed confused. Not because the place was unfamiliar, but by just *how* familiar it all seemed.

“I... I... How do I put this? I don’t feel any sense of unease here. Like I can

naturally sense that this is where I'm meant to be. I guess no matter what, I'm still an elf, right?"

"I don't think that's quite right," said Anriette. "You're intuitively understanding something, yes, but I think what you're feeling is the realization that this is your country."

"My country?"

She didn't have the chance to ask what that meant. Allen felt a presence appear close by. Then several more. Then...

"Uh, I think we're surrounded," he announced.

"You don't seem too concerned, considering," Anriette answered.

"They don't feel malicious, but... I know you said we'd be welcomed with open arms, but I didn't expect every elf in the forest to come out to greet us. Am I just imagining things?"

"Not at all. What do you expect? Their queen has just returned."

The elves began to step into view, each taking a knee, head bowed, before Noel. All spoke with one voice.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty. Long have we awaited your return."



# The Elven King

Allen would be lying if he said he wasn't surprised by the sight, but it wasn't entirely unexpected. His surprise was more at the sheer quantity of elves who had appeared in an instant than at their words; he'd already followed the insinuations of Anriette's many suggestive comments.

"Glamsight," he muttered. Anriette shrugged in a manner that said "bingo." The name referred to the eyes of the Spirit King. He'd thought it was just an overblown name for a Gift. He'd been wrong.

"I'd heard that such Gifts relating to the Spirit King are the mark of the elven king," said Anriette. "It wasn't something to run my mouth about without proof, though, so I kept quiet."

"So that's why you were saying so many mysterious things. If it's the mark of the elven king, does it confer the ability to command elvenkind?" He'd heard of such a Gift before. The Gift of King's Rule was said to allow its holder to forcibly command their subjects. He'd never encountered the real thing, but if Glamsight had even a shred of that Gift's purported power, then it would be proof of kingliness indeed.

"No, it's not that kind of Gift. It's just that only those who fulfill certain conditions are capable of holding it. Those conditions prove that they're the king."

"Huh. Makes sense, I guess." He'd heard of Gifts like that before, particularly among the innate Gifts. Akira's Gift of Champion, for example. She'd been selected as the most fitting Champion at a time when no other Champion existed. He'd also heard of Gifts that only manifested in certain bloodlines. "So Noel is the descendant of the elven king?"

"That's right," came the reply—but not from Anriette.

Searching, Allen found the voice belonged to a male elf, the one kneeling closest to Noel. The elf stood and faced them. He appeared youthful, but elven

appearances were often deceiving. He seemed to possess a wisdom and worldliness that could only come with age. Considering his position closest to Noel, and the fact that he did not bow his head, he was probably the current de facto leader of the elves—the king’s representative.

The elf bowed, not at Allen, but Anriette. “My thanks, Lady Anriette. To think you have brought our queen to us—”

“I must stop you there,” Anriette interrupted. “I only followed the path of another’s story. That it resulted in this is—”

“Even if merely coincidence, the fact is that you brought her here. Their involvement, too, was something we agreed to. We are in your debt.”

“Well, whatever. It doesn’t matter now. Could you stop bowing already? Isn’t it a bad look for the top elf to be doing that?”

The elf raised his head. “I suppose I *am* still the king’s representative. Though I feel that a great weight has just been lifted from my shoulders.”

He appeared deeply relieved. Clearly, serving as the King’s representative was a stressful task from which he was thankful to be freed—if he truly had been. Allen glanced at the still perplexed Noel and exhaled slightly.

“Now,” the elf continued, “your arrival was too sudden to prepare a proper welcome, but please come this way.”

“Us too?” said Allen.

“Of course. Why would we not extend our hospitality to the queen’s companions?”

There was no reason not to accept such a warm welcome. Riese and Mylène, too, seemed barely less perplexed than Noel, but both responded to Allen’s glance with quick nods. Without hearing what the elves had to say, they couldn’t make any kind of judgment. It seemed everyone was in agreement on that. For Allen’s part, he’d been sure this wouldn’t turn out badly when Anriette had brought them here, but...

He cast those thoughts aside. The elf led the way, and Allen and the others followed him deeper into the forest.

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It was said that elves lived in harmony with nature. They did not disavow the inventions of other races but would not make use of them themselves. Thus Allen had felt slightly uneasy when the elf told them he would show them around the elven dwellings.

“That was kinda surprising,” he said.

“Quite,” said Riese. “I’d heard the elves live in harmony with nature, but...”

“This is just a regular old house, right?” said Allen. “I suppose everything from the furniture to the tableware is made with stuff you can find in the forest. I guess that’s living in harmony with nature in a way, but not what I expected.”

“You weren’t wrong to expect something different,” said Anriette. “As far as I know, elves really did use to sleep in the trees, all that sorta stuff. But all the talk of ‘living in harmony with nature’ is just a fancy way of putting it. They did it because it was good enough. Elves are kinda apathetic, is the thing. They’re only interested in things they’re passionate about.”

“I get that,” said Mylène.

“Totally,” Allen agreed.

“Yes, that’s quite easy to understand,” said Riese.

“Why’re you all looking at me and nodding?” asked Noel.

The elf had guided them to a house made entirely of wood. Everything—tables, chairs—was clearly made by hand, likely by the elves themselves, but in the style of other races.

“Anyway,” Anriette continued, “once they got used to it, they realized this was a more comfortable way to live. Some still stick to the old ways, but they’re holdouts. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Kinda feels like they turned into regular slobs overnight,” Allen observed, “but I guess if it makes them easier to relate to, that’s no bad thing.”

“You just realized that now?” said Mylène.

“What’re you looking at *me* for?!” Noel cried.

“I’m sure you’ll understand if you really think about it,” said Riese. “More importantly...” She looked at Anriette with a stern gaze that wordlessly expressed her question: what was going on here?

Allen couldn’t blame Riese. The elf had left to prepare their welcome, leaving them alone. Anriette was the only one among them who knew what was happening, and although she’d helped them, she was still a stranger to Riese, who clearly still harbored lingering doubts about Anriette’s motives—and so she should. If she’d accepted everything Anriette had told her the moment they’d met, she would have been far too credulous. She was still taking Anriette’s measure, and the deception the latter had pulled to get them here only increased her suspicion.

Understanding all of this, Anriette shrugged casually. “I know what you’re thinking. I get it. Actually, the fact that you aren’t biting my head off already goes to show what good people you are.”

“No kidding,” said Allen. “It sounds like Noel is happy to go along with everything. I think a lot of people would’ve tied you up by now.”

Riese shot Allen a disgruntled look. “Whose side are you on?”

Allen shrugged. He was just as clueless as the rest of them, but considering the situation, he wouldn’t have faulted them for doubting him. That they weren’t *more* suspicious was probably partly because they were good people, but he had no doubt that they faintly understood there was more to the story between Anriette and him.

“I guess I’m in the middle,” Allen replied. “We need someone like that, right?”

“There’s no point in getting all heated,” said Noel, “so let’s just be open with our questions. What’s going on here? What are you trying to achieve? Apparently I’m the guest of honor, so I think I have the right to ask.”

“Certainly you do,” said Anriette, “but I’m not plotting anything. Okay, I wasn’t *completely* honest, but all I did was lead you here.”

“It was her idea,” said Allen, “but we *did* accept. If she knew what was going to happen when we got here, then she’s not completely innocent...but we can press her on that later. Look, we don’t know how long we have until they’re

done preparing. Shouldn't we ask why exactly this is happening first? I'm curious too."

"I think so," Mylène nodded.

Riese concurred with a nod of her own, then shot Anriette a look that said, "Well?"

Anriette shrugged innocently. "To be honest, I didn't think it would come to this either. But you all must have a pretty good idea of what's about to happen, right?"

That was true. All the elves of the forest had gathered to greet Noel. Even the most senior member of the group was only a representative. There was only one conclusion.

"Noel, the reason you received such a welcome is... Well, it's because the bloodline of the Elven King was once thought extinguished."

# The Welcome Party

The welcome was mostly as Allen had expected. The elven settlement, based on some town or other, consisted of houses surrounding a central plaza large enough to comfortably hold a hundred people—yet it was absolutely crammed with bodies. The crowd's considerable excitement heightened as a tantalizing aroma wafted over the plaza. It looked like a festival, and to them it probably was. A welcome party.

Allen had been told that the preparations were complete and had come to join the proceedings. "I guess you can't blame them for being excited," he muttered to himself, watching the crowd as he drank from a mug he'd been handed.

He was surrounded by elves. By chance, he had ended up alone. An elf had come, wanting to ask him about Noel, and had handed him a drink at the same time. After a few questions, the elf had cheerfully wandered off somewhere and Allen had remained as the party began. Despite elves' reputation for being well-mannered, this elf seemed drunk—not on booze, but on the situation. Elves seemed to avoid alcohol; Allen himself was only drinking fruit juice. But this level of excitement...

He took another gulp as he turned over Anriette's earlier words in his head. "Goes to show how worried they were, I guess."

"Could I have a moment?"

It was the king's representative from earlier. Allen didn't really enjoy talking to big shots, but the elf didn't give off a haughty vibe, and he was standing there idly. Alan couldn't really refuse.

"Sure. I'm not exactly busy right now."

"I see. My apologies. I told you to expect a warm welcome, and yet—"

"Hey, it's no big deal. I can't expect anyone to pay me any mind when the guest of honor is here." It only took a momentary glance at the scene to see

where everyone's attention was being directed: the elf girl around whom the crowd swelled.

"I told them not to bother her," the representative opined.

"Who can blame them? Their king's been missing for ten years."

The elf raised an eyebrow. Clearly, and understandably, that was a sensitive subject. "Did Lady Anriette tell you that?"

"Was it wrong of me to ask her?"

"No. You are a companion of our queen. Besides, with the state this lot is in, somebody was bound to tell you if they haven't already."

Allen smirked. It was true; he'd already been told at least twice. But he could have only gotten the finer details from Anriette.

"I imagine you've asked her about the nature of our race too," the elf continued.

"I couldn't have understood what was going on here if I didn't," Allen replied.

Even a race that lived as long as elves should have selected a new ruler after the king was missing for ten years. The elven candidates were unlikely to fight like the candidates for emperor; the fact that one elf could serve as a representative of the king was proof of that. But even though, according to Anriette, no successors to the king remained, the man was nothing more than a representative. Allen had heard that the elves were unusually concerned with bloodlines, but if the king's bloodline had ended, what choice did they have? And what did it mean that they hadn't chosen another?

"We elves are bound together by the blood of the king. To be specific, when we crown the king's descendant, their nature provides the example that all elves follow, allowing us to come of age."

Only by crowning a descendant of the king could elves come of age. The elves had settled on this practice long ago. The elven race was borne of the spirits. As the spirits had fallen, they formed the seed of elvenkind. And a vestige of the spirits still remained within the elves—the inability to grow through their own efforts.

Spirits could not grow or mature in the sense that living beings did. They were a phenomenon of pure consciousness. No matter their efforts, they could only change in scale, not grow. That trait remained with the elves. But as a race of mortal beings, they needed to grow. Not to compete with other races, but for a much more pressing reason: if they did not reach maturity, they could never conceive children. Elves lived long lives, but they were not ageless or immortal. One day they would die, and without the ability to continue their bloodline, the entire race would quietly expire.

Strangely, one among them was able to grow: the first spirit to become an elf. In time, it had become clear that by venerating this elf as their king, the others were able to mature too. Thus the king's bloodline became the most treasured, most safeguarded aspect of all of elven life. But ten years ago the king and all his children had each been struck down by a mysterious illness, and each had died in turn.

"In our minds, we were still living in that painful time," said the elf. "We assumed all of elvenkind would slowly go extinct."

"Now that I know the story, I can't blame you," said Allen.

"But Lady Anriette rescued us from our despair. She offered us hope."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Five years ago, a wandering elf was found. A strange individual who, despite their elven nature, only had passion for smithing."

"And that elf was a descendant of the king?"

"Yes. I know not how Lady Anriette learned this, but for us it was enough. We had nothing but hope to cling to."

And now Anriette had brought this supposed descendant of the king to them.

"So that's what's going on," said Allen.

Everyone's attention was on Noel, but a number of elves were gathered around Anriette too. They behaved differently than the elves who had approached Allen, as well as those who had approached Riese and Mylène, who were sitting farther from the plaza. Those elves, too, had only wanted to learn

about Noel. It soon became clear that after the instructions not to bother Noel, they had occupied themselves by asking others about her before returning to their fellow elves to relay the information they had gathered. This explained the commotions constantly breaking out here and there.

The elves who had assembled around Anriette were different; they were clearly there to meet Anriette herself. Judging by Anriette's bewilderment, they were offering her their thanks.

"That sounds like Anriette all right," said Allen. "Is she responsible for the influence of other races I see in your houses and such too?"

"Correct, though I imagine she would deny it. Even when a town was built by our forest, we never considered going there ourselves. We were content with what we had. But she was always bringing us things from the town."

"And that naturally piqued your interest."

"However Lady Anriette might deny it herself, she took care of those of us who visited the town. In time, most of us were coming and going with regularity, and the forest brimmed with the comforts and conveniences of other races."

That *did* sound like Anriette. She was always doing things for others, even when she claimed to be acting out of self-interest. Allen mostly knew her as a holy disciple, but it was becoming clear that her magnanimity wasn't a product of her position, but her personality. Allen himself had saved many people in his past life, but only because Anriette had instructed him to save them. If she'd been able to intervene directly, to save them herself, she would have.

"Oh, that reminds me, there's something I wanted to ask you," said Allen.

"Yes? After failing to provide you the kind of welcome I promised...well, I will at least try to answer if I can."

"I'm sure you'll be able to. It's not a difficult question." He scanned the area. From the corner of his eye, he watched as the elf followed his gaze, finally landing on the far outskirts of the plaza. A child stood there. "I assumed every elf in the forest was here, but there are a few that aren't coming, right? Like that kid over there. I saw children here before, though, so it can't be because of

that.”

“Ah, well, there are some non-elves who live in the forest, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Allen *had* noticed that thanks to Boundless Knowledge. “Yeah. That’s what I wanted to ask about.”

“Why aren’t they here? The elves came to venerate the king, so of course non-elves wouldn’t—”

“Actually, I was wondering why there are demons here.”

The elf froze, eyes wide with surprise.

# The Demon and the Child

The elf's mouth flapped silently, searching for the words to repudiate Allen's assertion. In the end, he saw the conviction in Allen's eyes and relented. "I suppose it would be foolish to ask how you know."

"Not at all," said Allen. It was mostly by chance that he *had* noticed. After surveying the plaza and noticing a child he'd never seen before, clearly not an elf, he'd taken the precaution of examining them with his Boundless Knowledge skill and discovered they were a demon. If the king's representative had come a moment sooner, he might not even have noticed. "Anyway, it's not like I'm about to dress you down or anything."

"Is that so?" said the elf with a dubious look.

Allen smirked. It was true; just as he'd told Anriette, as far as he was concerned, the matter with the demons was settled. He didn't have any particular issue with demons as a whole. "I'm more interested in the fact that there're other races here at all. I thought elves were a reclusive race. I didn't expect you to have guests."

Especially not ones with a reputation for obliterating other countries. Setting his lack of personal enmity aside, facts were facts. Though he hadn't asked, it seemed that the elven territory had been annexed by the empire. The empire, too, repeatedly waged war against foreign nations, but it at least conquered them rather than destroying them. The empire could be talked to and would recognize surrender. Demons would not. And yet the elves had no apparent issue with demons in their midst.

The elf contemplated for a moment. "You seem to be close with Lady Anriette, and as such, I am sure you will learn the truth regardless. So I suppose there is no harm in discussing it with you now."

"So Anriette *is* involved," said Allen. He'd guessed that either the elves had some long association with demons or that Anriette had some connection to this. "By the way," he continued, "I assume the fact that they all look like kids is

relevant too?”

“Most perceptive. I see Lady Anriette keeps good company.”

“I’m just using my eyes.”

“I suppose so. Well, I am not sure how much I can say, but...it was Lady Anriette who proposed that we harbor them here.”

“Huh, I guess this *is* a great place to hide out. How long ago was this?”

“It must have been three years ago.”

“When Anriette first moved here,” said Allen. It seemed that his first thought—that it must have had something to do with the killing of the emperor—was mistaken. Or perhaps it was too soon to jump to that conclusion. He would have to ask Anriette himself. “And nobody pushed back? *You* didn’t?”

“No. We understood the necessity.”

“Of harboring demons?”

“Of living in harmony with other races. That they were demons is incidental. Lady Anriette gave us hope about finding a king, but she also proposed another path. Whatever happens now that you have arrived, we cannot guarantee that a similar tragedy will not befall us again. We must change.”

“Become capable of maturing by yourselves, you mean?”

“Exactly. Our ability to survive as an isolated race has made us complacent. We are now convinced we must change. Of course, not all of our people feel so strongly about it. There are those who still have misgivings. Were it not for our state of despair, some would never have accepted.”

It wasn’t Allen’s place to judge whether this was a good idea or not. If the elves had accepted, it was not his problem.

The elf continued. “Additionally, those who have acquired an interest in the outside world have great influence among our kind.”

“I see. I guess the presence of other races is one of the biggest things about the outside world. After experiencing that, they’d be less likely to oppose it. But at the rate you’re changing, you won’t need a king for much longer, will you?”

“That I cannot say. We still do not understand why our ancestors were unable to mature by themselves.”

“Yeah, that’s a tough one.” Anriette had given him the impression that there *was* some kind of evidence regarding that, but he wasn’t in a position to contradict the king’s representative telling him otherwise.

“Regardless, we would never cease our search for a king, though it is already too late to return to our old way of life,” the elf said with a slight sense of shame.

Allen smiled wryly. Nobody could go back to a life of bread and water after sampling all the flavors of the world. That was true of elves, humans, and dwarves alike. But it stood to reason that an elf who saw fit to serve his people so loyally as the king’s representative would mourn the loss of their old way of life.

“You’ve told me a lot,” said Allen, “but why did you come to see me in the first place? It can’t have been to tell me all that.”

“True, it was not. I was hoping to ask you about our queen.”

“So, just like everyone else?”

“My question is of a deeper nature—or at least one that more deeply concerns us. I wanted to ask if you believe our queen will...become our queen.”

Would Noel agree to become the elven queen? Shouldn’t he ask her that directly? Allen glanced over at Noel. She *did* seem bewildered, but not—or at least, mostly not—because she was being treated like royalty; she’d already expected such treatment after the group’s private conversation earlier. Rather, having never encountered another member of her race before, she was unsure how to interact with them.

“If I had to guess, I don’t think she will. It’s not in her nature. And wouldn’t she have to live here?”

“No, that would not be necessary.”

“Really?”

“Once she acknowledges her role as queen, distance matters not. You have

never heard of wandering elves being unable to mature, have you?”

“I guess not. Wouldn’t she have any duties, though?”

“I will handle all responsibilities. We could not leave such matters to someone unfamiliar with our ways—even the queen.”

“Makes sense.”

The elf’s burden hadn’t come from the duty of representing the king, but from doing so without being able to allow elvenkind to mature. So Noel would be able to continue her life as before. It was entirely a personal choice and nothing more.

“I still can’t say for sure that she’ll accept, though. Knowing her, there could always be something else that troubles her about the idea. I guess it’ll come down to how good a job you do of convincing her.”

“I see. I greatly appreciate your insight. I will take this into consideration.”

“Just some random thoughts. I don’t think it’s anything too insightful.”

However, the elf responded with a look of great satisfaction. Clearly, Allen’s random thoughts were more than enough.

He looked over at Noel again and chuckled. She was surrounded by elves and squinting in bewilderment. He couldn’t even imagine what might happen next.

## An Audience With the King

The party was in full swing when the announcement came that it was over. In their excitement, the crowd had reached a level of fervor that threatened to become uncontrollable and had to be forced to cool down—or so Allen and his friends were told. But to them, the enthusiasm of the elves was a welcome development. Besides, it wasn't like anyone was getting hurt...aside from maybe one person.

"A-Are you all right, Noel?" Riese stammered.

"If you think *this* is what 'all right' looks like, you need your eyes checked!" said Noel.

"You did have to meet and greet an awful lot of elves," said Allen. "You did good."

"You could've come and helped me!"

"I thought I *was* helping you," said Anriette. "Only because so many elves kept coming to talk to me, but still..."

"I guess that means we all helped a little," said Mylène.

Allen shrugged. "We couldn't exactly stop people from going to talk to the guest of honor. That was kinda the whole point of the party."

Noel, sprawled out the sofa in front of him, shot him a resentful look. Exhausted from talking to so many elves, she was the only victim—if you could call it that—of the party.

"If it bothered you that much, you should have said something," said Riese. "I'm sure they would have stopped if they'd known."

"Oh, *please!*" Noel pouted in frustration. "You think I couldn't tell how overjoyed they were? And you want me to be a party pooper?"

The others exchanged glances, causing her to pout further.

"Did you catch a cold or something?" said Mylène.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” said Noel.

“What do *you* think?” said Allen. “I get where she’s coming from.”

“Yeah,” said Anriette. “Even I can tell you aren’t acting like your usual self.”

Riese approached the sofa, placing one hand on her forehead and the other on her own. “Doesn’t seem like a fever.”

“Isn’t doing *that* without asking more rude than anything I’ve said?” Noel griped.

Allen had to agree, but he knew that Riese was only acting out of concern. Still, it *was* unusual for her to be so forward.

“So, did you feel any kinship with them?” he asked.

“Hmm...I don’t know. They were getting on my nerves, but I didn’t hate them or anything.”

“I see,” said Anriette. “So you will become their queen and stay here as expected?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘as expected’?”

“You could do as you please here,” Mylène explained.

“Yeah,” said Allen. “You could sleep in as late as you like and nobody could say a word.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of what you all think of me,” Noel said with a glare, though she remained sprawled across the sofa. There was no doubt she was genuinely tired, though it was probably more mental than physical. After all, she had no experience with this kind of thing; that was why it had taken so much out of her.

“Enough joking around,” said Allen. “Have you decided what you’re gonna do yet? For what it’s worth, I was told you won’t have to stay here even if you do become queen.”

“Wait, really?” asked Riese.

“Oh, didn’t I mention that?” Anriette answered. “Generally, the queen doesn’t have to be close by.”

“They said the fact that wandering elves don’t stop growing is proof of that,” Allen added.

“Really?” said Noel. “Wandering elves are so rare that it could just be a myth.”

“I think even people who live as long as elves would notice if they stop aging. Oh, and the representative said he’ll handle all the duties.”

“Being queen wouldn’t suddenly make you an expert on royal duties, after all,” said Anriette. “You’d probably just get in the way.”

“I see,” said Riese. “If it helps the elves through this crisis, I suppose there’s no problem with accepting.” She paused. “But...considering how Noel is, I don’t think we can just leave the rest to her.”

Allen smirked. He’d been thinking the same thing. Mylène nodded. Either they were all in sync or Noel was just that easy to read.

“Hey,” said Allen, “what were you saying to them anyway?”

“Nothing important. Just what sort of things I get up to, stuff like that.”

“Nothing else?” said Riese. “In that case, it sounds like they didn’t get anything out of you that they couldn’t have gotten from me.”

“I heard similar things,” said Mylène. “Although I couldn’t talk much.”

“Same here,” said Allen. “Didn’t they ask you anything? I assumed they’d be telling you how much they want you to become queen. That’s what they were saying to me, at least.”

“They didn’t even say anything about not wanting to be pushy?” asked Anriette. “That seems like something they’d say.”

“Actually, they did,” Noel replied. “After nobody mentioned the whole ‘queen’ thing, I asked myself if there was something they wanted to say.” She sighed. Clearly she would’ve preferred them to make her decision easier by asking her outright. The way they went about it would’ve helped her make up her mind. Now she was left to make the decision based entirely on her conscience.

“It really is up to you,” said Anriette. “They’re just happy to know that the

queen's blood still prevails. There's no ulterior motive to the welcome you got."

"That's what makes this so hard," said Noel. "It would be easier if they just begged me to save them."

"That would be like disavowing all the efforts they've already made," said Anriette. "They probably don't *want* to ask for your help. Honestly, I almost think you *should* refuse."

"Because they're in the middle of figuring out how to become capable of aging without a queen, you mean?" Allen asked.

"They are?" said Riese. "Of course they are. It's a matter of life and death, after all."

"Is that why there're so many elves in town?" asked Mylène.

"That's all part of it," said Anriette. "Although the reason I say you should refuse has more to do with the nature of elves."

Allen was confused. Did she mean that it would be better for the elves not to be able to age? "I dunno what you're into, Anriette, but hoping for other people to never be able to grow up is a little much."

"Goodness, what kind of person do you think I am? No, it's because when the elves have a king or queen, they grow more similar to that person as they age."

"What does that mean?" asked Mylène.

"Their minds align. The queen's interests will determine the direction of the entire race. That's the real reason elves are said to be good at magic."

"Because the previous kings specialized in it?"

"Right. So what would happen if Noel took on the role?"

"Oh...they'd become smithing specialists instead."

That sounded just as disruptive to elven society as everything that had happened so far. Perhaps continuing to search for a way they could age without Noel would be the better option.

"Somehow that makes me feel like doing it wouldn't be so bad," said Noel.

"This isn't the time to get all contrarian on us," Allen told her.

In the end, it *was* up to her and the elves, though. Since she didn't even have to stay in the forest, there was really no need for anyone else's opinion.

"Besides, didn't they say there's no need to make up your mind right away?" said Anriette.

"They said they're prepared to wait decades," Noel answered. "Apparently that isn't too long to them, even when they're unable to grow."

"I guess that makes sense, considering how long they live," said Mylène.

"They understand that it would do them no good to rush you," Anriette clarified. "Even if that means waiting decades."

With no need to hurry, and as tired as Noel was, the group decided to disperse for the time being. Whether as a sweetener or out of sheer generosity, the elves had given them an entire house to stay in. It was an unnecessary gesture, since they could have returned to Anriette's manor at any time, but they decided to take full advantage of the hospitality. After all, staying overnight in the Elven Forest was a unique opportunity, even if it was under uncertain circumstances.

The group began to depart, each heading to their own rooms. Allen exchanged a brief look with Anriette, then followed.

# The Demon Children and the Disciple

The elven dwellings took full advantage of the surrounding natural landscape; almost everything was made of wood, with no iron or other metals to be found. For all that the exposure to a more convenient way of life had changed them, they hadn't changed *that* much.

Allen looked out the window of one such wooden house. The tranquil plaza betrayed none of the earlier commotion. When Allen had left, the excitement had shown no signs of cooling off; the viceroy had done well to somehow encourage them to disperse.

With nothing of interest to observe in the plaza, Allen searched for something else. Up above, the moon floated in an ink-black sea, seeming somehow different than it did outside of the Elven Forest. With the forest existing in a rift between spaces, perhaps it actually *did* look different overhead.

"A girl wouldn't complain if you said, 'Isn't the moon beautiful tonight?'"

Allen shrugged, eyes still on the night sky. He'd already noticed Anriette's presence, as she well knew. "Not really my style to say stuff like that."

"Ugh, you're such a drag. Why not try it while you have the chance?"

"Wouldn't yesterday have been the time? Anyway, where'd you learn that expression? People don't even say it in this world."

"Believe it or not, holy disciples have a lot of time on their hands. For a time, I was obsessed with collecting different stories and expressions from all around the world."

She'd never seemed like the bookish type to Allen, but now that he thought about it, it seemed strangely fitting. She had a funny way of talking sometimes, but she had a wealth of knowledge, and the content of her words was always on the mark.

"Yeah, that fits you."

“A pretty girl can make *anything* fit her.”

“How modest of you.”

Not that it wasn't true.

*Funny way of starting a conversation*, Allen thought to himself as he turned and smirked. Anriette's expression almost looked like a challenge.

“I assumed that look of yours earlier was your way of calling me here. Don't tell me I was wrong.”

“Nope. If I hadn't been expecting you, I'd be more surprised right now.”

“Oh, I don't think that's true. Anyway, what do you want from me? Don't tell me you've picked tonight to have your way with me? Here in the Elven Forest? There're far too many people who'll stop you...”

“You're so easy to read, you know that?”

“Oh?”

“When there's something you don't wanna say or hear, you blab on and on.”

Anriette pursed her lips. Bull's-eye.

“As you know, I want to ask about the demon children that live here,” he continued.

Anriette responded with a disapproving look and a sigh of resignation. Allen had known she'd be hesitant to discuss it.

“I knew I couldn't sneak it by you. Did Percival tell you anything?” She had to mean the viceroy. Their conversation wouldn't have escaped her notice.

“Not much. Only that you asked the elves to take those kids in three years ago and that they accepted, believing they might hold the key to allowing them to mature again.”

“Sounds like he told you a lot. So that's how you knew. And he's usually so tight-lipped about it. He must have taken a shine to you, or he respects you or something.”

“I think it was just because he knows I'm your friend. It's you he respects.”

“I think you’re capable of winning his respect yourself, but whatever.”

Anriette exhaled, looking at him with a steely gaze. Allen responded in kind.

“I’m sure you’re aware that I hid a few things about demons from you,” she began.

“I figured. So?”

“Like I told you, demons are traitors to the world itself. They’re the enemies of all men. Their reasons and methods might differ, but they seek revenge on—and the destruction of—all mankind. However they try to sweet-talk you, all they want is to use you until you’re dead. They’re merciless.” She paused. “But there are exceptions. The children born of demon pairings.”

“Demons can have children?”

“Demons aren’t of any particular race. They can be anyone the world identifies as a demon. That’s why I said you have the potential to become one yourself. So of course they can have children, no problem. It’s only *after* having them that the problems begin.”

“I can guess how this goes. The world identifies the children of demons as demons themselves, without regard for their own thoughts and feelings, right?”

“Exactly. As a rule, people become demons of their own will. But their children never had a choice. The world brands them as demons and regards them as abominations. It extends them no fortune, no friendship, and does all it can to destroy them, regardless of their true nature. Naturally, few of them live very long, and of those who do, most come to hate the world.”

“Makes sense.”

“You’d need the patience of a saint or the will of a champion to bear no resentment against a foe that tried to kill you for nothing—qualities most adults don’t possess, let alone children. It’s no surprise most of them end up dead. To survive takes incredible strength, and those survivors come to despise the world and make for fine demons. They become a blight upon the world, then have children themselves.”

“What a terrible cycle,” said Allen. “So that’s why demons are so tough. It’s

almost like the world planned it this way.”

“It’s more that demons are too cunning for the world to comprehend their evil designs. They use the ways of the world to their own advantage. Most die, but those who don’t are even stronger.”

“So they deliberately abandon their children to such a terrible fate?”

“That’s right.”

A demonic plan indeed—they would sacrifice their own innocent children to take further revenge on the world. The name ‘demon’ was well-deserved.

“So those kids are...”

“Children I spotted before they were killed. I couldn’t abandon them.”

“As a former holy disciple, shouldn’t you be siding with the world on this?”

“*Former* disciple,” she emphasized. “It’s not my problem now.”

Allen had presumed as much. She really was the most trustworthy, dependable girl he knew.

“Anyway,” Anriette continued, “I already knew about this place when I found them. The forest is located in an area that’s slightly removed from the rest of the world. I don’t think that’s really by design. It just turned out this way.”

“And that’s why you brought the demons here?”

“Right. The elves stood to gain from it too. I brought them here and left them in their care, and here we are.”

Allen got the impression that Anriette was leaving a lot out of this abridged account, but he got the gist. It all made sense...except for one thing.

“Why hide it from me?”

There didn’t seem to be any need. She’d rescued innocent children. If anything, she should be proud of herself.

“It isn’t that big a deal. If I’d gone out of my way to tell you, it would’ve seemed like I was bragging. And...you know. I thought if you knew they were harboring demons, it would make you uneasy.”

She'd been worrying too much, but Allen couldn't blame her for feeling that way after all she'd learned. From a certain point of view, it was demonkind who had destroyed his family. As far as he was concerned, though, they had reaped what they'd sown. Those responsible had already been dealt with, and he bore demonkind no ill will.

"Like I told you before, I'm not worried about that. Actually, I should be praising you for going to such lengths."

Anriette turned her head away bashfully. "No need for that. It really wasn't a big deal. I just couldn't stand by and watch. It's nothing worth bragging about and certainly nothing to praise me for."

Allen smiled. He had a soft spot for this side of Anriette, but more than that, her words sounded familiar. In fact, he remembered saying them himself, as well as the response *he'd* received.

*"That you simply follow your heart, doing what to you is natural, without boasting or expecting praise—that is precisely what makes you a worthy hero."*

Allen's smile widened as he wondered how Anriette would react if he came out with that now.

# Unanswerable Worries

Suddenly, she awoke.

No, it was more accurate to say that her mind became clear. Even as she'd drifted through a light sleep, she had always been conscious. Now that her mind was clear, there was nothing for it. Unable to bear trying to sleep any longer, Noel slowly rose.

"Am I really *that* delicate?" she wondered. She'd said it herself in the past, but she'd *thought* she was just being cheeky. She'd never imagined that the question of whether she should become queen would cause her so much anguish.

There was no question that she had neither the character nor the inclination for the role. But they'd said she could delegate all her duties and continue with her life as it was.

The faces of the elves she'd talked to that day floated through her mind. Their smiles conveyed an utterly authentic happiness about having the chance to meet her. She couldn't just ignore those faces. Apparently, she had the same capacity for empathy as anyone else.

"And that's *really* surprising."

Fellow elves or not, they were people she'd just met. She had no great sense of being an elf anyway. She'd been in *her* care ever since she was young, and when *she* had died, Noel had immediately traveled to the royal capital to earn a living as a blacksmith. She came in contact with so few people and had so rapidly made a name for herself as a smith that she had never really experienced discrimination. Even after traveling to the Frontier, her life had remained mostly unchanged, so she had little cause to suddenly become conscious of her elvish nature.

And yet she couldn't help feeling her spirits being lifted by their happiness, knowing she could help them if they were in trouble. She surprised herself.

“Maybe this is what it means to be a descendant of the king,” she mused.

That would mean she was being controlled by her blood, without regard for her own will...but it didn't feel bad, so why worry about it? Even if she *was* being influenced by her ancestry, it only amounted to a faint feeling, enough to give her a positive impression of her fellow elves and little more. Her thoughts were still her own—that was the problem. Her indecision was her responsibility alone.

“What am I gonna do?” she wondered. She knew her hesitation really meant she had already made up her mind. If she definitely didn't want to do it, there would be no need for all this indecision. But still she hesitated, because she knew herself too well. They told her she could go on with her normal life, but she would never be able to accept that. If she was to be queen, even if she had nothing to do in the role, she would surely end up living here with the elves.

That didn't sound bad. The elves' displays of respect and adoration were no superficial facade; they reflected deeply held feelings. She didn't feel a shred of anxiety at the idea of living among them.

Most importantly, when it came down to it, she wasn't satisfied with her life as it was: an aimless existence carried on the wind. Other than continuing to improve as a blacksmith, she had no goals. True, she still hadn't been able to forge a sword that surpassed Hauteclaire, but her original goal had been to slay the Fenrir, and that she had already achieved. There was nothing else for her to do.

She couldn't say her life with Allen and the others was boring. She had enjoyed her time with them. If not, she would have already set out alone. That she had remained with them for half a year was proof of what an enjoyable journey it had been. But it wasn't *satisfying*. Whatever she did, the intermittent and unpredictable joys of their adventures were always accompanied by an unrelenting sense of emptiness, as though a hole had formed in her heart. Wherever they planned to travel next, she could never shake the feeling that she was going nowhere.

But wasn't it thanks to living with them that she was even able to *realize* that she felt that way? Allen's goal of a quiet life seemed preposterous on its face,

but she couldn't deny the unwavering resolve with which he searched for it. It was clear that he had deep-seated reasons for his goals. Riese, too, seemed to go wherever her fancy took her, but she also had duties to fulfill. That was why she'd come to the empire. In reality—at least, it seemed to Noel—it was her strict sense of responsibility that granted her that air of freedom. Whether she did these things for herself or for a certain *someone*, Noel couldn't say, but either way, it was something Noel lacked.

Even Mylène... Her laconic nature made her hard to read, but after six months with her, Noel knew that she had a strong sense of self. When they first met, the child's despair had made her apathetic, but lately she was different, as though she'd discovered who she was and what her goals were.

Noel alone had nothing. She was treading water without a purpose. Then again, if nothing had been said to her, she would never have noticed.

"Maybe I'm beating myself up too much, thinking I have to make myself useful?" she wondered aloud, knowing there was no answer coming.

When it came to this, she couldn't seek anyone else's counsel. They could offer her nothing but an empathetic look and a restatement of the hard fact that she had to make this decision for herself.

"There's no need to decide right away, I guess," she muttered. But she knew that if she didn't make up her mind here and now, she never would. "What am I gonna do?"

It always came back to that. She wasn't satisfied with things as they were. It seemed like it would be nice to help the elves, but that was as strong as she felt. None of her feelings were enough to base a decision on. She enjoyed her life with her friends. She was loath to say goodbye, even if her lack of purpose made her feel miserable at times. But she couldn't ignore the plight of the elves either. Round and round in circles she went. If only there was something that would make accepting or refusing the elves' request the obvious choice.

"Ugh, I'm so wishy-washy."

There were limits to how indecisive a person could be. Before this, she'd thought she had a bold and daring disposition. Perhaps this was all the dissatisfaction with herself that she'd bottled up for months finally exploding.

“All I know is I’ve got to decide soon.” But deciding now, in the dead of night, would be too difficult. It would take time for her sleeplessness to subside. She would feel lethargic tomorrow. “Speaking of sleepless, I wonder what those two got up to today.”

She’d caught them exchanging glances as they left. They didn’t behave like two people who had barely known each other long ago. Something had happened, or was *happening*, between them.

Noel gave the thought no further consideration. She didn’t need to add to her problems. Dismissing the hazy notion that crept into her mind, she turned her mind back to her unanswerable worries.

## A Pair of Sighs

The world was cloaked in silence as the night wore on. Most were asleep, and those who were still at work endeavored to conduct their business without a sound—whether to avoid waking others, to avoid being caught in their devious acts, or to catch those involved in such acts by surprise. Despite their distinct, sometimes conflicting goals, it was thanks to the combined efforts of all parties that the silence was preserved.

Among them was a male elf, Percival, slouched in a chair in his room. “Now what?” he wondered aloud, brow furrowed. No great dilemma troubled him; he was just too wound up with excitement to sleep.

The elves had found their king, and he was no less ecstatic than any of the others he had tried to calm down. What a fool he was. But how could he *not* be ecstatic after seeing his greatest wish come true? Anriette had offered them some kind of hope, but it was a hope with no promise of fulfillment, and even less promise that such a fulfillment would turn out to be desirable.

Of course, anything was better than a slow march toward death, but he’d been looking for a certain escape from the unbearable pressure of leading his race through treacherous terrain on a journey where one false step could mean the end of elvenkind. And now their queen had been found. Nobody could understand the relief this brought him.

Even so, he had been sincere when he’d told her that it was her decision to make. The knowledge that she existed—that even if all their efforts came to naught, there was still one last hope to cling to—lightened his load immeasurably. Even if Noel did not deign to become their queen and all other elves were unable to pass on their seed—provided she someday bore a child—their race would continue. It was a fate far better than extinction.

Indeed, the knowledge of Noel’s existence had brought Percival incomparable joy. His current insomnia was a consequence of that. Tomorrow he was to properly introduce himself to the queen and her friends and show them around

the forest; he could hardly appear before them with bags under his eyes.

“What a shameful thing to be so troubled by.” But he had to admit the luxury of such a problem was itself something to be welcomed. “And this is all thanks to her. I’m not the slightest match for her.”

At first, he’d regarded her every action with skepticism, even considered her an enemy—attitudes for which he now felt acute remorse. That she likely wanted some manner of recompense could be dealt with at a later time. “At the least, I made the right move in not accepting this strange proposition,” he muttered as he unraveled the black parchment.

It wasn’t clear who had sent it or how it had reached the forest. All that was clear were the words inscribed: *Lend us your power, and we will give you a king.*

It was over half a year ago that he had found the message. Suspicious as it was, and with no clear way to reply, he had paid it no further mind and received no follow-up. Perhaps it had read his thoughts, or perhaps something else was afoot. Regardless, recent developments told him his judgment had been sound. Of course, he still had plenty to be concerned and curious about, but there was no need to pay *this* any further mind.

“When it comes to concerns, there is the matter of the children...”

He had granted the demon children shelter in the forest. He knew that they were utterly without sin, but he was also all too aware of the power they possessed. He had to be vigilant. But for now, he had a more pressing thought.

“How am I going to get to sleep?”

With sleep’s embrace still hopelessly distant, he could only sigh and smile gently.

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Meanwhile, in town, a girl sighed, melancholy. “What the hell am I gonna do?”

As was the wont of those who moved at night, and particularly those in her line of work, Lisette had been endeavoring to keep quiet. At the moment, it was all for naught. She was stuck. Her hushed movements were *supposed* to assist

in capturing a shady character, but with no sign of her target, it was wasted effort.

She surveyed the town once more. Her sigh reverberated through the empty streets. “I didn’t think *this* would turn out to be a dead end too.”

She and the others had made a determined effort to find and apprehend the suspicious young man she’d seen the day before. They’d closed off the streets with their usual disregard for the protestations of the city’s population. But this time their efforts had ended in failure.

If he turned out not to be a subject of the kingdom, there was no particular problem. That would be their own mistake. But it was strange; there was no trace of him at all. It wasn’t a matter of him escaping to an unknown location—that would simply mean he was a spy from some other country. But there weren’t even any traces of him *entering* the city.

“It’s impossible, especially with security as tight as it is. If he’d made it look like he’d come from a different direction than he really did, that would be one thing, but no trace at all? Impossible.”

If it *had* been possible, she never would’ve spotted the kid to begin with. There was only one answer: he hadn’t escaped the country without leaving a trace, he had just gone into hiding. But with so many knights around, that seemed impossible too unless someone in their ranks, or else very close to them, was responsible.

“I guess I’m forced to go with that theory for the time being,” she muttered. It was a simple process of elimination, even if it felt more ridiculous than rational; no other possibilities were conceivable. Having arrived at such a conclusion, there was one thing that concerned her. “I think *she* was in the city at the time.”

Anriette Linkvist. She was the rightful heir to the Marquis of Linkvist, though in practice she was treated similarly to Lisette and the other knights, as an unwanted child. She was capable of making someone disappear, and from what Lisette had heard, she’d left the city yesterday just as night fell.

It was too suspicious. What would she stand to gain by risking a dangerous journey at night? Of course, she could have had some urgent business to attend

to, but Lisette couldn't help but wonder. As a result, she had left the city to her comrades and come here, to the town where Anriette lived. However...

"Someone of her stature not being at home... I guess I can't say it's a swing and a miss just yet," Lisette mused.

It could mean that Anriette had hurried out of there. But Lisette had no idea where she might have gone. It was highly suspicious. In truth, Lisette had harbored doubts about her from the start, even if she *was* the heir to the marquis, albeit in name alone. And rumor had it that she had some secret duties too. It wasn't a stretch to imagine this was all connected. But this town was one of the few places to which her authority did not extend. Overstepping her bounds could result in her losing her head—literally.

"Not that it would make much difference at this point."

Lisette had already failed to deliver results even after blockading the streets. If she didn't turn up anything now, it would mean her life. Part of her didn't even feel compelled to do anything to avoid that outcome; in more ways than one, this had been her own doing. On the other hand, she didn't want to die if it could be avoided.

"Better do whatever I can. At worst, it's not gonna change anything anyway."

Better to die gracefully. Hidden in a corner of the gloomy town streets, Lisette pulled herself together and considered her next move with renewed vigor.

# A Walk Through the Forest

The next morning, Allen and the others walked through the Elven Forest. The excursion served as both a stroll and a survey, instructing Noel on how the elves lived and their current circumstances. The intent was not to implore her to become queen, but simply to show her that, should she decide to do so, the elves would like her to know more about them.

“Man, Noel really *is* an elf, isn’t she?” said Allen.

“What do you mean by that?” Noel asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Riese.

“I get it too,” Mylène added.

“I don’t know how you are normally, but it makes sense to me too,” said Anriette. “Even though you were brought up in a completely different environment, you still have the traits of being an elf.”

“Forgive me,” said Percival, wearing a pained expression. “I told them it would be best to go about their usual business, but...”

Much to Percival’s embarrassment, the elves were napping. Some sat half-awake, periodically nodding off, while others were spread out on the ground, fast asleep. The sight was a fine display of the mercurial nature of the elves. Though technically morning, it was close to midday. The group had set out a little after breakfast.

“You elves really are uninhibited, huh?” said Allen. Little was known about them, and most of what *was* known only amounted to rumor, but it was clear some things were true.

“They *do* tend to live freely,” said Anriette, “though usually only when they are able to.”

The implication, it was clear, was that now, when they faced the threat of extinction, wasn’t one such time. And yet the scene before them gave no such

impression. Was this siesta a byproduct of all the attention they had lavished upon Noel the previous day, or a sign that, now that Noel had arrived, they finally felt free to relax?

“Maybe it’s just ‘cause of how long they live?” Allen wondered.

“Precisely,” said Percival. “For most races, ten years is a significant period of time. That is not so for us. Not to imply that our present crisis is not serious, but it will be easy to return to normal.”

“You’re in a very difficult situation,” said Riese. “To me, it seems to be a good thing that your people can live in such a relaxed way.”

“You *are* a free-spirited bunch,” said Anriette. “I don’t think you need to think about it too deeply.”

“You’re right,” said Percival. “However I might complain, we have no real objections to you seeing us as we are so that you might understand how we truly live.”

“To be honest, though, I’m not sure how to take it,” said Noel. “Some of you seem to have funny ways of using that freedom.”

She turned, and the figure that had been peering out from behind a tree trunk hurried to hide themselves. They had to be half the height of the others.

“It’s natural for children to be free-spirited,” said Percival.

“I guess it’s important for them to have that freedom,” Mylène noted.

“Quite,” Riese agreed. “It may seem strange to say this, but it’s reassuring to know that elf children are just like any others.”

“All they’re doing is following us,” said Anriette. “That’s pretty well-behaved, isn’t it?”

“It’s nice of you to say so,” said Percival, “but the point of this trip is to show our queen how we live. The children were instructed to behave themselves too. What a bother.”

“They’re not getting in the way,” said Noel. “If it’s not bothering me, it’s okay, right?”

Percival gave her an appreciative look and continued walking. With all the elves asleep, there was no point in remaining here. There wasn't much to assist Noel in making her decision, although she probably did appreciate how relaxed it seemed.

"By the way, since you're unable to age, does that mean those children should already have reached adulthood by now?"

"No," said Percival. "They're still only around a hundred years old. Even if they were able to age, they would still be children, though perhaps they would not be making such a nuisance of themselves."

"You really *do* live a long time," said Riese. "To be a hundred years old and still a child!"

"I guess that makes us babies?" said Mylène.

"If we were elves we would be," said Allen. "Noel must be special, though."

"I suppose so," said Noel. "I don't really *feel* any different, but if I was just a normal elf, I would never have been able to grow up myself. So I guess it's not half bad being special."

"Seems like it's given you a lot to think about, though," said Allen.

"True. It's got its good and bad points."

The group continued to walk as they talked, but the sights didn't change; only more and more sleeping elves lying in the dappled light that leaked through the treetops. Clearly elves were not morning people.

"Maybe we should come back in the afternoon," said Allen.

"Hmm, I didn't want us to take up too much of our queen's time, but it seems that has happened regardless," Percival admitted.

"Yeah, I think that would be better," said Anriette. "There's not much to see right now. Let's head back home until evening."

"Something you need to attend to?" asked Allen. "You could've gone back earlier, you know. We're just sticking with Noel since we have nothing else to do."

“Oh, I’m basically in the same boat,” said Anriette. “In fact, I *want* to stick with you, but...well, it’s kinda embarrassing to say something like this in front of Percival, but I want to eat something substantial.”

“Ah. I see.”

The elven diet mostly consisted of fruit and a handful of wild plants. As filling as it was, it hardly felt like a real meal. Staying for lunch was one thing, but the thought of staying until late in the evening left them craving more familiar food.

“I don’t feel too satisfied with the food either,” said Noel. “I’ve gotten used to the food of the outside world.”

“Food, eh?” said Percival. “It seems I’ll have to quickly reconsider our approach.”

Food was a surprisingly important matter. As those concerned with raising military morale understood, people could endure a lot of pain and suffering if what they found on their dinner plate pleased them.

The food being of concern to Noel meant that, if she did take on the role of queen, she intended to stay in the forest...and that she was still undecided on whether she *would* take the role. To be fair, how could the sight of a bunch of sleeping elves help her to choose either way?

Suddenly, they heard the muddled speech of a child. “Hey, lady, are you the queen?”

Everyone turned, and many reacted with surprise. The child lacked the slender, tapered ears of an elf. It was a demon child.

# The Demon Child and the Stone of Thanks

Was a demon still a demon even if it was a child, or was a child still a child even if it was a demon? Both were correct. Off to the side, Allen caught sight of two figures bracing themselves and sighed. There was no need for that, but he understood. Percival was worried about anything happening to Noel. The fact that it was a demon probably didn't even factor into his reaction; it was just his instinctive reaction to a non-elf.

It was hardly a bad thing that Percival reflexively prepared himself to protect his queen. Allen could say the same of the other figure, Anriette, but in her case, she'd probably been acting out of concern for the children. Who could say what would happen to them if they caused any harm to come to Noel? It would be no surprise if the elves decided to extinguish them entirely.

Still, the pair hadn't given away much. Riese didn't seem to have noticed at all, and Mylène only looked in their direction for a brief moment. Noel's attention was completely diverted by the child. There was nothing much to worry about. Those three reacted only with a combination of confusion and curiosity, as if wondering why this child had suddenly appeared from nowhere and called out to them.

Allen was curious too. He had reflexively used his Boundless Knowledge upon recognizing the child as a demon. At only three years of age, the boy was closer to an infant. Remembering his conversation with Anriette the day prior, he was appalled that the world could treat such a young boy like any other demon.

The boy moved closer, paying no mind to the varied responses his appearance had received. Anriette and Percival again braced themselves, but nothing happened. The boy simply drew close to Noel and craned his neck to look up at her.

"Are you the queen, lady?"

Noel smiled gently and spoke in a voice that was gentler than usual, eyes wide and brows raised. "I suppose you could say that. Why do you ask?"

The child broke into a smile and stuck out both hands. "Your Majesty! Here you go!"

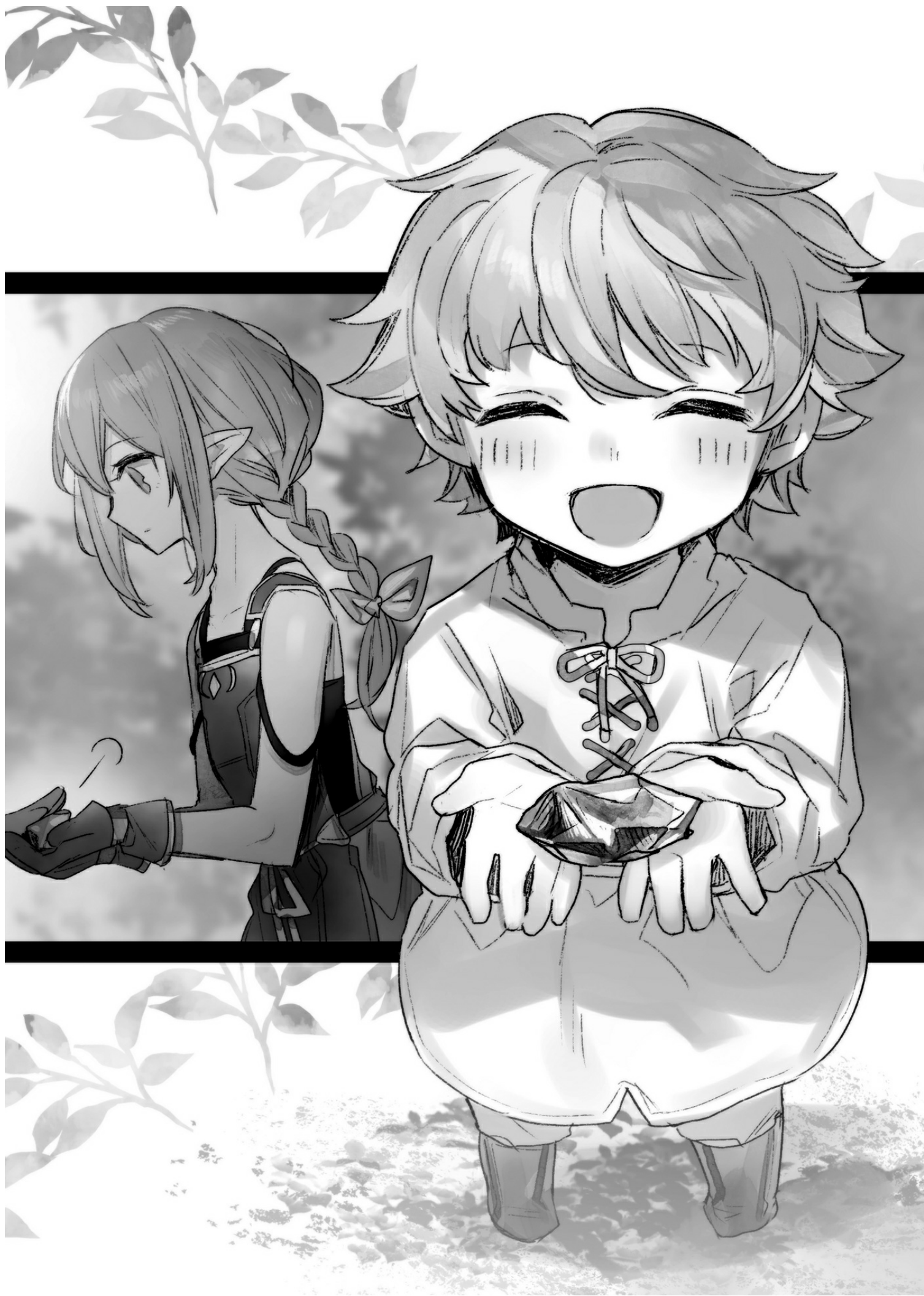
In his outstretched hands was a stone. Anriette and Percival regarded it as though a faint yet clear power emanated from it, but neither moved. Clearly it was no evil magic.

"Are you giving this to me?" asked Noel.

"Yeah!" said the boy. "Take it!"

"Thanks. But why are you giving me this?"

"Umm...my big brother and big sister told me to! Oh, and they said 'thanks!'"



Allen didn't know what to say, but he had some idea of what was going on. The boy had been instructed to hand over the stone and offer his thanks by the older demon children. The reactions of Anriette and Percival told him why they hadn't come themselves; these people couldn't help but be on their guard even around a mere toddler. Being approached by an older child, perhaps one the same age as the boy who still observed them from behind, would have provoked even greater caution. Presumably the demon children wanted to avoid that.

The thanks itself had to be for their current situation. Some of the children were old enough to understand that they were the recipients of great fortune and compassion. The current goings-on must have seemed like the perfect opportunity to express their thanks. Judging by Anriette and Percival's reactions, the stone was no ordinary stone, but a token of appreciation.

Noel and the rest had no idea the child was a demon or that the forest was home to demons at all—but it was clear he wasn't an elf, and they had to have noticed that there were other similar children. Had they arrived at a similar conclusion to Allen himself, or had they simply sensed the sincerity of the gesture without truly understanding what was happening?

"I see. Well, thank you very much," said Noel as she took the stone.

The child's smile widened. "You're welcome!"

Noel patted the child on the head. He nodded with delight. Even Anriette and Percival seemed to relax, charmed by the sight. But it seemed not everyone was pleased; Allen heard a gasp behind him, and sensed someone running away. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a figure not even half his own height.

"Leave him be," said a voice so quiet that only Allen could hear. He looked and saw Percival staring straight ahead, eyes narrowed. He'd noticed it too.

"I wasn't planning on following him," said Allen. "I can't see any good reason to. Is he all right though?"

"Probably jealous. Just leave him be. Elven children are still elves. He'll be back after he's cheered up a little."

If envy was all there was to it, then leaving him alone was all that could be

done. It seemed like Noel hadn't noticed, so better not to bring it up. If nobody said anything, she would assume the child had just gotten bored and run off somewhere to amuse himself.

The demon child seemed unfazed by all this. He departed with a smile and a wave, and the group resumed their walk through the now familiar scenes of the forest. After the encounter with the child, however, the sight of more sleeping elves left Allen with an acute sense of how *different* they were.

"They really do live freely, don't they?"

"I have to admit, it makes me wonder how kids like that would manage if they had real trouble," said Anriette.

"I cannot fault you for that," said Percival.

"I suppose it depends on the person," said Riese. "Actually, it just occurred to me...since this place is within the empire's territory, does that mean the elves are citizens of the empire?"

"We're certainly considered as such," said Percival. "Why do you ask?"

"It's strange that they're able to live so freely here, isn't it?" Allen interjected. "I had the same thought." The empire was aggressive in its efforts to expand its territory. Even now, troubled as they were, it wouldn't be surprising to find that they continued to pour resources into military pursuits. The elves were lucky to be able to live so freely, with no duty to do their part.

"That's where you're wrong," said Anriette. "It's the same for me, after all."

"That's true," said Allen. "You do whatever you want too."

"The empire's aim is the domination of the continent," said Anriette. "They have no mercy for those who oppose them, but if you don't get in their way, they'll give you a lot of leeway."

"We elves have never been forced to fight for them," said Percival. "That will continue to be true under the next king."

"I hadn't even thought about that," said Noel. "Good to know there's nothing to worry about."

"Wow," said Allen. "I guess it's not that surprising, but I am still a *little*

surprised.”

“Of course, if they were found guilty of something or other, things would soon change,” said Anriette.

“I suppose that’s inevitable,” said Riese.

“It’s not exactly the kind of thing they can shrug off,” said Anriette.

“Well...never mind. It’s not important right now.”

The group kept walking on as they talked. Allen looked over his shoulder. The elven boy was gone. He already knew that, but still he felt compelled to check. But why? Was that all there was to it? He didn’t understand.

Dismissing the thought, Allen faced ahead and pressed on, chuckling wryly at the unchanging sight of sleeping elves.

# The Spirit Stone

After their look around, Allen and the others returned to the house they had been assigned. In truth, he wasn't sure they'd chosen the best time for the excursion.

"I guess we got a realistic view of what it's usually like here, though," he said. "At least it killed some time. And considering we got *that*, we can't say it was pointless."

"Definitely," said Noel as she fiddled with the object she had received from the boy. It looked like a stone, but it wasn't hard; in fact, it seemed relatively malleable. Noel had mentioned earlier that it had an appealing texture and had been rolling it around in her hand ever since.

"Hey, Anriette," said Allen. "What is that thing anyway? It seemed like you reacted when that kid gave it to Noel."

"Oh, good point," said Anriette. "I'd better fill you in or it could be dangerous."

Riese's curiosity was piqued. "Dangerous? What's dangerous about it?"

Noel's hand froze. She looked nervously at Anriette, who shrugged.

"Oh, don't worry. Well...not that it's *not* dangerous, but...let me get to the point. It's a spirit stone. You must have heard of them, right?"

Allen's eyes widened. "A spirit stone? *That*?"

Everyone looked at the object that Noel held. Even Noel herself regarded her outstretched hand with surprise. Spirit stones were mainly used by alchemists, forming the cores of magical artifacts. The larger the stone, the more magical power it could provide, but most were said to be small enough to carry on the tip of a finger.

"I *knew* I could sense a strange power coming from it," said Allen. "And nobody knows where spirit stones come from, right? Makes sense that they're

mined here.”

“They’re not mined, actually,” said Anriette. “Despite the name, they’re actually crystals. The power of races like the elves seeps into the earth, and over many years, it takes the form of spirit stones.”

“I’ve heard that elves give off a faint power,” said Riese. “So that’s how it works.”

“Wait, but that kid didn’t look like an elf,” said Noel.

“Maybe he got it from one?” Mylène suggested.

“Like I said, races *like* the elves,” Anriette clarified.

Allen looked quizzically. “You mean...”

“Not just the elves, but races *including* them.”

So what power, exactly, was the spirit stone crystallized from? Anriette only shrugged, which told Allen that his guess was on the mark: the power of demons. He’d *thought* the power emanating from the stone felt familiar. Now he understood why. It didn’t remind him of magical artifacts, but of the power used by demons. Still, if it was dangerous, Anriette would’ve come up with some way of letting everybody know. Evidently there was no need to worry.

“Does this mean I could do that too?” asked Mylène.

“It’s not impossible, I suppose,” said Anriette. “But the power of Amazons is best suited to Amazons themselves. Noel is the only one of you who could really make spirit stones.”

“I’ve never seen one, though,” Noel replied.

“Like I said, they’re formed in the earth. You’d have to remain in a specific place for years, and even then you’d never know if you didn’t dig them up.”

“So it’s possible I’ve made them before and left them behind? They just went to waste?”

“Why don’t you try digging around your workshop?” asked Allen. “Maybe you’ll turn something up.”

“That sounds ridiculous, but it just might work,” Riese agreed. “She really did

spend all her time there for a long while.”

It was an idea. But Noel would never allow the ground underneath her workshop to be dug up.

“Oh,” Anriette interjected, looking at the stone in Noel’s hand, “the properties of the stones are supposed to vary depending on the race, so you probably won’t be able to use that one in magical artifacts, which use stones created by elves. Dwarves use spirit stones too, though, in their smithing.”

“Smithing?” said Noel. “How? They can’t be used for tools... They’re not hard enough. As fuel, maybe?”

“No idea. I don’t know much about smithing. I guess you’ll have to ask the dwarves.”

“Figures. Well, at least that tells me there’s more to smithing better swords than tools alone. Maybe *that’s* why that guy threw me out. Didn’t want me discovering his secrets.”

“Think that if you want, but please don’t go asking them directly,” said Riese. “I’m sure there’s a good reason you’ve never heard about this until now.”

“Yeah,” said Allen. “They might even attack you if you really put your foot in it.”

“That’s the goal,” said Noel. “That way I’d know I was right.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Allen argued, although deep down, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Noel hadn’t been completely swept up in everything that had happened lately; she still loved smithing. Yes, she’d been in a slump, perhaps due to having exacted her revenge, but that only meant that her renaissance was close at hand—although first she’d have to figure out what she was going to do here.

“Anyway,” Allen continued, “does that mean we can’t use it *or* sell it? If it could be used in a magical artifact, it’d be really helpful.”

“I would never do that anyway,” said Noel.

“I know. But what if it could be used for smithing somehow? I mean, you wouldn’t know unless you tried, right?”

“Would you stop trying to confuse me?” Noel glared at him, seeming well aware that she couldn’t promise she wouldn’t try that for herself. Of course, Allen didn’t think she actually *would*, but...

“Anyway, what’s so dangerous about it?” asked Allen.

“Good question,” Riese answered. “It doesn’t seem particularly dangerous to me.”

“Spirit stones give off a pretty unique kind of power,” Anriette explained. “Those who can see these things can tell. Don’t let anyone else see that you have it and you’ll save yourself a lot of trouble.”

“From people trying to steal it? Make me hand it over?” asked Noel.

“Exactly.”

“I see. I wasn’t going to walk around with it anyway, so there’s no need to worry. I could never face that boy, or the other children that sent him to us, if I lost it and something bad happened.”

“Good thinking,” said Anriette. “I’ve heard that once a spirit stone has grown beyond a certain size, it starts to feel like a part of you. They were showing you great gratitude by giving it to you, so take care of it.”

So *that* was why only small stones were found on the open market. Allen glanced at Anriette, who responded with a nod that told him her explanation of what made the stone dangerous had been a fabrication. There was something else behind it—something she was hiding.

Allen could guess what it was. The stone was crystallized demonic power. Anyone capable of recognizing it as such would probably assume its owner wasn’t associated with demons. Anriette had come up with a story that would avoid suspicion without revealing the children’s true nature.

“But what race *are* the children who produced this?” asked Riese. “They didn’t look like dwarves.”

“Right,” Noel added. “I’ve seen a few kids running around who didn’t look like elves, but they weren’t dwarves either.”

“Well,” Anriette replied, “elves and dwarves don’t get along too well, with a

handful of exceptions.”

“I think I’ve heard that too,” said Mylène.

“So you don’t know what they are, Lady Anriette?” asked Riese.

Anriette shrugged. “I was the one who brought them here, but by the time I found them, they were the only ones left.”

“If they don’t have any identifying traits and the kids themselves don’t know, I guess it’s hopeless,” Allen offered.

“Yeah,” said Noel. “There’s no way of knowing. Not that it really matters anyway.”

Allen watched as she unconsciously turned the stone over in her hand, seeming to treasure it more than before. If this was the whole of the story, then it was a heartwarming one. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder. He didn’t harbor any inherent malice toward demons, but he couldn’t deny that they tended to get people into trouble. And now an object that seemed practically designed to do just that sat in the palm of Noel’s hand.

Still, he was sure the children who had given it to her had no such intentions. He could only sigh and hope for the best.

## Speculation and Worry

Anriette walked the familiar path alone. It had to be approaching midday by now; about the time Allen and the others would be eating lunch. She'd been invited too and had initially intended to join them, but in the end she'd recused herself and instead wandered the familiar streets of the town outside the Elven Forest. After lunch, they would make a second attempt at observing life in the forest. What they would do after that was still undecided.

Anriette had to make contact with her servants at some point—she couldn't just burst in at suppertime and instruct them to prepare a meal for five people, even if she *did* suspect that they might prepare one anyway, just in case. Besides, she'd been unreachable for an entire day. She had warned the servants that she might spend the night in the Elven Forest, but it hadn't been set in stone. Her staff deserved a show of appreciation for preparing for multiple outcomes. Thus she returned to the manor alone instead of joining the others for lunch.

"I guess I probably could've waited until after lunch to come back," she said to herself. But then she wouldn't have been able to tour the Elven Forest with Allen and the others.

The forest itself wasn't the issue—she had already seen it countless times before. But Allen would only be staying with her for a week, at most, before he returned to the Kingdom of Adastera. After that, she had no idea when she'd see him again. Considering the enmity between their nations, they might never reconnect. She asked herself why she had chosen to be reborn in a rival nation, but she knew the answer: this was how she had thought she would be most useful to Allen. It was pointless to regret it now. All she could do was make the most of this chance.

"Ugh... I'm starting to think like a human woman. Oh well. I *am* a real human woman right now, after all."

There was another reason she had separated from the group—to get her

thoughts in order. That was impossible with the others. If worst came to worst, Allen might figure everything out. She had to think things over while he was still in the dark.

Why did the demon children have knowledge of spirit stones? The stones were supposed to be a closely guarded secret of the elves, who were well aware that if others learned of their provenance, they would exploit the elves mercilessly until the entire race was destroyed. In fact, it was the sale of small amounts of spirit stones through intermediaries that allowed them to enjoy their freedom. The funds raised let them live without working. But if the elves sold them directly, the outside world would soon catch on.

For that reason, they used Anriette as their intermediary. Even if the source of the stones remained a secret, if anyone learned that the elves produced them, they would demand all they had and more—an outcome the elves sought to avoid. As Anriette had told Noel, they considered the spirit stones a part of their very being, formed as they were from their own power. That they sold them was already unbelievable—they would certainly never give away their secret to non-elves. She couldn't imagine that was how the demon children had learned of the stones, even if some elf letting word slip seemed like the most likely possibility.

True, as fellow forest-dwellers, the demon children were almost family, but Anriette knew how strongly elves felt a connection to their own kind. Regardless of her royal blood, the fact that they didn't hesitate to call Noel their queen at first glance was a testament to this instinctive bond—and Percival's reaction to the appearance of the demon children made it clear that he did *not* consider them elves. Why would he tell them about the spirit stones? Of course, he'd told *her*, so she couldn't say it was impossible, but it nonetheless troubled her.

On the other hand, unlike the elves, the demon children couldn't leave the forest; they had no means of doing so. The forest itself was a kind of living being, and none could leave or enter without the permission of its masters. There was no chance the elves would let *demons* out of the forest.

Perhaps they'd known all along? But in all the times she'd met with the children, they'd never mentioned it. And if they had been guarding the secret

just as the elves had, why would they suddenly produce one now? It just didn't make sense.

"That's exactly why I didn't want to think it over back there," she said to herself.

Allen's discomfort over the object Noel had been given was easy to see. She didn't want to add to his anxiety. But she now realized she wasn't going to figure this out before heading back. There was something more, something as yet unknown, to the story.

"If anything goes wrong, it'll already be too late to do anything about it. I guess I've got no choice but to head back and tell him, but I really don't feel up for it. Wait...what's that?"

As she headed toward her manor, Anriette noticed a pair of familiar figures, a boy and girl, both of whom appeared to not yet be of age. The first was Philip, the elf boy who had followed them through the forest. The other was the girl Allen had encountered the previous day.

"What is *she* doing here? I thought I'd covered up any traces of Allen. Don't tell me it's the lack of evidence that caused her to suspect me?"

Lisette Belwaldt, one of the most famous and capable members of the Knights of the Black Wolf, the most elite knightly order in the empire. Anriette *thought* she'd been careful enough to avoid her attention.

"Maybe the fact that I didn't think I was taking her lightly just shows how talented she is," she mused. And what did she want with Philip? It looked like they were talking about something, but from her vantage point she had no idea what. "I bet I could guess if only I could see Philip's face from here. Wait...they're parting ways?"

Lisette bowed to Philip and departed. Was that the end of their exchange? Realizing that she might as well ask him herself, she quickly approached the boy.

"Philip."

"Oh, Lady Anriette? What are you up to?"

“That’s my line. Were you talking to that girl just now?”

“Not really. She just asked for directions. She said she’s new in town.”

“Is that so?” By coincidence, Philip was the one Lisette had asked for help. But it was no coincidence that she was here in *this* town. “And where did she say she was going?”

“To your manor.”

“Is that so?” So she *had* followed Anriette there, or at least it was reasonable to assume as much. Her *real* goal, however, was likely related to something else. “I guess that’s enough to go on for now. Philip, you should run along home while there’s still time for lunch.”

“I know, I know. I feel much better now anyway.”

“Oh? I guess I should tell you that you worried Noel, disappearing like that.”

“Her Majesty? Really?!” said Philip, so delighted that the queen herself was concerned about him that he seemed to forget that causing her to worry wasn’t a good thing. Clearly the elves were quite taken with their new monarch, even though she’d only shown up the day prior.

“That’s right, so get your butt in gear.”

“I’m going, I’m going! I’ve gotta apologize to *them* too!”

“Hm? Did you hurt someone?”

“Nah, I just felt really mad at those kids who were getting attention from the queen even though they’re demons. But they haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You only thought it? I don’t think you need to apologize, but if it makes you happy...”

“Yeah! Are you going back home?”

“Only for a while. I’ll be back soon.”

“Got it! See you later!” Philip replied. Without so much as a wave goodbye, he turned and broke into a sprint.

“What a temperamental kid,” muttered Anriette. “Now then...”

She couldn't afford to dawdle either. She'd have to make haste if she wanted to head home, give and receive the various reports, have a light lunch, and return to the Elven Forest as quickly as possible. To make matters worse, she'd just acquired one more job.

"What a pain being involved with Allen is turning out to be," she sighed. She was rushed off her feet, but she couldn't say she disliked it. Unlike the last time, her role now was only a small one, but she got to be with him in the flesh. "All the more reason to hurry," she said as she broke into a run, hoping to maximize the time she could spend by Allen's side.

## A Walk Through the Forest, Continued

After lunch and a short break, the friends had resumed their tour of the forest. As instructed by Anriette when she hadn't returned in time, they had set off without her rather than wait. Anriette was familiar enough with the forest that she'd be able to catch up.

It occurred to Allen that the elves trusted Anriette enough to allow her to come and go through the forest as she pleased. Given how much she knew about them and their society, they must have seen little need to keep tabs on her whereabouts.

During this second tour, Allen's main takeaway remained the same. "Yup, these elves sure are carefree, aren't they?"

They seemed to spend their time however they pleased. Though they were no longer sleeping, no small number were sprawled on the ground, and those who weren't were mostly reading, chatting, or otherwise idly passing the time. Not a single one was busy plowing the fields, weaving garments, hunting, or engaging in any kind of productive activity.

At a glance, the forest might appear similar to any other peaceful village, but it was unlike any other village in the world. Peaceful villages were almost invariably remote. The population of any remote settlement had to do everything for themselves; spending their days on idle chatter and frequent naps would soon lead to starvation or death from cold in the winter. In a way, the more peaceful a village seemed, the more work there was to be done. Yet that was not the case here, and the elves clearly weren't starving.

"Surely they have *some* concept of work, don't they?" asked Riese.

Percival gave an exasperated sigh. "If that were true, my life would be much easier."

Riese smiled wryly. Allen knew what she was thinking. He felt for Percival too. Their beleaguered guide was the only elf he'd seen doing any work at all.

Evidently, he'd picked up the slack for the entire population.

"If you'll allow me to offer an explanation, however," Percival continued, "this way of life is more natural to us. Fundamentally, we have no *need* to work—or perhaps I should say we *shouldn't* work."

"Shouldn't?" said Noel. "What do you mean?"

"We grow at a much slower rate than other races and live much longer. If we lived like other races, our lives would be rather *too* long."

"You mean if you lived like us, you'd get tired of everything before your lives were over?" said Allen.

"Not exactly, but it is fine if that is how others understand it...or at least, it would be if we still lived alone."

He seemed to be implying that as subjects of the empire, that was no longer possible, though at present, he seemed to be the only elf who understood that.

"I think it's more that our senses are different from other races," said Noel. "It takes us time to get used to things."

"That makes sense," Riese agreed. "But there's still one thing I don't understand."

Mylène cocked her head. "Food, right?"

Riese nodded. Allen had wondered about that too. How did they have a consistent source of food here in the forest? Stockpiling sufficient amounts would require more time and effort than any of them seemed willing to invest in. And yet there had been more than enough food the prior evening.

"Oh, that's not too difficult for us," said Percival. "In fact, we don't even have to think about it. You see, this forest is a part of us, and we elves are part of the forest."

"I don't get it," Mylène replied.

"I see..." said Riese, clearly not quite getting it either. "You mean you're so familiar with the forest that you hardly even have to work to find food?"

"I mean precisely what I said," said Percival. "Perhaps it would be easier to

show you.” He thrust his hand out in front of him. As everyone watched with bemusement, some sort of fruit fell into his palm. Even Allen couldn’t help but let out a surprised gasp as they stared at the item in Percival’s hand. “Do you see? We do not need to *look* for food. We need only wish and the forest provides.”

“The forest is alive,” said Noel. “No, that’s not exactly right. But now that I think about it, I’ve definitely felt *something*...”

“Ah,” said Percival. “I suppose since you’re not familiar with the forest, you don’t understand it as well as those of us who have lived here all our lives.”

“Hmm,” said Allen. “I think it’s more like...the elves are *part* of the forest?” It was hard to put it into words, but that was all he’d been able to glean from his Boundless Knowledge. Even his Eyes of Akasha weren’t enough to completely grasp this place, which was something he’d never experienced before. He’d tried to examine the forest alone, but there was something else, some kind of noise—other entities—interfering. His hypothesis had been nothing more than an effort to put what he felt into comprehensible terms, but it seemed like he was correct. Percival faced him with a look of surprise and admiration. “Oh, so you could tell? Interesting. I should have known a friend of Lady Anriette would be so perceptive.”

“I don’t totally get it,” replied Allen. “I’d appreciate it if you could explain.”

“Very well. It’s quite simple. We are born, live, and die here. We are close descendants of the spirits, and after we die, we return to the forest, where we look over *our* descendants.”

“I see,” said Allen. It made sense: the elves lived in one place for their entire lives, and they were descended from those who were in turn descended from beings of pure consciousness. They could never live like other races, but they’d also never have to work and would never go hungry.

“It almost sounds like elves don’t work because they’re forever being doted on by their parents,” said Riese.

“Indeed, there are some who see it that way,” said Percival, staring at the ground. It seemed she had hit a nerve.

"I think you've gotta blame the ones who are happy to go on being spoiled for that," said Allen. "It *is* only elves that get to enjoy this little perk, right?"

"Is that right?" said Mylène. "The forest won't give its fruit to non-elves?"

"That appears to be the case," said Percival. "But we can receive it ourselves and give it to whomever we please, though I am the only one who tends to do such things."

"Got it," said Allen. "So food won't be a problem. Then if someone, like me for instance, were to live here, you'd be able to get food for me?"

"Hm? I'm not sure why you ask, but yes, I suppose so. If you were to live here, we would consider you one of us."

"Got it. I guess there's no major obstacles to me living here, then." Allen nodded.

Noel peered at him. "It sounds like you're thinking of doing exactly that."

"Yeah, I'm definitely considering it," Allen replied. From everything he'd seen and heard, it was well worth some thought. He didn't necessarily want to laze around all day, but it was at least a peaceful place. Relaxing in the light under the forest canopy didn't seem like a bad way to spend his time. While he did worry about relying on the elves, or rather the forest itself, for sustenance, he was sure he could make it work by repaying them somehow. It wasn't like they were free of desires.

"I suppose that *is* why you came to the empire to begin with, isn't it?" Riese remarked.

"Yup." That was why he'd come to the forest too. Visiting it had never been in his plans, but that gave him all the more reason to inspect it thoroughly.

"Hm," Percival interjected. "I don't know your situation, but I must remind you that if you were to live here, it would require that we recognize you as one of us. Whether that is possible is another question entirely."

"Is it difficult?" asked Noel. "There are children of other races living here, aren't there?"

"That is strictly a temporary arrangement. We would never allow them to stay

here permanently—not even as a favor to Lady Anriette.”

“And what if I said I wanted to stay here temporarily too?” said Allen.

“In that case... Yes, so long as Lady Anriette vouched for you, that might be possible.”

“And how long would ‘temporary’ be?” asked Riese.

“How long? I suppose I haven’t thought that much about it. Say, twenty or thirty years?”

“That’s temporary?” said Mylène.

“It is to elves,” Allen replied.

It seemed he could go ahead and give serious thought to the idea. Thirty years of this sort of life didn’t sound half bad. Of course, there were still many factors to consider, but now he could consider them fully, knowing that it wasn’t a mere fantasy.

Suddenly Percival stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder.

“Something wrong?” Allen asked.

“It appears we have another visitor.”

“A visitor?” said Noel. “How can you tell?”

“As I said, we are a part of the forest. We know as soon as someone sets foot inside.”

“Someone?” asked Riese. “You mean it’s not Lady Anriette?”

“I would recognize her. It’s somebody else.”

“Somebody suspicious?” Mylène questioned.

“No. Since we were absorbed by the empire, we have had to grant passage to a number of people. It must be one of them. Nobody can enter this place without permission. Forgive me, but might we pause the tour for a moment? I am the only one who can greet visitors.”

Nobody had any objections. Even if they stopped here, it was easy enough to imagine what the rest of the forest would look like. There was no need for

Percival to accompany them further.

“I *am* a little curious who it is, though,” said Allen.

“There’s a high chance of it being someone from the empire,” Riese noted.

“We’d better not take any unnecessary risks,” said Noel.

“Agreed,” said Mylène.

“I guess I can always ask about it later. All right, don’t worry about us.”

“My apologies,” said Percival with a bow, before heading off in the direction he had turned before. The others looked at each other as he disappeared from view.

“I guess we should be good boys and girls and head back to camp, right?” Allen suggested.

“Indeed,” said Riese. “It’s tempting, but if they learn we’re from the kingdom, we could end up in real trouble.”

Even the Elven Forest was beholden to the empire’s rule. It wasn’t hard to guess what would happen if an envoy of the empire came across citizens of Adastera.

Their group began to walk briskly back to the house.

## Idle Talk

Back inside the cabin, Allen and the others found themselves with little to do. There wasn't much amusement to be had in the place, and all their ideas involved going outside. All they could do to pass the time was make small talk, but they struggled to keep a conversation going; after half a year living under the same roof, they had exhausted most topics of conversation. Mercifully, that time spent together meant none of them felt awkward whenever a silence like the one that currently enveloped the room came over them.

Allen stared off into the distance, his thoughts focused on the question of whether to make the forest his home. At the same time, he wondered what it meant that he was having such a hard time deciding.

Suddenly, Riese broke the silence. "Allen, do you really plan to live here?"

Perhaps his demeanor had told her what he was thinking about, or perhaps she just knew him well enough after six months living together. Either way, he had no reason to hide it; he responded with a nod. "Yeah. Like I said, I'm giving it some serious thought. It's a surprisingly nice place, and it has everything I want."

Sealed away here in the forest, Allen would be safe within its peaceful landscape, far away from the troubles of the outside world. At the very least, it was by far the most secure location he'd ever come across. True, he'd be consenting to being ruled by the empire, but that was a minor concern—from what he'd been told, he would never be put in the position of having to wage war against the kingdom. In that case, there was no problem.

"Because you'll be close to Lady Anriette, I suppose?"

Momentarily nonplussed by the unexpected mention of her name, Allen let out a confused murmur. "Huh? What does she have to do with anything?"

His choice was a matter of whether he'd find the kind of peaceful life he wanted in the forest. He couldn't say that nothing else mattered at all, but

Anriette certainly had nothing to do with it.

Riese pouted, apparently dissatisfied with his response. “Well, it’s clear that you’re more than just acquaintances.”

“No kidding,” said Noel. “I’ve been wondering what’s up with that too.”

“You seem close,” said Mylène.

Allen fumbled to offer an explanation that didn’t involve mentioning his past life. “Oh, uh, yeah. True, we’re not just acquaintances, but...”

He didn’t think there would be any real problem with telling them the truth, but there didn’t seem to be any particular need to do so either. Besides, it wasn’t exactly a fun topic of conversation for him. “And Anriette really has nothing to do with it anyway,” he insisted. “Not that I don’t *care* that she’ll be close by.” If he was going to live in this unfamiliar place, surrounded by strangers, of course it would be reassuring to have a friend close at hand. But that was all there was to it.

“Is that right?” said Riese. “Well, in that case...all right then.”

“Did that clear up your suspicions?” said Allen.

“Wh-What on earth would I be suspicious of?” asked Riese.

“Your hubby cheating on you?” Mylène suggested.

“It *does* feel like that, doesn’t it?” Noel added.

“How ridiculous!” said Riese, flushing bright red.

Noel and Mylène could only roll their eyes and gesture dismissively. Allen watched with amusement.

Noel looked at Allen. “Then you’d have no problem with me living here too?”

“Huh? Fine by me, I guess. Does that mean you’ve made up your mind?”

She shrugged. “Nope. I was thinking it would *help* me make up my mind. What better way than to experience life here for myself?”

“Makes sense, I guess,” said Mylène.

Considering how important her decision was to both the elves and Noel

herself, it did make sense. Spending a few days in the place would never be enough to go on, no matter how much she agonized over her decision.

“Besides,” Noel continued, “it’s not like I need to be back home. I can interrogate dwarves and inspect their workshops just as easily here. ‘Course, I’m not gonna give up smithing. I’ll have to rebuild my workshop. But that’ll just take time.” She looked at Allen. “And anyway, I’ve gotta stick close to someone who can tell me if my stuff’s any good. Why *wouldn’t* I want to live here?”

“I guess I’ll live here too, then,” said Mylène.

“Yeah. I won’t need a clerk anymore, but I can’t just abandon you, can I? Actually, why don’t all three of us just keep using this cabin? That would make things easy.”

“I dunno about that,” Allen blurted out. He didn’t care for his decisions being made for him.

Noel shrugged. “Why change? Do you need room to spread out after six months holed up together? Or do you just hate me?”

“Of course I don’t hate you.”

“Why are you all leaving me out?” asked Riese. “In that case, I’ll live here too!”

“Nah, that won’t work,” said Allen.

“You can’t,” Noel agreed.

“That’s right,” said Mylène.

“Why not?!” Riese cried, tears forming in her eyes.

“We’re rootless drifters,” Allen explained. “Nobody’s gonna care if we disappear.”

“But you’re a duchess,” said Noel. “Did you forget that?”

“Of an important border territory,” Mylène clarified.

“But that’s...” Riese stammered before falling silent as she realized she didn’t have a leg to stand on. Nevertheless, she clearly hadn’t given up yet; she looked at Allen with tear-filled eyes like an abandoned child.

He couldn't help but smile slightly. "You're so dramatic. I haven't even *decided* if I want to live here yet, and even if I do, it won't be anytime soon."

"R-Really?" said Riese.

"It'd be crazy to do that while the empire is in such turmoil."

It had been a year since the emperor was assassinated. The country's top brass had to be getting impatient, wanting to do something about it, and the most expedient approach would be to offer up a scapegoat as the culprit. With that problem cleaned up, they could move on to the next problem, which would doubtless lead to further disputes—but before they could even worry about that, they had to find a suitably convincing scapegoat.

A group of citizens of the Kingdom of Adastera hiding out in the Elven Forest fit the bill perfectly. Of course, with Noel among their number, it wasn't guaranteed that the elves would go along with this, but it wasn't guaranteed that they *wouldn't* either. It wasn't like they were in any hurry. So why move here in the middle of such a turbulent time?

"Even *if* I decide to move here, it's gonna be a long time before it actually happens," said Allen. "It might *never* happen. Once the empire's righted its ship, it'll probably start rattling its saber at the kingdom again. Hell, it might even start a war in order to quell the domestic turmoil." Nothing bound people together better than an enemy to rail against—especially one they had a long history of enmity toward. It was far from a remote possibility.

"And what would you do then?" asked Riese.

"Hmm. I guess I'd help to launch a counterattack under your command," Allen replied.

"Good idea," said Noel. "If we can capture the forest, that would *really* make life easier."

"And Riese could live in the town that connects to this place," said Mylène.

"That would be perfect," said Allen. "Although that would put Anriette in a difficult position."

It was likely that Anriette would come over to their side. She didn't seem to

be well-treated by the empire, and the elves were clearly indebted to her. Defecting would save her a lot of future trouble.

“We shouldn’t be talking about this,” said Noel. “This is empire territory after all.”

“Quite right,” said Riese. “Good grief, what if someone from the empire heard us?” Despite her rebuke, her impish smile showed that she knew they were joking.

“Enough far-fetched fantasies,” said Allen. “We’re talking about things so far-off that even discussing them is a waste of time.”

“Yeah,” said Noel. “It’s not a bad way to kill time, but maybe we should find something else to do.”

Suddenly, just as Noel finished speaking, two things happened at once—a faraway roar reverberated through the cabin, and she fell to the ground.

“Noel?!” Riese cried, but another faraway roar drowned her out completely.

# Noel's Collapse

*Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.*

Allen used his skill the moment Noel hit the ground, focusing on her body. If necessary, he wouldn't hesitate to use Parallel Wisdom too, but he wondered how he would handle the eyebrows it might raise.

As far as he could tell, nothing was wrong with Noel. She remained passed out on the floor, but Boundless Knowledge's insight was absolute. If it seemed wrong, something was instead wrong with his assumptions, or with his common sense in general. But in this situation, what could that be?

"Is there really nothing wrong with her?" he wondered aloud. "If she's in perfect condition, why would she collapse?"

His gaze was stolen slightly by the panicked Riese, who had drawn closer to Noel. He now observed her too. Boundless Knowledge was so strong that it was difficult to use; if he was able to focus on a single entity, he could quickly receive a response, but when multiple entities were involved, the information became almost impossible to process.

If he couldn't make a hypothesis from the circumstances, he'd never arrive at the correct answer. Fortunately, on this occasion it was relatively easy to guess the cause—after all, he'd seen something like this not long ago.

"Hold on, Noel! I'll heal you!" said Riese.

"Wait, Riese," said Allen. "Actually, heal her just in case, but...I think this might be a job for Mylène."

"What?" said Riese, puzzled.

"Is there something I can do?" Mylène asked.

"Yeah," said Allen. "I can't go feeling around in her clothes, after all."

"What?" said Riese. "Allen, what are you talking about?"

"Don't worry, I'm just looking for something. You go right ahead."

“Okay...” Riese replied, not satisfied with Allen’s answer, but more focused on action.

Allen looked at Mylène, who was staring at him with a careful yet questioning expression. He told her, “I want you to look for something in Noel’s clothes. The thing those children gave her this morning. But I only need you to tell me where it is. You don’t need to take it out.”

Mylène gave a puzzled nod. “Got it.” She moved to Noel’s side, leaning over and casually searching through her clothing. It was a strange sight, like something out of a painting: Riese with hands outstretched to provide Noel healing, while Mylène searched her garments. But now wasn’t the time to point out the absurdity of the situation. Although...

Allen averted his eyes slightly, just in case Mylène’s fumbling with Noel’s clothes revealed too much. It wasn’t long until the sound of Mylène’s rummaging stopped.

“Found them.”

“Both of them?”

“Yup, both of them.”

“Got it. Okay, can you put them on top of her clothes? But be careful never to move them away from her body.”

“Right away.” Mylène did as instructed, then quickly checked on Noel, ensuring all her clothes were in order before breathing a sigh of relief.

Allen looked at Noel once again and narrowed his gaze.

*Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.*

He exhaled. His initial observations hadn’t been wrong, and now everything had become clear. As far as he could tell, he didn’t have to do anything.

“Figure something out?” asked Mylène.

“Yeah, roughly. First, could you move those stones away from her?”

Mylène briefly shot him an uncertain look but soon seemed to realize that he wouldn’t have asked if he thought it was in any way unsafe.

“Sure.” She nodded, grasping the two stones and moving them so that they weren’t in contact with Noel’s body, then stood to her feet.

A groan rose from the floor. “Wh-Where am I?”

“Noel?!” said Riese. “You’re awake! Are you all right?!”

“Riese...” Noel replied. “Yeah, I’m fine. I think I can guess what happened.” She glanced at Mylène, who was still standing at her side, then at Allen. It looked like she was telling the truth: she knew that *someone* had done *something* to her. She offered a slight nod of appreciation—Allen responded only with his usual shrug—then, with an “Okay...” began to sit up.

“Noel?!” said the flustered Mylène. “You should lie down a little longer!”

“I said I’m fine. I can’t lie around after what I’ve just seen.”

“Huh? What have you seen?” asked Mylène.

“Something to do with the kids who gave you those stones?” Allen offered.

“You got it. You always know exactly what’s going on.”

“The children?” said Riese. “Are you saying it’s the children’s fault you collapsed?”

“I wouldn’t say *fault*, exactly,” said Allen. “They only wanted help, but their request had unintended consequences. I think Noel’s consciousness was transported to wherever those kids are in need of help.”

Noel was qualified to be the Elven Queen. The Elven Forest was a place with which she had an extremely high affinity, and she was carrying stones said to be almost a part of the elves themselves. All those factors had combined to produce an unintended outcome.

“Pretty much,” said Noel. “But how did you know?”

“That’s the benefit of experience.”

He wasn’t lying, exactly; he would never have been able to guess what the cause was if not for his many past adventures. He hadn’t been able to establish what was wrong with Noel because there was nothing wrong with Noel herself. At first, he’d used Boundless Knowledge in the hopes of finding some kind of

ailment. Since limiting the scope of what he examined allowed him to gather detailed information, all he needed to know was that the children had asked someone for help, and Noel had answered the call. No other information was necessary—that the world wouldn't recognize a natural consequence of the circumstances as any kind of ailment or irregularity was obvious. Having understood that much, he could surmise the rest based on his past experience. Then, before Noel fully recovered, he'd once again examined her briefly and managed to grasp exactly what had happened.

"Up to your old tricks again, Allen," said Riese. "How could you keep your cool and figure out all that?"

"You did more than enough yourself," he replied. "You wouldn't have been able to help if you hadn't kept your cool."

His ability to stay calm was a product of his wealth of experience—or rather, those experiences had rendered him *incapable* of getting flustered. Back when he was a hero, he'd always acted alone. In a life-or-death situation, even the smallest mistake, the slightest hesitation for even a moment, could not be tolerated. Now the behavior was automatic. It was a useful trait, to be sure, but not one he could be proud of or recommend that anyone imitate.

"Let's get moving," said Allen. "We can discuss the rest on the way."

"On the way where?" asked Noel.

"Come on. You were already planning on heading there yourself, right? You're not the type to abandon them after what you just said."

"Right," said Riese. "I might not quite understand what's going on, but I can tell it's something serious. I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Me too," said Mylène. "Although I dunno what I can do."

"Got it," said Noel, slowly climbing to her feet. "Thanks. Although I'm not entirely sure what's going on either." She quickly inspected herself, then nodded at Allen.

*None* of them knew exactly what was happening. All Allen knew was that the children had asked for help with *something*, and, most likely, it was related to the roaring they had just heard. That barely counted for anything, but it was

enough to head to where the action was happening.

It was hardly the time for it, but Allen couldn't help thinking about how, just moments earlier, he'd thought this place was so peaceful that he'd considered moving there. With a sigh, he nodded back at Noel. She would lead the way.

## Desire and Delusion

Noel described what sounded like an out-of-body experience. The moment she had collapsed, her mind had left her body and observed it from above before being whisked off somewhere. As a result, she knew where to lead the group.

“Hmm...but what exactly happened?” asked Allen. Noel’s explanation hadn’t helped him understand the details.

Noel only furrowed her brow. It wasn’t that it was hard to explain or that she was reluctant to say it out loud. “I don’t fully know either. It was already underway by the time I got there.”

“*What* was underway?” asked Riese. “I suppose I can imagine, based on that noise.”

“A battle?” said Mylène.

“I dunno if you could call it that, but there *was* a man running rampage.”

“A man?” said Allen. “You don’t mean Percival, do you?”

Based on what he knew so far, Allen hated to think that might be true. But the demon children *were* there, and they *were* magical beings. And based on what Percival had said, he didn’t consider them fellow elves. It seemed reasonable to believe that he might attack them if he deemed it necessary. But Allen couldn’t believe that to be true. He only asked the question to eliminate the possibility. If it *was* true, he had to believe Noel would have seemed more shaken than she did.

Noel shook her head, confirming his suspicions. “Percival was there, but this was someone else. He wasn’t an elf.”

Allen thought it over. “So Percival was there, but it wasn’t an elf rampaging? Must be the guy who arrived earlier.”

“Sounds likely,” said Mylène. “But why would he...”

“I dunno about that,” Noel answered. “Like I said, it was well underway by the time I got there. That’s what’s causing all this noise—sounds like he’s still at it. So I doubt it could be someone who just arrived. I think it’s someone who’s been here all along.”

“I guess it’s possible,” said Allen. “Anyway, what does this guy look like? How old is he?”

“Hmm,” Noel replied, “I guess he looked to be in his mid-thirties? He was wearing pretty light armor and seemed like he thought he was pretty important. Not a nice guy.”

So he was no child. It sounded like he’d come from outside the forest. At least, Anriette had never mentioned bringing an adult with her, only demon children who hadn’t yet been corrupted. Of course, it was *possible* there was something she’d never mentioned, but for now it seemed reasonable to exclude that option.

“Oh, and I think he has a Gift. It didn’t *look* like magic, at least. He attacked Percival by causing an explosion.”

“He *attacked* Percival?” said Riese.

“So it *was* an intruder,” said Mylène.

“I’m not so sure. I didn’t get that feeling. Oh, also...I don’t think he was actually attacking *him*. It looked like Percival was protecting the children. Actually, he said something about that.”

“I see...” said Allen. Even if Percival had successfully defended them, it made sense that the children would be frightened. They’d called for help, and a confluence of circumstances had brought Noel’s consciousness to them. But without a body, all she had been able to do was watch, no matter how troubled she was by the scene playing out before her.

“Thank you, Allen,” said Noel. “If not for you, I’d have been stuck watching until it was over.”

“That’s right,” said Riese. “And how awful that would’ve been.”

“Yeah,” said Mylène. “I don’t care what his reasons are, attacking children is

out of line.”

Allen wasn't sure *what* to make of all this. Of course, he agreed that an attack on children was inexcusable. But he had no idea what the man's motivations were. He didn't have enough information to pass judgment, and until he did, he wasn't sure if he could act. After all, this wasn't his fight—the elves had done nothing more than host him for a night. Yes, Percival was an elf like Noel, but what if the attacker was a human? Where should his loyalties lie?

Besides, the man's true target had been the demon children. Awful as it seemed to say it, there *were* reasons—understandable reasons, if not good ones—to go after them. That was why they had taken shelter here to begin with. Now, if it was Riese or one of the others, it would be a different story, but if that was the only reason the man had attacked, did Allen have a good reason to stop him?

On the other hand, in his past life, he wouldn't have hesitated to rescue a group of children, regardless of the details. But he was no longer a hero; he'd put such responsibilities behind him. He knew that helping others indiscriminately had brought him only emptiness—and that children, unable to conceal how much they feared him, were especially cruel. Their expressions of terror stung most of all. Fortunately, he hadn't yet been subjected to such treatment in this life—but he couldn't be sure it wouldn't happen now.

In the end, he was nothing more than a powerful human, and no human would leap into action without hesitation to help someone they barely knew, heedless of the consequences. Besides, in his past life he'd had a purpose and someone to lead the way. He'd known exactly what to do. Now he had none of those things. Why should he still be obligated to do anything? *Could* he even help?

Allen sighed. Perhaps due to the dream he'd had the day prior, he was once again thinking about things he'd been trying to put behind him. It would do him no good, but he couldn't help it if that was how he truly felt. It was frustrating—the reason he wanted a peaceful life was so he *wouldn't* have to think about things like this, and now here he was, ruminating over them in the very place he'd thought might be able to grant him the quiet life he wanted. It was like he was cursed.

But it was too soon to jump to conclusions, both about that and the question of how to deal with the course of action Riese, Noel, and Mylène were presumably about to take. Inexcusable as the man's actions seemed, Allen felt he might yet end up taking his side if his motivations turned out to be righteous. It might have been a slim chance, barely worth thinking about, but he didn't have enough information to say it was impossible.

Suddenly Noel's eyes widened, and she stared off into the distance. "Wait, I just remembered something. When Percival asked why he was doing this, the man said something like... 'Do I need a reason to kill demons?'"

# The Black Wolf Knights

Percival looked at the fissure that had appeared in the ground accompanied by a roar and clicked his tongue. Staring at that great crevice, he understood what kind of power he was dealing with and that the attack had been directed at the ground, not at him. Considering what had happened so far, there was no chance the attack had missed him by accident; it was meant only to intimidate him.

“Ugh, missed *again*. Oh well. I suppose there’s no use blaming myself. It’s almost like I only intended to scare you.”

“*Like?*” said Percival. “It’s clear that’s what you intended.”

The man gave a twisted smile. “Now, now. Who do you think you’re dealing with? I wouldn’t pick on the weak like that. Besides, do you think I’m doing this for fun? This is only happening because you refuse to hand over those brats—those *demons*.”

“I believe I told *you* that you’re mistaken. There *are* no demons here. You have no proof. Refrain from ravaging our land any further.”

Of course, there *were* demons here. That part was a lie, but Percival had good reason for saying that the man had no proof. Besides, he didn’t lie to protect the children—though his actions had that effect, he was barely even conscious of it. He was concerned only about protecting himself and the other elves. If the children were identified as demons, then the elves would be harborers of demons. In the empire, that was a grave crime; he’d heard of entire families being wiped out as punishment. He doubted that the children themselves not even being *aware* that they were demons would buy them much clemency.

Of course, Percival had known that an outcome like this was possible when he had agreed to take the children in; Anriette had warned them, and they’d all agreed with full knowledge of the risks. He had no intention of complaining now, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to resist the charges with all his might, particularly when, for all his accuser knew, they might well have been

false.

The man sneered contemptuously. “*Proof?* What makes you think I need proof?”

He wasn’t wrong. Percival knew who he was dealing with. It was what told him that the man didn’t *know* that the children were demons—that these were naught but baseless accusations. That was all that this man—no, all of them—were capable of.

“Do you understand who you’re dealing with?” the man continued. “I’m a Black Wolf Knight. The truth is whatever I decide it is.”

As absurd a claim as it was, it was true. The Black Wolf Knights held that kind of authority. Anriette had told Percival all about them, that they were a force to be extremely cautious of. Percival had only forgiven this man’s intrusion upon their land because he had introduced himself as one from their ranks. He had not been invited here but had managed to sneak inside after being lucky enough to catch sight of Philip as he was returning to the forest. Normally the man would have simply been repelled, but it seemed he possessed some manner of authority that allowed him to enter the forest. If what Percival had heard about the knights was true, that seemed feasible enough. Nevertheless, Percival had been about to eject him, forcibly if necessary, before he’d mentioned the name of the Black Wolf Knights—people Anriette had warned him not to make enemies of.

That the demon children had been wandering around was simply a matter of bad luck. Percival had never expected the knight to attack when he had refused to hand them over, and he knew that assenting would only have made things much, much worse for the elves.

It seemed Anriette’s information was well-founded: that the knights were the elite of the empire’s elite, endlessly capable, and *always* fulfilling their duties—no matter how difficult—and living to fight another day. Those facts alone, however, would warrant no particular caution. What *did* was that they were granted special rights. The Black Wolf Knights were often tasked with difficult-to-resolve situations that nevertheless demanded a resolution, and they were given the power to ensure that a resolution was forthcoming.

“The emperor allows us to live here freely,” said Percival. “Even *he* cannot compel us to do anything within our forest.”

“And what do *I* care about that?” the knight sneered. “I guess you wouldn’t know, all holed up in here. Go ahead, try appealing to the emperor directly. You’ll see that I’m in the right.”

Percival struggled not to outwardly show his disgust with the man’s arrogance. He knew the man was right, of course; that was why he had to find some way of getting rid of him. The special rights granted to the Black Wolf Knights were essentially that of extralegal punishment. These rights extended as far as the right to execute even the emperor himself. There *were* restrictions: if they could not, when called upon, provide evidence of a worthy cause for, and desirable result of, their actions, then their *own* heads would roll soon after. But provided those conditions were met, almost anything was permissible.

Even the most magnanimous appraisal would see apprehending demons as more than enough justification for whatever rampage the man wished to perform in the Elven Forest, whether the demons in question were children or not. In the end, it would come down to whether the knight’s argument held up.

That was the life the Black Wolf Knights led, constantly at risk of death if they chose the wrong course of action. Each of them were condemned criminals. Officially, it was true that none of them had ever been killed in the line of duty—officially, they didn’t exist, so their deaths could not be counted. Such awful treatment was made permissible by the nature of their crimes, so grave that no normal punishment was enough.

In truth, the Black Wolf Knights were a penal unit on a suicide mission. It was not that they were so elite that they could survive any mission, but that only the elite survived and the dead were left uncounted. As a result, the knights wouldn’t hesitate to use their special powers, knowing that only death awaited them should they fail a mission.

In short, considering the current atmosphere in the empire, the knight’s argument for his conduct would likely hold sway. Percival had heard enough about the empire’s circumstances from Anriette to know that much, hence his

attempts to encourage the man to choose to leave. But now it seemed it was time to try a different tack.

“Well, well,” said the knight. “From the look on your face, I’d say you’ve just made up your mind about something. You know what’s gonna happen if you take *that* attitude with me, don’t you?”

“Don’t take me lightly. I am but a humble elf, but I am still the queen’s viceroy. I will not fall afoul of the likes of you.”

The knight scoffed. “Don’t take *you* lightly? I was going *easy* on you. Time to put you in your place!”

The knight thrust his right hand forward, as Percival had seen him do many times before. He was preparing to attack. Percival only braced his arm slightly. His magical barrier was still in effect, and the knight had not managed to break through it yet. He *would* not, regardless of whether his accusations were true. Elves did not care for conflict and did not specialize in warfare. But they were still the most powerful magic users of all the races, and their powers were only enhanced within the Elven Forest. Percival was confident that he could defend against any attack here. When he finally went on the attack after completely negating the knight’s ability to do anything, even such a determined foe would surely have to give up.

However, he could not afford to waste time. With each attack, the knight produced a great explosion that reverberated throughout the forest. The noise had to have caught the attention of their queen, who could be en route at this very moment. No matter what, he could not let the battle drag on long enough to involve her.

“Rupture!” the knight yelled, cracking the knuckles of his clenched fist.

An explosion burst forth. The magical barrier should have blocked it, preventing the slightest impact to Percival himself. And yet, along with a roar, Percival felt a blow. In an instant, he realized that he had been flung backward and that the children who had hidden behind him were now standing before him. Then he felt a pain in his abdomen, and it became clear what had happened. Something rose from his throat, and he coughed up deep-red blood.

“Guh... Impossible... How did you... The barrier?!”

It was supposed to be unbreakable. Until now, it had been.

“Isn’t it obvious?” said the knight. “That time I attacked you directly. You thought I couldn’t handle your silly little barrier?”

Percival’s eyes grew wide. He coughed up blood again. “Impossible,” he muttered, but he couldn’t deny the truth. He hadn’t been focused exclusively on maintaining the magical barrier—he’d been careful to keep an eye out for attacks, to see what kind of attack was coming and where it was directed. And yet he’d been blindsided by a blow that had knocked him off his feet. He couldn’t believe it.

Elves were not suited to battle. That was why they hadn’t fought the empire. Elvenkind had agreed to surrender, knowing that resistance would result in massive losses. But they had never accepted defeat; they had *chosen* not to fight to avoid the suffering of their fellow elves, but if they *had* fought, they believed they could have won. So how could he have been so easily bested?

“I see you’re surprised,” said the knight. “You fought a good fight, you know. There’s maybe one other knight who I think could’ve beaten you. That attack *was* supposed to leave you in shreds, after all. You should be proud of still having all your limbs.”

Percival remembered what Anriette had told him: to beware of the Black Wolf Knights, and to go along with their demands if they ever set foot in the forest. He’d assumed she was warning him of their influence. How he’d been mistaken...as useless as it was to regret it now. Besides, what other course of action could he possibly have taken?

“Are all elves as tough as you?” the knight asked. “Now I’m *really* excited. And you came here all alone, clearly trying to avoid attracting attention. This place must be even more interesting than I’ve heard. For now, though, I’ve got other business to attend to.” He looked at the children, who flinched and trembled, powerless to do anything but listen as he continued. “Sorry to keep you waiting, kids. Have you been paying attention? I want to ask if you’re demons, but I doubt I’d get a straight answer. Maybe you’ll feel more cooperative if I blow one of you to pieces? There *are* three of you, after all.”



The children trembled. Percival knew they were incapable of helping themselves; despite being demons, they were still only children. They were not fellow elves, and their deaths should have been of no concern to him, but Anriette had entrusted him with their care. To her, they were important, and he owed her a debt of gratitude. He could not allow them to be harmed.

“I guess it doesn’t really matter which one of you it is,” said the knight. “Now then... Oh? Seriously? You can still get to your feet after taking a blow like that? You really *are* something. Well, that’s fine by me. I dunno what it’ll take to turn you into a fine red mist, but maybe at that point these kids’ll feel like talking.”

“So stop talking and do it,” said Percival. “I don’t think you can.”

He was bluffing. The blood continued to flow from his abdominal wound. He didn’t have enough to go on fighting. The next attack might well do him in. But he would not yield. He was the queen’s viceroy. He would give everything he had to protect elvenkind, even if it meant dying in vain.

“You know, I like you,” said the knight. “For that, I’m gonna grant you a special death.”

The knight thrust his right hand out. Percival accepted that death was mere seconds away. And yet, in that moment, he turned to the children. Their faces were frozen in fear, on the edge of tears. He felt not a shred of desire to console them—he only smiled slightly, realizing that death meant he would no longer have to care for them.

“Rupture!” said the knight, his knuckles cracking.

“Jeez, I don’t get a moment’s rest, do I? Looks like I’m just in time. I’d rather nothing had happened to begin with, though. Man, what happened to my peaceful little forest?”

No explosion came. Percival heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of the young man who stood facing away from him.

# The Evil-Cleaving Sword

Allen didn't know what was going on, but he didn't need to. He saw a group of frightened children, a wounded elf, and standing opposite them, an unfamiliar man.

"I take it you're the bad guy?" Allen asked.

The man smirked, but there was no joy in his eyes. Allen immediately grasped his intentions.

"This really *is* an interesting place. You did something just now, didn't you? I've never thrown a dud before."

Technically, that didn't answer Allen's question, but the stranger's attitude gave him all the answer he needed; there was no need to ask again. Likewise, in more ways than one, there was no need for Allen to answer the stranger's question.

Keeping one eye on the man who stood across from him, Allen looked over his shoulder. "You all right there? Doesn't look like it."

"H-How?" was Percival's only reply. There were many things *that* could mean too.

For his part, Allen had questions of his own, particularly why Percival had gone to such lengths—to the point of grievous injury—to protect the children. But it would have been uncouth to ask. Instead he turned his thoughts to how he should handle the situation. The other three hadn't shown up yet; as the path had narrowed, Allen had taken the lead, thinking it better to arrive alone but as quickly as possible rather than all of them arriving together.

Seeming to notice this, or perhaps sensing something, Percival gulped. "We need...our queen..."

"Oh, she knows about this. But by the time she gets here, there won't be much she can do. I mean, you practically look done for already."

In truth, Allen hadn't been sure whether he should do anything at all. But now that he was there, he wasn't cold enough to abandon someone who had almost been killed, even if he barely knew the man.

"I see," said Percival. "Then I shall say that this is our problem. We will not accept your help."

"Huh?" was the only reply Allen could muster. In the state Percival was in, his words weren't particularly persuasive, but it seemed he didn't want to involve Allen. Still, Allen couldn't just leave. Noel would never accept that anyway. He looked at Percival inquiringly.

The viceroy averted his eyes. "He is a Black Wolf Knight. This problem is between us and them. As an outsider, do not get involved."

"Huh."

It seemed the issue was that wading into the dispute could be dangerous. Allen had heard about the Black Wolf Knights from Anriette; she'd told him to steer well clear of them lest he get into trouble. At this point, though...

"I'm already involved," said Allen. "Kinda hard for me to play dumb now, right? Besides, this guy doesn't seem any tougher than I expected. I don't think you've got much to worry about."

"What's that?" said the knight, eyes narrowing, the twisted grin suddenly disappearing from his face. "Hey, what was that? I'm not that tough? Don't get carried away just because you got lucky and blocked one attack, ya hear?"

"I think I'd know better than anyone if I got lucky," Allen replied. "But if that's what you want to believe, knock yourself out."

"Sure, sure. I get it now. You're sick of life and lookin' for a way out, right?" The knight thrust his right hand forward.

Allen sensed Percival's desperation behind him and simply sighed.

The knight grimaced with irritation. "Rup—"

*Sword of Cataclysm—Beast Cleaver.*

"—ture."

Before the man could finish, Allen swung his sword through the open air. The stranger cracked his knuckles, but nothing happened. The man was astonished. Apparently, he hadn't expected that. "What?! *Again*?! Wh-What the hell did you do?!"

"Nothing you didn't see me do," said Allen.

It seemed the knight wasn't the only person struggling to understand. "You swung your sword *before* he attacked," came a child's voice. "How'd you do that?"

"Yeah!" came another voice. "Doesn't the attack come out when he cracks his knuckles?"

"What the hell are you kids babbling about?!" the knight spluttered.

Though it was a common practice, Gifts didn't actually *require* the use of incantations. There was no need for the knight to declare his attack and crack his knuckles as he did. Still, it wasn't rare to see people use such techniques. The main reason they would telegraph their attacks in this way was to avoid accidentally using their Gift when they didn't intend to. Since Gifts were activated by a single thought, they could easily accidentally go off at random. Such signals were a means of guarding against that.

Strictly speaking, this was only necessary when the user was still inexperienced. Once they gained better control of their Gift, the signals were no longer needed. By then, though, many had already formed habits that they had difficulty changing.

Still others would use the gestures as a diversion—for example, by behaving as though it was the crack of the knuckles that released an attack that had actually been prepared in advance, merely cracking their knuckles when it was ready to be released.

"I see," said Allen. "So he draws a fuse with his line of sight, then lights it. It's not a physical thing, so it can go through barriers. Pretty nasty Gift. And the explosive power's nothing to sneeze at either. Easy to deal with once you know the trick, though."

That was as much as he had figured out, but it was enough to know that the

knight wasn't such a tough foe—not one that he would lose to, at least.

"I don't have the faintest idea how you knew that," said Percival. "I suppose that's to be expected of a friend of Lady Anriette's."

"Guess I've just got a knack for it," said Allen. He turned to the knight. "Anyway, you wanna try that again? I've got someone here who needs healing, so it would be *great* if you'd just give up already."

"You little punk!" roared the knight. "Who do you think you're dealin' with?! A Black Wolf Knight ain't gonna lose to some snot-nosed kid like you!"

Allen wasn't sure if the man really believed his words or was just trying to boost his own confidence. It made little difference either way.

*Sword of Cataclysm—Beast Cleaver.*

The knight set out the fuse wire even earlier than before, but Allen easily cut it before it reached his body. The man glared resentfully at him.

Allen sighed. "If you're not gonna settle down, I guess I'll have to *make* you."

"You punk! Who do you think you—"

*Sword of Cataclysm—Final Flash.*

Allen didn't need to listen to the knight any longer. He exhaled, finally able to let his guard down. He heard the sound of someone collapsing behind him. Turning around, he saw the knight lying on the ground. He was just unconscious—Percival's injuries were much worse. He'd wake up by himself after a while.

Allen thought it was best to let the man off lightly. According to Anriette, the knights could not come and go as they pleased; they were typically under something like house arrest, if not outright imprisonment. They could only travel freely when ordered to. So why was this knight here? It gave him a bad feeling. Better to knock the fellow unconscious and get some information out of him once he recovered.

But for that he'd have to wait. For now, healing Percival took priority. Then, if necessary, he could take care of the trembling children.

"I dunno if *I'll* be much use at that, though," he muttered.

The others would be arriving soon. He could leave it to them. Allen sighed and walked to Percival's side.

## Doubts and a Return

Percival regarded his body, completely healed of its wounds, with utter confusion. Over and over he patted himself here and there, furrowing his brow. “Hm. You healed such serious wounds so quickly? Even we elves cannot perform such powerful magic... Well, I won’t pry. We are indebted to all friends of our queen. Exactly who you are is beside the point.”

It seemed Percival had surmised the group’s background. After all, there *had* been half a year during which the news that the Saint was a former princess of Adastera would have reached the Elven Forest. Riese, rather than Allen, had healed Percival’s wounds—not to avoid letting Percival know that Allen, too, was capable of such feats, but simply because Allen couldn’t risk taking his eyes off the unconscious knight. He had never intended to hide the group’s history from Percival, so the elf knowing these facts wasn’t particularly problematic. Besides, though they had been acquainted for only a short time, it had been long enough to understand the viceroy’s nature. He seemed unlikely to do anything that would be harmful to Allen or his friends. And Percival himself had said that he wasn’t too concerned about such details. It certainly hadn’t changed how he looked at them or talked to them.

“What do you all intend to do now?” asked Percival.

“Huh? I dunno, really,” said Allen. “I can’t ask you to continue the tour after everything you’ve been through today. Wait for Anriette to get back, I guess?”

“That’s not quite what I meant,” said Percival, looking at the collapsed knight.

*Oh, right,* Allen thought. “Well, I want to ask him why he came here, but I’m a little worried that’ll cause more trouble. So, since I don’t think any of the others want to ask him anything, I don’t mind if you go first.”

“What would *we* ask him?” Noel replied. “I don’t even know what happened here.”

“Indeed,” said Riese. “And anything we *did* ask would only be to satisfy our

own curiosity.”

“Agreed,” said Mylène. “You go first.”

“Sounds like they’re all in agreement,” said Allen.

“I see,” said Percival. “Thank you. But I’m still not clear on our goal here.”

From the look on his face, however, it seemed he had a fairly good idea of what had happened. It didn’t seem like it was something he was hiding from the others—more that he didn’t want to say it without proof.

“As I’m sure you know,” he began, “we have hidden here for many years. Until recently, we were never discovered by other races.”

“But the empire found you?” said Riese.

“That was simply a matter of the empire being more capable than us. However, they did nothing more than discover us. It was hardly a failure on our part.”

“But this incident was?” said Noel.

“Yes, something like that.”

Percival explained that the knight had seen an elf child returning to the forest after visiting the town and quietly followed him. But that sounded like nothing more than an unfortunate meeting of an absent-minded child and a particularly cunning knight.

“Isn’t it strange that nothing like that’s ever happened before?” asked Allen.

“Quite,” Percival replied. “It is hard to imagine that it is only by coincidence that this happened *now*. And that the intruder simply *happened* to be a Black Wolf Knight.”

“It seems at least *possible* to me, but I have to agree with you. I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

It was all too much of a coincidence. Yes, the Black Wolf Knights were an elite group but not the only one. There were other orders with knights who were just as capable. If any of *them* had happened across the entrance to the forest, Percival would have been free to send them packing. They’d had incautious

children and town visits from elite knights before now, but never had they been discovered due to a lack of caution—until now.

And yet the one time it had happened just happened to be with a Black Wolf Knight. Regardless of the outcome, the fact remained that Percival could easily have lost his life. It seemed unlikely that the Elven Forest as a whole would get off scot-free either; at the very least, the demon children were sure not to fare well. To see all this as mere coincidence was too naive.

“I guess there’s no point giving it too much thought,” said Allen.

“Right,” Percival agreed. “We’ll never know until we ask the man directly. Again, thank you. *If* someone or other has unsavory plans for us, you’ve helped us to learn of them and plan our countermeasures as quickly as possible.”

That was exactly why Allen had offered Percival the first crack at interrogating the knight. Suddenly, he felt the eyes of the others on him. “Something wrong?” he asked.

They looked at him as if there was something they wanted to say, but couldn’t.

“Nothing’s *wrong*, exactly,” said Riese. “It’s just...”

“You say it was a Black Wolf Knight like that explains things,” Noel continued, “but that doesn’t mean a thing to us.”

“But I guess it’s the same deal as always?” said Mylène.

“Oh, right. I see,” Allen replied. Of course. Anriette had told him about the Black Wolf Knights personally. “To be honest, I was just wondering how much I can say.” It had been a private conversation, but he knew how the others would react if he took that tack with them and sighed as they continued to stare at him.

“I don’t mean to force you to answer,” said Riese. “I’m sure you have your reasons. I was just thinking how typical this is.”

“I *do* have my reasons, but I feel like you’re getting the wrong idea,” said Allen. “I just don’t want to explain before the person involved gets here.” He couldn’t reveal the details of a private conversation without checking with her

first.

“You mean Anriette?” said Percival. “Perfect timing.”

Allen didn’t have time to ask what he meant. He’d suddenly noticed a change in his vision.

“It...feels like space is warping around us,” said Noel.

“Yeah,” Allen replied. “And it feels kinda familiar.”

Noel was right. He understood what she meant as he watched the scenery around them distort. He’d seen this place before—it was where they’d first arrived in the forest.

Another change: the space warped further still, and a young woman appeared. Anriette looked at them with confusion.

“Huh? What’re you all doing here?” She looked around and saw the unfamiliar man. “You...didn’t just come to meet me, did you?” Turning to Allen, she gave an exasperated sigh. “Ugh, I take my eyes off you for two seconds and look what happens!”

“I swear, this time it had nothing to do with me,” he protested.

Anriette shrugged. Perhaps she wasn’t buying that as an excuse, but judging by the stern look on her face, she was more concerned with sharing something else. “Whatever. Anyway, this is perfect. There’s something I *really* need to tell you.”

Bingo. Allen raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

## Indecision and Conclusion

Noel exhaled as she looked up at the sunlight that poured through the trees, then looked back down at the many elves who were lined up, genuflecting before her. Unlike the last time she'd seen such a sight, this time Allen and the others weren't with her, and the elves were seeing her off rather than welcoming her. She would soon leave the forest. The others had gone on ahead of her—now it was her turn to follow.

She still hadn't come to a decision. She couldn't make up her mind; should she become their queen? Stay here in the forest? Or continue the life she'd had until now? She hadn't come to a conclusion on anything. Nevertheless, though she would have preferred to stay longer and observe the elves' way of life, circumstances meant she had to go.

"Sorry," she said, "for leaving just as suddenly I arrived."

"Not at all," said Percival. "Your wish is our wish too. Please follow your desires. That alone is good enough for us."

It was a typically grandiloquent statement, but Noel didn't feel too bad about it. In fact, part of her felt it was only right. Maybe she *was* cut out to be queen after all, but that alone wasn't enough to convince her she should take on the role. One year—no, even half a year ago—she wouldn't have understood that. A year ago, she would have gladly accepted the offer. Back then—back when she only cared about improving her skills as a blacksmith—why wouldn't she accept, provided she could continue smithing? Even six months ago, she wouldn't have hesitated. But since exacting her revenge, she'd lost her only objective and only continued smithing out of habit. She would have accepted any role that would give her a purpose.

Even now, things hadn't changed much. She still hadn't found her next goal in life. But she'd at least composed herself enough that she knew she couldn't use the elves' offer as an opportunity to provide herself with a sense of purpose. In that sense, it was her own personal development that was responsible for her

indecision.

“I’m really sorry,” said Noel.

Percival began to respond. “Oh, it’s really—”

“I mean, going back home before I’ve made up my mind. I know you wanted me to make up my mind by now.”

“It’s still no problem at all,” Percival insisted. “I will not deny that we are impatient to know your decision, but until now we did not even have the luxury of feeling impatient. In fact, it feels like a blessing.”

Noel didn’t care for the grandiose way Percival talked about her, even knowing that it only went to show how eager he was for her to accept her position as queen. After all, she already knew that, and it wasn’t enough. Or rather, the forces pushing her to accept and to decline were equally balanced. That was why she’d wanted to stay here a little longer, to look for something that would give her a reason to make a choice one way or the other.

Suddenly she remembered something. She glanced over the scene but couldn’t make out the people she was looking for. “I guess those children didn’t come?”

“Children?” asked Percival.

“The ones who gave me the stones.” She didn’t know their names, only their faces. But only elves were present.

Percival nodded. “Right. This is, after all, an elven ceremony. They *did* wish to participate, but I asked them to stay away.”

“I see,” said Noel. “That’s a shame. I wanted to thank them.”

“Thank them?”

“Yes. It seems to me that, thanks to their gift, in the end, neither this place nor you came to any harm. Does it bother you for me to put it that way?”

“Not at all. You’re correct, my queen; I have nary a scratch on me.”

“But you have to admit it was all thanks to their gift, right? I haven’t agreed to be your queen yet, but they still assisted your fellow elves. I wanted to thank

them for that.”

“Understood. Leave it to me. I will ensure that your thanks reaches them.”

“Got it. Thank you.”

Suddenly one elf among the many raised their bowed head. “U-Um!”

It was a child, younger than Noel. His face looked somehow familiar, but she couldn’t remember where she’d seen him before. They certainly weren’t well-acquainted enough for him to exchange words with her in a situation like this. From his expression, he seemed deeply concerned about something. Noel peered at him with confusion, head tilted.

The boy hurriedly bowed his head again. “I’m sorry!”

“I’m...not sure what you’re apologizing for,” Noel replied.

“The thing you were talking about before... That was my fault.”

“Ohhh.” She remembered where she’d seen the boy before—he was the one who’d been following them as they were shown around the forest, always keeping his distance and hiding his face, never getting close enough to talk to. Now she understood what he was trying to say. She knew the man who had rampaged through the forest had taken advantage of an elf returning from town. Clearly, this boy was that elf.

“I don’t think it’s your fault,” said Noel.

“But they told us to be careful when coming home. I didn’t see anyone around, so I thought it was okay. I wasn’t careful enough...”

Nothing she’d heard changed how Noel felt. “Even so, I don’t blame you. Maybe you *were* careless, but you’re not the one who did wrong. Besides, like I said, I haven’t agreed to be your queen yet. I’m just another elf. Even if you *were* to blame, I’m not the one you should be apologizing to. It should be the person who was hurt most, if anyone.” She looked at Percival.

The viceroy’s head remained bowed, but he smiled slightly. “No. If our queen has decreed that the boy is not to blame, there is nothing more to be said. Even if I *were* the appropriate person to apologize to, my response would be the same as yours. The blame lies entirely with that man.”

“But if I’d just been more careful...” said the boy.

“We still don’t know if it could’ve been avoided,” said Noel. “That man might have been a bad guy, but he was pretty tough.” She looked at Percival again. “Right?”

“Having confronted him myself, I can confirm that. With a foe that capable, I imagine the boy’s caution would not have changed much.”

“Exactly. Of course, this is all guesswork, but the outcome is what matters. And in the end everything worked out okay, so you didn’t do anything wrong. Unless you disagree?”

“N-No, I understand,” said the boy. “Thank you.”

*The outcome is what matters*, Noel thought as she watched the quivering boy with his head bowed. Perhaps that should apply to her too. All this dithering and failing to come to a conclusion—even that had an outcome. She hadn’t reached a decision, but she was still leaving the forest, even though she would have preferred to stay and think about it longer. In fact, if she didn’t have enough information to decide yet, it would be the sensible thing to do.

She had only decided to leave because Anriette had said they were leaving. Though Anriette had never said so directly, Noel got the impression that things—whatever those things were—would be easier if they stayed at Anriette’s manor. Percival and the others seemed to agree, hence this parting. But she alone could always stay if she wanted to. And yet she had assumed she would be leaving too, without even considering the option. In which case, surely...

“Well, that’s how it is,” she muttered.

“Excuse me, my queen?” said Percival.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself. But... Right. I still haven’t made a decision, but I’ll return before long, accompanied by the same party.” She didn’t know when that would be, but it felt like the right thing to do. She *wanted* to do it, so she believed it would happen.

As if her words had caused him to feel something, Percival raised his head momentarily to gaze at her, but he soon bowed it again. “Very well. We will eagerly await your return.”

Noel delivered her parting words. “Great. See you then.”

## Smoldering Thoughts

Allen exhaled as he watched the scenery pass by. It was familiar, yet different. They were traveling in the opposite direction and with one less passenger on their way to Laurus by carriage.

As he looked out of the window, he heard a meek voice. “Allen...um...are you sure about this?”

He turned his head and saw Riese wearing a worried expression. The sight brought a smile to his face. She couldn’t help being concerned.

“You worry too much,” he replied. “Not that I’m not the slightest bit anxious myself, but...Anriette’s a busy girl, you know. That’s why I chose to do this instead.”

He shrugged in a manner meant to be reassuring, but it seemed Riese wouldn’t be soothed so easily. From the corner of his eye, he saw the same concern on Noel’s face.

*Jeez, what did I do to deserve such a caring bunch of friends?*

He wasn’t that worried himself. He’d already come to accept the risk. After Anriette had made her way back to the Elven Forest, the entire group, as planned, had returned to her manor. There, she had given them the familiar lecture: return to the kingdom at once. But this time it was different. Before, her admonishments had seemed like a friend offering some advice—serious advice, but advice nonetheless. This time, however, it had seemed like a grave warning based on clear and specific concerns.

Of course, Allen had asked for her reasons, and her response had taken him aback. She’d said that the road to the city had been opened up again. It had been barricaded to assist in Allen’s apprehension, to ensure that he could not escape to the kingdom—but more to the point, to capture the demon that had killed the emperor. That was why permission to close the road had been granted. As such, its reopening effectively announced that the demon that had

killed the emperor had been captured.

Allen had never outright asked, and Anriette never outright said it, but there was no misinterpreting the way she had spoken. As for why this meant that Allen and the others should return home, Anriette had said she smelled a rat with the whole affair. On that point, Allen had to agree. A culprit who had evaded capture for an entire year was suddenly apprehended after the road was blockaded for a single day? It sounded like a bluff designed to catch the perpetrator slacking.

But Anriette insisted that not only had the road been reopened, but that the Black Wolf Knights stationed in Laurus had been withdrawn. So she had advised them to return to the kingdom at once. At the very least, it would do nobody any harm and would avoid them getting involved in any more trouble arising from these very suspicious circumstances. As of now, the path for them to return home was still clear. She had proclaimed all of this succinctly and sincerely, clearly having nothing but their best interests at heart.

“But if it weren’t for us, you wouldn’t have chosen to go home, would you?” said Noel.

Allen avoided her gaze. She was right. He had been given two choices: to either do as Anriette said or not. He had chosen not to because it was clear she was hiding something—something that concerned her own safety that would surely sway his decision. He didn’t know what it was, but there were only a few things it *could* have been. He had decided to ignore her admonitions.

But here he was now, doing as she said. He’d had to determine who took priority: Anriette or Riese, Noel, and Mylène? In the end, the latter had won out. If he’d decided to stay, he was sure the others would have insisted on staying too.

“Yeah, if it was just me, I would’ve stayed,” said Allen. “But that’s pointless to even think about—if it was just me, a lot of things would be different.” If he’d been alone, he never would’ve visited the Elven Forest in the first place. The city road might never have been blockaded. It was all speculation. No need to even mention it.

“You’re worried, though,” Mylène observed.

Allen smirked. “I guess you’ll just have to let that slide. Of course I’m a *little* worried.” He didn’t regret his decision, but that didn’t stop him wondering. He’d prefer that the others just ignored it.

“You can’t expect us not to notice,” said Noel.

“I’m asking you to let it slide regardless,” he replied. “Why didn’t *you* stay, anyway?” He hadn’t expected her to arrive at a decision before it was time for the others to leave, but she’d seemed enthusiastic about staying there longer. Whether she ended up becoming queen or not, he’d thought she’d at least stick around and take the measure of things a little longer.

“I just thought I’d step back and think things over a little,” said Noel. “But I *do* think I’ll go back there at least once more. Until then, I don’t think I’ll know if I really want to live there or not.”

“Got it. I guess I’ll tag along when you do. Even with all that trouble, it’s still a viable candidate.”

“Why don’t you just admit that you’re worried about Lady Anriette?” said Riese.

“I can’t say that’s not a part of it. I’m curious about that man too, though.”

After explaining things to Anriette, they had left the unconscious man in her care. She had insisted they didn’t have enough time to properly interrogate him and that any information they learned could only cause them more trouble. In truth, Allen was grateful for her intervention; he wasn’t sure how they were going to handle the interrogation, let alone whatever follow-up it required. Now that Anriette had sent them home, he was confident she’d be able to figure something out. He knew she wasn’t the type of person to harm someone for the purpose of getting information out of them, but he was sure she’d have ways of making even a guy like that talk. Whatever she learned, Allen could ask her about it during his next visit.

That was another reason he wasn’t *too* worried about her—she never overlooked anything. Even if things went south, she’d have a trick or two up her sleeve to get out of a sticky situation.

“Anyway,” said Allen, “I told her to call on me if she’s ever in a tough spot.”

“And how exactly would you...” Riese paused. “No, I suppose if anyone has a way of helping someone in another country, it’s you.”

“No doubt,” said Noel. “But how would you hear her call for help in the first place?”

Mylène perked up. “The power of love, I guess?”

Riese blushed. “Love?!”

“I don’t think love has that power,” said Allen. “So you can settle down, Riese.”

He couldn’t help smirking. Suddenly he remembered how Anriette had seemed when they’d parted ways, almost troubled by something. But he was sure everything would be fine. She wouldn’t do anything stupid, and the children would be taken care of. He *did* worry that he was leaving her with too much on her plate, but the way she’d volunteered to take care of the children, she seemed to think there was no other option.

As he mulled everything over, the last words Anriette had said to him wouldn’t leave the back of his mind.

“I guess the children appreciated me saving them,” he muttered.

“Hm? Did you say something?” said Riese.

“Oh, just talking to myself.” He’d just realized that perhaps this journey *had* been worth it. “I’m just wondering what’s next.”

“With everything going on, I suppose you won’t be able to return to the empire for a while, will you? What *will* you do next?”

“Head east, I guess?” Noel suggested.

“Or south,” said Mylène.

“I’ll have plenty of time to decide on the journey home. Although from the sounds of it, you all intend to come with me.”

“You’re imagining things,” said Riese.

“Yup. All in your head,” Noel agreed.

“But our destinations *might* end up being the same,” Mylène added. “Just by

coincidence.”

“Whatever. It’s not like I insist on traveling alone. The more the merrier, I guess.”

He smiled, then narrowed his eyes as he peered out of the window. He really did understand that it had to be this way. At least, he’d accepted the reasons they had to retreat. And he really wasn’t too worried about Anriette. It wasn’t a matter of trust so much as confidence that if she encountered something that was too much for her to handle, he’d end up involved. If he had to explain why he was so sure, he could only say that he felt they had a connection from their past lives. He knew anyone else—*especially* Anriette—would think it ridiculous, but he was sure of it.

Besides, he’d saved an entire world before. There was no way he wouldn’t be able to do *something* to help a girl out of a spot of danger or two. Considering current circumstances, it seemed like the empire itself might become his enemy. Of course, he didn’t want that to happen, but if it did, it was no problem either. Yes, he wanted peace, but there were other things he valued just as much, and if anything jeopardized them, he wouldn’t hesitate to take action, even if it meant taking on an entire country.

Of course, ideally, nothing of the sort would happen. It certainly wasn’t set in stone. *Whatever happens, happens, I guess*, he thought as he watched the landscape go by.

## A Cry For Help

It had been three days since they'd parted ways with Anriette—more than enough time to make it past the empire's border. And yet Allen and the others were still inside Viktor. The party wasn't in any kind of trouble; they simply couldn't leave Laurus. Not because the path had been blockaded again or because unrest had broken out in the city; they just hadn't finished preparing.

From Laurus, it was trivial to make it across the border, but it was still two days to the closest settlement within the kingdom. There were other places that people lived, but they were military bases for surveilling the empire, not somewhere you could procure food and other supplies. Even the nearest settlement was only a small village that wouldn't have large quantities of food to buy. For that, they'd have to travel for more than a week to the nearest town. To make the journey, they had to stock up on food in Laurus...and that wasn't going well.

Every store they visited had only a scattering of goods. Rumor had it that some noble had bought up everyone's stock. Allen wondered if they were preparing for war, but he saw no signs and heard no rumors of an impending conflict. Whatever the case, it was really making their lives difficult. Until today, they'd been stuck spinning their wheels.

"Phew...I think this should finally be enough?" Setting his burden down on the ground, Allen exhaled as he looked over the piled bags of food they'd gradually managed to accumulate over the past three days. It was more than enough to cover four people on a weeklong journey; knowing how they had a way of getting held up by this and that, they'd made sure to procure two weeks' worth.

"Sure looks like a lot," said Noel. "If you say it's enough, then I guess it is."

"Right," said Riese. "I'm afraid we're not very good judges, so we'll have to count on you."

"I don't see why you had to dump it all on the floor like this, though," Mylène remarked.

Allen smirked as Riese and Noel looked at the pile of bags and nodded in agreement. He couldn't blame them for wondering. Their concern wasn't how they would fit into the normally spacious carriage; they all knew that Allen could use the same magical storage device they'd used on their initial journey to the empire. What they didn't understand was why he hadn't used the device to store each bag as he'd bought them rather than carrying each one to the inn and leaving them on the floor of their room.

"Well," Allen began, "if we bought everything at once, that would be one thing. We could confirm I had everything before we put it all away. But we visited so many stores, and over three days. I don't see a better way to make sure there was nothing we missed. Plus it means more sets of eyes on everything."

"I see," said Mylène. "So you wanted us to take a look too."

"Didn't we just tell you we have no idea what enough food looks like?" said Noel.

"Yeah, I'll handle that," said Allen. "I just want you all to check that you'll have everything you need. I can't say I know everything each of you could want."

Since four of them had handled the shopping, Allen didn't know exactly what had been purchased. And even sticking to the essentials, there were probably things he didn't even realize the others needed. He directed his attention elsewhere as they began to inspect the shopping.

Suddenly, he felt someone's eyes on him. Looking up, he saw Mylène, standing away from the others. "What's wrong, Mylène? Nothing to check?"

"I already did. Looks good. I'm wondering how we suddenly managed to get so much stuff today."

"Oh, yeah. No kidding."

While the party had gradually assembled the supplies over three days, they'd bought the vast majority that day. For some reason, products that had been sold out the day prior had suddenly become readily available again.

"I don't get the sense that war's about to break out, though," Allen continued. "And everyone I've asked says that it's just someone in another town buying

everything up.” Nobody gave him the impression this was some big secret either—just someone buying up the town’s food for their own needs. “But nobody has any clue *why*. And they all said it only started happening the day before yesterday, so it was just a two-day thing.”

“Maybe there was a bad harvest this year?”

“That’s what I thought. But then it only lasted two days. And there would’ve been no need to buy up *everything* like they did.”

It was common for people to buy up food, anticipating price increases as the result of a poor yield that year, but this was too much; it would reflect poorly on whoever was responsible, and the locals would surely have something to say about it on their next visit. No, it was more likely this was a case of someone, for some reason, having no choice *but* to empty the town’s shelves of food.

“Not that I think this can mean anything *good*,” Allen mused, “but I doubt it’s anything *we* need to worry about. We’re leaving today, after all.”

“I guess so,” said Mylène.

The empire was already in disarray. What was one more thing? If it turned out this was a problem that wouldn’t remain contained within the empire, they’d cross that bridge when they came to it.

As they talked, Riese finished checking the supplies. “No problems here.”

“Got it,” said Allen. “In that case, we can leave after I’ve checked we have enough of everything. Unless anyone has any unfinished business here?”

All three shook their heads. Allen nodded. They’d be out of there before lunch. A small delay of only three days—nothing to get worked up about. Anriette had told them to hurry out of the country so they wouldn’t get mixed up in any further trouble, and they’d managed to avoid that. There was no need to rush to make up for lost time.

Then again...in a way, hadn’t this been just what Anriette was talking about? Allen didn’t mean to let his guard down, but as soon as they left the inn, he did just that.

“Wait!”

He didn't even think the voice was calling out to them, but simply out of curiosity, he turned around anyway. There, he saw a strangely familiar boy staring straight at him.

"My sister! Please! You've got to help her!"



\*\*\*

*Three days earlier.*

Anriette sighed as the departing carriage disappeared from view. She sighed for many reasons, chief among them the melancholy of saying goodbye.

“They could’ve stayed longer after coming so far. Another day or two, at least.”

Anriette turned in the direction of the voice. There was a face she hated to see: Lisette. Not that it was her fault. Or, at worst she was only half-responsible. Anriette shouldered the rest of the blame. She couldn’t *only* resent Lisette for it.

“I don’t mind,” Anriette replied. “I’m more concerned that the longer they stay here, the greater the chance they get involved with you and the rest of your friends.”

“Yeah, uh, sorry about the whole mix-up with him. We were given insufficient direction or something like that.”

“You’re not taking this seriously, are you? I swear, you’d think it was *my* fault.”

Anriette sighed. Lisette was impossible to deal with. Someone known as one of the most dangerous people in the empire should conduct themselves with a little more decorum. Still, that was also the reason they were able to speak freely.

“Anyway, this is over now, right?” Anriette continued. “You won’t interfere with them again. You’ll keep your end of the bargain?”

“Of course. Whoever they are, and whatever they were up to, it’s no concern of ours.”

It was true. Allen and the others had nothing to do with the Black Wolf Knights’ current duties—at least, not anymore.

“So, you’ve suddenly apprehended the emperor’s killer after a year?” said Anriette. “How convenient.”

“Not our job to worry about that. We just follow orders. Anyway...come on, let’s hear all about how the killers conspired with demons to do the job.”

Anriette said nothing. She looked once again in the direction of the departing carriage, but only for a second. Then, indicating that Lisette should follow her, she began to walk away.



## Afterword

Hey, this is Shin Kouduki.

Whether you're back from the previous volume or joining us for the first time, thanks for picking up this book! As I'm sure you know by now, this volume ends on a cliff-hanger, meaning I'm going to be able to put out another volume! Thank you all so much! I know I'm making you all wait for the next one, but I'm doing my best to ensure it won't disappoint. And of course, there'll be another bonus story, so even those of you who've already read the web version will be able to enjoy it. I really hope you'll all check it out!

The manga version is also progressing great—again, thanks to everyone's support! I can't express my gratitude for how many of you have read it. Oh, and speaking of the manga version, the first volume will be on sale on the 25th of this month! I hope you'll check it out, since it features a bonus short story from me—and more importantly, because Karasumaru has put together an incredible piece of work! I'd love for everyone to keep supporting both the novel and manga versions.

Once again, a whole lot of people helped to put this release together.

As usual, the support of my editors S and F was huge. I hope they'll both continue to put up with me for the next volume!

Chocoan produced another set of wonderful illustrations for this volume. I appreciate how she always delivers better results than I could ever imagine, even when I leave most of the artistic decisions to her! I'm always so thankful that she's the one I chose for the job. As stressful as it must be, I hope she'll stick with me!

I'd also like to extend my deepest thanks to everyone who worked on this volume, including the proofreaders, management, and the designers.

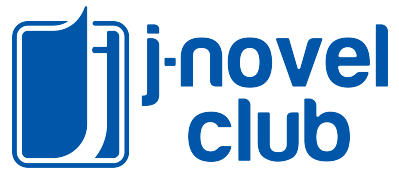
And more than anything, I'd like to express my heartfelt appreciation for all my dedicated supporters and to everyone who purchased this volume! I hope

to see you again in volume four! Later!





Thanks for  
buying volume 3!  
*KANESUMAH*



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The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases: Volume 3

by Shin Kouduki

Translated by bedi Edited by Tess Nanavati

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