

Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv

14



Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Ballad of Vengeance

Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv

14

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Ballad of Vengeance



"I'LL GO
ALL-OUT ON
MAGIC ESSENCE,
THEN! QUINTET
MAGICIAN
MAGICAE
DISPLODO!"

She wasn't about to be a burden like she was on the journey from Cleia to Rodania. Celia focused all of her mental energy on reciting her spell.



*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*



"LONG TIME
NO SEE,
RENJI."

"YOU SURE
ABOUT THIS?
EVEN IF YOU
CAME IN SECRET,
YOU'RE STILL
VISITING AN INN
LIKE THIS."

Sylvie was seated on the sofa across from Renji, smiling.

CONTENTS



Prologue: Before Departing

Chapter 1: The Royal Siblings' Ordeals

Chapter 2: Reiss's Intentions in Rodania

Interlude: The Fifth Hero

Chapter 3: Fang of the Avenger

Chapter 4: A Fierce Battle

Chapter 5: Paladia Kingdom Infiltration

**Chapter 6: The Whereabouts of the
Royal Siblings**

**Chapter 7: Before the Battle to the
Death**

Epilogue: Engagement

Afterword



Rio (Amakawa Haruto)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.



Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.



Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.



Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.



Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.



Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.



Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under Rio's protection along with Miharu and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

**Flora Beltrum**

Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Finally reunited with her older sister, Christina.

**Christina Beltrum**

First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Worries about her little sister from the shadows.

**Roanna Fontaine**

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. Traveling with Sakata Hiroaki as his attendant.

**Sakata Hiroaki**

A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

**Shigekura Rui**

A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

**Alfred Emarle**

Commander of the Beltrum Kingdom's Royal Guard. Possesses the title "King's Sword," which is given to the strongest person in the kingdom.

**Liselotte Cretia**

Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her previous life.

**Aria Governess**

Liselotte's head attendant and an enchanted sword wielder. Has been friends with Celia since their academy days.

**Sumeragi Satsuki**

Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

**Sylvie Rubia**

First Princess of the Rubia Kingdom. A warrior also known as the Princess Knight.

**Reiss**

A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.

**Lucius**

The man who murdered Rio's mother. Leader of the mercenary group The Heavenly Lions.

Prologue: Before Departing

Rio's mother was murdered when he was five years old.

For two years after that, Rio struggled to survive alone in the slums.

For two years, he continued staring down his mother's death.

He couldn't look away from it.

Kept thinking about it.

Why did his mother die?

Why was his mother killed?

Why? Why?

He couldn't understand. He thought about it continuously for the two years he spent in the slums, but he couldn't understand why. He only had a sense of loss and an anger that intensified day by day.

She was his only family member. He didn't have anyone else. She was his everything. Someone so precious to him was taken from him before his eyes.

And yet, the man who killed his mother unjustly was still living somewhere out there, enjoying life with a pleasant smile on his face.

It was unforgivable.

Absolutely unforgivable.

It was why he wanted revenge. That feeling never faded.

As time flowed by and he grew older, before he knew it, he had plenty of important people in his life other than his mother. When he glanced around at his surroundings, those same people were watching him.

But even then...

Even with those people as a part of his everyday life, Rio's resolution for revenge was always close at hand.

Sometimes, the memory would resurface. Fragmented replays of his mother being murdered before his half-conscious state.

Each time it did, a nauseating sense of irritation swelled within him. A hatred strong enough to almost make him forget himself.

The target of his revenge, Lucius, was alive. The die had already been cast. Now that he had faced Lucius and failed to catch him, he couldn't turn back anymore.

He didn't feel any regret in being unable to turn back from the path of revenge. It was he himself who decided to push forward down this path when he was in his parents' hometown. He didn't care if it was a path of no return. He decided he would proceed anyway. That was Rio's resolution. There was no way he'd feel any kind of regret over it.

That was why Rio tried to discard the people around him. He believed it would be best to stop associating with people if he were to proceed down the path of revenge, and tried to keep Miharu and the others at a distance by pretending to act bad. If he could distance himself from the ones close to him, he would surely be able to give up on everything other than his plans for revenge.

By discarding everything, he could move forward. He wanted that kind of strength. That was the strength Rio formerly had—the strength of being a man with nothing to lose.

Humans were ugly and not worth salvation. Rio thought he knew this, having grown up in the slums by himself after his mother had been killed.

He thought he knew the terror of trusting others and the terror of being betrayed. After all, he knew that he was on the ugly side. That's why he was afraid of socializing. He was afraid of trusting. He'd always been that way.

That's why he was constantly one step away from everyone else in order to observe things from a distance. So that he wouldn't be hurt if he were ever to be betrayed. However, that caused him to feel a sense of alienation. Each time he felt happiness being surrounded by his friends, he felt like this wasn't the world he should be living in.

Someday, he was going to leave.

However...

He couldn't simply discard them in the end.

Humans weren't that ugly.

Because he had realized that... Because he had been taught that...

He started to yearn for it.

To live in an ideal world that had the possibility of myriad risk.

Was it possible for someone like him to be allowed there? That was what he yearned for, even though it was contradictory to yearn for something that was right before him.

However, you can only yearn for what you don't have. The further out of reach it is, the stronger that feeling. For Rio, his friends were far, far out of reach.

That was why he had tried to keep an objective view, and yet...

If he didn't want to lose them, he shouldn't have pursued a life of revenge from the beginning...

Was that a weakness?

A type of naivety?

He didn't know.

However, there was one thing he did know.

And that was...

That he had to finish this fight as soon as possible.

Rio had a vague feeling that he would be confronting Lucius soon.



Before Rio had left Celia and Aishia for the Proxia Empire, he'd temporarily stepped out of Rodania to visit the stone house hidden in the forests of the outskirts.

His return delighted everyone present, and they relocated to the living room where he was given a warm welcome surrounded by the girls.

"I'm sorry to bring this up on such short notice, but I'll be leaving on another journey in a few days. I won't be back here for a while," he brought up awkwardly.

"..." Instantly, the girls exchanged looks with each other. They had a feeling this would happen; they'd discussed the possibility while Rio wasn't around.

"I'll be going to the Proxia Empire," Rio informed them.

"Are you chasing after that Reiss person?" Orphia asked hesitantly.

"Yes. It's possible that Lucius, the man who killed my mother, is there...so it may turn into a journey where I kill someone."

Rio purposefully phrased it this way in order to address his plans for revenge.

"..."

What do they do if Rio formally brings up the topic of revenge himself? The girls had discussed this in advance, but now that it was actually happening they were still unsure of how to react.

"I'll be coming back...I think. But I'm not sure how to say goodbye in a situation like this. Even if I openly declare I'm going to kill someone, I'm sure everyone will just be bewildered..." Rio said in a troubled and inarticulate tone.

"We won't stop you," Sara said stiffly but clearly. She looked around at Miharu, Latifa, Orphia, and Alma's faces as she continued solemnly. "We've talked about it between ourselves already—about how you're trying to enact revenge on the person who killed your mother. Everyone knows about it. You're more kind and honest than anyone else, and that's exactly why you're strong. But because you're the way you are, you're unable to forget your past and carry all your burdens yourself—and so you try to enact revenge as the answer."

Rio's face twisted with guilt. "I'm not as impressive of a person as you think."

He simply wanted to kill him because he hated him. However, he didn't want to become the same as Lucius, a man who lived like a beast.

It had nothing to do with his own character, but it was a part of himself he

didn't want to lose.

Miserable and pathetic as it was, this was his tiny form of resistance. That's why he forced down those emotions and irritation in order to act rational.

"I'm sure you've experienced greater grief than we can imagine. That's why we won't stop you. We cannot stop you. We believe that you surely understand everything and have nevertheless decided to challenge that man to a life-or-death battle..."

There was no way she could easily tell him it was better to give up on his goal of revenge. The reasons that they could come up with for giving up would have definitely crossed Rio's mind already.

"Everything Sara said is our collective opinion."

"So please make sure you return. We'll be waiting in this house."

Sara's opinion was the opinion of everyone in the house, so Orphia and Alma immediately spoke up in agreement.

"You have to come back, Onii-chan. You're not allowed to go wandering off afterwards. Got it?" Latifa demanded and hugged Rio's arm tightly.

"I'm not a child, you know." It was as though she was worrying for him like a lost child. Rio had a frown on his face.

"But it sometimes feels like you'll wander away somewhere. Even when you're nearby, it's like you're far away..." Unable to express her words well, Latifa looked a little frustrated.

"R-Really...?" Rio replied a little awkwardly, feeling slightly startled.

"Really. You wander around alone, and you don't talk about yourself unless you're asked—just like with your revenge thing. We know that this is the answer you came to after worrying and worrying over it, so we all decided to see you off. But the truth is, everyone wants to know what you're thinking, and we're worried," Latifa said directly.

"Latifa..." Rio was a little taken aback by the way she addressed the core of the matter, but Latifa's words seemed to resonate deeply in his chest. He suddenly looked around at Miharu and the other girls and noticed they were all

staring at him with watchful expressions.

“I’m sorry. I’ve always been running away. I was sure that everyone would deny my existence... But that wasn’t the case. Even when you learned that I’m trying to kill someone, you’re all still here. That’s why I wanted to talk to you all properly before departing. That’s why I’m here today,” Rio confided in them with a determined look. He had already told Celia and Aishia the things he was about to reveal to them before coming here. Now he was about to tell them the same.

“Are you sure? You don’t have to force yourself...” Sara and the others exchanged looks of hesitation.

“It’s easy to not force myself and run away from everything painful. I’m a dishonest person, so I always try to flee right away, but my problems will never be solved if I keep running from them. I realized that wasn’t the answer. That’s why I want revenge. And I don’t want to run away from everyone either. I don’t want to hide things and distance myself—that’s why if everyone will listen to me, if anyone has anything to ask, I want us all to talk it out,” Rio looked at everyone present and stated.

“Does that mean...that revenge is something painful to you?” Sara asked quietly.

“Resenting people is draining, after all. That’s why the truth is... If possible, I don’t want to take revenge. That’s why part of me thinks that. Part of me also thinks that if I can live a life without hurting others, then that’d be for the best. Once I use my power for hatred, that hatred will come back and leave me walking through a swamp of my emotions forever...”

The girls listened attentively to Rio’s bitter words.

“It’s only natural that what goes around comes around, which means there’ll be no end to it. That’s why somewhere down the line, someone has to refrain from seeking revenge. I understand this as well, but...” Rio continued. “I know. I know that there’s an enemy I have to defeat no matter what,” he declared, showing a glimpse of his resolute will.

“...”

Sara and the others were overwhelmed by his spirit and swallowed.

“There are people out there who calmly—no, gleefully rob others of what’s important to them. I have to fight people like that or I’ll lose everything. They’ll unreasonably try to force you to surrender whatever happiness you have. That’s why I have to fight. Fight...and kill him. In order to prevent any more important things from being stolen from me... That is the reason I want to take revenge.”

Though he seemed cold on the surface, the passion he carried deep within his heart could be glimpsed from between Rio’s words. He wasn’t going to punish him under the name of justice. He simply hated the person who robbed him of something important, and didn’t want to be robbed anymore, so he couldn’t let him run free.

“You’ll fight to prevent any more important things from being stolen... Isn’t that different from getting revenge because your mother was killed? It’s like your motive has changed,” Alma pointed out.

“It’s the same thing. In the end, my motive is my hatred for the enemies who try to steal from me. The feeling of hatred for that man and my desire to kill him hasn’t changed. But I guess you could say I’m no longer trying to take revenge just because my mother was killed...” Rio trailed off inarticulately here. He looked a little worried, which made the girls incline their heads as they watched him.

“I don’t want to drag everyone into the chain of hatred between me and that man. There’s no guarantee you won’t be dragged into things if I fight him. That’s something I want to avoid at all costs. That’s why I have to finish things quickly.”

In order to end this chain of hatred, one of them had to die. Both of their existences were a hindrance to the other.

Because of that, killing was the only answer.

That was, by no means, justice.

It was murder.

“The chain of negativity may end if I kill that man. But it may not end... I might

end up dragging everyone down into the swamp with me just by being nearby. Although that may be avoidable if I distance myself from everyone..."

"That's absolutely not allowed!"

Miharu, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Latifa's voices overlapped.

"I considered doing that up until a while ago... I believed even if nothing remained, it'd be easier to be alone. I thought it would be best for me to disappear," Rio said. The girls gazed at him disapprovingly.

"Hmph." Latifa strengthened her hold around Rio's arm, as though to stop him from escaping.

"But I don't think that anymore. I want to try going down the hard path—is what I started to think. It may not be easy, but I'm sure it will be more fun that way," Rio added with a pained smile. The girls seemed to be satisfied by this and nodded contently.

"The aura around you has changed a little, Rio," Orphia pointed out with a giggle.

"You think so?" Rio inclined his head in embarrassment.

"Yes. It's like you've grown a little softer during your time living in Rodania. Does it have something to do with your change of heart?"

"Who knows? It may be because the peaceful days have been in abundance lately... But the trigger for my change in thinking was probably Miharu, Satsuki, and Masato," Rio said, looking at Miharu.

"Huh? M-Me?" Miharu, who hadn't been actively participating in the conversation, flinched in surprise.

"Yes. Because the three of you told me your feelings so directly while we were in the Galarc Kingdom. I learned that it was important to tell people your feelings," Rio said with a faint smile.

"Oh... No, I should apologize for being so audacious back then." Miharu ducked her face in embarrassment. She had remembered the moment she unexpectedly confessed to Rio in the Galarc Castle.

I love him. I love him, so I want to be together with him. I fell for the same

person twice—the Haru-kun he was reborn from, and Haruto now.

The words that had come out of her own mouth replayed in her head. Aishia had connected a path between Miharu and Rio to share the conversation Miharu had with Takahisa.

Aah, I can't believe he was listening to that. Ai-chan...

There was nothing she could do about it now. Having her feelings conveyed was probably something she should've felt happy about, but she couldn't help feeling embarrassed. Fortunately, Rio was away more often than not after they'd left the Galarc Kingdom, but when they did meet up like this, they were both at a loss for what to say to each other.

Miharu was a shy person to begin with. It didn't really cross her mind when she was with the others, but even then she was nervous whenever they met again after a long time.

I wonder why... Why am I more nervous than before?

Her heart wouldn't stop pounding because she was aware of it now.

“Ever since she came back from the banquet, Miharu sometimes looks like she’s remembering something and acts all weird,” Latifa giggled teasingly.

“I-I’m not acting weird, and I’m not remembering anything. Forget about me. We’re talking about Haruto right now, no?” Miharu tried to restore the derailed conversation in a fluster as she blushed.



“The atmosphere calmed down so quickly,” Alma chuckled.

“Indeed it did.” Sara sighed tiredly.

“Hehe,” Orphia giggled.

“I don’t want to say anything arrogant, so I won’t. However, once everything’s over, I will return to this house. Until then, can I leave this place to you? While I hope nothing will happen, it’s possible that something may occur to this house or Rodania while I’m away. If an emergency arises, I hope you can all support Aishia.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” Rio replied.

“There’s nothing to thank us for.”

“Yup.”

“Indeed.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma chimed in.

“No, there are so many things I have to thank you all for.”

“Really? I can’t seem to think of any reason why we need to be thanked...”
The girls exchanged curious looks.

“Part of the reason why I decided against disappearing from you all was also because of Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Latifa. That’s why.”

“Well, we don’t remember doing anything.”

Sara and the others still looked curious.

“That’s not true. You’re waiting for someone like me to return. You’re telling me that it’s okay for me to return. I still have my doubts about whether it’s truly okay for me to come back, but I’m really happy because of that,” Rio said quietly. That’s why he thought it would be okay to change.

Sara, Orphia, and Alma suddenly looked embarrassed. Latifa was grinning from ear to ear, while Miharu watched them all with a pleasant smile.

“Th-There’s no need to thank us for something that’s only natural.” Sara

made eye contact with Rio, then averted her gaze with an unsteady voice.

“Ah, Sara’s being shy,” Orphia pointed out in amusement.

“I-I’m not being shy,” Sara turned away and denied.

Alma joined the teasing after seeing that, and the others all smiled in amusement. Rio smiled too.

This occurred one week before Rio snuck into the Proxia Castle. It was a peaceful moment of time, like the calm before a storm.

Chapter 1: The Royal Siblings' Ordeals

One early afternoon, three days after Rio fought Nidoll at the Proxia Castle, in the room of an enchanted airship flying in the skies near the Beltrum-Galarc border...

“Instans Motus.”

By way of the teleport crystal used by three intruders invading the ship, Christina and Flora instantly disappeared from the room.

The intruders used another teleport crystal to suddenly disappear from the scene of the crime. The only one left in the room was Vanessa, who had been stabbed in the abdomen and was bleeding profusely.

The door to the room suddenly burst open.

“Hey! What was that noise?!”

Roanna and the previously sulking Hiroaki stepped into the room. As soon as they saw the ravaged remains of the room and Vanessa lying in a puddle of her own blood—

“Wha...”

Hiroaki’s eyes widened in shock as he fell speechless. He slowly turned his neck to look around the room, but Christina and Flora were nowhere to be seen.

“What is this...?” After seeing the state of the room from behind Hiroaki, Roanna instantly paled.

“H-Hey, what’s the meaning of this...?” Hiroaki’s voice cracked in his flustered confusion.

“Vanessa!” Roanna ran to her in a hurry.

“Urgh... Princess...” Vanessa stared ahead vacantly with unfocused, hazy eyes, letting out a groan.

“She’s still breathing!” Roanna confirmed that Vanessa was still alive. However, the abdomen of her knight uniform was completely soaked with the large amount of blood that had pooled on the floor. At this rate, she would die from blood loss.

“Hey! What happened?! Where are Christina and Flora?! Hey!” In his shock, Hiroaki questioned Vanessa hysterically.

“Ah... P-Princess...” Vanessa murmured quietly.

“Oh no, don’t speak! You’ll die!” Roanna didn’t force her to speak and instead drew the knife from the sheath at Vanessa’s waist. She proceeded to cut open the buttoned-up jacket Vanessa was wearing, then the buttoned shirt below that as well to expose Vanessa’s upper body without reservation.

“H-Hey, Roanna! What are you doing?!” Hiroaki asked in shock as he looked at Vanessa’s half-naked state.

“I’m checking her wounds. The only place she was stabbed was her stomach, but... Th-This is... *Cura*.”

Roanna used the minimal amount of movement to confirm the wound on Vanessa’s body, then recited the spell to begin healing her abdomen. Was she stabbed by a blade that was then twisted? Her abdomen was gouged into a bright-red pulp.

“Ugh, that’s brutal...” Hiroaki must have felt nauseous, as he paled and looked away from Vanessa.

“I may not be able to save her alone. Sir Hiroaki, please yell down the hallway for help. The attackers may still be on the ship, so make sure you don’t step outside,” Roanna instructed with an ashen face. The fact that they were nowhere to be seen probably meant they had already fled, but the possibility was still there. Despite the circumstances, she wasn’t about to abandon a life that could still be saved.

“R-Right... H-Hey! Is anyone there?!” Hiroaki nodded nervously and headed to the door, where he yelled down the silent corridor in search of help.

“...”

However, no one stuck their heads out of any of the rooms along the corridor. Of course they wouldn't. All the nearby soldiers had been ambushed and killed by the intruders, then had their bodies shoved into the nearby rooms.

"Hey! Hey! Anyone! What are you all doing?!" Hiroaki continued yelling in distress.

Wouldn't the attackers come to this room if I yell? Concern surged within him as he yelled, heightening his anxiety by the moment.

"Hey! Hey! Heeey! Why isn't anyone responding?!" Hiroaki continued yelling anyway, down the corridor of rooms filled with corpses...

"No one's coming..." he muttered weakly after some time.

"What in the world happened here...?"

No one on board the airship knew the answer to that. It was a short time after that when the surviving crew members noticed the abnormality on board the ship.



Meanwhile, in the western side of the Paladia Kingdom, a small kingdom located to the northeast of the Strahl region that was allied with the Proxia Empire...

Having been forcefully teleported by the attackers on the ship, Christina and Flora were currently standing frozen in a dense forest, dressed in their gowns.

"Huh...? Wha?!"

The sudden change in scenery left Flora in clear confusion. Once she understood that they were in a gloomy forest, she immediately drew closer to her older sister in fear.

"...Where are we?"

Christina touched the magic-sealing collar the men placed on her and looked around in a daze. Her eyes wandered, taking in the dense growth of vegetation.

They had been attacked by three assailants on the enchanted airship, so why were they in a forest on the ground? Was this a dream? The cold sensation of

the collar said otherwise.

She looked around, but there was no one else in sight. The plants were being stirred by the wind. When she listened carefully, she could hear the cries of birds and beasts in the distance. Her heart thundered in her chest.

The crystal-shaped magic artifact the men threw at us on the airship... Was it enchanted with space sorcery?

Christina was as calm as could be in such an unrealistic situation, desperately racking her brain for an explanation.

Space sorcery was an ultra-high level of sorcery impossible to use with the modern sorcery of the Strahl region, but she had read about the existence of such ancient artifacts during her Academy days, and the sacred stones that summoned the heroes were also said to be enchanted with space sorcery. It would be extremely difficult to explain the current situation in any other way.

However, it was strange that they were teleported all the way here without anyone awaiting their arrival. The men had also said they didn't know what would happen once they arrived here...

They said that if they wanted to kill us, they would have done so already. They also said the more hardships, the better—are they going to use us as hostages? But there's no one around...

There were plenty of forces she could think of that would want to use them as royal hostages, but there wasn't enough information for her to grasp the situation clearly.

“Christina...?” Flora called out, worried by her silence.

Christina smiled gently to calm her down. “Sorry, I was trying to figure out the situation. Even I am confused by something like this.”

“Where are we? Vanessa, Sir Hiroaki, Roanna... Everyone else on the ship is...” A dark shadow fell over Flora’s face.

“The enchanted airship was still flying normally, so the people in the cockpit should be safe. Sir Hiroaki and Roanna too, surely. Someone will find Vanessa and give her treatment. So...let’s focus on ourselves for now.”

Christina hugged Flora close to her and petted her head softly. Her words weren't directed at her little sister, but rather at herself.

Either she was still shaken, or she could feel a vague sense of danger from this unpredictable situation, as her hand was shaking faintly.

"Okay..." Flora nodded slowly.

"If we wait here, those men and their allies may appear... But we won't let ourselves fall into their hands so easily. Before we set off haphazardly, let's explore this area first. We may find some kind of clue."

Thus, the two of them began to explore their immediate surroundings. Then, within a few minutes—

"There's a cabin over there, Christina!"

"Yes, I can see it."

They discovered a single cabin standing alone in the forest not far from where they were teleported to.

It's close to the spot where we were teleported to. It would be natural to assume that this place belongs to those men, but...

There may be people inside. If not, then there was still a high chance of obtaining some clues Christina thought as she stared at the cabin.

"We'll examine the state of things from outside, and if it doesn't seem occupied, then we'll look inside. Follow behind me quietly."

"Okay."

Glancing around at their surroundings warily, the two of them approached the cabin.

Dresses and high heels. It wasn't an outfit that was appropriate to walk through the forest in, and it was extremely conspicuous, so it wasn't suited for moving stealthily. In the first place, the unstable footing of the forest was extremely difficult to walk on. Despite that, they drew within ten meters of the cabin.

"I'm going to get a little closer. You hide here," Christina said, approaching the

cabin alone. She went around the back instead of the front and listened carefully.

I don't hear anything.

There was no sound of conversation, creaking floors from footsteps, or any type of work being done. There was only complete silence.

The window's closed, but...

Christina tried to pry open the small, wooden window that was situated slightly above her head. Then, with a quiet creak, the window opened. She stretched upwards to peek inside the room.

There's no one here.

The light was turned off so the room was dim, but she could see a table and chair.

Christina went around the outside of the house and opened the windows to carefully check the state of the interior. As a result, she confirmed there were no lights on in any room and the cabin was truly uninhabited.

"Flora, come here." Christina stood before the entrance and called Flora over from the shadows of the trees.

"Was there no one inside?"

"Yes. I feel ashamed for acting like a burglar, but let's go inside. The door's unlocked. Right now we want as much information as possible—as well as the supplies that we'll need to survive being in this forest."

"Okay..." Flora must have felt some sense of guilt, as she nodded hesitantly.

"I'm opening it now."

Christina gripped the doorknob and slowly pulled open the door. It creaked louder than when she opened the windows. Even knowing that there was no one inside, the two of them still flinched faintly.

Once they opened the entrance, there was a room that appeared to be like a dining room and a kitchen.

"Let's go inside." Christina stepped in first, followed by Flora.

“Pardon the intrusion...”

“Flora. Can you use magic to make some light?” Christina touched the magic-sealing collar and asked.

“Yes! *Radialem*.”

Flora immediately held out her hand and recited the spell. A geometric patterned spell formula appeared past her hand, turning into a ball of light. It had no destructive power, but it was magic developed to illuminate the dark like this. The brightness of the light could be adjusted by the caster, and it also emitted a faint heat that could be used to warm oneself.

“Let’s check that all the rooms are empty, just in case.”

“Okay.”

It wasn’t a large building. There was a dining area and kitchen immediately beyond the entrance, a bedroom with three beds, a small room for storage, and a toilet. It didn’t take long for them to go through every room and check that it was completely deserted before returning to the dining room.

“It does seem well-maintained...” Christina muttered. She had touched the bed and other furniture and none were covered in any dust.

“Does that mean someone is living here?”

“That, or it’s possible those men anticipated we would find this cabin and had their friends clean it in advance.”

“...” Flora’s face stiffened as she fell speechless.

“Sorry for scaring you. The dining room, kitchen and bedroom are all neat and lack that lived-in feeling, so I don’t think anyone’s living here right now. Though we still can’t relax too much...” Christina said with a troubled look.

“Wh-What should we do?” Flora asked in a panic.

“There’s nothing we can do. I feel bad if this cabin belongs to someone unrelated to those men, but we’re going to rummage around for any food or useful supplies. Come over here.” Christina headed towards the kitchen first. She opened the cupboard to find some simple kitchen utensils and tableware. There was also firewood.

"It looks like there's a set of kitchenware here. All that's left to figure out is if there's food or not. Let's check the storage room."

"Okay."

The two of them moved to the storage room.

"I'll look through everything. You just stand there and illuminate the room," Christina instructed quickly.

"Okay."

Flora's light filled the room as Christina opened the lid on one of the wooden boxes. Inside was preserved food like dried meat and dried bread, a bottle of oil, jars of seasoning, and bottles of alcohol. In another wooden box, there was a single piece of paper with writing on it.

"A letter...?"

Christina moved beside the light Flora held up to read the letter.

This is food. It hasn't been poisoned, so feel free to help yourselves. The forest is filled with prowling beasts like bears and wolves, but you should be safe if you stay inside the cabin.

"It looks like this cabin really does belong to those men... It seems like they prepared the food in here for us. It says it's not poisoned, but..." Christina looked down at the goods and muttered with a tormented expression.

They had been sent here alive through a teleportation artifact. There was no reason for the men to go out of their way to poison them to death after doing that, so it probably wasn't a lie—but their intent was still unclear.

Of course, it seemed clear they were being kept as hostages, but why were they left unattended in the forest? It made sense to throw them in the forest to make it harder for them to move, but wasn't it a bit too deserted here for that? Was it possible that this wasn't an organizational crime? Such doubts arose.

"If there are ingredients, then we can make meals out of them. It looks like learning how to cook in Rodania was the right move," Flora said to uplift the dark atmosphere. Normally there would be no need for two princesses to learn

how to cook, but to make up for the time they spent apart, the siblings had used their days off to learn how to cook together.

“We won’t be able to make the best use of our cooking skills with the ingredients here, but it’s a lot more reassuring than having never cooked before.” Christina set aside the problems she couldn’t solve right now and nodded with a chuckle.

“It said we’d be safe as long as we’re inside this cabin.” Flora looked over at the letter.

“Indeed, if we only considered our own safety, the most pragmatic option would be to stay still in this cabin, but...”

Those men would eventually catch them if they remained here in the cabin.

The journey with Sir Amakawa as an escort taught me that traveling isn’t just about walking. I can’t even fight properly with my magic sealed right now, so I need a trustworthy escort.

However, they didn’t even have the money to be able to stay at an inn. They couldn’t hire an escort to return to Rodania, and all the fighting would have to be left to Flora. It’d be one thing if they were currently within the restoration’s sphere of influence...

If only her magic hadn’t been sealed... Christina touched the magic-sealing collar with an irritated expression as she was lost in her thoughts.

On top of that, they were in the forest. There was no telling what dangers were out there. From the perspective of an older sister thinking about her sister’s safety, they should stay in the cabin, even temporarily.

However, thinking as royalty, she believed they needed to leave the cabin. Though there were dangers in relocating, their freedom of mobility meant they should move for the good of their kingdom. That was the duty of royalty.

Flora saw the pained expression on Christina’s face and guessed at what her sister was thinking. She clenched her fists in a show of enthusiasm. “Christina! I’ll do my very best!”

“Flora...”

Perhaps the men had sealed her magic to prevent them from taking the option of escape, since Flora clearly looked like she wasn't cut out for fighting. However, Christina had no choice but to rely on Flora.

"If we try to escape from the forest, I'll be a burden on you because this collar seals my magic. If a beast attacks, all the fighting will be left to you. Do you understand?" she asked.

"Yes." Flora gulped, but still nodded firmly.

"All right... Then let's finish our preparations in this cabin and try to leave the forest. After that, we'll find out where we are and aim to return to Rodania," Christina decided. But just at that very moment...

Grrr.

The sound of a hungry stomach rumbled cutely. The source of the sound was obviously from one of them, so it was easy enough to identify.

Christina looked at Flora's shocked face.

"Th-That's not what you think it is!" Flora held down her stomach and blushed bright red.

"We departed from the Galarc Kingdom in the morning, and it's already long past lunchtime. Let's finish eating here first," Christina said with a chuckle. Thus, they finished their meal before preparing to leave.



Afterwards, Christina and Flora selected the items they would need for their departure, then set about cooking with the utensils and ingredients in the cabin. They made a soup by stewing grains and preserved meat, seasoned with salt. That way, the dry and stiff bread could be eaten easily once it was dipped in the soup.

There wasn't much of the work they could split, so Christina did all of the cooking alone. It didn't take much time, either. She carried the completed dish over to the dining table, where they sat down across from each other.

"Go on, give it a try..." Christina said doubtfully, staring at the dish.

It wasn't inedible when she tasted it herself, but it was nowhere near as good

as the food they normally ate.

“Thank you... It’s delicious, Christina!” Flora spooned the soup into her mouth and beamed happily.

Christina blinked at the look on her little sister’s face, then gave a slightly curt but embarrassed response. “...Is that so?”

I want to protect her smile, Christina thought.



The ironclad rule of traveling was to depart in the morning. However, Christina and Flora set off into the forest after eating lunch. They considered staying in the cabin for a night, but the longer they delayed their departure, the more they’d risk their assailants closing in on them.

Unfortunately, there was no map in the cabin for them to determine their present location, but they were prepared to camp outside if need be. That said, they didn’t just start walking off in a random direction once they’d left the cabin.

“That tree will do.”

Christina first found a tree with a lot of branches that was taller than the other trees around it.

“What’s wrong with that tree?” Flora asked curiously.

“I’m going to see what direction to head in from the top of that tree. If the view is clear, I may be able to see where the forest ends.”

“I see... As expected of you!”

“This is how Sir Amakawa got his bearings while we were traveling through the forest. I’m just imitating him,” Christina said, embarrassed by her little sister’s open praise.

“This is what Sir Haruto did...”

Flora’s expression softened faintly at that name. Christina was pretty sure that wasn’t just her imagination.

“Now, let me try climbing this,” Christina said as she selected a branch she

could start climbing from. However, Flora called for her to stop.

“Umm... I’ll climb the tree, Christina.”

“You will...? But you’re not good at physical activities, right?” Christina blinked at the unexpected offer.

“Even so, it’ll be much easier for me to climb once I’ve enhanced my physical abilities with magic.”

“Still...”

Flora’s suggestion made sense, but Christina was hesitant. When she considered the chance of Flora falling, she felt it would be much better for her to climb the tree herself. It was common to see unathletic sorcerers lose control of their magically-improved physical abilities and trip over their own feet. Climbing trees wasn’t particularly strenuous, but it still demanded some degree of coordination, so Christina was worried.

“I’m not as smart as you, so please let me do this much. I’ll be fine.” Flora was oddly assertive for once.

“All right... But don’t push yourself too hard. It doesn’t matter if you feel unsteady and have to stop in the middle. It’ll be too hard to climb in heels, so take off your shoes and go barefoot. Climbing in a dress might be tough, so you’ll have to put up with this even if it’s improper.” Christina hesitated before nodding, then rolled up Flora’s dress and tied it with a rope taken from the cabin so that it wouldn’t get in the way of her climbing.

“Okay! *Augendae Corporis!*” Flora replied in high spirits, taking off her shoes and reciting the spell. A geometric spell formula immediately engulfed her body—proof that her physical abilities had been enhanced.

“Be careful, okay? Use only the thick branches, not the thin ones. You don’t have to reach as high as you can go right away... Just take it slow and steady,” Christina called out to her, a worried look still on her face.

“I know. Here I go, then!” Flora replied with a forced smile, then finally began to climb. She obeyed her sister’s advice faithfully, climbing little by little without aiming too high in one go.

“...” Knowing that calling out to Flora without thinking would just interrupt her concentration, Christina watched her climb in silence.

“Heave-ho... Heave-ho...” Flora grunted sweetly, climbing with her eyes fixed upwards.

It looks like she'll be all right. But I have to watch over her carefully. Christina vowed to catch Flora if she fell. However, contrary to her worries—

“I did it, Christina! I’m at the top! It’s a wonderful view!” Flora declared.

“Right now, the sun should be climbing from the south, so remember its position. Also, can you see the edge of the forest?” Christina had to raise her voice to speak to her. Flora couldn’t be seen from the ground behind all the branches and leaves, but she was apparently captivated by the scenery.

“I’ve memorized the position of the sun! The other trees are also pretty tall, so I can’t see the edge of the forest... But I can see smoke rising in the distance!” Her voice echoed back down to Christina on the ground.

“There must be people living there... Do you know which direction it is?” Christina muttered the first half to herself, then raised her voice again to ask the second half.

“Umm, the sun’s in that direction, so... It’s to the east, I think!”

“Thank you! Once you’ve memorized the directions, come back down.”

“Okay!” Flora’s cheerful voice echoed back. Not long after, her descending figure could be spotted between the branches and leaves.

“When you’re descending, focus on the branch below you instead of the ground! Make sure you choose your footholds carefully.” It wasn’t as though Christina had any experience in tree climbing, but she gave Flora advice as if she were putting herself in Flora’s position.

“R-Right. Don’t look at the ground, just at the branches...” Flora descended slowly and nervously. She took a considerably longer amount of time climbing downwards than she had upwards, but she managed to make it roughly two meters above ground.

“Looks like it’ll be all right...” Christina said in relief, having watched her in

suspense.

“Yes. If I rely on the branches, then this much is... Eek!”

She had just crouched down to dangle from a branch when it snapped. Surprised by the sudden falling sensation, Flora screamed.

“Look out!” At the same time, Christina ran below her. She caught Flora as she fell, but the weight of her fall was too much for her to support. They toppled over together, but she sufficiently fulfilled her role of a cushion.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

Clutched in Christina’s arms, Flora opened her eyes fearfully to her sister’s face right before her.

“Are you okay...?”

“Yes, somehow...”

“I see. Thank goodness.” Christina sighed in relief. They remained hugging each other for a while, lying on the floor in a daze.

“Heh. Heheh. Hugging each other like this in the forest is kind of strange. Let’s get going soon,” Christina suggested with an amused smile.

“Okay.” Flora nodded shyly.

“Your dress is all ragged now. Let’s fix it before we depart. And put on your shoes again.”

Christina stood up and checked Flora’s outfit, undoing the rope to roll down the dress. She also picked up the discarded shoes and made her put them back on. She considered walking barefoot, but that made them liable to being injured by tree branches, so she gave up on the idea.

Incidentally, Flora’s dress must have caught on branches while she was climbing, as it was noticeably ripped and coming apart in several places.

“Thank you very much.” Flora seemed to find something pleasing, as she thanked her with a cheerful grin.

“I haven’t done anything deserving of thanks. More importantly, are you sure you remember the directions? What an odd child,” Christina said awkwardly,

picking up their belongings left on the ground beside them. She had made makeshift backpacks using a blanket on the bed in the cabin, filling it with food, seasoning, and cooking utensils.

Perhaps it was because they were dressed in gowns with high heels, but their appearance would have looked extremely mismatched and comical to an onlooker. Thankfully, there were no spectators to worry about here.

“Yes! The sun was in that direction, and the smoke was rising in that direction!” Flora picked up her own backpack and pointed at the locations she memorized.

“Well done. Let’s get going then.”

The two set off in order to escape the gloomy forest.



How much time had passed since then? The forest floor was difficult enough to walk on to begin with, yet the two of them had to proceed in fancy high-heeled shoes unsuitable for walking. Their expensive gowns were already stained with dirt at the hems.

Their feet were heavy and riddled with blisters, so Flora occasionally cast healing magic over them to temporarily ease the pain as they progressed. However, the sun was beginning to set and the forest was getting much darker. Their conversation diminished as time passed.

I can’t see the end of the forest at all. How long have we walked? I doubt she got the direction wrong, but... Christina thought as she silently moved her feet, glancing at Flora walking beside her. Flora’s expression clearly showed her fatigue.

Christina’s field of view was filled with the same trees they’d been looking at all day. When they had first set off she could see into the depths of the forest, but now it was too dark to see very far.

She hadn’t intended on taking the forest lightly, but she had expected them to make it out today, which was why their current situation made her mentally and physically exhausted.

“Let’s stop here for the day. We’ll eat, have a good night’s sleep, then prepare ourselves for tomorrow.” Christina decided to make camp before the forest became completely dark. It was another ironclad rule of traveling to set up camp before it became dark when one couldn’t reach their destination by sunset.

“Okay.” Flora replied with a sigh that expelled her fatigue.

“Where should we sleep? Well, the only option we have is the trees.”

She looked around, but there was no flat land. Small stones were also scattered about the place, making it difficult to sleep on the ground. It seemed that sleeping against a tree would be for the best.

“Did you camp outside while traveling with Sir Haruto, Christina?” Flora asked.

“No. Sir Amakawa managed our travel time and route appropriately so that we never had to sleep outdoors.”

She had been impressed back then too, but looking back on that time in her current situation made her appreciate how amazing that was all over again.

Just then, Flora’s stomach let out a cute grumble of hunger. One beat later, Christina’s stomach echoed that sentiment.

“Shall we eat, then?”

The two of them giggled in amusement and set about eating dinner.



That night, in the middle of the dark forest which had fallen completely silent, Christina and Flora sat under a tall tree, wrapped in the blankets they took from the cabin, and huddled before a campfire.

There must have been nocturnal beasts in the forest, as their eerie cries in the distance made Flora tremble. At first she had been too terrified to sleep, but the fatigue she accumulated eventually won over, and now she was dozing off with her head resting on Christina’s shoulder.

“Flora, you must be exhausted. Go to sleep already,” Christina said to her sleepy sister.

“But what about you, Christina...?” Flora’s drowsy eyes were filled with worry. Her older sister had stayed awake this entire time because Flora couldn’t sleep.

“I’ll sleep as soon as you fall asleep. If you’re feeling drowsy, you should be able to fall asleep quickly.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Good night.”

“Yes, good night...” Flora must have approached her limit, as she passed out as soon as she replied, leaving Christina as the only one awake.

I can’t believe we’re camping in the forest. I did learn a little about camping while at the Academy, but...

The information had mostly been targeted for royalty and nobility. Like how to order people around, what kind of place was suitable for camping with a large number of soldiers, and so on. Although she had participated in an outdoor drill as part of her lessons on military operations, those drills were merely for form’s sake, as all the personnel, equipment, and the testing ground had been prepared in advance.

However, an extremely irregular situation had occurred in her sixth year... Christina recalled the outdoor drill she participated in when she was twelve years old. They left the route that had been provided to them and, as a result, were attacked by monster swarms that would have otherwise been exterminated. In the end, they were even attacked by a minotaur and narrowly avoided a disastrous incident.

If Sir Amakawa is the same person, then...

There were two people that immediately came to Christina’s mind. One was the orphan, Rio. The other was the honorary knight, Haruto Amakawa. No matter how much she tried to discard her conviction that the two were actually the same person, she always returned to the same thought.

If Haruto Amakawa were here right now, she probably wouldn’t feel any fear about her current situation. Though she knew this wasn’t a good thought to have, Christina couldn’t help thinking this way.

She knew she wasn't a very capable person, but she couldn't even use magic right now. The fear of whether she could protect Flora was overwhelming. And she was fully aware of how self-centered, convenient, and spoiled this wish was...

Why do I keep hoping for him to save us from this situation...?

Someone like her should have been even less than a complete stranger to him. Haruto Amakawa directed his kindness towards Celia, whereas Christina had only received the leftovers of that. With that thought, she scoffed at herself with a hint of deeply seeded guilt.

I have to do my best to get Flora back to Rodania...

Christina softly petted Flora's sleeping head. That seemed to release her strained nerves, causing a sudden surge of sleepiness to wash over her.

She had continuously strained herself thinking she had to be strong for her sister, so she was actually fairly exhausted. Unable to fight against the drowsiness any longer, Christina fell into a deep sleep as well.



The next morning...

Sunlight had just started filtering faintly through the trees. Despite the uncomfortable sleeping environment, Christina and Flora slept through the night without waking up even once. The forest was cold as they slept and their quality of sleep wasn't the best, but they both got enough hours of sleep.

The sisters blinked their eyes open. The first thing that came into view was the forest scenery, followed by the sight of the other with their eyes closed tiredly. Then, as their own fatigue from walking hadn't recovered, they soon closed their eyes for a second round of sleep, surrendering themselves to the warmth of their blanket. They wanted to rest a little longer, unable to resist that desire. They half-dozed, with only the smallest bit of stimulation needed to wake them next time.

"Mm..." At the sensation of something tickling her neck, Flora woke up first.

What...? Flora thought, reaching for her neck.

“Oww!” A sharp pain pricked the back of her neck, making her flinch.

“Wh-What?! What happened?” Flora’s sudden scream shocked Christina awake.

“Th-There’s a pain in my neck...” Flora said, brushing her hands at the place where she felt the pain in a panic. Something small was sent flying as a result. It was a spider.

“Eek!” she cried out, immediately understanding the situation she was now in and paling more and more by the second.

“N-No! No! No! NO!” She had been bitten by a spider. Thinking there could be more bugs on her body, Flora shot to her feet and started patting herself down in a fluster.



“C-Calm down. It’s okay, I’ll look at it for you.”

“P-Please do...” Christina stood up and patted down Flora’s dress, checking carefully for any bugs. She also checked underneath the dress, confirming that the only bug that had made contact was the spider.

“It’s all right. There are no other bugs,” Christina said in relief.

“Th-Thank goodness... Sorry about that. I screamed out in surprise,” Flora apologized for losing her composure.

“It’s fine. I’d be surprised if a spider bit me in my sleep too,” Christina said with a chuckle.

“I’ll check if there are any bugs in your dress as well,” Flora offered, moving to pat down Christina’s dress to check for any foreign substances attached.

“Before you do that, detoxify the area you were bitten with magic. The spider may have been venomous,” Christina said, looking down at the fleeing spider.

“R-Right! *Purgo!*”

Flora must have forgotten the possibility of venomous spiders, as she hurriedly placed her hand over her neck and began detoxifying it.

I’ve heard there are some poisons that can’t be detoxified with magic, but...

Christina watched on with a tinge of unease.

Detoxify magic, as its name implied, was magic commonly used to neutralize poisons, but like Christina was thinking, there were some poisons that couldn’t be detoxified. This was because detoxifying magic broke down the substances that were toxic to the human body and made them harmless—it had no effect on bacteria, viruses, and mold.

Medical technology hadn’t advanced enough in this world for people to consider the fact that bacteria and viruses weren’t a type of poison, so they could only explain it away as *Purgo* being unable to detoxify all poisons.

That being said, it was clear that would only make Flora uneasy for no reason, so Christina didn’t mention it. She could only pray that the detoxifying magic worked, or that the spider wasn’t venomous to begin with.

"Show me the spot you were bitten... Looks like it isn't bleeding. But cast healing magic over it anyway."

Christina peeked through the gaps between Flora's hand casting magic to check on the affected area.

"Okay."

After Flora activated healing magic like directed, Christina prepared the same menu as yesterday for breakfast. Once they had eaten breakfast and warmed up, the two of them set off to escape the forest.

Chapter 2: Reiss's Intentions in Rodania

Meanwhile, several hours after Christina and Flora were originally sent to the forest in Paladia Kingdom...

Rodania, the capital of Marquess Rodan's domain, was home to the headquarters of the Restoration. The Restoration's central office was located in the guest house, which Celia was visiting. Normally, the leading nobles of the Restoration and their secretaries would be working hard at their duties, but no one answered the door when she knocked.

"Excuse me..." Celia opened the door hesitantly.

There was no sign of anyone else inside the silent office.

That's weird... Did everyone go out to meet Princess Christina and Princess Flora?

Celia was visiting the central office on the day Christina and Flora were scheduled to return to Rodania from the Galarc Kingdom. She cocked her head in wonder, but it wouldn't be too strange for everyone to go and greet the two princesses if they had returned already.

That was what she thought, when Aishia suddenly materialized beside her.

"H-Hey, Aishia! You can't materialize here, even if there's no one in the room," Celia scolded her in a fluster. She didn't think the room would be left empty for long, which meant that someone could come back at any time.

"Step back. There's a strange presence," Aishia said, staring at the corner of the room.

"Huh...?" Celia followed her gaze.

The distance between them was a few meters.

"I suppose there was no hiding after coming this close. And as I expected, the one guarding Celia Claire in spirit form was you... I had my hopes up, but it seems I've been completely outwitted by that man. What a bother..."

The Proxia Empire ambassador, Reiss, stood there quietly. How long had he been there for? It was as though he had appeared out of nowhere.

“Why do you know about Aishia’s spirit form...?” Celia mumbled with a dumbfounded look.

“I wonder why indeed...” he chuckled smugly.

“What do you want?” Aishia stared at Reiss as she asked him directly.

“Do you think I’d answer that? That’s what I’d like to say, but my purpose isn’t to confront you here—I’m not that rash. I had business with a particular member of the Restoration. Unfortunately, my timing wasn’t the best... It seems everyone in this room has headed for the harbor already.” Reiss shrugged and looked out the window as though to change the topic.

“Business? Who are you after?” Aishia asked in her flat tone, but her gaze was slightly sharper than normal.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that much.”

“If it’s Celia you’re after...” Aishia stood before Celia as though to protect her from Reiss. He had already made his hostility clear on their journey from Cleia to Rodania—if he was after Celia, then there was even less of a reason for her to show him any mercy.

“Just to be clear, the reason why I confronted your contract holder on the journey from Cleia to Rodania was merely because of Princess Christina. Well, my plans were foiled and the princess safely reached Rodania in the end, but... As long as you don’t get in my way, I won’t have reason to harm you either.” Reiss raised both his hands to show he had no hostile intentions.

“Why are you after Princess Christina and Princess Flora?” Celia asked with bated breath.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that either.”

“Is there a spy amongst the Restoration leaders? Is that why you’re here?”

“Who knows?” Reiss evaded Celia’s probing questions with vague answers.

“You said you were outwitted before.” Celia picked up a part of Reiss’s earlier statement to probe him further.

“Let’s leave the unnecessary chatter at that. This situation is extremely unexpected for me, so I’d like to leave as soon as possible.” Reiss ended the conversation there and made to leave.

“Your words cannot be trusted. Therefore, I’m not letting you get away,” Aishia stated quietly.

“Oh? You wish to fight me? In such a restricted space like this? It would be one thing if you let me retreat quietly, but if you’re going to fight, then I will resist.” The room would inevitably be destroyed if they fought, Reiss was implying. “I doubt even you would be able to suppress me easily. Much less while protecting Celia Claire as you fight.”

Reiss looked at Celia.

“I-I can fight a little myself. Did you think we would let you walk away peacefully after you snuck all the way into our innermost office? Even if I set aside the matter of Princess Christina and Princess Flora, you’re still related to Haruto’s enemy.” Despite the nervous look on her face, Celia refuted him without cowardice.

“I haven’t snuck in, though. Since you’ve found me like this and all. And what if I was invited here as a diplomat?” Reiss chuckled while evading the point. As he said that, he approached the balcony of the office.

“If you want to leave the estate, you can leave through the front door and not the balcony,” Aishia said, raising her right hand up at the ceiling. She had already prepared her magic essence for combat, but she instantly increased that essence further. Then, without any visually obvious phenomenon occurring, a screeching ultrasonic sound rang through the air.

“A powerful resonance between ode and mana...?”

While Celia couldn’t use spirit arts as a sorcerer who handled magic, she had lived in the stone house for a long time. Thanks to her training under Rio and the spirit folk girls, she was able to see the light of ode and detect mana. Thus, she understood precisely what Aishia had tried to do. That is, she had forced a powerful resonance between the ode and mana across the entirety of Rodania, creating a signal that could only be noticed by those who could sense it. Sara and the others would soon realize something had happened.

“I see, so you’re going with that... I shall take my leave now, then.”

Reiss immediately guessed that their allies were hiding nearby. If they all joined up together, Aishia would be able to focus on pursuing him alone—something which would be extremely problematic. With an annoyed sigh, Reiss took a great leap onto the balcony and flew into the air with spirit arts.

At the same time, Aishia picked Celia up in a bridal carry. “We’re going to chase that man. Hold on tight to me.”

“Huh...?!” Celia let out a hysterical noise at abruptly being picked up. Aishia accelerated suddenly and flew outside from the balcony.

“W-Wait! Hold on!” Celia screamed.

“Don’t open your mouth while we’re accelerating. You might bite your tongue,” Aishia advised calmly. Flight using spirit arts involved setting up a wind barrier against the surroundings, so that the air resistance was eliminated while flying at high speeds. As a result, one could converse while flying, but the faster the flight, the more recoil would be felt from the acceleration. Aishia could control even that recoil with her spirit arts, but her control wasn’t as accurate with the considerable burden of carrying Celia in her arms.

“G-Gosh, don’t surprise me like that. Though I guess it was an emergency, so it makes sense... But what do we do now?”

Once the recoil of Aishia’s acceleration finally calmed down, Celia pouted her lips cutely. However, she soon put those feelings behind her and focused on chasing Reiss. She could see him fleeing through the air ahead of them, and when she looked down, she could see the city of Rodania below.

“We’ll lead Reiss to the stone house. I’ll attack him from the sides, so use your magic to stop him from moving upwards. You don’t need to hold back. You can use intermediate attack magic spells.”

“A-All right. I’ll give it a go.” Celia gulped and nodded at Aishia’s orders.

“Here we go, then.” Aishia created countless balls of light at her side, each roughly one meter in diameter. The next moment, they all fired outwards and curved in Reiss’s direction.

“As expected of a humanoid spirit. What wonderful control.” Reiss glanced back and evaded the light spheres that curved irregularly.

“I’m not as good as you, but I’ll go all-out on magic essence until Sara and the others arrive as backup! *Quintet Magician Magicae Displodo!*” She wasn’t about to be a burden like she had been on the journey from Cleia to Rodania. Celia focused all of her mental energy on reciting her spell. Seven magic circles appeared around her; she took a mere three seconds to take aim and fired at just a hair’s breadth above Reiss’s head.

Whoa! Seven intermediate attack spells at once, you say? Her spell deployment is also quick. I didn’t think I was underestimating her, but I see why she’s called the genius sorcerer now. It would be one matter if I was facing her alone, but having a sorcerer of this level as a support is quite troublesome indeed...

Reiss avoided Celia’s light missiles by slightly lowering his altitude, when the next barrage came at him without delay. There were as many bullets as there were spell circles, and as soon as he dodged one, the next would come flying. On top of that, it wasn’t only Celia’s attacks coming at him.

When he tried to raise his altitude, Celia’s magic would snipe at him, and Aishia’s spirit arts freely changed direction to fly at him from the sides.

I’ve been completely blocked from above and to the sides. I can’t accelerate like I want like this. We’ve already left the skies of Rodania, so perhaps it would be better for me to just hide myself in the forest.

Thinking that, Reiss lowered his gaze to the forest.

“Guh...”

Suddenly, an ice, fire, and light bullet came shooting up from the ground. Orphia came flying out of the forest.

This is...a rather unlucky situation. No, I suppose I was led here on purpose. Reiss made a contemplative face at the difficult situation he was in. Just then, Aishia swooped down and approached Orphia.

“Lady Aishia!”

“Orphia, take Celia. Protect the house with everyone else,” Aishia said, tossing Celia in Orphia’s direction.

“Huh? Whaaa?!”

Celia screamed at the sudden floating sensation. However, they were racing against time right now. Reiss had already taken the chance to speed up and retreat.



"I'll be off now," Aishia said once Orphia caught Celia, who was still in a fluster. Aishia accelerated upwards once again, flying after Reiss.

It doesn't look like she'll be giving up. Honestly, what an unlucky day. Reiss had a rare look of pain on his face. Just how did things end up like this? He recalled the events leading up to this moment...



Shortly before Rio left for the Proxia Empire...

On the upper balcony of the Proxia Castle stood Lucius, Emperor Nidoll, and Ambassador Reiss. Lucius had barged in on them.

"The bastard is my prey," he said about Rio, then left, leaving Nidoll and Reiss behind on the balcony.

"Now...shall I explain the plan to kill Haruto Amakawa—the boy also known as Rio and the Black Knight?" Reiss brought up cheerfully.

"You're killing him? Was the brat not capable of reaching the transcendent ones?" Nidoll asked frankly.

"Well, part of the reason why the transcendent ones were brought up as an example was to control Lucius. Though it seems it had no effect at all." Reiss shrugged in annoyance. "However, it's true that the Black Knight's combat power exceeds those of the great hero class from the time of the Divine War. While I don't know if he's capable of wide-ranged attacks like the awakened heroes, it would be wise to consider his individual combat ability just as threatening as theirs. He does have a contract with a humanoid spirit, after all. Their threat when combined would be..."

"Something that would surpass an awakened hero?" Nidoll's expression twisted with a grin.

"You seem rather pleased. This isn't good news for me, though." Reiss sighed wearily.

I'm sure their combined power cannot reach that of the transcendent ones, but the fact they're equal to the awakened heroes means they'll be equal to us when unbound... Which would be extremely problematic if true, Reiss thought.

“And so you plan on splitting them up and crushing them individually. Indeed, that is one of the fundamentals of war.” Nidoll correctly guessed the general plan Reiss was thinking of.

“Yes. He should be utterly convinced that Lucius is connected to me, being that I am the ambassador of the Proxia Empire. If his resentment for Lucius is strong, he shouldn’t be able to overlook this country. It won’t be long before he comes here—to this very castle. We should use that chance carefully.”

“And that is when you want me to pass a message on to the Black Knight?”

Reiss nodded in satisfaction. “I’m glad you’re quick on the uptake. However, his arrival will be unpredictable, and if he comes across Lucius, we’ll end up involved in a destructive head-on collision between them. This situation will need to be avoided.”

“That seems interesting as well.”

“It’s not interesting for me. That is why there will be a need to prepare a different location for the showdown and make Lucius avoid the castle for the time being. I shall take on that role myself.”

“In which case, my role will be to guide the Black Knight.”

“Indeed. If his target is merely Lucius, then he wouldn’t want to fight more people for no reason. Use that to your advantage and have him follow Lucius.”

“Will it really go that smoothly?”

“That will depend on your capabilities, and a little bit of luck. If he decides that this castle isn’t worth his time for a visit, then the plan would be ruined.”

“It would.”

“However, in that case, we can just guide him in another way to the battlefield I shall prepare. But I do believe he will stop by this castle. Not even he should be able to slip past the castle’s barrier undetected, so it’ll be your time to shine once he’s snuck in.”

“Naturally, I should treat him as an intruder. Is that correct?” Nidoll asked with a slight bounce to his voice.

“As long as you guide him to the location of the battlefield, I leave the rest to

you. However, you absolutely must clarify that your relationship with Lucius is as mercenary and employer, and you must hint that Lucius is in the Paladia Kingdom. That is what I request of you.”

“The battlefield shall be Paladia, you say. It is a shame I cannot go there myself... I will have to make do with enjoying the opening act. It has been some time since I last faced a powerful opponent. It makes my heart leap.” Nidoll spoke brightly as he imagined his confrontation with Rio here.

“Keep things in moderation... Even if he does sneak in, he won’t fight with the intent to kill, as his goal is to obtain information. If the battle gets too heated and intense, the worst may come to pass.” Reiss narrowed his eyes as he emphasized his point.

“Surely that mustn’t be the sound of concern for my defeat that I am hearing. And from you, no less.”

“If it comes down to an all-out battle, then even you will be in an unfavorable position in your current state. It may not be what you want to hear, but have some restraint in your fun.”

“Fine.”

“Good. During that time, I’ll drag Lucius around and work on securing our victory.”

“What do you intend on doing?” Nidoll asked in interest.

“My first idea is to bring at least one of the heroes onto our side as a pawn. At worst, we can stimulate their awakening and throw them against the Black Knight.”

“Hmm. Speaking of heroes, there was a report that a certain church has made a move.”

“You mean the saint of the Church of the End? I was planning on leaving that case until after the Black Knight had been dealt with. In terms of a threat, he is far above them.”

“Which hero do you intend on luring to this side, then?”

“There’s one hero without any affiliation to a kingdom or organization,

masquerading as an adventurer. There's been various activity around the Rubia Kingdom's princess regarding that, so I am considering using this opportunity to take the hero in. If things go according to plan, this should act as a distraction for Lucius as well."

"How overly protective of you."

"There is no better candidate at present than Lucius, after all... I'd like to avoid losing him at all costs. That is why I'm bending over backwards trying to keep him pleased." Reiss shook his head tiredly, while Nidoll smirked in agreement.

"I'm sure it's beyond my imagination. So, what will be the core of your plan for victory over the Black Knight?"

"It's simple. We just have to take hostages. Rio may be strong, but he's susceptible to what will happen if we take hostages. It'll merely be a matter of taking someone precious to him from his home base while he's away. We'll be making a total enemy of him if we mess up, but, well... This method will suit Lucius's tastes much more, so it will be easier to gain his cooperation," Reiss said with a cold laugh. Defeating an enemy by aiming for their weakness was a normal tactic in battle.

"I see," Nidoll hummed with meaning.

"Does something worry you?"

"You are indeed a cunning man. You excel in making people do things for you. However, perhaps there's something that you're forgetting?"

"Which would be...?"

"That Lucius is also a cunning beast. He moves on instinct, preying on others. He isn't of the caliber to be kept as a pet."

"I do believe I am aware."

"I don't know how you've calculated your victory, but... No matter how much Lucius is forced into working with you in order to locate the Black Knight, as long as you hide the important things from him, he won't obey you," Nidoll warned.

“Fine. I shall find the occasion to tell him everything other than the fact his beloved boy is coming to the castle,” Reiss said, raising both shoulders.

“I see. I’ve given my warning.”

“Indeed. Now, it’s about time I take my leave.”

With the essential matters discussed, Reiss turned his back to Nidoll and walked off.

“Now, what to do from here...” Nidoll’s muttering was delightfully animated.

Interlude: The Fifth Hero

Several months ago, around the time Satsuki, Rui, Hiroaki, and Takahisa were summoned to the Strahl region...

In the group of small kingdoms sandwiched between the Galarc Kingdom and the Proxia Empire, there was a small country called the Vilkis Kingdom. On the eastern side of this kingdom, a hero was secretly summoned.

The hero's name was Kikuchi Renji, a high school student who lived in Japan. He was slightly below the average height of a male high school student at 160 centimeters tall, and he had an innocent but strong-willed look on his face.

"Where...is this? Am I...standing in a crater?" Renji muttered, wide-eyed and confused.

After returning home from school, he had left the house still dressed in his uniform to drop by the convenience store. Yet before he knew it, he found himself standing in an unfamiliar place. The area where Renji stood was gouged into the ground like a round crater, leaving him in the center. It was no wonder he was surprised.

There was no sign of anything man-made around him, and it seemed whatever had created this crater had blown away everything around it during the impact—there was nothing but the ground spreading out in a circle around him wherever he looked. The edge of the crater appeared to be several hundred meters away, but Renji couldn't tell what was going on outside the crater from where he stood.

"It's a little cold... And today was meant to be warm... Is this still Japan?"

Renji trembled in his school blazer as he took another good look around. The time of day hadn't changed, but the location was completely different. It was at this moment that a thought crossed his mind.

It's almost like one of those other-world summoning novels.

Japanese people were reading a lot of novels involving summoning to another

world, so the possibility occurred to him.

“Nah, that couldn’t be.”

The novels Renji read were merely a form of entertainment to kill time. Fictional worlds inside fictional stories. There was no way that could happen in real life.

“But...”

Something that should’ve been impossible *had* happened. He was in a situation that couldn’t be explained in any other way. Renji cast his eyes over the area and gulped.

I guess I’ll check what’s going on outside the crater.

With that decided, Renji started walking towards the edge of the crater. There was an incline from the center to the farthest edge, so moving out of the crater was easy. He arrived at the edge to see a forest of trees spread before him.

“A forest, huh...” Renji closed his eyes as though to avoid reality and tapped himself on the head a few times, then opened his eyes and looked around again. The crater was still surrounded by trees as far as he could see.

“That’s right, my smartphone...is out of range, huh?” Renji suddenly took his smartphone out of his blazer pocket. The impossible situation had shaken him so much, he forgot about the first tool he should have checked. However, the symbol near the battery indicator showed he was out of the network range. This meant that even if he was still in Japan, he wouldn’t be able to use an app to find his location.

“I guess...I’ll look around outside the crater for now.”

It was possible that this crater was located at the edge of the forest, and he’d be able to make his way out easily.

With that decided, Renji sighed heavily and started walking.



Some time later...

“Well, that was a waste of time after all...”

Renji was unable to find a way out and sighed heavily. No matter where along the outer perimeter of the crater he stood, he couldn't see the end of the forest.

"Do I have no choice but to enter the forest? I guess not... Hm?"

He leaned against a tree while looking around at the area and talking to himself. Then, from the other side of the crater, a group of people appeared from the forest. There were eight of them.

"That's...!"

Renji spotted the figures opposite to his position and almost ran forward without thinking. However, he was stopped by the caution that rose within him.

No matter how you look at it, they're not Japanese... They're dressed like they walked straight out of a fantasy world. Some of them even have swords.

Renji quickly hid behind the tree he was leaning on and strained his eyes to watch the group that came out of the forest. They were all men in their twenties to forties. Some of them had spades in their hands. If those were farming tools, were they being used in place of weapons? They didn't have any defensive equipment like armor, shields, or helmets equipped, and the clothes they were wearing all varied. Compared to the school uniform Renji wore, they seemed quite plain.

They don't seem like soldiers... Are they villagers? Renji guessed.

They're pointing at the crater and saying something.

The villagers seemed to be excited. He couldn't tell what they were saying, but there didn't appear to be any anger in their expressions. Were they surprised?

That aside, my eyes feel like they can see really clearly right now... They should be pretty far away, yet I can see their faces without a problem, Renji suddenly thought. His vision didn't require glasses, but both eyes were below 1.0. He wondered why he could see so far and so clearly.

Are they coming this way?

The men started walking along the outside of the crater.

Even if I showed myself, we wouldn't be able to communicate. I don't want to approach armed men barehanded either. Let's see what happens a bit longer.

Renji decided to retreat a little farther into the forest. The attention of the villagers was drawn to the crater, as though they were wary of something.

There may be wolves or other dangerous beasts. Wait, this is a fantasy world, so monsters might also be possible.

Once he reached that thought, Renji glanced back at the forest in fear. There were only dense trees growing there, but the thought of dangerous creatures gave him the chills. However, he couldn't move from his current position. Renji hid himself in the trees and waited for the villagers to approach.

After roughly ten minutes had passed, the men were finally beside the trees Renji was hidden behind. Renji retreated a little farther into the forest to avoid detection, holding his silence while listening attentively to them.

“Chief, how do we explain this to the lord of the region?”

“No clue. We have no choice but to report the reality as is—that all the water in the lake has vanished.”

Obstructed by the trees, there was roughly ten meters distance between them, but he could clearly hear the conversation between the villagers.

So that crater was a lake, huh... Wait. Wait, what?! I understood their words?! They can speak Japanese?!

Renji swallowed his breath in shock.

“We went around once but there was nothing. The sun will set soon, so let's head back,” the village chief said, ushering the other villagers to move. They proceeded to leave briskly without noticing Renji's presence. Once he confirmed that, Renji followed them at just a far enough distance not to lose sight of them.

Being able to speak Japanese is like the exact template of an other-world story, but I'm grateful. I don't want to approach armed strangers, but if I can communicate with them then I may be able to negotiate something. At any rate, there's no point in staying here. Whether I negotiate with them or not, I should

at least follow them to get out of this forest.

Renji was almost certain that this was another world now. He decided he would follow the villagers until they left the forest.



We only walked for a bit, but we got out of the forest pretty fast, surprisingly.

Renji had arrived at the edge of the forest. A hundred meters ahead of him were the villagers he had been following, and past them was the village they were heading towards. The village was surrounded by a rather tall fence to prevent intruders from getting in, and there was a gate as an entrance to the village.

They must be residents of that village.

From the sight of the poorly built wooden rooftops and their numbers, the population of the village was probably a few hundred or so people. The sun was already starting to set, so his only choice was to rely on the hospitality of the village or sleep outside.

I can guess what their standard of living is like from the look of their buildings, but I suppose it'd be better than sleeping outside. Well, I'll have to make do.
Renji decided on going to the village.

If I follow those guys into the village like this, they'll realize I came out of the forest after them. It'd be an issue if they pried into why I was at the crater. I should move. With that thought, he took a detour. He distanced himself so the villagers wouldn't spot him, then went around the outside of the village to the opposite side to the forest. The opposite side to the forest was farmland. The road towards the village cut through the farms, so he made his way to the road and through the gate, when—

“...”

He encountered a girl who appeared to be a villager. She must have been in her mid-teens—either the same age as Renji, or younger. The girl spotted him and froze at the sight of an unfamiliar stranger.

“Hey, are you one of the villagers here?” Renji marched right up to her.

“Yes, I am. Umm... Are you a noble?” the girl asked, looking at Renji’s face a little warily.

“No, I’m not a noble.”

“But you’re wearing fine clothes...”

“Hmm. So these look like fine clothes to you?” Renji looked down at the high school uniform he was wearing.

“They’re so clean... Only a noble would wear something like that.” The girl looked between his clothes and her own in comparison. Hers were rather worn out and dirtied by her daily work, looking rather shabby in Renji’s eyes.



“Right, your clothes do seem worn out. But I’m not a noble.”

“O-Oh, I see.”

“By the way, what are you doing here?” Renji asked the slightly sullen girl.

When the girl realized Renji wasn’t a noble, she relaxed her guard and sighed lightly. With her shifted attitude, she questioned him in a less formal manner. “That’s what I should be asking... Haha. Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m a traveler.”

“A traveler...” The girl shot Renji a dubious look.

“There’s no need to be suspicious of me. I’m not here to do anything bad.”

“Hmm... So what do you want from our village? Oh, are you here because you saw the pillar of light?” The girl still looked at Renji distrustfully, but then she thought of a possible reason why Renji came to visit and asked about it.

“The pillar of light?” Renji tilted his head.

“It disappeared right away, but there was an amazing pillar of light in the sky just now.”

“Ah... that light. Right. I saw that from a distance and wandered in this direction. I didn’t really have a destination, so I followed the light.” Renji quick-wittedly matched his story with her words.

“I knew it. If it’s the pillar of light you’re after, it came from the forest. Everyone in the village was shocked and made a commotion about it. Some people went into the forest to investigate, but they should be back soon,” the girl explained excitedly.

Based on the situation, the center of the crater where I stood would have been the point of the light pillar, right? So that light was what summoned me into this world.

“I see.” Renji nodded as he analyzed the situation in his head.

“If you want to hear more about it, I can show you to the chief,” the girl offered kindly.

“No... I’m interested in that too, but I have another favor to ask.”

“A favor?”

“I don’t have anywhere to go. Could I stay in this village?”

“Huh...?”

“Could I? Otherwise I’d have to sleep outside.”

“I’d have to ask the village chief.”

“Please ask him, then.”

“Huh? Why me? I’ll show you the way to the chief, so you ask him.” The girl frowned.

“Fine. I have to do it, I guess,” Renji agreed with a shrug.

What a weird guy. His hair color is also...not quite strange, but black isn’t a color I’ve ever seen in this village. His face isn’t quite girlish, but rather childlike? Still, he’s cocky and shameless. I guess all boys are like this, though. The girl’s childhood friend came to mind as she compared Renji’s attitude to his, making her sigh quietly.

“Let’s go, then,” she prompted.

“All right.”

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“...It’s Renji.”

When the girl asked for his name, Renji hesitated before answering. The reason why his reply was delayed was because he feared giving his Japanese name would sound questionable. However, Renji was a name that passed even overseas, so he figured he could use it openly here.

“I see. My name’s Rhea. Nice to meet you.”

This was how Renji and Rhea first met.



That night, at Rhea’s home...

“Ugh, why does he have to stay here? I’m a single young woman, living alone...” Rhea muttered to herself with her lips in a pout as she cooked in the

kitchen.

“You’re the one who agreed,” Renji said awkwardly.

“Honestly, why did I agree?”

Rhea had shown Renji to the village chief, but he had expressed his disapproval in providing accommodation.

“Seriously though. Who are you?”

“I said I was a wandering traveler.”

“That’s so shady...”

Renji refused to explain his background properly. Because he was trying to hide his summoning into this world, he couldn’t help his lack of background, but as a result, all the villagers—including the chief—looked at him with a distrustful gaze.

If he wasn’t a noble, why did he have such clean clothes? If he was a traveler like he claimed, why didn’t he have a sword on him? Why was he traveling without any money or tools? On top of that, he wanted them to show him to the nearest city.

“Well it’s the truth, so I can’t help it,” Renji had boldly declared, leaving a bad impression on the village chief. He had expressed his displeasure in letting an unknown outsider stay in the village.

But the one who had stopped the chief was Rhea. “The nights are cold; it’d be too pitiful to make him camp outside...” were the words that started an argument between her and the chief about how “this man doesn’t have any manners,” and “that doesn’t mean we can let him sleep outside,” and so on.

In the end, the chief had said, “If you’re that insistent, then host him in your own house. I’ll allow that much.” And with Rhea’s permission, it was decided he would stay at her place.

“Well, I’m grateful I don’t have to sleep outside. Sorry...” Renji apologized awkwardly, feeling bad for everything he had done.

“It’s fine. But you’re leaving the next time a merchant comes, got it?” Rhea stressed. Renji was staying at her house under the condition that he would

leave with the next merchant that came by the village, which was at most one month away.

"Yeah, I know. In exchange for staying here, I'll help out with whatever work I can."

"That goes without saying," Rhea snorted. She turned back to her cooking and said curtly, "I've left a change of clothes out, so use the ones I put over there."

"You live alone because your parents died, right? Whose clothes are these?" Renji asked.

"My late older brother," Rhea answered smoothly.

"Hmm... I see." Renji was taken aback, but he didn't know how to react, so he lightly brushed it off.

"..." Rhea said nothing more than that, silently working away at cooking. Thus began Renji and Rhea's temporary life together.



Late that night, when the villagers had all fallen fast asleep...

"Mm..." Renji was sleeping on the bed that Rhea had lent him. He was dreaming, yet his consciousness was stirred completely.

Where am I...?

Before he knew it, he was in a pure white room. The room continued endlessly.

(Hero.)

An unfamiliar male voice suddenly echoed in Renji's head.

Who's there?! Renji looked around with a gasp.

(Hero. The chosen hero.)

Hero...? Does he mean me?

(I impart upon you the knowledge of how to use the Divine Arms of Ice you have been bestowed. Accept it.)

What? Wha...?!

In the next moment, knowledge burst into Renji's head. It was knowledge about tools called the Divine Arms, which he had never heard of before. All of a sudden, he understood what Divine Arms were, what they could do, and even how to use them.

This is... Renji was taken aback in his dream.

(Divine Arms will respond to your requests, granting you power. You are a hero. You are a special, chosen existence. Know that.)

Gah! What the hell is that?! Who are you?! This is so one-sided! Renji questioned the owner of the voice.

The owner of the voice spoke to Renji with no acknowledgment of the other. There was no conversation to be held. And then—

(This is my final advice to you. Until the day comes: survive.)

The owner of the voice left behind those words and faded from Renji's consciousness.

H-Hey, wait! Did you leave?! Who are you?! Are you the one who brought me to this world? Why did you do that?! Renji called in a hurry, but there was no response. In the next moment, Renji jerked awake.

“Ah?!”

His heart was pounding, possibly out of excitement. “Hah... Hah... Was it... a dream? No...” Renji gulped.

Imagine it. The Divine Arms I've obtained.

According to the information in his head, the Divine Arms would materialize in the shape of the weapon imagined by its wielder. Renji closed his eyes and focused his mind, thrusting out his right hand.

After a moment, faint light particles floated in the air, gathering together in the next instant to form a halberd in his hand. It was taller than Renji's height, with an intricate and artistic design.

“I did it...” Renji grinned. “According to what I learned, this Divine Arms wields the power of ice. Apparently if I name it, my impression of it will strengthen and speed up the materialization... Ice, huh? Then maybe... Cocytus.”

Cocytus was the name of the icy world in the final layer of hell. Though he kept it a secret from the people around him, Renji was actually a nerd when it came to things like that, so he had an abundant amount of useless knowledge.

“Disappear.”

Cocytus vanished in an instant.

“Okay, it’s gone. Cocytus.”

This time he tried to materialize it. Perhaps it was because he had named it, but there was practically no time lag at all.

“It feels familiar in my hand. It isn’t heavy at all. Looks like it was true that my body and physical abilities were enhanced as well.”

The halberd was roughly two meters long. He didn’t know what material it was made of, but it was a metal object that should weigh pretty heftily. However, for some reason, it felt like he could handle it freely.

“I want to try swinging it...” Renji couldn’t help the desire within him to test swing Cocytus. He had the eager expression of someone who had just bought a new game to play.

“Maybe I can sneak out quietly and try...”

The villagers were all asleep, including his housemate. They shouldn’t notice if he snuck out of the house. With that thought, Renji slipped out of Rhea’s home.

The full moon is almost here. I should be able to walk in this darkness.

There were no lights leaking from any of the houses, so the villagers must have all been sound asleep. The only source of light was the moon, but the rod cell of the human eye could see clearly enough under the moonlight without any street lamps.

The region Renji lived in in Japan had been surrounded by farmland without man-made lights as well, so he wasn’t afraid of this much darkness.

“This far should be fine.” Renji arrived at a location far enough to oversee the houses of the village and began spending a few minutes doing some light stretches to relax his body’s muscles. Then—

“Cocytus.” He called the name of the Divine Arms he had vanished earlier and materialized it in his hand. Then he tried holding it in a stance with both hands.

“I don’t know if this is the right grip to use, but... Hah!” Renji relied on the strength of his enhanced body to swing Cocytus horizontally with all his might.

“Hmm... Mmph! Hah!” He swung the halberd a second and third time to grasp the feeling of it.

“I see.” Renji grinned smugly and began to swing the Divine Arms silently. Horizontally, vertically down, vertically up, rotating it over his head... He nimbly performed all the tricky movements he considered to look cool. It was a feat no normal person could do. After that, he switched from a two-handed hold to a one-handed hold, swinging Cocytus many times to draw the path that he wanted.

“I’ve got the feel of it now.” He swung the halberd down one last time, stopping barely before scraping the ground. He then lifted it up and rested the handle against his right shoulder, laughing.

“Still, I’ve been swinging such a huge thing around so dramatically and I’m still not out of breath. Makes sense since I’m in another world, huh?”

Thanks to all the other-world novels and stories he had read while obsessed with the subgenre, Renji was somehow able to accept the situation he had been left in fairly smoothly. However, since he didn’t know anything about how to return to Earth at the moment, he still had his concerns.

“...Time to go back, I guess.”

Renji looked up at the sky, lost in thought, before returning to Rhea’s house.



The next morning, during breakfast...

“Say, Rhea.”

“What?”

“Do you know about the heroes?” Renji asked.

“I do, but... Are you making fun of me for being from the country?” Rhea had

an exasperated expression, as though there was no way she wouldn't know.

"No, that wasn't my intention..." Renji scratched his cheek, frowning.

"We hear about them in fairy tales, so even children know about them. They're the disciples of the Six Wise Gods that saved the world, right?"

"Yeah, that's right... I was just wondering if there was any disparity with the fairy tales that I know of. I'm curious. What are the fairy tales told in this village like?" Renji asked, immediately adjusting his words to fit her reply.

Rhea looked up at the ceiling to recall her memories of the story. "Hmm. I doubt there'd be much difference, but... It's a long story, so to summarize, an evil demon king that could control monsters appeared a thousand years ago. In order to save the world, the Six Wise Gods imparted wisdom upon us humans. The fight with the demons intensified, so the Six Wise Gods summoned six heroes from the world of the gods for the sake of humanity. The heroes could cut down thousands of monsters in a single swing. The Six Wise Gods and the heroes worked together to defeat the demon army, bringing peace to the world. And they all lived happily ever after. Sound familiar to you?"

"I see. It isn't any different to the story I know, then."

"Well, it is a story written in the holy scriptures. If anyone tried to twist the truth, they'd be declared a heretic and denounced."

"Yeah, that's right." Heroes were religious beings, apparently.

If it's knowledge even a child would know, then I can't ask too many questions about it. Otherwise my lack of knowledge would be exposed. With that thought

"Do you think heroes exist?" Renji asked.

"They're the great heroes of legend, so it'd be a huge deal if they appeared, don't you think?" Rhea answered with an amused laugh.

"Right, of course. And even if they did appear, it's unlikely anyone would believe them," Renji muttered meaningfully, then spoke nothing more about heroes to Rhea after that.



Five days had passed since Renji arrived in this world.

He was getting used to life in Rhea's home, but he still didn't fit in in the village. He had completely familiarized himself to life in Rhea's home, but the villagers all gave him the cold shoulder for being a suspicious outsider.

He was treated like an enemy by Rhea's childhood friend more so than anyone else; he was a boy who came up to him the day after he first stayed at her house and demanded he leave the village. At that time, Rhea stood on Renji's side while acting as the mediator, which caused Renji to smirk and send the childhood friend flying into a rage. Renji had immediately enhanced his body with the power of his Divine Arms to evade all of the boy's punches easily, continuing until the boy ran out of stamina to move. It was barely even a match.

Some villagers who witnessed that scene feared Renji's strength, spreading rumors until Renji became completely isolated.

The villagers had no ill feelings towards Rhea, but they didn't try to approach her while she was with Renji. On top of staying at her house, he always went with her to her work outside, so an uncomfortable atmosphere surrounded the village.

"Your childhood friend was glaring at me again," Renji said to Rhea over dinner.

"After what you did, that's only natural," Rhea snapped.

"Just so you know, what I did was legitimate self-defense," Renji said calmly.

It would be more accurate to say that he had purposefully created a situation where his act of self-defense would be seen as legitimate, but Renji didn't have the faintest intention of showing mercy to someone so hostile towards him, so it was really nothing more than an act of revenge. Rhea hadn't seen the provoking smirk he had sent towards her childhood friend.

"But with your strength, wouldn't you have been able to pin Yoran down easily?" Rhea inquired indirectly.

"Don't be silly. I didn't have the leisure to do something like that. Your childhood friend is the strongest person in this village, no? I'm a lot shorter than him, too."

“That’s true, but...”

At the time, Renji had seemed unusually happy about being attacked by Yoran. In reality, Renji wanted to test how his physical body enhancement would fare against Yoran, so the impression Rhea received wasn’t mistaken.

However, Rhea didn’t think Renji was a bad guy. He was blunt and uncommunicative, and sometimes spoke with an arrogant attitude, but actually living with him made her notice his unexpectedly kind side. He carried the heavy things for her when she was at work, and he also helped out around the house. The other men in the village lacked such consideration.

“Is that guy in love with you?” Renji asked, watching Rhea for her reaction.

“Huh? What are you on about?”

“He got real worked up over you. That’s why I was wondering if he was.”

“Please. We’re just childhood friends. He’s been foul-mouthed towards me since before you came to this village. I have no idea why he’s so mad about it now,” Rhea said with a tired sigh.

“Hmm. Then are you in love with him?” No matter how Renji looked at it, it was clear that the boy had a crush on her, but he decided not to point that out.

“...You must be kidding me. Do you want to get punched?”

“I see.”

Rhea had sent a fierce glare at him, but Renji merely brushed it off with a cheery laugh.

“It’s not like anyone will want to marry me. I’m doomed to grow old alone in this lonely house,” Rhea said sulkily.

“Eh, you can do housework well. I’m sure there are plenty of people out there who would want you as a bride. Your face isn’t too bad either,” Renji muttered.

“H-Huh...?! What are you saying?!?” Rhea blinked several times before turning red.

“I just said what I was thinking.”

“But you said you think my face isn’t too bad... Does that mean you think I’m

cute?" Rhea stared at Renji with a faint blush on her cheeks.

"Now, as you are aware, I'm a wanderer... An immigrant, basically. I haven't had many women around me before, and I haven't seen the faces of the women in other villages, so I cannot give an objective opinion." Renji averted his eyes and dodged the question. He had attended an all-boys middle school and high school, so he felt some charm from the reluctantly caring Rhea. Perhaps that was why he had said something in praise of her, but couldn't be frank and call her cute to her face.

"I'm asking what *you* think right now, though."

"I just said it. Your face isn't too bad."

"That phrasing..." Rhea pouted, glaring at Renji scornfully.

"What?" Renji turned away and asked.

"You're always so arrogant, Renji. That's why you end up antagonizing everyone in the village," Rhea pointed out frankly.

"Me? The arrogant ones are the villagers. Especially the village chief and your childhood friend."

"I won't deny that. But you also have a condescending attitude when you speak sometimes. When you went to ask to stay in this village, things would have gone better if you had explained things before making your request. We've had lots of travelers stay in the village in the past."

"But they were also given the cold shoulder by the villagers for being outsiders too, no?"

"Well, we did keep our distance to watch what they did, but no one actively avoided them like they do with you right now."

"..." Renji fell silent.

"I know you're not a bad guy, so I bet they'd change their minds if they had the opportunity to do so," Rhea said, watching Renji once again.

"Is there a need to change their minds?"

"You said you were a wanderer, but do you have a goal for your journey?"

Rhea responded to Renji's question with one of her own.

Renji thought for a moment before replying. "No... Not in particular."

"Hmm... Then how about you live in this village for a while?" Rhea suddenly suggested.

"...I'll see." Renji evaded the question.

"I think you'd be a great help to the village if you stayed. You're strong."

"The villagers already dislike having an outsider stay here temporarily. It'd be even worse if I settled here."

"That's not true. We've had people move into the village before. People will change when they're given the right opportunity to do so."

"I wonder about that. Plus, I don't have anywhere to live."

"...You can just keep living here."

"Wasn't the agreement that I could only stay until the next traveling merchant comes?"

In other words, it could be a month at the longest, or as early as tomorrow. Renji looked at Rhea in slight surprise.

"If you insisted on staying in this village, then I wouldn't mind, you know? It gets boring living in this house by myself, and it's a little scary at night. I'm the only one in this village that lives alone, too..."

"Are you lonely?" Renji asked, watching Rhea's expression.

"Not exactly lonely, but...having someone to talk to and eat meals with in the house has just been kind of nice, that's all," Rhea mumbled.

Perhaps that was why the living arrangements she had been so against in the beginning didn't seem so bad anymore. She no longer had to watch the other villagers returning to their families at the end of the workday with envy. "Don't you get lonely traveling alone, Renji?" Rhea asked cautiously.

"I..." Renji stumbled over his words in thought. It was a lie that he traveled alone. However, he could understand how it felt to be alone. In reality, he did find living together with Rhea in this tiny home a lot more fun than when he

stayed shut inside his room whenever he wasn't at school. There was a part of him that agreed with her.

"But isn't it problematic for an unmarried young man and woman to live together for real? Our current living arrangement is questionable enough..." Renji expressed his hesitation, asking his question in an inarticulate manner.

"Shall we just get married, then?"

"...It's been five days since we met. Right?" Renji said awkwardly, his eyes widening. He was fairly shocked.

"...R-Right. It's all because you said such weird things to begin with. Calling me cute and all that." Rhea collected herself and spoke with a bright-red face.

"I don't recall calling you cute..."

Renji trailed off, unable to give a clear denial. After wandering into another world and living together with a girl, his mood had been in high spirits without his realization. In his ten-odd years of life, he had never experienced the feeling of being wanted by anyone other than his family, so Rhea's feelings echoed deeply in his heart.



The next afternoon, Renji and Rhea took a break from their work and returned home to have lunch, when a visitor appeared.

"Hey, Rhea. Come with me."

It was Rhea's childhood friend, Yoran. Yoran walked to the dining table and shot a glare at Renji before ignoring him in favor of talking to Rhea.

"What do you want?"

"The village chief is calling for you. He has something important to discuss about the future of the village."

"The village chief...? What do you mean by 'important'?" Rhea asked, eyeing him warily.

"I can't tell you in front of the outsider," Yoran answered, aware of Renji's presence.

“...Does that mean it involves Renji?” Rhea asked sullenly.

“H-How would I know? I was just told to bring you there,” Yoran said, his tone harsh out of awkwardness.

“Go on, Rhea. Don’t worry about me.”

Renji smirked at Yoran in a relaxed manner while speaking to Rhea.

“Fine...”

Rhea seemed unhappy with being called out for an unclear reason, reluctantly nodding her head only after hearing Renji’s words.

“Grr... Come.”

Yoran clenched his fists and left the house. Rhea followed after him, heading towards the village chief’s house.



Yoran brought Rhea to the village chief’s house.

“What did you want to discuss, ch...”

Rhea spotted the village chief as soon as she entered the house and started to question why she was summoned in an aggressive tone. However, she trailed off mid-sentence. There were people who weren’t from the village in the house — a total of eight people. They were all armed and dressed in expensive-looking military uniforms. The most well-dressed among them was a plump man positioned at the head of the room.

“Are you the girl living with the man named Renji?” The plump man in a military uniform glared at Rhea.

“U-Umm...” Rhea was completely bewildered.

“Answer the question. Are you the girl living with the man called Renji?” the plump man said in a threatening tone.

“E-Eek!”

He was a noble. Once Rhea sensed the other party’s social status, she nodded her head in fear.

"I'm going to question you about that man. Answer with everything you know."

After the plump man spoke again, he asked Rhea question after question. Things like, was his hair really black, did he make any ideological statements, where did you meet Renji, do you know the reason why he came to this village, did he say anything regarding the lake in the forest, and so on. Rhea answered each and every question honestly.

"I see. So you don't know anything useful. In that case, I have no choice but to investigate him directly." The plump noble sighed in annoyance.

"U-Umm, why are you investigating Renji?" Rhea could easily predict that Renji was the "him" the noble was referring to, so she questioned the reason why nervously.

"The lake near this village completely dried up. That lake was one of the holy grounds of this kingdom, and that man named Renji is suspected of drying up that lake. If this is the truth, then it is a crime deserving of capital punishment," the plump nobleman said.

"P-Please wait a moment! Renji wouldn't do such a thing...!"

There was no way he would do that.

"That's what I'm investigating. Let's go. Lead the way, chief."

"Y-Yes, sir."

The nobleman turned a deaf ear and stood up, leaving with the knights in the room.

Wh-What should I do...?

Rhea watched their retreating backs in horror before snapping back to her senses and following them.



Several minutes later, at Rhea's house...

From the entrance, she could see Renji seated opposite to the plump nobleman at the back of the house. Two knights stood behind the noble, and

Rhea stood farther behind them by the entrance. There were more knights on standby outside Rhea's house, along with a gathering of curious villagers.

"What's the meaning of this?" Renji asked unhappily, glaring at the noble and knights who had barged into the house.

"Your name is Renji, correct? The one who came to this village six days ago?"

"So what if I am?" Renji's attitude didn't change even when he was in front of nobility. He questioned the noble in return with an equal way of speaking.

The man furrowed his brows in displeasure as he spoke. "I am an interrogator of the Vilkis Kingdom. I was dispatched here from the capital in order to investigate the pillar of light that appeared six days ago. After questioning the villagers, I've determined that you are under suspicion of drying up the nearby lake in the forest."

Renji paused for a moment, feigning ignorant composure. "...What are you talking about?"

"That lake was a holy ground of the kingdom. Six days ago, on the day you came to this village, a pillar of light rose into the sky. Was that something you were involved in? The drying up of the lake was your doing, was it not?"

"You're suspecting me of that without any proof whatsoever?"

It seemed that the villagers had passed on information about him after the nobles arrived in the village. Renji came to that conclusion and sought the disclosure of evidence.

"I am not required to show you anything. What was your purpose in visiting this village?"

"In that case, I'm not required to tell you anything."

Renji gave a scornful smile as payback. This made the nobleman frown openly.

At this rate, Renji would incur the noble's displeasure and be killed. Rhea was pale-faced as she peeked through the entryway and called out to Renji. "Renji! This is a nobleman you're speaking to! Apologize immediately or you'll be killed!"

“I have nothing to apologize for,” Renji replied sullenly.

“I don’t care if you don’t answer. You will be sent to an appropriate location for the crime of drying up the lake,” the nobleman stated coldly.

“I didn’t do it,” Renji insisted firmly.

“In that case, you can prove that by answering my questions. If a suspicious person with an unfamiliar hair color and unusual clothing visits a village immediately after a pillar of light rises into the sky, it’s only natural to feel a certain amount of distrust, don’t you think? You claimed to be a traveler, yet you were practically bare-handed. You said you lost your belongings, but where did you lose them?”

The nobleman didn’t lose his temper over Renji’s impolite attitude, instead observing him closely as he asked his questions in a flat tone.

“I came to the village from the road opposite to the forest. I literally went through the gate on that side and ran into Rhea in the farmlands there. I didn’t go near the forest. My belongings were lost somewhere along that road. Since I lost them, I obviously don’t remember where.”

It seemed that Renji couldn’t stand the current situation, as he spoke firmly.

“Hmm. If it’s the road opposite to the forest, then you mean to say you came from the western road? That means you may have lost your belongings in the valley a short distance down the road. That area is rocky and difficult to walk on,” the plump noble guessed as though he was in deep thought.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Renji declared immediately.

“Hmm... That’s strange. Very strange. I remembered things wrongly just now, and there shouldn’t be any valley down the west road at all.” The nobleman narrowed his eyes.

“What...?” Renji’s face froze.

The nobleman suddenly adopted a serious expression. “Did you really come to the village from the west road?”

“...” Renji’s gaze wavered as he fell silent.

“Why did you lie? Where did you come from? You really were in the forest,

weren't you? You must know something about the lake drying up—or perhaps you are the perpetrator behind it..." After concluding that Renji had been lying, the interrogator looked at him sharply. As expected of an interrogator, a mere high school student like Renji became cornered easily.

"...I don't know anything." Renji shook his head, faltering.

"Do you think the words of someone who lies during an interrogation can be trusted?" the nobleman asked sharply.

"Guh..." Renji finally felt a sense of danger and shot up out of his seat. The next moment, the knights behind the interrogator parted left and right to surround Renji.

"Don't act rash, now. It's my job to reveal the truth. However, if a suspect struggles or attempts to flee, I cannot guarantee you'll keep your life," the plump interrogator warned sharply.

"..." Renji glared at the two knights approaching him in succession to keep them in check.

"Seize him."

At the interrogator's order, the two knights promptly closed in on Renji. They charged forward with vigor in order to capture Renji, who had backed up all the way to the wall.

Two knights who had undergone military training, versus Renji who had been a normal high school student just days ago. The difference in their physiques was clear as day, and it was only a matter of time before the shorter-than-average Renji was apprehended, no matter how much he struggled.

"Oh no!" Rhea squeezed her eyes shut against the heartbreak scene. However, the next moment, something happened that no one other than Renji could have predicted.

"Haaah!" Renji, who had been cornered against the wall, suddenly charged towards one of the advancing knights.

"Ugh... Guh...!" The knight approaching from the right received Renji's tackle and was sent flying towards the wall. He proceeded to crash through the thin

wood and tumble outside.

“Wha...” Those who had witnessed that scene were all frozen speechless. In the next moment, Renji used that chance to send the knight approaching from the left flying with all his might as well.

“Nngh?!”

The knight that was sent flying crashed through the wall just like the other knight. The events were so unexpected, the entire room fell silent.

Everyone watched Renji, frozen.

“Hah... Hah...” Renji must have been intensely agitated, as his breathing was heavy while he looked down at his hands with bloodshot eyes.

“R-Renji...?” In a state of shock, Rhea called his name with a trembling voice.

“...” Renji slowly raised his face and stared at the entrance where Rhea was.

“Eek!” Rhea shrank away, clearly terrified.

Renji gulped. “...It’s not my fault. I didn’t do anything wrong!” he yelled while running towards the destroyed wall.

“D-Don’t let him escape! Kill him if you must!” the inspector yelled at the knights outside.

The knights were on high alert after the house’s wall was destroyed and awaiting Renji at the broken wall. They all had their swords drawn.

“Come, Cocytus!”

Renji materialized his divine halberd as soon as he was out of the house. The knights froze in their tracks for a brief moment, before they all recited the spell to enchant their physical ability and slashed their swords at Renji together.

“*Augendae Corporis!*”

“Raaargh!”

Renji swung his halberd desperately at the knights closing in on him. His movements were completely those of an amateur, but he had overwhelming physical strength. The axehead at the end of the halberd sliced through the bodies of the knights like a knife through paper.

“Wha...”

The interrogator that belatedly appeared from the destroyed wall watched Renji fight, lost for words. Where did he get the halberd from? Why were the experienced knights being slaughtered without even putting up a fight...?

“U-Urgh...”

When Rhea and the villagers saw the scene, they pressed their hands to their mouths to hold back their nausea.

“Y-You monster! *Ignis lecit!*”

The interrogator nobleman pointed the wand that was hanging at his waist at Renji and recited a spell that would kill a regular human upon contact. A magic circle immediately appeared at the end of the wand, forming a fireball over a meter large that was fired towards Renji’s back.

“R-Renji!” Rhea screamed right away.

“Wha?!”

Renji promptly turned back and used his momentum to swing his halberd. Then, a sturdy spear of ice shot out of the spike at the tip. The spear of ice pierced through the fireball easily, passing smoothly through the torso of the interrogator behind it.

“Guh...?”

With his wand still raised, the interrogator looked down at the cavity in his abdomen. The next moment, he fell forward with a thud. Everyone could tell he had died instantly. There were still three knights left.

“Aaahhh!”

They all fled as fast as they could, leaving behind the corpses of the interrogator and other knights.

“Hah... Hah... Hah...”

Renji panted heavily, frozen in his stance after swinging his halberd. Silence fell for a long moment.

“S-Shit. What have you done? You’ve killed a noble that was visiting the

village. This is b-bad. Very, very bad..." the village chief muttered with a pale face, having accepted the scene before him as reality.

Immediately beside him was Rhea's childhood friend Yoran, who stepped forward.

"Wh-What have you done?! Are you trying to bring this village to ruin?!"

"Y-Yoran!" Rhea tried to hold Yoran back in a fluster.

"Shut up, Rhea! This all started with you letting that monster stay in this village! Now there's a dead noble! What are you going to do about it?!" Yoran said, looking around at the corpses on the ground.

"I-I didn't... That's..." Rhea turned deathly pale as she struggled for words with tears in her eyes.

"You're not the one at fault. It's all that guy's fault!" The blood seemed to be rushing to Yoran's head, as he pointed to Renji and yelled hysterically.

"..." Renji glared at Yoran.

"Wh... What, are you going to kill me too?" Yoran squeaked in fear.

"..."

"What about it? Huh? Huh?! Don't just stay silent, say something!"

Renji's silence gave Yoran more confidence. Eventually, he was encouraged enough to move closer, grabbing Renji by the shoulder and shaking him. Then, with the exception of Rhea, all the villagers began to look at Renji with angered gazes.

"H-Hey! Stop it, Yoran!" Rhea called for him to stop, but Yoran's anger only intensified.

"I'm not stopping! It's all this bastard's fault!"

"..."

"You—Hey!"

"Don't touch me!"

"Gah?!"

Enraged at Renji's continued silence, Yoran finally raised his fist, but Renji punched him back and sent him rolling across the ground. He didn't use as much strength as when he had sent the knights flying earlier, but Yoran was bleeding from the mouth.

"Huh...?" Yoran looked up at Renji's face as though to ask why he was punched.

"Don't try to take this opportunity to look cool. Piece of trash. What I did was legitimate self-defense."

That's why I wasn't at fault. I didn't do anything bad. Renji looked down at Yoran, emphasizing his point.

"Renji..." Rhea called Renji's name sadly.

"I..." Renji opened his mouth to say something.

I'm not at fault. That's why I want you to come with me!

He was driven by the impulse to yell that and reach for Rhea's hand. However, Renji drew his hand back. Then, he averted his gaze from Rhea with a guilty conscience. "If you guys attack me, I won't hold back," he said, glaring back at the village onlookers looking at him with critical gazes.

"Oh..."

The villagers backed away in fear.

"..." Renji bit down on his lip and started running to flee the village. Beyond that was the lake where Renji stood when he first wandered into this world, and farther beyond that was the Vilkis Kingdom's enemy nation, the Rubia Kingdom.

Chapter 3: Fang of the Avenger

Several months had passed since Renji's arrival. He never returned to Rhea's village in the Vilkis Kingdom after that incident, instead acting as an adventurer in the Rubia Kingdom.

For the record, the adventurer's guild was an international organization established and entrusted by each nation. The original purpose of its establishment was to force a part of the kingdom's unmanageable defense onto those socially unfit for proper jobs, so that the kingdom could manage them indirectly and effectively utilize them as a labor force.

Of course, it was pretty much an international organization in name only. The organization headquarters existed in form, but there was no base equipped with said function, and management was conducted practically independently by the branches in the capital of each kingdom. This was because the officials of each kingdom were dispatched to supervise the operations of the branch, so they couldn't cross kingdom borders.

Furthermore, in order to become an adventurer, registration at the headquarters or branch was required, each having its own merits and demerits. For example, belonging to a branch restricted the activities under the jurisdiction of other branches (in this respect, belonging to the headquarters gave one the freedom to act in every branch, but the support from regional branches was weaker).

Renji belonged to a regional branch of the Rubia Kingdom. At first, his impudent personality on top of his small stature and young appearance caused the other adventurers around him to treat him disparagingly and aggressively.

However, he turned the tables on every adventurer that picked a fight with him regardless of their rank, completing very difficult subjugation requests all by himself until, eventually, everyone left him alone out of fear.

Instead, he gained fame as the fastest rising rookie in history, obtaining nicknames like "Aloof" from his solo activities or "Ice Emperor" from his

powerful ice enchanted sword (the generic name for weapons with ancient sorcery in them).

His name even spread to the royal castle, reaching the ear of the Princess Knight, first princess Sylvie Rubia. She personally invited Renji to the castle to judge his abilities, sparring with him before scouting him as a personal knight.

“I have no intention of working underneath anyone. Royalty and nobility are especially out of the question.”

Renji brazenly refused Sylvie’s offer to become a knight, but the impudence in his answer showed his lack of understanding of the world. This caught Sylvie’s favor, so they formed a friendship instead of a master and servant relationship.

“Hey, it’s Aloof.”

Simply by appearing at the adventurer’s guild in the Rubia Kingdom capital, the adventurers in the lobby stirred noisily. There were some gazes of strong envy and hatred among them.

“Hmph.” Yet Renji marched through those gazes with a cool smile as he headed to the counter. He didn’t dislike being looked at with envy. It didn’t feel bad being called Aloof and Ice Emperor—he had been behaving exactly as such, after all.

Having forgotten about the events of the village—no, in order to avoid remembering the events that had occurred in the village—Renji continued to enjoy his new life as an adventurer to the fullest.



That was what Renji’s other-world life had been like before everything changed. It was the day after Rio had his fierce battle with Nidoll in the Proxia Castle—two days before Christina and Flora disappeared from the enchanted airship. The first princess, Sylvie Rubia, was visiting the expensive inn room that Renji had rented in stealth.

“Long time no see, Renji.” Sylvie sat down on the sofa across from Renji and smiled.

“You sure about this? Even if you came secretly, you’re still visiting an inn like

this,” Renji asked with a chuckle.

“You sure have guts calling the highest quality inn in this kingdom ‘an inn like this.’”

“It’s still not a place a princess can visit so casually, right?”

“Did you not want me to come?”

“Nothing of the sort. I just can’t give you a proper reception.”

“Oh? I’m surprised you understand the concept of welcoming your guests,” Sylvie said cheerfully.

“Who do you think I am? Well, whatever. I haven’t seen your face lately, so I just so happened to be wondering what you’ve been up to as well.” Renji sighed tiredly as he asked about Sylvie’s recent developments.

“Not long ago, there was a banquet in the Galarc Kingdom where the heroes of each nation had gathered. I was away from the capital for a while because I had been invited as the representative of this kingdom. Then there were various things to deal with once I returned, too,” Sylvie answered, her tiredness showing faintly on her face.

“You met the heroes of each nation...?” Renji asked.

“Yeah. I talked to them a little,” Sylvie replied while watching Renji’s face.

“What were they like?”

The rumors that heroes had been summoned across the Strahl region had also reached the Rubia Kingdom, which Renji was already aware of. He had yet to confide in anyone about his status as a hero, but he seemed to be interested in the other heroes.

“...They were boys and girls the same age as you and me,” Sylvie answered simply after a slight pause.

“I see... That aside, has Estelle been well?”

Renji seemed to feel awkward about hiding his own hero status, so he didn’t ask any further questions about them. Instead, he changed the topic to Sylvie’s little sister, the second princess Estelle. The last time he was invited to the

castle, Renji had spent some time interacting with Estelle. In contrast to Sylvie, a gallant lady known as the Princess Knight, her younger sister was a modest and mild-mannered girl. It was because of this that they were often said to have polar opposite personalities for siblings.

“...Estelle is recuperating right now.” A shadow fell over Sylvie’s face as she spoke.

It’s a confidential matter of the kingdom. I can’t tell him she was taken hostage as a tool for diplomacy, was what Sylvie was thinking.

“Is she sick?”

“Well, something along those lines.”

“If you need any medicinal herbs, I can go get them.”

“No, it’s okay. She should recover with time, so don’t worry about it. She’ll definitely be able to see you again someday. When that day comes, let’s bring her to this inn,” Sylvie said with a smile to smooth over Renji’s concerns.

“I see...” For a moment, Renji’s eyes were captivated by Sylvie’s smiling face, but he soon chuckled and said, “But Estelle’s a princess. It’d be better for me to go to the castle.”

“Hey... What do you mean *she’s* a princess? What about me? I’m a princess too!” Sylvie blinked, then objected with a dissatisfied face.

“Yeah, you’re the Princess Knight.”

“Stop that. I don’t like that name.”

“Hey, you were the one who introduced yourself as the Princess Knight when we first met. We even sparred after that, remember?”

“I figured introducing myself that way would lead to a match more naturally.”

The friendly atmosphere over their chat was unthinkable for a first princess and a mere adventurer. Time flew by while they chatted pleasantly.

“It really is nice talking to you like this; there’s no need to be so stiff about it. It’s calming,” Sylvie muttered.

“What’s with you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing. I’ve just had to keep my nerves steeled a lot recently. I was just thinking how it was worth visiting you, as I’ve been feeling pretty burned out.”

“Have you been working too much? It isn’t my place to say this as an adventurer living leisurely, but working too hard is a problem. You should take some time to relax in moderation too,” Renji advised.

At that moment, the door of the room was knocked on before opening.

“Princess Sylvie, do you have a moment to spare?”

The one who entered was the female knight under Sylvie’s command, Elena Broman. She had been standing on guard outside the room while Sylvie and Renji chatted.

“...I instructed you to wait outside the room until I left, did I not?” Sylvie asked in a scolding tone.

“Yes, but—Jean Bernard is requesting your audience.”

Elena hesitatingly uttered the name of the visitor. Jean Bernard was the alias of the Proxia Empire ambassador, Reiss, when he was acting in the Rubia Kingdom.

“My audience? Fine. I’ll return to the castle immediately. Sorry, Renji, let’s leave it at this for today—”

Sylvie was wrapping up her chat with Renji with a grimace when Elena interrupted her to stop her. “Princess. Regarding that... Jean Bernard has actually come here...”

“Here? Ngh, how did he know...?” Sylvie’s expression grew even more bitter.

Does he know about Renji? He’s a famous adventurer, so it wouldn’t be odd if he did... What does he want? All kinds of possibilities came to mind.

Renji saw the look on Sylvie’s face and tilted his head in suspicion. Just then, the aforementioned Jean Bernard—otherwise known as Reiss—appeared beside Elena before the door.

“Pardon my sudden intrusion.” Reiss placed a hand against his chest and bowed his head respectfully at Sylvie and Renji.

I haven't seen this face before... Haven't heard his name before, either. Isn't it rude for a mere retainer to visit a princess undercover without any warning?
Renji thought such things as he watched Reiss carefully.

"...What do you want?" Sylvie asked in a displeased tone.

"I heard that you were here, so I came to visit. Before I state my business, may I first give Sir Renji the Aloof my greetings?" Reiss stared at Renji with a cheerful grin that bordered on creepy.

"Well, I don't mind. But you're taking up my private time right now. Your business better be important." Renji leaned back on the sofa, crossing his legs as he spoke menacingly.

"Yes, it most likely is. Then, if I may give a short greeting: I am Jean Bernard, an unworthy Rubian noble of the lowest rank."

"I've never heard of your name or family." Renji had no interest in the nobility of the Rubia Kingdom, so that was a given. A normal noble would have felt offended by Renji's words at this point, but—

"Indeed, as we are on the very bottom rung of the social ladder. It is a great honor to meet the renowned Aloof one." Reiss avoided the topic with a truly pleasant smile.

"..." Renji watched Reiss with narrowed eyes.

What a creepy dude. The grim look on Sylvie's face is bothering me, too.

He tried to look out for any changes in expression, but it was like the man was wearing a mask. There was something strange about him.

"Hey. What is the meaning of this, Bernard?" Sylvie interrupted in an aggravated tone.

"I had something to discuss with Your Highness regarding the adorable, adorable Princess Estelle. Isn't it time you went to see her?"

"...What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I just said..." Reiss cocked his head calmly.

"...I can see her?"

"Yes. That was our previous agreement, was it not? That you would eventually see her again. However, I am rather busy myself and would be inconvenienced if anything strange got in the way, so if you want to see her, now would be the best time."

"...Fine." After hesitating for a long moment, Sylvie nodded.

"What's going on, Sylvie? Wasn't Estelle recuperating?" Renji asked dubiously.

"I'm going to where she's resting. Sorry, but I'll be leaving for today. I'll visit you again some time, Renji." Sylvie put on an air of composure with a fleeting smile and stood up.

"Right, that's fine..." Renji stared at Sylvie, not entirely convinced. However, she was already halfway out the door before he could do anything about it.

"Lead the way then, Bernard," she said to Reiss.

"As you wish, Your Highness."

Reiss pasted a grin on his face and turned to head out of the room and down the corridor. Sylvie followed him out. Just before Reiss left, he gave Renji a look. He flashed a suggestively suspicious smile before vanishing outside the door.

The way Sylvie was acting... Is something strange happening? That man is definitely suspicious...

Renji's instincts felt heightened. Reiss's suspicious grin flashed in his mind, giving him an uneasy feeling as he looked out the window at the inn entrance below. Reiss and Sylvie were both boarding a horse carriage. There was something menacing about the two of them.

Weird. Should I follow them and investigate?

With that decided, Renji quickly prepared his belongings and stepped out of the inn.



Meanwhile, inside the carriage Sylvie and Elena were riding on...

There was no telling how long it had been since they set off. A suffocating

silence continued inside the carriage.

“Hey, Reiss. Who is this man?” Sylvie asked for the identity of the third party sitting diagonally across from her in the cramped carriage. The man’s left eye was hidden behind a jet-black eyepatch, his left arm wrapped in bandages with some kind of spell formula written on them. There was an alarming aura of bloodlust emanating from him.

“He’s my guard, as it would be unnerving for someone as powerless as me to travel alone. His name is Lucius. He’s in a bit of an irritated mood at the moment, so don’t try anything strange. I cannot guarantee your life if you do,” Reiss answered with a refreshed look, shrugging his shoulders.

“Lucius?”

“Oh, do you know of him?”

“If it’s the commander of the Heavenly Lions, then I’ve heard of the name. However, I don’t recall doing anything that would warrant this amount of bloodlust directed at me. It makes me want to cut him down before I’m attacked first,” Sylvie said, glaring intensely at Lucius.

“Ha!” Lucius suddenly let out a burst of delighted laughter.

“What?” Sylvie furrowed her brows.

“This bloodlust isn’t directed at you, y’know? The bastard I’m dying to kill is somewhere else. In fact, I’d like nothing more than to go and kill him right this moment,” Lucius said with vacant, dark eyes.

“Hey, Reiss. Is this man deranged or something?” Sylvie narrowed her eyes in suspicion and questioned Reiss. But Reiss merely gave a light shrug without answering.

“Say, Princess.”

“...” Lucius had addressed her, but Sylvie adamantly ignored him.

“Imagine this. Your sister—Estelle, was it? A woman that beautiful was taken hostage. Do you really think she’s still safe right now?”

“Y-You!” Sylvie reacted fiercely when her little sister’s safety was brought up, a vein standing out on her forehead.

"Heh." Lucius sneered.

"Was that statement just now a declaration that you don't treat hostages as hostages? If so, this ends here," Sylvie reached for the sheath at her waist.

"Hey now, do you plan on drawing that thing in such a tight space?" Contrary to his words, the smirk on Lucius's face was eager for her to do just that.

"Do you think I am incapable of cutting through you and the iron plate of this carriage at the same time?" Sylvie snapped.

A tense atmosphere filled the carriage. Beside Sylvie, Elena also switched to prepare for battle with a grim expression. She was braced to act if something happened.

Lucius reclined back arrogantly, continuing to provoke them with his gaze. At this rate, one would expect a fight to break out at any moment, but Reiss intervened with a fed-up expression. "Stop that. We are acting formally on behalf of our nation. We're not the same as your average bandit or mercenary, so we wouldn't do anything to harm the hostage we obtained. Princess Estelle is completely unharmed," Reiss said to Sylvie.

"Acting formally for your nation? You mean the nation that rose from mercenaries?" Sylvie was seething with anger, frowning as she refuted him.

"How strange. It's because you consider us a formal nation that you've agreed to this secret alliance, no?"

"Shameless words for one who took Estelle as hostage before forcing negotiations..."

"That's another strange statement. Hostages have been used in cross-national negotiations since ancient times, no? Even for internal politics, it wasn't rare for lords to seek hostages from their retainers as an assurance of obedience..." Reiss tilted his head curiously.

"Don't think a nation that takes hostages will be truly trusted in an alliance."

"I shall keep it in mind. However, a pact is a pact. We will endeavor in matters other than the hostage in order to form a trustworthy relationship. Therefore, your side should also bear in mind not to ruin a relationship of mutual trust."

Well, a few complaints here and there can be overlooked," Reiss replied calmly to the glare Sylvie sent him.

"..."

Sylvie snorted softly and refrained from speaking further. Though reluctant, that was a silent sign of agreement to Reiss's words. Several minutes later, the carriage came to a stop.

"Shall we leave the carriage now?" Reiss suggested. Sylvie and Elena got down first, with Reiss and Lucius following them.

So we've been brought out of the capital after all, huh?

In order to check on Estelle's safety, before boarding the carriage, she had agreed to the condition that the destination wouldn't be revealed until arrival. The window had been closed while they'd traveled, so she didn't know what route they had taken either, but she had a faint suspicion that they were heading outside the capital. The capital of the Rubia Kingdom was Sylvie's territory, and Reiss wasn't senile enough to let her reunite with Estelle in such a place.

Sure enough, their current location was along the road stretching from the capital, far enough for the tallest royal castle in the capital to be seen in the distance.

"I don't see Estelle." Sylvie looked around. There was no sign of anyone on the road besides them, and they were surrounded by uninhabited grass plains on either side of the road. It seemed the grass lacked nutrition, as the color was poor and the length short. There were boulders large enough to hide a person scattered about the place.

"Please, come this way." Reiss gestured with his hand and invited her off the road. Leaving the carriage and driver on the road, he led the way forward.

"Princess Sylvie, I shall be behind you."

"Right."

Sylvie first followed Reiss, with Elena walking behind her. Further behind her was Lucius, and the four of them proceeded in a single line. Sylvie warily

watched Reiss before her, while Elena warily watched Lucius in the rear as they walked.

“You informed your other subordinates that you would be heading out with me when we departed from the inn, so there’s no need to be so wary. As long as you don’t try anything yourself, that is.” Reiss chuckled as he spoke to the two walking behind him.

“I don’t intend on doing anything as long as I can confirm Estelle’s safety. However, I hope you’re ready for the worst if I find Estelle has been harmed.”

“In that case, neither of us have anything to worry about. Please stop here,” Reiss said, pointing to a large boulder ahead him. Three hooded men and a girl appeared from behind that boulder. It seemed she was wearing a magic-sealing collar, but there was no sign of any injuries. She had a sad look in her eyes, seeing her older sister a hundred meters before her.

“Estelle!” Sylvie reflexively burst into a run. However—

“Ah ah, please do not get any closer than this.” Reiss stood in her way.

“Ngh...”

“As promised, you’ve confirmed her safety. It’s about time we turned back,” Reiss said ruthlessly, his expression cool. Sylvie sent a murderous glare towards him.

“What?! I’ve only seen her face! And from this far!”

“But you’ve seen her, no? You’ve achieved the goal of confirming her safety.”

“As if I can be sure she’s unharmed with just a look. At least let me speak to her,” Sylvie pleaded desperately.

“We would be accepting a rather high risk if I allowed that... But fine. One of the reasons why this meeting was arranged was to make sure your stress didn’t prompt you to act out of line,” Reiss said, placing his hand by his mouth in a thinking manner.

“Then...”

“However, there is one condition you must accept. If you accept that condition, I will allow you to have an uninterrupted conversation for several

seconds."

"Let's hear it." Even if it was only for a few short moments, the thought of being able to converse with Estelle was enticing enough for Sylvie to at least listen to the condition.

"Your Highness must hand that enchanted sword over to your guard knight."

"...Is that all?" Sylvie asked in surprise. She expected a more demanding condition from Reiss at such an opportune moment.

The enchanted sword Sylvie used was also a national treasure of an ancient artifact. She wouldn't have let Reiss or Lucius hold it, and even in comparison to those untrustworthy alliance partners, she could just barely entrust it to her close aide Elena.

"Yes. For someone as powerful as the Princess Knight, I would have preferred to place magic-sealing shackles on you, but I shall put my trust in you. Think of this as an act of deepening our trust in each other," Reiss requested in an oddly serious tone for once.

"Fine... Elena, please hold on to this for a short moment." Sylvie detached the sheath at her waist and handed it to Elena.

"I shall handle it with the greatest care." Elena knelt and accepted the enchanted sword reverently.

"Go ahead, then," Reiss prompted.

Sylvie walked towards Estelle. Estelle herself had been temporarily freed and began moving towards Sylvie timidly. The closer the two of them got to each other, the faster their feet moved.

"Are you unharmed, Estelle?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry for all the trouble I've caused, Sylvie."

The two of them linked their hands and exchanged words of reunion. Sylvie was smiling in joy from seeing her little sister safe, but Estelle's expression was gloomy due to the fact that her own existence was now an inconvenience to her sister and her kingdom.

"Don't let it bother you—you're not at fault here. Don't be rash and do

anything odd." Sylvie gripped Estelle's hand tightly.

"Okay..." Estelle nodded with a flash of an admirable smile.

"Have they done anything strange to you?"

"Nothing in particular. I've been placed in confinement, but my living conditions aren't that different to staying in the castle."

"I see... Is there anything else troubling you?"

"Nothing. I'm sure you're far worse off than I am. If the necessity arises, please discard me."

"Such a necessity will never arise. Never," Sylvie stated, her expression strained.

"Thank you..." Estelle placed her hands on her chest and bowed her head with a fleeting smile.

"Time's up." Reiss approached Sylvie from behind, accompanied by Elena and Lucius.

"All right." Sylvie turned with a sigh and approached Elena, who stood beside Reiss.

"Take this, Your Highness."

"Right."

Elena kneeled on the ground, returning the enchanted sword to Sylvie. While doing so, she got a good look at Estelle's unharmed figure and let out a small sigh of relief.

"Now, Princess Estelle. Please return to those men," Reiss said, looking at the three hooded men by the boulder.

"Okay." Estelle nodded. She separated herself from Sylvie and the others and started walking back.

Then, from a boulder located diagonally beside Estelle and the men, a figure leaped out at superhuman speed. The figure dashed to cut into the space between Estelle and her captors, and there was a silhouette of a halberd-like weapon in their hand. The mysterious figure raised their long weapon easily in a

single hand, blocking the way of the men and slamming the weapon down into the ground.

“Wha...?!”

A giant wall of ice appeared between Estelle and the hooded men. It was several meters tall and had appeared right before Estelle, making her shrink in on herself. Sylvie and Elena looked shocked. But on the other hand...

Hehe. Like the rumors said, he seems to be a boy of decisive character. Thanks to that, I've been saved the trouble of pointing out where he was hiding myself.

Reiss grinned eerily as he watched the back of the figure standing before Estelle.



A mysterious figure suddenly stood between the three hooded men and Estelle, forming an ice wall to divide them.

“R-Renji?!”

The hero who could control the divine arms Cocytus: Kikuchi Renji.

“Oh? What is the meaning of this, Princess Sylvie?” Reiss twisted his mouth with a chuckle and immediately questioned Sylvie beside him.

“N-No, this is...” Sylvie was in a panic, thinking he had followed them from the inn, when—

“I should be saying that.” Renji carried his halberd against his shoulder as he approached. Then, he stood as though to protect Estelle from Reiss and the others.

“Renji...” Estelle blinked and stared at him.

“Why, if it isn’t Sir Renji the Aloof. We just met earlier. Then, I shall ask you instead: what is the meaning of this?” Reiss asked with a fearless smile.

“Did you not hear me? I should be the one asking that. Sylvie said Estelle was recuperating. Why is she being treated as though she’s your hostage? Let’s hear what you have to say about that.”

Renji frowned, glaring back at Reiss.

"Why, that would be because she *is* a hostage," Reiss acknowledged without a hint of guilt.

"Oh? So you're not even gonna make any excuses? You have some nerve."

"That's because I have no need to make any excuses in the first place. You're the one who's interrupting us with no awareness of what's going on, trying to take control as though you own the situation. Aren't you the one with some nerve here?"

"My understanding of the situation is fine. No matter how I look at it, you're using Estelle as a hostage to control Sylvie. That's what you acknowledged yourself," Renji scowled as he argued back.

"Indeed. You've happened across a scene of hostage diplomacy."

"What trash... Sylvie, Elena, come over here. Estelle is secure now, so there's no reason to obey them anymore." Renji glared at Reiss with contempt in his gaze.

"Are you sure about that?" Reiss chuckled smugly.

"I'm not asking you."

"I see. But did you think we would overlook that passively?" Reiss asked.

The three hooded men appeared from both sides of the ice wall Renji had created; they had their swords drawn and held at the ready.

I made the wall with the intention of trapping them inside, but I guess they evaded at the last moment, huh? It seems they're fairly agile. That aside, why do Sylvie and Elena look so scared? Renji observed those around him quickly. "If you don't want to make an enemy of me, the one they call Aloof and the Ice Emperor, you should retreat. I don't know who you are or where you're from, but you don't want to die in a place like this, do you?" he said to Reiss, who stood in his line of fire.

"What a cheap provocation."

"I don't recall provoking anyone."

"I see. A natural airhead, are you?"

“Fine, it seems you want to make an enemy of me...” To intimidate Reiss, Renji made a show of looking at his halberd and holding it ready.

“I see, I see. It seems you’re even more egoistic than the rumors make of you. Reckless, hasty, and arrogant. The type of personality unsuitable for negotiating, yet you seem to have a fair talent for it.” Without any particular sign of shrinking back, Reiss applauded Renji with an unconcerned look.

“Are you looking down on me?”

“I’m praising you. The way you flash your tremendous might to one-sidedly have your way is exactly that of a major nation dealing with a minor nation. The courage you have in forcing things to go your way is truly splendid.”

“He’s just an idiot with no knowledge of how the world works, you mean?” Lucius interrupted with a mocking laugh.

“Sounds like that man wants to die first.”

Renji lifted his halberd up with one hand, pointing the tip at Lucius.

“Hey, Reiss. Can I kill this impudent brat?” Lucius asked.

Reiss chuckled. “Has your interest finally been piqued?”

“...Did you just call me a brat?” Renji frowned in displeasure. There were less people who looked down on him by calling him short or bratty nowadays, but that kind of thing had happened regularly back when he first became an adventurer. Thus, for Renji, scornful words like “brat” were taboo. He had taught everyone who had looked down on him like that a painful lesson, without exception.

“I have no idea who you think you are, but no matter how I look at it, you’re a brat. Especially the part where you overestimate yourself just because you’ve gained a little face as an adventurer.” Lucius sneered at Renji with contempt.

“I’ve taught all the people who’ve looked down on my appearance a lesson. You may end up in the same boat.”

“So you were looked down on for both your appearance and your attitude. How scary. Sorry about that, little egoistical one.”

“You just keep talking...” Renji was seething with enough anger to attack at

any moment, glaring at Lucius with dangerous eyes.

“W-Wait, Renji. Don’t be rash,” Sylvie called out to him in a hurry.

“...What are you saying, Sylvie? These people took Estelle hostage so you couldn’t oppose them, right?” Renji asked in confusion.

“That’s...” Sylvie fell silent with a conflicted expression.

It’s true that this situation may seem favorable. However, the Rubia Kingdom as it is now doesn’t have enough power to oppose the Proxia Empire. If I go with the flow of things and take Renji’s side, the Proxia Empire may earnestly begin to invade us as retaliation. If that happens, our kingdom will fall in a matter of months. If the fact I assisted the Proxia Empire at the last banquet circulates, we could be isolated from the nations around us. It would be different if the rescue was done in secret, but this situation is...

It was possible she was overthinking it, but what if this situation was a trap by Reiss? Her attention had been completely focused on her reunion with Estelle, but when she looked back upon it now, she had plenty of reason to fear that the conversation in the inn was made to entice Renji into following them.

If so, this situation could have been set up by Reiss in order to ascertain Sylvie’s true intentions. That was the natural assumption to make. Despite still being shaken by this situation, Sylvie desperately racked her brain.

“What’s wrong? Please say something, Sylvie,” Renji called out, slightly anxious.

“Hehe. It seems our relationship is already strong enough to withstand something as simple as transferring the hostage,” Reiss answered on Sylvie’s behalf.

“What...?” Renji frowned. He could already imagine that it was because they were threatening her with another reason.

“Renji. I appreciate the sentiment behind you acting for my sake, but this is our kingdom’s problem. It’s not something that can be solved by me returning to the kingdom at this point.”

Estelle, who had been silent beside Renji until now, finally made up her mind

and spoke up. Her expression and words were both gentle, but at the same time had a hint of resignation.

“See? This is why I called you reckless, hasty, and arrogant. You’ve stepped into a matter that can’t be solved with your power,” Reiss sneered.

“I said it too. That you’re an idiot who doesn’t understand the way the world works,” Lucius taunted Renji with a hearty laugh.

“...” Renji stood where he was, trembling with fury. After making such a dramatic declaration of his intent to rescue her, the hostage herself had refused to be saved. It must have been a comical sight indeed.

“...Don’t look down on me,” Renji muttered after a moment.

“Ah?” Lucius replied without any interest left.

“Do you really think my power can’t solve this?” Renji asked Reiss and Lucius with a glint of anger that had nowhere to go in his eye.

“Bwahaha, you really are a brat after all. Why don’t you switch from an adventurer to a trainee clown?” Lucius said while holding back his laughter.

“I’ll say this one more time: don’t look down on me.”

“What if I do?”

“You have two options: rub your head against the ground and apologize to me through the blood running down your forehead, swearing to keep away from Sylvie and Estelle, or be killed by me right here. Well? You decide.”

“I believe there are many more options available than that, though.”

“Oh?”

The tension between Lucius and Renji was like treading on ice.

“H-Hey. Stop, Renji! Don’t do anything foolish!” Sylvie tried to stop him in a hurry, but—

“Sorry, but this isn’t your problem anymore. It’s my problem now. I can’t forgive anyone who looks down on me. I have to settle this in my adventurer way—especially against Mr. Eyepatch over there. Are you ready?”

Being looked down upon was defeat. That was what being an adventurer was

about, which was why he refused to listen any longer. His head was filled with nothing but rage towards Lucius and Reiss now.

“Well, I never intended on letting you go home quietly now that you’ve witnessed this scene anyway. Which means...” Reiss made a show of looking at Lucius, who was accompanying him as a guard. Lucius gave a light shrug before placing his hand on the pommel of the sword sheathed at his waist.

“Please wait, Reiss! I’ll talk things out with Renji myself.” Sylvie tried to settle things peacefully.

“...Do you think I’ll lose to these guys, Sylvie?” Renji asked bitterly.

“I know plenty well that you’re an undefeated adventurer here. However, even if you do kill them, it would be a problem for us as well. Please understand,” Sylvie pleaded.

“That’s amazing. Undefeated at home, huh?”

“Please don’t provoke Renji!” Sylvie scolded Lucius for his mocking.

“You say that, but he’s already raring to go.”

“Yeah, I don’t follow anyone’s orders,” Renji declared with energy.

“Ngh...” Sylvie fretted.

“Hmm. It seems that Princess Sylvie has a fairly high opinion of Aloof’s abilities. Which makes this the perfect opportunity for us to demonstrate our abilities as cooperative partners. And so, if I may make a suggestion—how about a bet?” Reiss said as though he had just come up with an idea.

“A bet?” Sylvie frowned, wondering what he was going on about in a situation like this.

“It shouldn’t be a bad deal for you, Princess Sylvie. We’ll have a one-on-one duel between my guard Lucius and Aloof over there, and the loser has to accept the victor’s conditions. Let’s see... if the Aloof one wins, I promise to release Princess Estelle unconditionally. I will overlook his intervention here.”

“Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden...?” Sylvie asked with a wary look.

“Why, you ask? Because I highly value the fact you didn’t betray us when the Aloof one first intervened. As proof that it’s greatly contributed to our trusting relationship, I just wanted to prepare something befitting.”

“In that case, I shall do the fighting—”

“No, it’s going to be me.” Renji spoke over Sylvie’s objections to the duel.

“Renji...”

“Like I said, this is my fight now. I have no intention of backing down after being made a fool of to this extent.”

“Then it’s decided.” Reiss smiled pleasantly.

“I have no objections to the bet, but the fight is mine. I want an additional condition.”

“As you wish.” Reiss agreed easily to Renji adding a condition. Sylvie’s face twisted bitterly.

“Hmph. But before I state my condition, let me hear your condition on the off chance that Mr. Eyepatch wins,” Renji said.

“I have only one request if Lucius wins: that from then onwards, you will become my subordinate and follow my orders. For example, if I tell you to fight someone I designate,” Reiss explained.

“...Fine. In return, if Mr. Eyepatch loses to me, you’re going to give me all your money and become my slaves.”

“Hehehe, very well. Then it’s decided. If you have anything you want to say before the duel, go ahead. You may temporarily keep Princess Estelle over with you as well.” It was clear the contents of Renji’s conditions were harsher than Reiss’s, but Reiss agreed readily with a fearless smile. Then, he started walking out of earshot of Sylvie’s conversation and towards Lucius.

“...Hey, Reiss,” Lucius said to Reiss’s back in a displeased tone.

“Oh? Are you doubting your ability to win?”

“That’s not it.”

“Rest assured. Even if you win, I wouldn’t do anything like use the Aloof one

to pour water over your thirst for revenge. I'll be disappointed if you lose, so I intend on giving you extensive backup," Reiss added with a shrug, sensing that Lucius was dissatisfied.

"I'm saying I don't need that backup."

Perhaps it was because they were talking about Rio now, but Lucius's atmosphere had completely changed. His voice took on an ice-cold tone with not a drop of warmth whatsoever.

"Oh? But that eye and arm of yours are products of my most dedicated form of backup, no? Are you saying you'll carry out your revenge without using them?"

"...Silence." Lucius exuded even more anger at Reiss's carefree attitude.

"Good grief. What a whimsical person indeed. However, you need to find the location of the boy, no? I'd appreciate it if you trusted me a little more."

"I know you well. You have no problem lying to people's faces—betraying people easily after gaining their trust."

"How harsh."

"But I don't care what kind of man you are outside of my business with that bastard. So hurry up and tell me his location."

"I've told you many times already, his location is under investigation. I haven't been able to grasp his trail after he delivered the Beltrum Kingdom's first princess to the Restoration. He's the type of person to wander all over the place, after all," Reiss said with a sigh.

"In that case, I don't have any reason to cooperate with you," Lucius said, implying that he was free to act independently.

"I have a plan. And my methods should be to your liking. I believe it should be far more efficient than searching on your own. It would be one matter if you accompanied me, but if you don't accompany me then I'll have to exclude you when I make my move, no?"

"Is that a declaration of war?"

"I'm hurt. I even prepared this fight for you as a prelude to your fight with

your beloved one. You've been recuperating recently, so your battle senses have dulled a little, have they not?"

"...I'm losing interest in this."

It was true that Lucius's skills had dulled after his long recuperation period. That, and he did think crushing Renji would act as a good distraction. However, when he thought about how this development was entirely planned by Reiss, his interest was immediately dampened.

"Now, don't say that. Please use this battle to test the abilities of that eye and arm. If you lose, we'll become his slaves, you know," Reiss chuckled.

"Are you saying I'll lose?"

"Not at all. As long as he hasn't awakened as a hero, there isn't even the slightest chance of you losing to him."

"Hmph. Time to finish this quickly, then. Seems like they're ready too." Lucius stopped in his tracks and turned as he spoke. Renji had also finished saying what he needed to say to Sylvie and the others and was watching Lucius and Reiss with a sharp gaze.

"Shall we begin, then?" Reiss and Lucius approached Renji once more.



Renji and Lucius glared at each other as they stood on a wild grass field littered with boulders. Beside them were Reiss and Sylvie, and another few dozen meters in the distance were Estelle, Elena, and the three hooded men.

"Now, for some simple rules. A victory will be decided by making your opponent surrender or rendering them unable to fight any further. Killing is technically against the rules, but there isn't really a penalty for doing so. Any objections?" Reiss explained briefly.

"Oh? My abilities aren't suited for knocking enemies unconscious, but you're saying it's fine if I end up killing him? How convenient." Renji smirked, his mood brightening at the opportunity to finally silence the man before him. He didn't doubt his own ability to win at all, which strangely calmed his anger and elevated his spirits. He was undoubtedly in his best condition.

"I don't mind if you come at me with the intention to kill me. Use that halberd's power however you wish. Don't hold back," Lucius responded boldly.

"That was my intention from the start... After all your boasting, you'd better survive the first hit. I've grown so bored of finishing off all my enemies in one shot," Renji lamented, sighing dramatically.

"Sure. Look forward to it." Lucius drew the black sword at his waist with his left hand as he spoke. Then, he removed his eyepatch. Underneath was an eyeball the color of all-engulfing darkness. There was no distinction between the pupil, iris, or conjunctiva. It was as though he had pitch-black darkness in place of a left eye.

Left-handed, huh... His left arm covered in bandages also seems strangely showy... Is he afflicted by an other-world version of eighth-grader syndrome? Not to mention that black sword...and what's with that creepy black eye? Can he even see with that?

Renji looked at Lucius in disgust.

"Hey, why are you standing still? Got cold feet?" Lucius asked with a sneer.

"No, I was looking at your left eye and arm, and that sword. They all seem oddly showy, so it'd be a real laugh if they were just for looks," Renji chuckled mockingly.

"Cut the chit-chat there. The moment this pebble I throw hits the ground, the match will begin. Now, both of you take your places. We shall stand back as well," Reiss said, walking over to where Estelle was with Sylvie. Once he was twenty or so meters away, he threw a rock roughly the size of his palm. The rock flew in a parabolic line, landing between Renji and Lucius. The moment it landed, Renji closed the ten meters of distance to Lucius in the blink of an eye, swinging his halberd downwards with great force.

Lucius reacted to that speed by moving backwards by a minimal distance. The blade of the ax missed Lucius's face by a hair's breadth.

"Hmm, so you can react properly to this speed," Renji said as though he was impressed. "But now it's time for you to die." Instantly, the area ten meters before him froze over, creating a block of ice several meters tall that swallowed

Lucius.

“Hmph. Looks like you were all talk after all...” Renji mumbled, venting his pent-up rage. He poured magic essence into his Divine Arms to strengthen his physical body and swung his halberd at the ice block with all his might.

“Haaah!”

It was a spirited brandish. The impact caused a tremendous shattering sound, the halberd taking out a chunk of the ice without coming to a halt, sending ice powder blowing everywhere.

Renji closed his eyes and smirked, bringing his halberd up to rest on his right shoulder.

“It’s over. After all that blabbing I had to listen to, you were no different from the average punk in the adventurer’s guild... What a disappointment. It would’ve been more interesting to actually have you apologize as my slave,” he said as though assured of his victory. However—

“Indeed. Who would have imagined such a dull fool.”

The voice of someone who shouldn’t have been there could be heard. He should’ve been dead.

“Wh-What...?” Renji whipped around.

Thud. The sound of something hitting the floor.

In the next moment, Renji felt like his left side had lightened in an odd way. He turned around to see Lucius standing with his black sword in his hand.

“You’re such a disappointment, I’ve completely lost interest. This can’t even be called a warm-up to my match with that bastard,” Lucius said with a bored look.

Renji looked at Lucius with an incredulous face. Then he turned his gaze to the ground where the sound had come from. There was an arm on the ground wearing clothing that looked very familiar. What could this mean?

“...An arm? Wait... My left arm?”

Renji was extremely confused as he looked at where his left arm should have been. However, there was nothing there past his shoulder. Instead, a

tremendous amount of red liquid was gushing out, flowing onto the ground.

“RENJI!”

One beat later, the scream of a familiar girl’s voice could be heard in the distance. Renji looked up to see Sylvie pale as a sheet, Reiss and the three hooded men obstructing her from running over to him.

“Hey.” Lucius grabbed Renji by the neck with his right hand, easily lifting his small body into the air.

“Gah...” Renji groaned in pain. Struggling for breath, he finally registered the reality of what was happening.

“What are you zoning out for over just one arm? Huh?”

“Gngh... Ugh...”

Lucius tightened his hold, making Renji’s face twist in pain. Losing his strength, the halberd in his hand fell to the ground with a dull thud.

“Are you frustrated? You must be. I get it. I also see that bastard’s face whenever I look at this left arm of mine. That’s why I won’t settle with just taking the bastard’s left arm. I won’t settle with gouging out his left eye. I won’t accept it if he dies with just that. That’s why I’ll take everything from him, right before his eyes. I’ll kill him half to death and drag him around, then drag around everyone precious to him and make him watch.” Lucius ranted about his grudge with bloodshot eyes, furiously agitated.

“Uhh... Ah... Ugh...” Renji’s consciousness was fading, the light in his eyes weakening by the moment.

“Seeing your face just now reminded me of the bastard again. That’s why I used you as a dry run of the real thing—so don’t think I’ll let you pass out this easily. Hey, you listening? What are you passing out for?!” Lucius yelled at Renji harshly, then threw his body into the hole gouged into the block of ice. The weakened ice crumbled and rained down on Renji from above.

“...”

There was utter silence for a few seconds, but after a moment, Renji’s halberd vanished from where it lay on the ground.

“Screw...you...!” Renji leaped out of the ice. His halberd was clenched in his right hand as he attacked Lucius, losing himself in his anger.

“Hmph.” Even though there was still space between them, Lucius swung the sword in his left hand. Renji then lost his balance and crashed to the ground.

“Guh?!“ Renji tried to scramble to his feet, but he lost his balance and fell forward. He tried to stand up again, but fell once more.

It was as though he couldn’t get his footing at all. Renji’s feet had been severed at the knees.

“Take a look at your feet,” Lucius sneered.

Renji looked towards his lower body. “Wh-When did...?! Gah!”

Immediately after that, Lucius stood before him and kicked his face with all his might. Renji’s body flew several meters up into the air.

“Hey! This better not be all you’ve got!” Lucius cut beneath Renji and launched a sharp upwards kick at his falling body.

“Gngh...!” Renji’s body flew into the air once more. He could see Lucius’s figure getting farther away below him, but before he knew it, Lucius had disappeared. Or so he thought—

“Where are you looking?”

Lucius’s voice came from above his head, followed by a strong impact against his back. Lucius had landed an ax kick with all his might.

“Wha...?!”

Renji’s body accelerated downwards. He crashed into the ground, unable to brace himself for the impact. His halberd fell from his right hand once again. As his body rebounded back upwards from the impact, Lucius appeared before him.

“Yo,” he said cheerfully, grabbing Renji by the neck with his right hand. Then he tightened his grip.

“Aah...”

At that moment, fear filled Renji’s eyes for the very first time. As though to

back that up, Cocytus vanished from where it lay on the ground. Lucius didn't fail to notice that, either.

"Seems like you picked a fight against the wrong person, huh?" he said, throwing Renji's body to the ground.

"Ugh... Urgh... I-I surren... Gah?!"

Lying with his face downwards, Renji used his right hand to desperately crawl away from Lucius as he tried to say he surrendered.

However, Lucius stomped on Renji's back before he could.



“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“I-I surr—aaah...!”

The weight on his back increased, making Renji scream. Just then, several bolts of light came flying straight towards Lucius from his front side. Each bolt was aimed accurately to pierce through Lucius’s body.

The bolts of light originated from Sylvie, who stood in a posture as though she had just drawn and thrust her rapier-shaped enchanted sword.

“Huh?” Lucius swung the sword in his left hand. Immediately, darkness swelled and swallowed up the bolts of light. Sylvie started charging towards Lucius, thrusting into empty space from several meters away. Each thrust released several bolts of light from the end of her rapier, every bolt aimed to snipe at Lucius’s torso with precision.

“Ha!” Lucius sneered, dealing with Sylvie’s bolts head-on. He swung his sword lightly, releasing a darkness that swallowed the light beams. Despite that, Sylvie continued firing the light from her enchanted sword. Then, once the distance between them had reduced to roughly ten meters—

“Here, let me return them,” Lucius said, pointing his sword at Sylvie.

“Huh?!”

The same attack that Sylvie had fired came flying at her from every direction. Her speed dropped from her continuous charge. She tried to change directions quickly, but the light flew at where she was trying to evade towards. When she tried to find another escape route, she realized for the first time that the bolts were coming from every direction. Because of that, Sylvie’s reaction was delayed.

“Ngh...”

She tried to evade the light bolts in order to minimize the damage as much as possible. However, before Sylvie knew it, she was standing away from the siege of light bolts.

“Wha...?”

Just how did she move instantaneously? Sylvie was speechless. Then, Reiss

stepped beside her.

“Your jokes have gone too far. Are you trying to kill Princess Sylvie?” Reiss asked Lucius in a fed-up tone.

“Don’t get in the way. You let that woman pass you on purpose,” Lucius pointed out with a snort.

“That’s because you were hurting him a little too much. Well, the match will count as Renji the Aloof’s defeat due to Princess Sylvie’s intervention anyway,” Reiss said, looking down at Renji on the ground.

“Ah... Aah...” Renji was barely conscious, groaning with his eyes open slightly.

“R-Renji! Ngh...” Sylvie snapped back to her senses and ran up to Renji. His physical body had been strengthened during the fight, but it was hard to imagine he could maintain that while unconscious.

The damage to his body and the amount of blood lost appeared to be so severe, there seemed to be no way for him to survive. Sylvie shook at the tragic state of Renji’s body and glared at Lucius.

“Hey, it was a consensual match. I don’t think I deserve to be glared at for that. He never said he surrendered either, y’know?”

It wasn’t that Renji didn’t say it, but that he couldn’t. Lucius looked down at Renji and chuckled smugly.

“The match was settled the moment you cut his arm and legs off! You were fully intending on killing him!”

“That goes for the both of us, though. He tried to kill me with no hesitation from the very first blow.”

“Guh...”

Indeed, since Renji had tried to finish the match in the first blow by killing Lucius, Sylvie couldn’t argue any further.

“The two of you can leave your argument at that. He won’t die like this—or rather, I won’t let him die like this.” Reiss had picked up Renji’s severed limbs while the two of them argued harshly.

“He won’t die...?” Sylvie looked at the severed limbs in anger.

“Yes. Because he’s a hero.”

“Wha...” Sylvie was shocked into speechlessness by Reiss’s words.

Why...does he know...? Renji’s mind thought in a daze. However, with that question as a final thought, his consciousness faded.

“Falling unconscious from this... It’s proof of how he’s still unawakened as a hero, I suppose. It seems he’s still inexperienced,” Reiss said, holding the severed limbs to their original positions. Renji’s limbs began visibly reattaching themselves as though they were being drawn together.

“Wh...?!” Sylvie swallowed her breath in shock.

“See? He won’t die.” Reiss smiled as though he knew everything from the start. *Well, he’s still unawakened as a hero, so his recovery speed is rather slow... And as a human, he’s still bound by his human emotions.*

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?! What?! Reiss! You knew Renji was a hero from the beginning, didn’t you?!” Sylvie ranted in confusion.

“You were somewhat aware of the Aloof’s identity yourself, no? And it was because you saw the heroes at the banquet in the Galarc Kingdom too, I’d wager?”

“...What do you intend on doing with Renji?” Sylvie asked with a disgusted look. Seeing how calm Reiss was helped her regain her composure a little.

“As agreed, he’ll become my subordinate.”

“You’ll make a hero your subordinate?”

“Do you find that disrespectful? Just so you know, I value him for his latent combat potential rather than his political use. We can never have enough superior fighters, after all,” Reiss replied to Sylvie’s frown with a creepy smile.

“...” Sylvie fell silent.

“You don’t have to be so wary—I won’t turn his power towards you. As long as we are allied, that is.” In other words, it would be a different story if they were enemies.

“Now, shall we go? Princess Estelle will continue her stay with us, but as a sign of our trust, you may look after your friend for the time being. Please explain his position to him clearly.” Leaving behind those words, Reiss walked away. Lucius, who had completely lost interest in Renji, followed him.

Renji’s severed limbs had been reattached and the bleeding had stopped.

Renji...

Sylvie picked up the unconscious young man with a miserable expression and followed behind Reiss and the others.



That night, Lucius and Reiss returned to Proxia Castle with Second Princess Estelle. Renji, who was still unconscious, was taken to the royal castle by Princess Sylvie.

Lucius locked himself in his room and sat by the window to glare at a few documents. These were reports regarding Rio which Reiss had handed to him to read while he went to speak with Nidoll. Lucius reread the reports over and over again to search for information he could use.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Reiss had settled his matters with Nidoll and arrived at Lucius’s room. He came to a stop as soon as he entered the room and spotted Lucius seated by the window.

“Someone in the castle used a teleport crystal,” Lucius said without taking his eyes off the reports. A short time ago he had detected the scattered ode and mana characteristic of space sorcery.

“Impressive. Arein, Lucci, and Ven just left for a job. I had them head to Rodania in the Beltrum Kingdom.”

Lucius lifted his head for the first time and glared at Reiss sharply. “What are you scheming now?”

“It seems you still don’t trust me. There was no scheming—I sent the three of them to search for the location of your fated partner, the Black Knight. I’ve handed you the reports with all the information concerning him, sending off my

subordinates using precious teleport crystals that cannot be mass-produced just to gather information. It's about time you trusted me a little."

"That depends on what you say next. You said you'd set up the stage for me to fight that Rio bastard alone if I went with you to the Rubia Kingdom, right?"

"Indeed, I have no intention of breaking that promise." Reiss nodded without hesitation.

"But you interfered with the end of my fight with that brat today." Lucius recalled the moment when Princess Sylvie had intervened.

"The one who interfered was Princess Sylvie and not myself."

"Don't dodge the point. You would have been able to stop that woman."

"I do not deny that. However, I did inform you before we entered that kingdom that I would intervene if you went too far. I allowed Princess Sylvie to act because your careless actions could have cornered the hero to the point of awakening."

"...What do you intend on doing during my fight with Rio, then? Even if you prepare a stage for me to fight the bastard, will you interfere while I'm in the middle of fighting him?" Even if Reiss himself didn't interfere in the fight, he could easily allow someone else to do so like he had done with Sylvie. Lucius was wary of that.

"As I said before, I will prepare a stage for you where no one can interfere at all."

"But you believe I'll lose if I have a rematch with him." That was what Lucius was most displeased with. It was also the basis of his suspicion that Reiss would interfere.

"...I admit, I believe you're at a disadvantage. However, as long as he is human, he should have as many openings as you need. I believe I stated this—if you assist me in my business at the Rubia Kingdom, I will explain my entire plan to you. I mentioned it before you fought Renji as well, but I'm sure it'll be to your liking."

"Then let's hear it."

“Of course.”

“But first, I want to confirm something.”

“Whatever you wish,” Reiss nodded with a shrug.

“You already know Rio’s location, don’t you?” Lucius asked, getting straight to the point.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t know his precise location... He’s able to fly about the sky freely, as you know. He also moves at an extraordinary speed,” Reiss said without batting an eye, his explanation the same as it had always been.

“So you don’t know the bastard’s location, but you say you can set the stage for a battle for me. If you end up saying anything wrong, I’ll be acting by myself. I won’t go along with your stalling any longer,” Lucius said threateningly.

“I understand. However, I’d like you to listen to my explanation of why this time spent waiting isn’t a waste. If you can understand my reasoning, I hope you will be willing to wait until the right moment arrives. If you’re insistent on rushing towards your death, then I will cancel the arrangements myself.” Reiss sounded oddly serious for once.

The two of them stared at each other.

“...Fine,” Lucius nodded without breaking eye contact.

“Then, for my explanation: as insurance for the worst-case scenario, I’m thinking of kidnapping the people close to the Black Knight. Once I’ve secured that insurance, I can promise not to lay a finger on your fight with him,” Reiss explained.

“I see. They might know where Rio is too. It’s not a bad idea.” Of course, Lucius had also considered obtaining a hostage.

“However, it’s easier said than done. There is one problem with this plan.”

“No doubt.” Lucius’s reply was immediate. He knew Reiss wasn’t foolish enough to pass on an opportunity with guaranteed success. In this regard, he trusted him completely.

“I’ve identified several candidates that could be secured as hostages and located them. As you may have seen in the documents on the Black Knight, the

candidates are either powerful themselves, or have powerful people around them... It's been a challenge to find an easy mark to grab. If I slip up, I'll be making an enemy out of him in the future, so the only time I can act is when I'm certain of my success. That is why I'd like your cooperation in securing the hostages," Reiss said with a dramatic sigh.

"...Who's the target?"

"The first candidate is Celia Claire. As you know, she was his former teacher at the Beltrum Academy back when he was attending. She's currently affiliated with the Restoration in Rodania. That being said, I cannot imagine the Black Knight would leave her completely defenseless, so there's a high possibility his contract spirit is acting as her guard... Even then, she would probably be the best target."

"For what reason? Doesn't his contract spirit have a fair amount of hidden strength?"

"The reason is plain and simple—helpless women make the best hostages, no? And no matter how strong that humanoid spirit is, there's a limit to what can be handled alone. There are plenty of ways to deal with a spirit burdened by a hindrance."

"...I see." Though faint, Lucius showed a pleased smile for the first time at that.

"His contract spirit is menacing, but as long as nothing else gets in the way, the two of us should be able to get it done; we should be able to kidnap Celia. She would also make a good political bargaining chip in the future," Reiss said with a twisted grin.

"Ha, you're one greedy bastard yourself," Lucius sneered, seeing through him.

"If I didn't gain something as well, you wouldn't believe me anyway," Reiss said, understanding Lucius well.

"Well, yeah..."

"How about it? I'll apologize for putting on airs over such a straightforward means, but I believe hostages are a method you also enjoy using. As long as there's a hostage, there will be no need to fear my interference. It's not a bad

idea—in fact, I believe it's a most reasonable suggestion..."

"...Fine. We'll take a hostage." Though he had a hint of displeasure on his face, Lucius nodded.

"Excellent." The corners of Reiss's mouth lifted upwards.

"Hmph. When do you plan on going through with this?" Lucius snorted and asked.

"It's short notice, but in two days' time. That's why I sent Arein and the others off in advance. They are to spend one day gathering information about Celia Claire, and if the situation looks favorable, then we'll go ahead with the plan."

"Sounds like everything's been planned from start to finish. Exactly how you want it." Lucius's frown spoke of his discontent towards that.

"You're overestimating me there. I've had consecutive miscalculations in regards to the Black Knight, after all. Why, a new miscalculation occurred right when we were absent from the castle..." Reiss lamented.

"I heard an intruder snuck into the castle last night. And that they fought that Nidoll and escaped," Lucius suddenly said.

"...Oh? You're aware of it already. Nidoll said he placed a gag order on the topic, so I was thinking of informing you as a sign of our collaboration." Reiss's eyes widened in apparent surprise.

"Don't play the fool. You predicted Rio would come to this castle too, didn't you? Even though you said you didn't know his location just now..." Lucius questioned him with emphasis on his words.

"The former was a miscalculation. He probably took into account my position as the Proxia Empire ambassador and snuck here suspecting my connection to you," Reiss stated with an indifferent expression.

Lucius knew that Reiss was in regular contact with the imperial capital. He probably received word that Rio had invaded the castle before deciding to return at this point in time.

"...Then what about the latter?"

Figuring he would just be lied to anyway, Lucius didn't pry any further into the

former. He wasn't satisfied, but it was a better idea to remain silent about that here.

"I didn't lie to you. At present, I do not know of his precise location. However, thanks to Nidoll's quick-wittedness on the spur of the moment, I do have an idea of his destination."

"Where is it?" Lucius questioned immediately with hatred burning in his eyes.

"You don't have to glare at me with those terrifying eyes—I won't hide anything at this point. He's heading for Prince Duran in the Paladia Kingdom, since Nidoll received information that you were working there just recently."

"Paladia, huh... Not bad. Finally some luck on our side." Lucius smiled faintly at the lead he finally received on Rio's whereabouts.

"And so, I'll be heading to the Paladia Kingdom now to prepare Prince Duran for contact with him. I'll have Prince Duran guide him towards a specified location, so you should stay here and conserve your energy. I will return soon. If you disappear without notice in the future, I will consider our collaborative partnership terminated, so don't try anything strange," Reiss emphasized. He probably had no intention of telling Lucius where specifically in Paladia they would hold their fight, as a matter of insurance.

"Hmph." Lucius snorted in discontent at being ordered to wait.

"Hastiness will invite mistakes. I'm sure you're feeling impatient knowing he's heading for Paladia, but securing the hostages comes first. We need to confirm Celia Claire's situation in Rodania and the presence of the humanoid spirit, so wait one more day. I would have preferred to spend several days observing her, so I've brought things forward for your sake already," Reiss said with a sigh, sensing Lucius's displeasure.

"Get out of my sight and go where you should be going," Lucius spat with venom. He waved his hand as though he were shooing away an irritating bug.

"Understood." Reiss gave a troubled shrug and turned around, leaving through the door.

"Arrogant bastard... You don't know anything," Lucius muttered to himself in the empty room, standing up to open the door leading to his bedroom. He then

called out to the three men waiting inside. “Hey. Arein, Lucci, Ven.”

The three people Reiss thought he had sent to Rodania were here. They were technically Lucius’s subordinates in the Heavenly Lions, but were presently being lent to Reiss as agents of the Proxia Empire.

“I was so anxious Reiss would notice. That was bad for my heart,” Arein said with a strained smile, exuding a cold sweat.

“Not even Reiss would realize the coordinates of the teleport crystals you used led to my room. Using them from his stock was the right move,” Lucius chuckled. Since a magic artifact was required to set the destination coordinates on teleport crystals, crystals and artifacts needed to come in a set.

On top of that, there were also magic artifacts that created barriers preventing the detection of ode and mana fluctuation from teleportation. Lucius used such an artifact to invite Arein and the others to his room without Reiss’s notice.

“But our remaining stock is really low now. Reiss has been carefully managing the teleport crystals and coordinate artifacts,” said Ven.

“Tell me how many you have left, including the ones we pilfered,” Lucius ordered, taking a Strahl region map from his shelf and spreading it open on his bed.

“One teleport crystal Reiss gave us to go to Rodania just now. One that leads to the Galarc Kingdom’s capital. One to a forest in the east of Beltrum where we hid to gather information. Then there’s seven sets of free teleport crystals we’ve pocketed from our missions until now.” Ven took out small pouches of teleport crystals from his breast pocket, placing each on the map at the destination point labeled on the pouches. He left the seven pouches with the free destination crystals on top of the imperial capital where they currently were.

“...I have two teleport crystals to where I was hiding in the Paladia Kingdom, and one to the royal capital there.”

Lucius took out two pouches of teleport crystals and placed them on the map as well.

"Will you get the jump on Reiss with this, Captain?" Lucci asked.

"I'm considering it. As long as we can secure a different hostage to Reiss in the next day, anything works. The problem is whether there are any women with hostage potential left that he hasn't set his eyes on..." Lucius said, looking down at the documents regarding Rio. The papers had Rio's past and human relationships recorded on it, detailing how the former orphan from the slums had obtained new people precious to him and was living happily. It was truly a report that infuriated him the more he read, but that was precisely why he examined it carefully from cover to cover.

The people who were deeply related to Rio were noted down with their names and details, but apart from Celia, none of their locations were known. The next most acquainted people with him were also listed, but their locations were either out of reach of the crystals or too securely guarded within a castle.

Should we grab the hero in the Galarc Castle? But with Reiss's eyes on me, I can't leave.

The ones who would actually be doing the abducting were Arein and the others. They were all excellent fighters personally trained by Lucius himself, but there was no guarantee they could successfully sneak into a castle and face a hero on par with Renji at the very least. If they failed, they could risk getting captured themselves.

"...Maybe we could just grab the Beltrum sisters?" Lucius muttered, looking through the documents again. The report noted the relationship between Rio and the royal sisters—that Rio attended the Beltrum Royal Academy years ago, how he was treated there, and so on...

I don't know about the older one, but the younger one already proved to have hostage value when we fought at Amande.

Lucius looked at the text about Rio and the royal sisters while recalling the Amande battle with a sneer.

Back then, Rio had definitely tried to protect Flora. In other words, even if Rio had an unpleasant past with them, they could still be used as hostages.

Thanks to this left eye, I can move short distances easier than before, but I still

can't underestimate that bastard's mobility in closing distances at instant speeds. I'll need to pin him down with hostages to seal his movement. It'll be fine as long as he has a burden on his side. I'll show him what it's like to obtain the power to protect others without being able to use it. That'll infuriate him.

He was an avenger, yet he surrounded himself with people precious to him. He tried to protect irrelevant strangers. What reason did he have to do that?

Was a human seeking revenge really trying to keep a high sense of ethics at the same time? If someone carrying such impurities really came to kill him, Lucius would laugh. Then, he would be truly pissed off.

That was pure deceit. It was hypocrisy—the work of a fool. Sacrificing yourself to protect the weak was unthinkable. It shouldn't happen.

There was nothing to gain by keeping up that behavior. There would only be things to lose. Someone born in the slums choosing the path of revenge should know that well, yet Rio was trying to keep up his appearance. That was something extremely displeasing. Revolting, even.

Rio's face—Rio's eyes when he appeared at Amande for revenge were unforgettable, even now. That attitude that suppressed hatred in order to remain rational...

You and I are birds of the same feather.

That was why he would expose that filthy character of Rio's and make him taste despair. On top of that, he'd drag Rio's half-dead body before his precious people, and steal them from him.

That would be Lucius's retaliation towards Rio. He'd take hostages in order to trap Rio, but he wouldn't let anyone else get in the way.

I'll take a hostage. But I never said I'd do so in collaboration with you, Reiss. I told you that bastard was my prey. I'll take a hostage out of my own will, but no one said I'd use the hostage you prepared.

There was no beast that hunted prey placed fully prepared before them. At the very least, Lucius wouldn't accept that. It was a different matter when he moved of his own will, but he couldn't stand being used by others. The only reason why he had moved according to Reiss's orders until now was to find

Rio's location.

After that, Lucius spent some time staring at the documents with a serious face. Arein and the others watched on silently.

Once he had organized his thoughts, Lucius opened his mouth and said, "Reiss is heading to Duran in the Paladia Kingdom right now. I can't move from this castle. In order to get the jump on him, you'll have to move for me."

"As you wish," the three of them nodded with wide grins.

"First, the hostage candidates are the royal sisters of Beltrum. You'll send them to my hideout in the Paladia Forest. Not even Reiss knows of that precise location—it'll be perfect for outsmarting him," Lucius chuckled with contempt. "Ven, you warp to Rodania immediately after this and sniff out where the siblings are by tomorrow evening. Take a free teleport crystal and set the coordinates before returning."

"Roger that." Ven picked up the pouch with the crystal that led to Rodania, and one of the free destination crystal pouches.

"So what should Arein and I do?" Lucci asked with an excited grin.

"Once you've confirmed Reiss's return, Lucci will go to the Paladia capital. Buy enough supplies so that the princesses don't drop dead, then teleport to the woods and stock up the cabin. Make your way back here by tomorrow evening."

"Got it."

"Arein, you'll go with Lucci to the Paladia capital. However, you'll be moving separately once you get there. Get in touch with the first prince Duran as my messenger—tell him to act like he's following Reiss's instructions while actually following mine. Duran will be the messenger that lures the bastard to the forest. Return by tomorrow evening."

"Understood."

Lucius fired off his orders one after another. Lucci and Arein each picked up the respective teleport crystals they needed.

"Once you've finished up your business, you'll all go to Rodania together. In

order to look like you were following Reiss's orders, that is. We'll play whatever follows that by ear, but in two days' time, I'll find a moment to dump Reiss and go to Paladia. Before that happens, you guys have to kidnap the princesses and return to Rodania without Reiss's notice."

"We just leave the royal sisters in the woods after kidnapping them?" Lucci asked.

"Yes. If I assigned one of you as a guard, Reiss would notice your absence and suspect our movements. With our lack of personnel, I'll have to be the one to retrieve the princesses after I outsmart him. If Reiss tries to shake you down for answers, pretend you don't know anything and make it work in my favor. You might even get to see his expression look panicked, you know?"

Lucius wouldn't be able to see that face. However, just imagining it was enough to send the corners of his mouth upwards cheerily.

Chapter 4: A Fierce Battle

The day finally came for Lucius and Reiss to execute their plan to kidnap Celia, just two days after Lucius made his arrangements to get the jump on his partner. However...

In the skies several kilometers east of Rodania, two shadows were chasing each other through the air at a tremendous speed. The shadow in front was Reiss, and the one giving chase was Aishia.

You've done it now, Lucius. I never imagined a betrayal at the last moment like that...

Reiss flew at his maximum speed to flee from Aishia while recalling the events from several moments ago with an annoyed grimace. Reiss and Lucius had visited the central office of the Restoration together.

"It seems like Princess Christina and Princess Flora are returning by airship, so everyone's in a rush. I didn't think everyone in the central office would be out, though..." Reiss said, gazing out the window.

"Maybe something's happened. So what are we gonna do? Shouldn't Celia's lecture be over soon?" Lucius asked with a faint smile.

If everything was occurring as he planned, Arein and the others would have sent Christina and Flora to the Paladia Forest already. Based on the look of things, it had gone well, making him chuckle to himself on the inside.

"She normally returns to her estate from the front entrance, but with this many people out and about, we won't be able to attack her within the premises. Oh dear..." Reiss looked towards the door as though he noticed something.

"What is it?"

"It's extremely faint, but I can detect a spirit's presence approaching. As expected, it must be the contract spirit of the Black Knight. It seems like it's in spirit form right now, but even in spirit form it's giving off a faint presence. How

terrifying,” Reiss said with a light shrug.

“...Isn’t it going to notice your presence too?” Lucius checked.

“Veiling my presence is my forte, but even I’d be noticed at close range. If the spirit’s got sharp senses for detection, it may even notice that we’ve stopped by this room.”

“I see. So what now? Do we attack it in this room? Or wait for it to go outside?” Lucius asked in a rather calm tone.

“If it passes by the room then we’ll go after it, but if it enters this room then we’ll do it here. If it enters the room, you should handle it. The contract spirit should show itself immediately, so while you’re fighting the spirit, I will apprehend Celia Claire,” Reiss said somewhat rapidly, as though he was pressed for time.

“I see.”

“It’ll be here soon, so you should move next to the door.”

“Right.” Lucius approached the door as instructed. Shortly afterwards, someone knocked on it.

“They’re here... What are you doing?” Reiss whispered. His attention had been drawn to the door, but he frowned in suspicion when he saw Lucius take two magic crystals out of his breast pocket.

“I’ll show you a little mercy and erase my tracks when I go.”

“What are you—” Reiss’s confusion intensified.

Lucius immediately activated the magic crystal. “*Transilio*.” At the same time, he dropped the other magic crystal in his hand onto the ground.

“What?!” Reiss’s eyes widened in surprise. That was the last he saw of Lucius before he disappeared. The space distorted and Lucius vanished in an instant.

Meanwhile, the barrier spell in the magic crystal Lucius had dropped absorbed all the magic essence emitted by the space sorcery. A circle of light roughly one meter in radius appeared, completely shutting off the torrent of odes and mana from leaking outside. Even its creator, Reiss, wouldn’t have noticed the sorcery being activated if he hadn’t seen it with his bare eyes—the

exceptional quality had backfired on him.

“Excuse me...”

Immediately after that, Celia entered the room.



Several minutes later, in the skies above the east Rodanian outskirts...

Good grief. After all I did to emphasize how capturing Celia Claire would be the best possible move for him. Do you detest my interference that much, Lucius?

Reiss sighed, wondering when the last time he felt so panicked was. When he looked over his shoulder, he could see Aishia hot on his tail.

Having entrusted Celia to Sara and the others, Aishia was rid of her burden and able to increase her speed. Reiss also accelerated, but the distance between them was slowly growing shorter.

She's definitely getting closer. We'll soon be out of the forest and out in the open wasteland with nowhere to hide. It'll only be a matter of time before she catches up... I guess I have no other choice.

Fleeing would be a challenge at this rate. With that thought, Reiss resolved himself. The moment he flew out of the forest, he descended rapidly. He landed first on the level wasteland and waited for Aishia to come down as well.

“Had enough of running?” Aishia asked after descending several meters away.

“Yes. I could see you would catch up soon at the rate we were going.”

“Indeed,” Aishia replied shortly. She quietly assumed a battle-ready stance.

“If I promise never to sneak into Rodania ever again, would you let me go?” Reiss suddenly pleaded for his life.

“No.”

“Then how about a little chat? I’m quite interested in you.”

“I’m not interested in you,” Aishia replied flatly.

“Hmm. Spirits develop a stronger sense of self with the passing of time and

increase in rank, becoming more similar in appearance and personality to humans, but your sense of self is awfully faint. You've reached the realms of a humanoid spirit, yet you're more like a newborn one. Do you even know who you are?" Reiss stared at Aishia as though to ascertain her identity.

"You don't seem like a human either... There's something eerie about your aura. It's inhuman. Similar to a spirit, but more repulsive than a monster."

"Oh? Have you developed a little interest in me, then?"

"..." A slight discomfort appeared in Aishia's expression for the first time. Reiss didn't let that slip past him and grinned arrogantly.

"Hahaha, so you can express emotions after all."

"I'd rather remain the way I am than express emotions like yours."

"So you can make self-assertions too. By the way, it seems you have rather sharp senses, but I'm not a spirit," Reiss boasted with an empty smile. There was no telling how much of his words were true or not. It was a cunning tone.

"I have no intention of chatting with you any further," Aishia stated flatly, her magic essence swelling.

"What if the reason why I bought all this time was because my true aim was to grab Celia Claire?"

"Celia is with Sara and the others. I can return instantly at this distance too." Aishia activated her spirit arts in a show of her confidence. Light bullets of magic essence appeared around her, locking their aim onto Reiss.

"How awfully calm of you. Well, that wasn't my true aim anyway—really. That's why I'd like you to let me go... Whoa!"

"Get over yourself." Aishia fired the light projectiles with a stern expression, fed up with Reiss's babbling. Contrary to his joking attitude, Reiss didn't let down his guard at all, reacting at an incredible speed to leap to the side and avoid the attack.

However, Aishia had already fired other bullets with trajectories she could freely control, making them aim for Reiss from every angle.

"Goodness." Reiss immediately sighed heavily and released an enormous

amount of darkness from his entire body. The darkness completely swallowed Aishia's light and promptly contracted in size.

"..." Aishia watched on with an extremely wary look. She was concerned about the darkness that had swelled up—it wouldn't be wise to approach carelessly, she realized.

"To think I'd have to reveal my abilities for the mere purpose of fleeing..." Reiss said with a sigh. Then, the shadow at his feet expanded rapidly, staining the surrounding ground pitch black. The next moment, minotaurs with massive stone greatswords and several creatures resembling Winged Lizards—a flying subspecies of dragon—appeared. They were all jet black in color.

"...Monsters?" Minotaurs were naturally categorized as monsters, but Aishia sensed a monster-like aura from the winged creatures as well.

"I do not wish to be killed, so I'll be resisting you with everything I have. Well, I'll do what I can in this situation. It's a good chance for me to play with my collection as well." At the same time Reiss finished speaking his words, the minotaurs and winged creatures moved to surround Aishia.

"MROOR!" One minotaur took a giant leap, directly attacking Aishia. It moved above her head instantly, carrying the momentum of its fall behind the swing of its stone greatsword.

A thundering impact echoed. The surrounding ground cracked, and the minotaur was certain it had made contact. However, the stone greatsword hadn't crushed Aishia's body.

"Grah?!"

In an unexpected turn of events, an invisible wall surrounding Aishia had blocked the minotaur's greatsword. The minotaur reacted in surprise and placed more weight and strength into pressing the sword forward, but the arm holding the sword merely trembled without moving an inch.

"Move," Aishia muttered, placing her hand against the minotaur.

"Gwoh?!"

Aishia shot a powerful shock wave from the palm of her hand, blowing away

the giant body of the minotaur. It flew through the air and crashed to the ground, skidding a dozen or so meters from where it landed.

“Gah... ah...” The minotaur had no strength left to stand and turned to ash on the ground, leaving behind a magic gem.

“Even an enhanced minotaur can’t lift a finger against you, I see. How about an attack from the skies, then?” Reiss said, and the winged creatures in the air opened their mouths. They spewed flaming hot breaths towards Aishia. The breath had enough heat to burn a human into ash, but Aishia easily evaded the fiery downpour with light footwork.

“Winged Lizards shouldn’t be able to breathe fire...” Once she evaded all the breaths and came to a stop, she looked up at the winged creatures and compared them to the knowledge in her head.

“Then perhaps they aren’t Winged Lizards,” Reiss said cheerfully, having overheard her voice. Aishia frowned faintly and tried to close in on him, but the other minotaurs stood in her way and rushed at her, attacking in surging waves.

However, Aishia remained calm. She purposefully leaped towards one of the minotaurs rushing at her and touched its face as she passed, instantly turning its head into a block of ice. The giant minotaur crashed to the ground immediately afterwards.

“What are you doing?”

A murky black essence had been flowing out from Reiss’s body for a while now. Aishia realized Reiss was accumulating that strange magic essence and tried to close in to stop him, but—

“I just want to drive you away and flee from this place safely.” As though to back up Reiss’s words, another breath came raining down from overhead.

“Then I’ll just reduce their numbers.”

Aishia summoned countless bullets of light around herself, then turned half of them into beams that spiraled into the skies and shot down the winged creatures. The majority of the beams made direct contact.

“Guugh?!”

The winged creatures directly hit by the beams were heavily shaken off balance, but caught themselves without falling out of the sky. It seemed like they hadn't been damaged by anything other than the impact.

*The skin of dragons and their subspecies can repel *ode*. Do the ones in the sky also have that characteristic?*

In that case, she could either approach to physically attack them, or use her spirit arts to create a physical phenomenon. With that calm analysis, Aishia flew up and closed in on the winged creatures in the sky. However—

“I won’t let you!”

The minotaurs in the area raised their greatswords to attack Aishia as though they were reacting to Reiss’s orders.

“Doesn’t matter.” Aishia poured more magic essence into the remaining light bullets, transforming them from ten-centimeter-wide bullets to two-meter-wide ones. She then rapidly launched them at the minotaurs approaching from every direction.

“Gwuh...”

Unable to evade the shots and lacking magic-resistant skin, the minotaurs received direct damage from the bullets. Their huge bodies weighed in the tonnes, yet they were sent flying easily—some were even hit fatally and died on the spot, disintegrating into magic gems.

“As expected of a humanoid spirit—what tremendous strength.” Reiss watched Aishia fight and sighed, half in awe and half in exasperation.

“There are fewer monsters now,” Aishia said, creating several spears of ice two meters in length to snipe down the winged creatures in the sky. The number of monsters had been reduced to half of what Reiss originally summoned.

“Then let me summon them again.”

Reiss showed no sign of unease as he enlarged his shadow to call for reinforcements once more.

“Krrt, krrt...”

Skeleton warriors newly appeared from the shadow, making a rattling noise resembling chatter. There were easily over a hundred of them.

Like the minotaurs and winged creatures, they were black and looked as sinister as demons. They each had a jet-black sword and shield in hand, emitting an eerie aura.

“Are you manipulating space with that ability of yours?” Aishia asked dubiously.

The phenomenon occurring was extremely similar to space sorcery, but she couldn’t feel any ode or mana surges that normally accompanied space sorcery.

“Who knows?”

“The monsters you summon are all strange.” Aishia glanced at the skeleton army Reiss had summoned. Their auras were like monsters, but like the winged creatures, they didn’t exist within Aishia’s knowledge.

“Well, I still won’t be able to defeat you like this,” Reiss said in a defeated tone.

“Then stop resisting and give up.”

Aishia made a light sweeping motion with her arm and created a fierce gale. The wind strike created by magic essence slashed at the skeletons, mowing many of them down. However, Reiss evaded the strike by gently floating into the air.

“I was aiming for you to run out of magic essence without your contract holder around, but it seems you’re still full of energy,” he said upon landing.

Scattered around him were the skeletal remains of the warriors Aishia had defeated.

“My magic won’t run out this easily. The number of your friends has dwindled away again,” Aishia said plainly.

The minotaurs and winged creatures tried to attack her even as she was speaking, but Aishia activated her spirit arts to accurately fend them off, not even allowing them to approach.



"Indeed, you've reduced them by quite the number. It seems like aiming for your essence to run dry wasn't the best plan. Which means I'll have to face you directly from here on..." Reiss muttered with a sigh, raising his right hand into the air. The skeletons scattered around him turned into a murky black mist, gathering around his body. The mist soon changed shape and enlarged itself.

However, Aishia wasn't about to watch that happen quietly. She used spirit arts to finish off the remaining monsters that attacked her and launched several light spheres at the black mist. The light spheres all made contact with the mist, but—

He's absorbing the spell...?

The spell had no impact. Aishia could imagine what was happening. Since magic projectiles wouldn't work, she tried ice spears—but they were also sucked into the mist without any resistance.

During that time, all the monsters attacking her were eliminated, leaving only the black mist that Reiss was within.

After some time, a humanoid skeleton appeared from within the mist. It had a similar form to the skeleton warriors Reiss had created earlier.

However, its size and sinister aura couldn't be compared to the earlier skeletons. Its body was bigger than the minotaur, and it was equipped with a giant one-handed sword, a sturdy shield, and armor. It even had wings, implying it could fly through the air. It was truly like a demon or fallen angel had descended.

This is his true form? Aishia tilted her head curiously.

But just as she did, the enormous skeleton knight closed in on her at a speed surpassing the minotaurs, easily swinging the several-meter-long sword.

However, Aishia activated her invisible wall and directly caught the attack. At the same time, she fired a shock wave as a counterattack.

A thundering boom echoed. However, the giant skeleton knight was only knocked back slightly, without being sent flying. It had blocked the shock wave with the shield in its hand.

He's much sturdier than the others.

In that case, she just needed more firepower. Having determined that in an instant, Aishia fired successful powerful shock waves to execute her plan.

The impact created was visually similar to a sonic boom, the energy gathered together on the skeleton knight releasing at once.

“...” Without even a groan, the shield in the skeleton knight’s hand disintegrated into dust. As proof of the tremendous force, its large body lifted into the air and flew backwards. The skeleton knight flapped its wings in an attempt to soften the landing, but Aishia fired a further shock wave. This time there was no shield to stop her, and the skeleton knight received the damage directly against its body. Cracks appeared across the entire skeleton.

Far above in the skies, one figure watched all of it unfold.

This is the strongest familiar I can create right now. Though it can't reach the level of the great heroes, it should be able to easily crush several people of the hero class. Even then, the best it can do is buy some time... How truly terrifying, Reiss thought. Well, if she can defeat that and mistakenly assume she's defeated me, it'd be for the best. I still need to track Lucius's whereabouts, so I'd better leave before she finds me—otherwise she really will put an end to me. My stock of powerful monsters has been diminished quite a bit too.

A tactical retreat was the smartest option here. Reiss immediately flew away in an embodiment of that idea; his figure was soon hidden by the clouds and no longer visible.

“...”

Meanwhile, the skeleton knight was lying faceup on the ground, silent. Its limbs had been crushed, but it was still struggling to move until Aishia landed on its torso and stomped down.

She landed with such incredible force, the impact completely crushed the bones of its torso. The energy of the impact carried through to the ground, creating a small crater.

Then, the eerie light in the skeleton’s eyes faded. One beat later, the body turned into mist and dispersed. There was no magic gem left behind.

“...Did I defeat him?” Alone in the empty wasteland, Aishia cocked her head.

“His presence is gone. There’s no magic gem either.” He surely had to be defeated. But for some reason, something didn’t feel right—it was almost like it had been too easy. Why was that? Unsure of the reason, she looked around at her surroundings for a while. But the eerie aura was completely gone.

I couldn’t find out who Reiss really was in the end...

If he was going to die this easily, she should have questioned him a bit more, Aishia thought.

There was nothing to be gained today. That’s why she felt like her efforts were in vain.

“Do you even know who you are?”

Aishia suddenly recalled Reiss’s words.

“...I don’t know who I really am,” Aishia muttered with a slightly saddened expression. Why? For some reason, recalling her conversation with Reiss made her heart stir restlessly.

Time to return to Celia and the others.

She wanted to see them immediately. And Rio too... With a final glance around the area, Aishia flew for the stone house.

Chapter 5: Paladia Kingdom Infiltration

Two days ago—the same day Renji battled Lucius...

After fighting Nidoll Proxia, Rio left the imperial castle and immediately returned to the inn. When morning arrived, he checked out like a regular customer and left the imperial capital.

His next destination was the Paladia Kingdom, located to the east of the Proxia Empire. The Paladia Kingdom was one of the small kingdoms north of the Galarc Kingdom that was constantly in conflict with its neighbors over disputed territory.

Considering where and how it was obtained, he had his doubts about his information. But after causing such a commotion in the castle, he couldn't just sneak back in the next day for more. Information was still information, in the end.

There wasn't anything particularly strange about Lucius selecting this kingdom for his mercenary activities, so without any other leads, Rio had no choice but to head for the Paladia Kingdom.

According to the emperor, the first prince should know something... The problem is how I should make contact with him, Rio thought while he flew. He would probably be granted an audience if he introduced himself as the honorary knight of Galarc, but with his goal being what it was, he didn't want to involve his official noble position by going through the formal route.

Which left his only option as infiltration, but—

I'll probably be able to sneak into the castle, except...

If he was to sneak inside, he'd have to wait for the dead of night, but the private rooms of royalty would probably be heavily guarded. If the prince had a wife and children, he'd probably be sleeping with them, and it wasn't rare for royalty to sleep in bedrooms without windows in order to prevent intruders.

It was possible to force his way through by making the guards sleep, but

recalling the commotion created by his fight with Nidoll made him feel reluctant to do that.

...But this isn't the time to be thinking that. For now, I'll sneak in and see how it plays out. I'll have to wait for a chance to approach him.

With a tentative plan in mind, Rio increased his speed slightly—an unusual sign of how restless he was feeling.



The next afternoon, after a slight delay in locating himself amongst the disorderly, crowded small kingdoms, Rio arrived at Paladia Kingdom's capital.

So this is the Paladia Kingdom, huh?

Rio looked around at the townscape as he walked. The city was spread along a lake shore and looked plain, but had the bustling activity of a larger kingdom's suburban city. There were several merchants along the trading area of the city shouting for customers to look at their items.

It's pretty normal... That was Rio's first impression of the country.

I'll stay at an inn like yesterday and wait for sunset, then head to the castle right away.

He came to an abrupt stop and looked up at the castle, located on a small hill beside the lake. With its tall and solid castle walls, it looked more like a fortress than a castle. It was also much more compactly sized than the castles in Beltrum and Galarc, which were larger kingdoms.

The possibility of Lucius being inside the castle right now was enough to send him into a bloodthirsty rage, but he calmed himself with a deep breath and went to prepare an inn.



Once the sun set, the Paladia Castle closed its front gate and prohibited anyone from entering or exiting. However, under the cover of darkness, there was one shadow that easily made its way past the patrolling soldiers and over the castle wall.

Rio was dressed in his black coat, hood over his head and mask over his face.

The security's pretty tight.

He looked down from the top of the wall and observed the security below. There were torches illuminating every corner of the grounds, with many guards patrolling in extremely strict security.

Let's try the upper floors for now.

Entry through the ground floor looked rather problematic; the residential area of the royalty was probably on the upper floor anyway. With that thought, Rio decided to enter the building from above. Enhancing his physical abilities, he nimbly ran up the wall of the castle. He then stood on the rooftop of the Paladia Castle. There wasn't a good foundation to stand on, but he stood steadily as he looked around for an entry point into the castle.

From a defensive perspective, castles were normally made without any windows on the lower floors, but as the Paladia Castle was made more like a fortress, there were no windows that could be entered on the upper floors either. They were all windows so narrow, not even a child could fit through them. While there were larger windows every now and then, they were all locked from the inside.

Not even Rio had lockpicking abilities, so he had no way of opening locked windows other than physically breaking them. But that would leave clear evidence of a breakin, which he wanted to avoid. There would be more ways in if he just looked, anyway.

Seems like I can enter through that watchtower.

Rio identified a watchtower as a point of entry. There were soldiers standing guard in the tower that connected to the building, but it didn't seem like there were any other entry points, so he didn't have any other choice.

Rio activated a certain wind spirit art—by permeating his magic essence into the surrounding air, he could create a unique space that couldn't be visually observed. However, this technique couldn't erase sounds or the essence being released, so moving quickly or touching things would cause the spell to come apart. He had to proceed with extreme caution.

Rio slowly shuffled along the wall, moving below the watchtower. He then

activated an additional spirit art, releasing a soft wind laced with magic essence to probe the inside of the watchtower.

Three, huh? The security really is strict. Are they on some kind of emergency alert?

Three guards stood on watch in the tower. However, Rio hadn't given up on his breakin. He grabbed a handhold and climbed the wall just enough to peek inside the watchtower.

While the three of them are looking the other way...

Rio swiftly and smoothly descended into the tower. Fearing the space would distort and become noticeable, he canceled his optical disguise for a brief instant. At the exact same moment of his landing, he reactivated the spirit art and disappeared in the blink of an eye—it was a magnificent show of skill.

"Hmm?" The closest soldier reacted with a twitch, having picked up the sound of his landing. Rio crouched down on the spot.

"What's wrong?" another guard asked curiously.

"No, I just thought I heard a noise... Must have imagined it."

Since there wasn't even a shadow to be seen, he dismissed it. After checking there was no one in the watchtower other than themselves, the guards diverted their attention again. Rio cautiously stood up and slowly walked through the watchtower and down the corridor leading to the castle.

Right, time to find the first prince's room.

Pulling himself together, Rio moved through the shadows before canceling his optical disguise spell.

While he didn't want to walk around the castle visible to the patrolling guards, there could be sorcerers in the castle sensitive to magic essence, or artifacts and barriers made to detect essence reactions.

That was why it was wiser to avoid walking around with magic essence constantly flowing out. Instead, he'd watch for the presence of others, detecting any suspicious essence reactions, then hiding himself as needed to cleverly avoid the eyes of the security.

As someone who had broken into many royal castles already, Rio was a veteran at this. He knew that intruding like this sometimes needed recklessness, so he stepped forward without hesitation. He descended the staircase leading to the tower and reached the main castle building.

He passed several patrolling guards along the way, but he hid himself in the shadows and against the ceiling to avoid their detection. The floor Rio came out on was the second floor. He started walking around to gain an idea of the castle's interior and state of security.

While the castle wasn't as big as those of major kingdoms, the guards didn't leave any blind spots. However, that made things easier to predict. He memorized the areas with the most soldiers and analyzed the construction of the building to determine where the highest-ranked people would most likely be located.

That seems to be the bedroom of the first prince the emperor of Proxia mentioned.

Rio finally located the room of his target. Hiding in the corner of the corridor, he sounded out the situation. The door to the room was closed, and three knights stood guard in front of it. This made entering rather difficult.

"Hah, I want to go back to my room and sleep. Prince Duran sure has it nice, having fun on the other side of that door."

He heard one of the knights muttering that.

Since he had learned the first prince's name was Duran at the inn he was staying at, he knew there was no mistaking that information. Apparently he was very famous throughout the city for being quite the military man.

"Did you see the new woman Prince Duran brought today?"

"Yeah, she was pretty cute for a commoner."

"Apparently she's a famous poster girl for an inn downtown. She came to watch the festivities today."

"He really does have it nice, swapping women one after another. I want to be in a superior position too. His infidelity is officially approved too, right?" the

knight who first mentioned Duran's name muttered.

"What infidelity? You're single. You have to find a bride before you can dream of cheating on her. That, and you'd better achieve as many military exploits as Prince Duran to climb the ladder of success."

"Sh-Shut up. I was just speaking hypothetically."

The three seemed to be friendly colleagues, as their conversation was unreserved. However, they seemed to be trained quite well, as they showed no sign of letting down their guard despite this. It was proof of their high experience.

"But there might be a way to climb the ladder without military success," one of the knights suddenly said.

"Oh?"

"It was mentioned at the festivities today, no? Whoever can withstand one blow from Prince Duran will receive a reward. They'll be holding it again from noon tomorrow. There are no limits to the participants, so even we could apply."

"...Don't joke about that. I don't want to die yet—there's no way I could survive a hit from Prince Duran's enchanted sword. Not in a million years. He probably wouldn't even hold back against us if we applied."

The bulky knights shrunk in on themselves in fear.

"All the adventurers that participated were sent flying, after all. Those that made it out with just their armor broken were still lucky—there was one fool who tried to block Prince Duran's downwards swing and was rendered beyond recovery." Another knight recalled the scene with a cold smile. It seemed like the reward was being used as bait to hold an event even highly trained knights feared.

An event, huh?

Rio's interest was piqued by that contest. The timing was a little too convenient, but Rio had never met Duran before—this development was a godsend to him.

Then there's no need for me to risk things here.

Having decided to participate in the event, Rio quietly left the scene.



The next day, around the same time when Christina and Flora were sent to the Paladia Forest...

Rio walked easily through the main gate to the Paladia Castle. Normally, the area was strictly off-limits to unauthorized personnel, but today the grounds were open up to the courtyard. A huge crowd of people had gathered there in excitement, blocking his view of the action.

"Whoaaa!"

Cheering could be heard from afar. Rio went up the stairs of the courtyard open for spectators, deciding to watch the event from the viewing space above.

This should do.

There were two large men wielding swords. One was clearly a rowdy adventurer, while the other was wearing a neat military uniform. Both were in their mid-twenties.

Is that man Prince Duran?

Rio focused his gaze on the man in military uniform. He had an aggressive grin and a wild air about him, but his facial features were extremely refined. As proof of that, it was clear the spectating women were all watching him with heated gazes.

The adventurer and Duran distanced themselves and faced each other in the courtyard.

"Here goes," Duran said, charging forward to slash his sword. The adventurer was hunched over a bit, but he held his sword at the ready without moving an inch.

Suddenly, Duran slashed at the adventurer's sword. "W-Whoa?!" The nervous adventurer was unable to stand his ground and was easily blown away.

"Oooh!!" The spectators cheered passionately. Young ladies in the crowd

squealed, and Duran lowered his sword with a smug look.

“How pathetic. Prattling on about joining my squad when you’re such a weak-kneed man. Is there no one out there with some backbone?” Duran glanced down at the adventurer, who was sent flying, and shook his head in disappointment. Then he looked around at the crowd and shouted to incite them. “Well, is there?! Is there no one who can withstand one blow from me, the great Duran?! You’ll be rewarded with whatever you wish!”

The adventurers who were out to get rich quick stirred noisily.

Every adventurer yesterday and today had been beaten down; while Paladia was only a minor kingdom, the reward the first prince spoke of was attractive enough to spur them into action.

As long as they held their weapon at the ready, Duran would engage them. As long as they weren’t unlucky enough to be hit from the wrong angle, there was little chance of them meeting their demise.

Even though they had just witnessed a man be sent flying moments ago, there were several people sucking in deep breaths and summoning their courage to step forward.

Amongst them, there was one person who raised his hand immediately.

“...Oh?” Duran immediately spotted them. He easily lifted a two-handed sword up with one hand and pointed with the tip.

“The man... No, the boy over there. Come down here,” he said, nominating Rio, who had been the one to raise his hand.

“...” Rio bowed once, silently, and went down the staircase to where Duran was waiting in the center of the courtyard. The spectators opened a path for him in slight shock.

“Hey, hey...”

“That brat’s dead meat.”

“But he’s got pretty good gear on him.”

The adventurers that were too late to step forward started making their usual lively remarks.

In reality, there was quite a height difference between Duran and Rio, and their body weight was quite different too. The adventurers couldn't foresee a still-developing boy's body being able to withstand a hit from Duran, so it was only natural they would underestimate him. However—

"Kid. What do you want as a reward for withstanding one blow from me?" Duran asked, staring sharply at Rio as though he were watching some kind of interesting prey.

"The location of the Heavenly Lions' captain—Lucius Orgueil," Rio answered without hesitation.

Duran's eyes widened faintly before he grinned. "Hmm. Very well. Draw your sword."

"Excuse me, then." With that preamble, Rio drew his favored blade from the sheath at his waist with a flowing gesture. A sharp but clear sound echoed, revealing the gleaming blade. Meanwhile, the spectators were holding their breath in suspense. Even the lively adventurers had quieted down, leaving the courtyard in silence.

"Interesting. An enchanted sword, huh? I'll strike you with a blow worthy of your reward. Do not disappoint me," Duran's proud voice sounded clearly.

"I will do my best. Ready when you are." Rio already had his sword braced.

"There will be no signal..."

Duran's aura sharpened. The atmosphere was no longer that of recreation, but a real battlefield. The moment someone spectating gulped noisily—

"..." Duran kicked off from the ground without a sound. He closed the ten-meter gap between himself and Rio in a single instant, swinging his sword down from above.

"Wha...?!" The spectators lost sight of Duran as his speed surpassed what they could follow with their eyes. It was the moment they finally understood how much Duran had been holding back until now.

Meanwhile, Rio saw through Duran's movements perfectly. Since the rule was to stop the blow, he couldn't avoid it; instead, he held his sword ready to guard.

Zoom! The sound of the impact reverberated. Rio held his ground as he caught the blade of Duran's enchanted sword with the blade of his own.

"You... What did you do?" Duran asked in confusion, his sword still held aloft.

"I just caught your blow," Rio replied curiously as though he didn't understand the question.

"Caught my blow, you say? Bah!" Duran burst into hearty laughter. "Then what was that lack of resistance I felt just now? What did I just try to cut?"

Duran corrected his question. He had definitely struck Rio's sword with his own, but there had been no resistance.

"That's probably because I redirected the force..."

"In a single instance? To a blow from me?" Duran often redirected the power of an opponent's blow behind him as well, so he understood the logic. However, his eyes were wide as though he couldn't believe it.

"Yes," Rio nodded calmly.

"Ha. Bwahahaha!" Duran cackled.

"..." Rio stood there somewhat awkwardly.

After laughing for a while, Duran collected himself and hummed. "If it's Lucius Orgueil's location you want, you'll need to wait a while. I should be able to tell you by tomorrow."

"You know his location?"

"He's nearby, is what I can tell you. He's also searching for you, kid... No, Haruto Amakawa—the Galarc Kingdom's Black Knight."

"..."

How does he know my identity? Rio watched Duran warily.

"I simply received a message from him—one that said you would most likely visit me in search of him. I've hired his services out of convenience quite a few times, but we're not allies by any means. Though I'm not a neutral party either," Duran said suggestively, then chuckled.

"Why can't you tell me now?" Rio asked.

“I received his message as part of an agreement—one where I was ordered not to say anything unnecessary—and I’m a man of my word. I’ve told you he’s in this country somewhere, but I actually do not know his exact location. I’m expecting him to send word today of a location to give to you. It could arrive right after this. And that’s all I can say on the subject.”

“...”

“Any objections?” Duran grinned at Rio’s silence.

“...No,” Rio said, shaking his head slowly. With his movements anticipated to this extent, it was almost certain that Lucius would have set up some kind of trap to make the first move—but in this situation, there was nothing he could do about it.

“Where are you staying?”

“I’ve rented a room at an inn in town.”

“Then I’ll have one of my knights follow you when you return. Once I’ve received word of Lucius’s location, I’ll send a messenger there. That, or I can prepare a room at the castle if you’d like to stay here?”

“...I’ll be at the inn. I won’t run or hide, either.” Rio was rather taken aback at the bold declaration of sending someone to tail him.

“What a shame. I would have liked to talk to you over drinks...” Duran sighed in disappointment.

What an odd guy.

Based on their conversation so far, Duran didn’t seem like a two-faced kind of person. He drew a line where he needed to, but it seemed like he was merely curious about Rio.

“There’s no helping it. I would risk breaking my contract with him as well. Go now.” Duran looked almost hesitant, but he sent Rio off bluntly as though to sever himself from his indecision.

“...Right.” Rio put the royal castle behind him, not feeling entirely satisfied.



Several hours later, in the forest west of the Paladia Kingdom's capital, a man arrived at the cabin where Christina and Flora had teleported to.

"..." The man opened the door to the silent cabin. There was no sign of anyone inside. With the lamp in his hand to light the way, he marched in. After confirming that the building was empty and that the food in the storage and sheets on the bed were gone, he concluded that someone had stopped by the cabin.

"Heh, so they chose to run. I didn't think such sheltered princesses would have the guts." The man—Lucius—sneered as he left the cabin, then looked around carefully at the ground outside. Two amateurs were traversing the forest—they'd definitely leave tracks of trodden vegetation.

"It's been a few hours at most since they left the cabin. They won't get away."

Like a beast hunting down its prey, Lucius started treading through the quiet forest.

Chapter 6: The Whereabouts of the Royal Siblings

The day after Christina and Flora were sent to the Paladia Forest, the two of them silently walked through the forest during the afternoon hours, trying to make their way out. Though they took some breaks, they had been walking continuously since morning.

Flora's healing magic could soothe away their physical fatigue, but there was nothing that could be done about their mental fatigue. Being cornered into an extreme situation like this—on top of going through the commotion of Flora being bitten by a spider in the morning—meant they had long surpassed the limits of their minds.

"How are you holding up, Flora?" Christina asked, stopping frequently to check up on Flora as she walked behind her.

"I'm fine." Flora nodded with a brave smile, sweating profusely.

"You've been staggering for a while now."

Though they only just took a break a short moment ago.

"Ehehe... Umm, I think I may be a little hungry. It seems I don't have much of an appetite when walking."

"I'm sorry, I lost track of time. Let's have lunch."

They had been so preoccupied with walking, their sense for hunger had probably been numbed. However, they surely had to be starving—their declining ability to think was evidence of that.

"Okay."

Though she smiled brightly, exhaustion showed on Flora's face. Christina let Flora rest while she prepared a meal by herself.

The menu was the same as yesterday afternoon, yesterday night, and this morning—grains boiled with preserved meat into a soup seasoned with salt, along with stiff, dry bread.

It wasn't very delicious to begin with, yet they had eaten it for four meals in a row. They were definitely bored of it by now, but they were in no position to complain.

It really makes one realize just how luxurious the food Sir Amakawa and Orphia made on our journey was.

Christina looked down at the simmering soup with conflicted thoughts, but this wasn't the time to be lost in her sentiments. She pulled herself together and turned around to look for Flora, who was resting behind her.

"It's almost ready, Flo... Flora?!"

She paled at the sight of her little sister wrapped in a blanket, slumped limply on the ground. Abandoning her cooking, she rushed over to her.

"Hah... Hah... Christina?" Flora replied, breathing heavily.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm fine. I'm just a little tired."

"But you're sweating so much. Why are you wrapped in a blanket?"

Christina took out her handkerchief and started wiping Flora's sweat. She then tried to lift the blanket, but—

"I'm fine. I'm just cold."

Flora refused to let go of the blanket. She curled up into a ball, sticking only her flushed face out. Her eyes seemed to be out of focus, her pupils wavering drowsily.

"...Show me what's under the blanket."

Christina had a bad feeling and paused for a long moment before grabbing Flora's hand. Then, she lifted up the blanket once again. Flora had either given up or didn't have any energy left to object, as the blanket lifted easily.

"Ever since our last break, my neck suddenly started feeling hot... So I was casting *pурго* and *cura* underneath the blanket..." Flora explained in a faint voice. The area where she was bitten by the spider this morning had gradually turned black.

“...I’m sorry,” Christina apologized, her voice heavy with regret. She had been so desperate to leave the forest, she had failed to notice the abnormality in Flora that normally would have been evident to her.

I can’t believe we walked for hours while poison was flowing through her body...

Why didn’t Flora say anything until now? Perhaps it was because saying something wouldn’t have helped.

“Why are you apologizing, Christina? I’m the sorry one... I wasn’t actually hungry, I just wanted to rest a little...”

“Oh, goodness... What a fool. You should have just said so.” Overwhelmed by her helplessness, Christina held back her tears. She was actually calling herself a fool.

“But...”

“No buts. Can you drink water? What about food?”

“Water...”

“Here.”

She placed the cup against Flora’s mouth and let her gulp the water down.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I can eat. Even though you went through the trouble of cooking...” Flora apologized with a pained look.

“That doesn’t matter at all. I’ll carry you from now on. We have to leave the forest as soon as possible...” The poison gnawing at Flora’s body didn’t seem to be lethal, but she didn’t feel relieved at all. They had to leave immediately.

We’ll take a little bit of food along, but we’ll have to leave the rest behind.

Christina looked around at their supplies before promptly putting out the fire heating the soup and organizing their belongings. They departed from the area soon after.



One hour passed. Christina carried Flora on her back as she walked, hoping to leave the forest as soon as possible. It seemed like Flora was approaching her

limit: her high fever had left her so exhausted, she was currently unconscious.

“Hah... Hah...” Christina panted. Her fatigue had been accumulating this entire time, but now she was carrying another person through the uneven forest on top of that.

Since her high heels weren’t suitable for walking, she had thrown them away. Walking barefoot meant she stepped on rocks and twigs that injured her, making her feet bleed and protest in pain.

The air in the forest was cool, but the constant walking left her body flushed hot. She was also sweating a lot, making her dress stick to her uncomfortably. With Flora and her high fever being carried on her back, the fabric there was completely soaked.

However, Christina didn’t begrudge that in the slightest as she walked. She didn’t slow down her pace at all. In fact, whenever she felt like she was struggling, she sped up as though to scold herself for it.



She walked endlessly through the forest like that, step by step, proceeding with an ironlike will. However—

“Aaa!”

Tripped up by a plant, Christina lost her footing and toppled forward heavily with Flora on her back.

“Ugh, that hurts... A-Are you okay, Flora?”

She hurriedly looked towards Flora, but she showed no signs of waking up. Her breathing was rough and she was still completely limp.

I have to get up...

Christina supported her body with her dainty arms, somehow managing to get up. Her elegant dress was dampened by her sweat and absorbed the dirt from the ground, but she didn’t spare a single thought for it.

But it was difficult to use her arms at this point. While her mind could hold up, her body was screaming in protest. It was almost like she was wearing heavy weights. She was filled with the urge to fall forward on her face.

We have to leave the forest quickly. For Flora’s sake!

Christina forced strength into her arms through her sheer will. After a moment, she managed to stand up, though she was shaking like a newborn fawn.

I got up... But which way was I walking? Since I fell forward, then it was that way. But I should climb a tree to confirm our direction soon.

Perhaps she hadn’t supplied her brain with enough nutrients, as her thoughts were finally dulling. For a brief moment, she completely lost track of her thoughts and had to refocus. She was filled with uncertainty about the direction they were moving in.

They had climbed a tree to check earlier, but they definitely hadn’t done it as frequently as Rio had while they were moving from Cleia to Rodania.

What if she had made a mistake? What if they couldn’t leave the forest today because of that? What if they were attacked by beasts or monsters? Christina

couldn't even create water with magic in her current state. And even if she disregarded herself, would Flora be able to make it another night in this forest?

She was sure she had been mentally prepared to leave the forest, but that single uncertainty became the foundation for all the other worries at the back of her head to come forward.

What should I do...?

What if she couldn't save Flora, even though she was right here beside her? Christina paled as she imagined the worst-case scenario happening.

"...I should check where we're going." She furiously shook her head as though to drive away her uncertainties, then voiced her current task at hand to encourage herself.

"I'm sorry, Flora. Please rest here for a while." Christina set Flora down against a tree trunk and approached a nearby tree that looked easy to climb. Then, she slowly started scaling the tree.

The sun hadn't set yet. Though she was worried it would be impossible to leave the forest by the end of today, she continued to climb.

Eventually, she reached the top of the tree.

I'm tired...

Christina first looked for the position of the sun. It was still bright out, but sunset would surely happen within the next few hours.

Next, she looked around at her surroundings.

The smoke is close... I can see the edge of the forest.

She spotted the smoke they were heading for as a sign of civilization. At the far depths of her view, she could see where the trees came to an end. It meant the time for them to leave the forest was finally near.

"We can leave... We can leave! It's the end of the forest... I have to go back down," Christina said hoarsely, swallowing her saliva. With a slight start, she started making her way back down the tree.

"Christina..."

By the time she reached the ground, Flora had woken up.

“Flora! Thank goodness, you’re awake... I saw the edge of the forest. There’s a settlement right beside it. We’ll be able to leave the forest soon,” Christina said in relief.

“R-Really? That’s great...”

“It is. Let’s go. Come on, I’ll carry you.”

“First, the cup. *Procreo Aqua*. Here, please drink up.”

Flora immediately took a cup out of the blanket being used to carry supplies and recited a spell to fill it with water. The cup filled with water pouring out of the small magic circle.

“...You drink first.” Christina shook her head slowly and pushed the cup back towards Flora.

“You’ve been walking this entire time, so you drink first. I’ll make more for myself.” Flora smiled weakly and took the other cup, filling it with another spell to create water.

“Thank you,” Christina said with a bow, bringing the cup to her face elegantly. However, it seemed she was severely dehydrated, as she gulped it all down at once.

“Phew... I feel like I’ve been revived,” Christina said in a daze.

“I’m glad. I think I feel a bit better now, thanks to you carrying me this whole time,” Flora said while sipping from her cup.

“Your fever seems to go up when you move your body. You still have a bit of a fever, so let me continue to carry you. If it hurts despite that, let me know.”

“Okay... Thank you very much,” Flora said apologetically. The two of them continued to rehydrate themselves for a few minutes before setting off to leave the forest.

Not long after Christina started walking, Flora fell into a deep sleep as though she had fallen unconscious again—but they were nearly out of the forest. Christina relied on that future to keep her anxiety at bay as she continued walking as calmly as she could.

Then, roughly half an hour later...

“We’re out...”

Christina finally reached the end of the forest. It felt like an eternity since the last time she had seen anything other than trees, making her stare in a daze for a moment.

The forest came to an end at a gentle hilly area with a clear view. There were buildings that looked to form a village outside of the forest. Relief and exhaustion surged within her instantly.

“It’s a village... Let’s go and see if they have a doctor.”

Christina squeezed out what energy she had left in her body to sluggishly drag her feet towards the village. However, with her accumulated fatigue and mind focused on leaving the harsh forest, Christina had forgotten an important thing—the possibility that their pursuer was hot on their tail...

“Haha. Well done. What an effort.”

There was someone in the forest watching Christina descend the hill towards the village with Flora on her back. Lucius.

While the forest was a harsh environment for the two girls raised as princesses, it was nothing but a walk in the park for Lucius. It hadn’t taken any time for him to catch up to them at all, and once he did, he observed the royal siblings in their hard struggle.

Well, they’ll definitely rest at the village in their state. I can leave this be for now and head back to Duran.

Rio had probably visited Duran by now—if so, the moment of truth was near. Lucius grinned and flung the magic artifact to set a teleport crystal’s location to the nearby hill so that he could return at any moment.

“I’ll be back for you soon, princesses. *Transilio.*”

With the spell for teleportation uttered, Lucius disappeared.



Back in Paladia’s capital...

One day had passed since Rio's contest with Duran, and it was around the same time Christina and Flora had reached the village.

Rio hadn't taken a single step out of his inn since the day before. Since he didn't know when Duran's messenger would arrive, he didn't want to be absent from the inn if at all possible.

He had taken a book out of his Time-Space Cache to read, but none of its contents had seeped into his head. He had finally gained a clue about Lucius, so his emotions seemed to be unusually agitated.

This is no good. I need to calm down...

Rio slammed his book shut and took a deep breath. Then, someone knocked on his door.

"Yes!"

Could it be? Rio leaped out of his seat with that thought, answering at a louder voice than normal. He prepared himself sufficiently to react no matter what happened, then slowly opened the door. There, he was faced with someone unexpected.

"Prince Duran..." Rio called his name in shock. He hadn't imagined the first prince would come to this inn in person.

Furthermore, he was here without a single guard. There was no sign of anyone else in the corridor.

Did he really come without guards? Isn't that really careless of him? Rio thought to himself, but he had heard word of the prince's character during his investigations upon reaching this kingdom.

"Why are you so surprised?" the large man looked down at Rio and said.

"I wasn't expecting Your Highness to visit in person... Did you need something?" Rio asked, collecting himself.

"It's about your reward. I came to tell you his location," Duran said as he looked around curiously at the run-down inn room.

"Where is he?" Rio asked with bated breath.

"If you follow the road west from this capital for thirty kilometers, you'll find a large forest. Before the forest is a village—he said he'd wait for you there."

"...In a village?"

"Your face says you're wondering why it's there, of all places." Duran chuckled, seeing through Rio's reaction.

"Would you tell me the reason?"

"There's someone related to you in that village, apparently."

"...What does that mean?" Rio's expression changed with a twitch. The words caught his attention; he had a bad feeling.

"Who knows? I have no more information than that, and you're looking rather murderous. If it bothers you that much, why don't you hurry along?" Duran shrugged, suggesting that Rio depart.

"Excuse me, then."

"Sure."

Rio left the room. He originally arrived in the clothes he was wearing, so he didn't have any belongings to take with him.

Duran was left alone in the room. But as soon as he stepped out into the corridor, he entered the room next door.

"Was that enough, Lucius? I did everything you said, but..."

"Yes. I am most grateful." Lucius stood up.

"That aside, you've sure changed a lot since the last time I saw you. He must be quite the outrageous man to make you suffer to this extent..."

Duran stared at Lucius closely. His left eye was covered by an eyepatch, and his left arm was heavily wrapped in bandages. The air around him was sharper than usual, and a hint of deep hatred no regular person would ever have could be seen in his gaze.

"Unfortunately, I don't have time to chat with you. Reiss will have realized something was off and will visit you again soon. In the meantime, I need to get ahead of the bastard so I can lie in wait. If you're coming along, then stay

silent."

Lucius was clearly in a bad mood. Before, he would talk to Duran—his contract partner—with some level of respect, but when Rio became the topic of conversation, he instantly unraveled.

That being said, Duran had taken on a role to help him get the jump on Reiss. After Lucius had arrived first to meet Duran, Duran had fed Reiss false information about Lucius's whereabouts the day before. By now, Reiss should be searching for Lucius, wandering around the point he was originally supposed to direct Duran to guide Rio towards.

"Very well. In return, allow me to watch your battle with him. I'll have to decide which of the royal sisters to receive as my reward as well."

Duran didn't appear particularly fazed and acted as his usual self. He had requested to spectate the showdown with Rio as repayment for assisting Lucius. Since he wouldn't have been able to outwit Reiss without Duran, Lucius reluctantly agreed.

"Hmph... *Transilio.*"

Thus, the two of them headed to the village where Christina and Flora were.

Chapter 7: Before the Death Battle

Immediately after Lucius teleported to Duran, Christina stepped foot into the village beside the forest with Flora—who was unconscious—on her back.

The village was extremely quiet, but she could see villagers walking around here and there. They had also noticed Christina and were staring at her closely, but there was a secluded atmosphere hanging over the village that made it difficult to call out to them.

“Umm...”

In fact, when Christina looked at them and spoke, they averted their gazes with disgusted looks. But she couldn’t afford to feel timid. Christina approached the next villager she saw; the man was in his twenties and in the middle of working beside a cabin, so he didn’t notice Christina’s approach.

“Excuse me, do you have a moment?” Christina called out to his back. The villager flinched and turned around. When he spotted Christina with Flora on her back, he clearly froze on the spot. It seemed he hadn’t expected her to talk to him, as he looked around to check there was no one else nearby before replying.

“...Uh, yeah. Who are you?”

“Is there a doctor in this village?” Christina asked politely.

“A doctor... That would be the village chief,” the man answered with a murmur.

“Could you lead me to him? My little sister was bitten by a venomous spider and has a fever,” Christina explained succinctly.

“...All right.” The man looked at their tattered dresses in suspicion, but nodded quietly before walking off. Christina chased after him. They barely exchanged any words along the way, but the man kept glancing over curiously as he led them.

I suppose this outfit does stand out.

Christina looked down at her clothes and felt awkward.

“There’s one thing I’d like to ask.”

“What is it?” The villager flinched before turning back.

“What area are we in?” Christina tried to confirm their location with a vaguely worded question.

“The area? To the west of the Paladia Kingdom, I guess...? I’ve never really left the village, so I wouldn’t know,” the man answered, tilting his head curiously at the odd question.

Christina’s face stiffened faintly before she gave an awkward response. “I see...”

Pretty far from Rodania, then. And allied to the Proxia Empire...

They had finally made it out of the forest, but their situation hadn’t gotten any better. The influence of the Beltrum Kingdom, one of the largest powers in the Strahl region, wouldn’t be of any help here—if anything, it was more likely to be a hindrance.

It isn’t a distance I can travel while carrying Flora. What should I do...?

Faced with such a harsh reality, Christina’s face stiffened further. For now, something had to be done about the poison eating away at her sister, but she didn’t have any good ideas about what to do after that.

In the end, they arrived at the village chief’s place before she could come up with a plan to return to Beltrum.

“This is the village chief’s place. I’ll go explain the situation, so you wait here for a bit.”

The villager left behind those words and entered the house alone. Christina waited before the entrance and he returned one minute later.

“The village chief will see you. Come inside.”

“Thank you. Excuse me, then.” With Flora carried on her back, Christina gave a tiny bow before entering. A middle-aged man was waiting in the living room

just past the entrance.

The villager who led them here stood beside the man who appeared to be the village chief. Beside him was another man of similar age. He stared at the filthy state of their dresses curiously when they approached.

“This... Welcome, I am the chief of this village. I’ve heard the general gist of things—you’re in need of a doctor, is it?” The middle-aged man introduced himself and bowed deeply.

“Yes. My little sister was bitten by a venomous spider in the forest. Could you examine her and see if you have any antidotes to treat her?”

“That can be done, but...would you two happen to be nobility?” The village chief looked at Christina with a searching gaze. Though it was fairly dirty, the dress she wore must have made him assume that.

“Yes.” Though she was technically royalty, Christina nodded without correcting him.

“I see, so that’s how it is. Hey. I’ll handle the rest, so you two can leave.”

The village chief ordered the two young men beside him to leave, but they remained standing there, reluctant to do so. The chief glared at them impatiently. “You’re in the way. And you shouldn’t be here to witness a noblewoman’s medical examination. Leave.”

“F-Fine.” The two men exchanged looks before dragging their feet outside.

The village chief bowed his head. “I apologize for the youngsters.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry for causing a fuss,” Christina said, bowing in return.

“Now, let me take a look at your sister. There’s a guest room at the back of this floor, so please head over there. I’d offer to carry her myself, but I’m afraid my back isn’t what it used to be...”

The village chief urged them to move, smiling wryly at the latter half of his words. Thus, the two of them headed towards the guest room.

“By the way, may I ask what two nobles were doing in the forest? You appear to be alone, too...” the chief asked along the way.

“We were traveling on board our transport vehicle when we were attacked by bandits. My sister and I escaped with our lives by running into the forest, but...” Christina answered tactfully.

“Oh, my... How awful that must have been for you. Wouldn’t there be quite a commotion over your disappearance by now, then?” the chief asked worriedly, as though he believed her story just now. They were the words of a noble—as long as there were no clear contradictions or suspicious factors, they wouldn’t be suspected. Though the collar around Christina’s neck was a little curious...

“Yes, most likely.”

“Considering the state of your little sister, you should stay here for the night. It may not suit the taste of nobility, but we have warm food here as well.”

“Thank you very much.”

They arrived at the guest room, and the village chief invited them inside. “Now, come in. Lay her down over there.” Christina moved beside the bed and set Flora down gently.

“...Flora?”

Flora hazily regained her consciousness and opened her eyes.

“The village doctor is taking a look at you.” Christina smiled gently to reassure her.

Flora spotted the village chief standing to the side. “Thank you very much...” she said weakly.

The doctor shook his head and began his examination. “No need to thank me. Now, where were you bitten by the spider? Please tell me all about the situation when you were bitten, and how much time has passed since then.”

“She was bitten in the neck by the spider early in the morning. She used detoxifying magic immediately, but it didn’t seem to have any effect. We were walking all afternoon, which seemed to make the venom circulate...then she passed out with a fever,” Christina answered on Flora’s behalf.

“I see. If you would excuse me... Hmm, I see, I see.” The village chief approached Flora and moved her hair to check the affected area. He

immediately spotted the swollen, bruise-like mark.

A black mark, huh? I do recall there being a venomous spider in the forest that can create this. If left untreated, the black gradually spreads until it turns into necrosis. It can be treated immediately after the bite by applying a strong alcohol, but I have no idea how to treat this once it's progressed so far... I've heard that the symptoms can become contagious if aggravated, too...

The village chief stared closely at the mark on Flora's neck. If the poison eating at Flora's body was the contagious type, then those symptoms were extremely troubling. The thought of the poison spreading through the village was terrifying, so he wanted them to leave as soon as possible. But he hesitated to say that directly to nobility.

"Will Flora be okay?" Christina asked.

"...It doesn't look good," the village chief answered with a pained look.

Christina paled immediately. "Y-You can't treat her?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have the means to treat her. Perhaps if you had a noble physician... Also, it's possible that these symptoms may not be poison," the chief suggested with uncertainty.

"Not poison...?"

"I fear it may be an infectious disease. If left alone, the skin will gradually blacken and rot away. It may have been treatable immediately after the bite, but I haven't heard of anyone recovering from these symptoms after so much time has passed. While it's truly regrettable for me to say this..."

"That can't be..." Christina's face grew visibly paler by the second.

"..."

I fear the disease may spread, so could you leave the village? Those words were on the tip of his tongue, but the village chief swallowed them in front of the nobles.

"Will Flora... die?" Christina asked with bated breath.

"I am not sure. I've heard that necrosis spreads rapidly...and since it's on her neck, it could be bad. There's also the fear of the disease spreading, so it may

be best not to get too close..."

"Wha..."

Don't get close? There was no way she could do that. Christina almost wanted to argue back angrily, but she could sense that the chief was troubled by Flora's presence as a source of disease and swallowed her words.

Suddenly, the two men who had left earlier reappeared. They must have ran here, as they were panting for breath. "D-Dad! There's big news!" they said from the other side of the open door.

"Wh-What is it?" the chief asked in confusion, seeing the serious atmosphere.

"Some important person from the kingdom has come to the village!"

"What did you say...?" The village chief slowly turned his head to look at Christina and Flora.

Did they come in search of us? If so, that means the Paladia Kingdom is involved in this incident as well...

Christina immediately processed her thoughts, but she lacked the information to make any conclusions.

"Do you have someone in mind?"

"I have no idea..." Christina shook her head nervously.

"Yo."

"We're coming in."

Two new men appeared in the doorway. It was Lucius and Duran.

"Wha—?! Ngh..." Christina shot to her feet and braced herself on reflex. However, she was belatedly reminded of the fact her magic had been sealed by the collar around her neck.

Duran's eyes widened in interest. "Ooh. What a fiery spirit we have here."

"This is the older sister, Christina Beltrum," Lucius informed him. The two of them marched into the room without reserve.

"Then the one lying down must be the little sister, Flora Beltrum. Hmm, she

seems to be in a pinch beyond help..." Duran's gaze turned to Flora, lying down on the bed.

"Haha! Must've been poisoned by some annoying creature of the forest." Lucius laughed heartily, making an eerily accurate guess at the situation.

"Is that true?"

"..." Christina held her silence at Duran's question.

"Hey, chief. How about it?" Lucius asked.

Overwhelmed by the atmosphere in the room, the village chief gave his answer in trembling fear. "Y-Yes, sir! She was apparently bitten by a spider in the forest! I've just informed them that it cannot be treated here..."

"I see... Heh, this is why you should've just waited quietly at the cabin. Now you've gone through all this effort to leave the forest before being found anyway. A wasted effort, if you will," Lucius said mockingly.

"Ngh..." Christina bit down on her lip and clenched her fists.

She couldn't deny that. If they had chosen to wait in the forest cabin, Flora wouldn't have been bitten by the spider. That was the thought in her mind, but —

"I-It wasn't wasted. It was my fault. I slowed Christina down..." Flora joined the conversation from where she lay on the bed, protecting her older sister.

"Oh, you're awake." Lucius looked at the bed.

"Your voice...is familiar," Flora said weakly.

"I'm honored you remember. It's my first time meeting the first princess, though. Good day—I'm Lucius Orgueil." Lucius introduced himself in a pompous tone and grinned.

"Y-You're the one who tried to kidnap Flora in Amande..." Christina's gaze sharpened.

"Yeah, but I was interrupted by that bastard." Lucius was reminded of that time and lowered his voice in irritation.

Duran patted Lucius's shoulder to calm him before looking at Flora. "Save that

anger for when he arrives. More importantly, we might be able to treat the second princess at the Paladia Castle."

"What...?" Christina's heart swayed. Her precious little sister could be saved.

"The price will be one night in bed with the first princess. How about it?" Duran added.

"Wh... Y-You wretch!" Christina glared at Duran, red in the face.

"Ha! Although, the pathetic sight of her filthy dress has made me lose my appetite. Who would imagine the princess of a major kingdom falling this far? She looks worse than a harlot from the outskirts. Nay, I can only see her as a beggar," Duran ridiculed.

"..."

What a rude and unrefined man this was—Christina had never been so disgraced since she was born.

"Hehehe. A princess of an enemy nation. And a strong-willed one, too. Mm, what a wonderful woman indeed." Duran laughed mockingly, but Christina had no idea if she was being praised or insulted.

"...What's going on here?"

Just at that moment, Rio was suddenly standing before the door, looking around at the inside of the room. Christina, Flora, Lucius, and Duran were present. What kind of combination was this? He questioned the situation with a stern and doubtful face.

"S-Sir Amakawa?! Why are you here...?" Christina was shocked, her mouth falling open in a daze.

"Well, this is a surprise. How did you arrive already? There's at least thirty kilometers from the capital to this village." Duran stared closely at Rio. Only ten minutes had passed since he teleported here, so how was Rio here already? But Rio had flown at full speed after leaving the Paladia capital.

"There's nothing to be shocked about. This guy can move at monstrous speeds." Lucius glared at Rio.

"What's the meaning of this?" Rio's gaze sharpened, but Lucius drew his

sword and pointed the tip at Flora's throat.

"Wha..." Facing upwards where she lay on the bed, Flora stiffened faintly.

Rio also braced himself to fight at any moment.

"Whoa, there. Do you intend on fighting here?" Lucius said, looking at the dangerous air around Rio, who was ready to draw his sword.

"You were the one who drew first, no?"

"Now now, there's no need to rush. I've wanted to kill you with every fiber of my being since the last time we met—I feel the same way as you."

Without looking away from Rio for a moment, Lucius sunk the tip of his sword into Flora's neck by a mere millimeter.

"..." Rio didn't seem to want Flora hurt, as he frowned while subduing his bloodlust.

"Ha. That's more like it. We can't even swing our swords fully in this cramped place. Let's move the slaughter outdoors."

"...Fine." Rio agreed to Lucius's proposal.

"Prince Duran. Could you carry Princess Flora?" Lucius asked Duran, but Duran shot Flora a single glance before refusing point-blank.

"I refuse. She's filthy and she reeks. I have no interest in holding such women."

"..." Both Flora and Christina trembled with flushed faces.

"Hah, fair point. Hey, first princess. You carry your sister." Lucius gave the order to Christina instead. The entire party then left the village chief's house together. Curious onlookers had gathered around the chief's house, watching them leave the house with a heavy air.

"Get lost. This isn't a show." Duran threatened the villagers in a sullen mood and they scattered in every direction. For some reason, the village chief and the two villagers with him had followed them, so Duran turned to them as well.

"There's no need for you all to come along either. You're in the way."

The three men nodded and retreated back into the house. After that, Rio,

Duran, Christina, Flora, and Lucius left the village, walking in that order.

“Princess Christina and Princess Flora should be separate from our confrontation,” Rio said to Lucius as they walked.

“That’s not quite right—they’re functioning perfectly well as hostages right now, are they not? You fought at Amande for the second princess’s sake as well. Anyways, Reiss is after these two for some reason or another. Though he *has* been continuously thwarted by you.” Lucius chuckled coldly, thrusting his sword at Christina’s neck.

“...” Christina broke out in a nervous sweat at the prickle of danger she could feel on her neck. Like Lucius said: no matter how she looked at it right now, they were the shackles holding Rio down. She felt terrible because of that.

“Anyway, he has a rather curious connection to you two royal sisters. I was interested in that as well, so I decided on choosing you two as hostages,” Lucius added smoothly.

“What are you saying...?” Rio frowned.

“Oh, I just found your suffering to be similar to your father’s. You have no obligation to save these two, yet here you are. Haven’t they repaid enough of your good with evil?” Lucius asked, hinting at something.

Christina and Flora held their breaths as they listened.

“So? What about it?”

“That’s not something to be dismissed, is it? I’m talking about the reason why an orphan from the slums left the Beltrum Royal Academy and went across the border, changing his name to Haruto. Ring any bells to you, Rio?”

“...And I’m asking: what about it?”

His identity had been revealed past the point of hiding anything from Christina and Flora, but Rio’s expression didn’t waver at all—he was fully aware that Lucius was trying to provoke him. However, Christina and Flora didn’t look good. Lucius purposefully made his way beside Christina to peer at their faces.

“Haha! The princesses look more upset than you. Hey, princesses. Does the name ‘Rio’ sound familiar to you? The boy you looked down upon, charged for a

groundless crime, then banished grew up into this guy here. Aren't you curious about his past? Don't you have anything you want to say?" Lucius could see through Christina and Flora's state of mind and chose words to incite their sense of guilt. Their expressions grew stiffer and stiffer.

"As usual, you're even nastier than me." Duran sighed, shaking his head.

"Watch it, Rio. Your murderous aura is scaring the princesses," Lucius jeered at Rio's back.

"..." Rio continued ignoring him.

"Listen up, princesses. His parents used to be from the Yagumo region. Because of some unavoidable circumstances, they migrated to the Strahl region, and the place they chose to settle down just so happened to be the Beltrum capital," Lucius continued by himself, exposing Rio's past to Christina and Flora.

"His father, Zen... He was a real capable one. He used his skills to distinguish himself as an adventurer, which was how he caught my eye back when I still lived in Beltrum's capital. I managed to win over his trust after that, but what surprised me the most was the fact that Rio's mother was a royal with a sheltered upbringing. Apparently, Zen was Ayame's personal guard."

Rio's mother was royalty. This fact made Christina's poker face crumble, her gaze trembling in shock.

"You could compare it to a princess of your kingdom marrying a knight. They both migrated since some problems happened, but that bastard, Zen, was living a happy life. Ayame was head over heels for him, and they both adored Rio. The picture-perfect family, if you will. I socialized with the family—I even played with young Rio often."

Lucius exaggerated his emotional tone as he spoke, as though he were recalling those memories fondly. Then his mouth twisted with a smirk.

"It made me sick to my stomach, so I decided to destroy it—that happiness. I killed Zen before Rio was old enough to remember, then killed Ayame when he was five."

"So you were the one who killed my father after all..." Rio interrupted Lucius's

monologue when he paused, speaking in a tone devoid of any warmth.

“That bastard was in such despair when he realized he was betrayed by his best friend. He made a face like the one you had when Ayame was killed right before your eyes.” Lucius could sense that Rio’s anger was slowly building and grinned crudely as he spoke.

“How awful...” Flora muttered sadly, her face flushed with her fever.

“Awful? Your kingdom did plenty of awful things to him too. He was just a brat living happily with his mother up until he was five. He may have roughened around the edges from two years struggling in the slums, but you gave him plenty of harsh treatment just because he was an orphan, no?” Lucius took this chance to prod Christina and Flora’s guilt once more.

Does this man intend to use us as hostages against Sir Amakawa? If so, why would he dig up Sir Amakawa’s past and reveal it to us like this...?

Christina sweated nervously as she tried to figure out Lucius’s intentions, but there was no way she could—the only thing she knew for sure was that she and Flora were potentially the reason why Rio was backed into a corner right now.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue, princesses? I don’t know if he’ll save you, but why don’t you try begging Rio for your lives? Are you thinking of a convenient excuse for yourselves? You know he’ll probably save you even in this situation.” Lucius looked at Christina and Flora’s faces, mocking them.

“I...” Christina’s hair stood on end. Like Lucius had pointed out, part of herself felt expectant—expectant for Sir Amakawa to save them. Feeling ashamed of herself, Christina bit down on her lip. She had been so enthusiastic about protecting Flora herself, but in the end, she hadn’t been able to. Instead, she was seeking the assistance of the person she had caused so much trouble for in the past.

Even though I have no right to that...

But even if she had to sacrifice herself, she wanted to protect Flora. She had no choice but to rely on Rio for that. So, Christina tried to think of a way to give Flora the highest chance of survival. For example, if they had to be used as hostages, she needed to make sure that Rio discarded her first. And so, a pained

look flashed across Christina's face for a brief moment, before she made a curt statement.

"...That's not true."

"Oh? What isn't?" Lucius asked curiously.

"It's only natural to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the kingdom. If you wish to condemn that as an awful deed, you can condemn it all you want. I don't recall ever doing anything awful to him—at least on an individual level, I believe. Flora may not think the same." Christina spoke as though she were reciting a memorized speech. There was no hint of her emotions behind those words at all. However—

"Heh heh heh. How terrible. Rio was placed in an environment that could make the average person's misfortune sound petty, you realize? He could have grown up as royalty instead. Yet through some kind of mistake, he became an orphan in the slums at the age of five. If you're saying it's only natural for someone like that to be used up for your political benefits, then you're truly cold-blooded to the core." Lucius cackled in delight, eagerly bringing up Rio's misfortunes.

"I don't believe you should be the one saying that, since you're the one who made him an orphan... But you've made one mistake. I have no value as a hostage." Christina looked at Lucius with clear disdain.

"Did you hear that, Rio? What do you think? Sounds real admirable, eh? She's trying to anger you on purpose—probably so that she'll be the first to go, right?" Lucius chuckled, seeing through her plan.

"Wha..." Christina tried to object, but she ended up biting her lip bitterly instead.

"Did you go senile walking around the forest? This bastard wouldn't forsake you. If he was going to abandon you, he would've cut down my back ages ago. He's trying to save you in this situation. The hypocrisy is disgusting," Lucius spat.

"That's enough. How far are we going?"

Rio called for Lucius to stop. They were currently on a hill, several hundred meters away from the edge of the village.

“Fine. Let’s settle this,” Lucius said, pointing his sword at Christina’s neck.

“Ah...” Christina swallowed her breath and froze.

“What, can’t draw your sword?” Lucius sneered.

“...” Rio glared at Lucius sharply, but didn’t draw the sword at his waist.

“Ha. If you want to win against me, you should throw away everything other than your bloodlust. You’re the same as Zen—you try to fight while carrying excess weight on you. And yet, you’re strong. That’s what I can’t stomach. Living like a walking contradiction... But that’s precisely why you’ll die unable to protect those close to you. I’ll prove it to you—the foolishness of a human carrying around that kind of unnecessary weight.” Until now, Lucius had been using an exaggerated tone to provoke Rio, but the bloodlust he had been holding back was released as he glared back at him.

“I don’t get it... What do you gain from me throwing away that so-called excess weight?” Rio asked in an indifferent tone. Lucius was obviously speaking of Christina and Flora.

“I’m saying if you don’t, you won’t be able to defeat me in this battle. Then... Was it Celia Claire? And a woman named Miharu—I’ll go after those women next. Of course, I’ll enjoy them to the fullest before killing them. Don’t worry, though. I’ll leave you half-alive and bring you along to witness it,” Lucius boasted to irritate Rio.

“...”

Perhaps it was because Celia and Miharu’s names had been mentioned, but Rio’s wrath swelled. As though to embody that rage, a tremendous amount of magic essence poured out of Rio’s body.

“Ha! You finally look like a proper avenger now.” Lucius smirked, removing his left eyepatch.



Rio observed every small move Lucius made so that he could react if he tried to harm Christina and Flora. Then, Lucius suddenly hugged Christina towards him, Flora still on her back.

“Eep...!” Christina let out a shriek as she lost balance. Meanwhile, Lucius took his gaze off Rio and looked into the distance. Immediately after that, Lucius, Christina, and Flora disappeared.

“What?!” The one who raised his voice in confusion was Duran, who had been silent until now. He was astonished by Lucius’s sudden disappearance, but—

Over there!

Rio was able to identify Lucius’s location with precision. He could see someone falling from the sky several meters away, as though he had teleported there.

However, Rio wasn’t about to lose to that. He used his wind spirit arts to forcefully accelerate his body and approach Lucius.

“Eek!”

Lucius grabbed the fabric of Christina’s dress and threw her and Flora together towards the ground. The fabric at the middle of the back of her dress ripped loudly. There was no way she’d walk away unharmed after falling several dozen meters.

“Tch...” Rio manipulated the wind to super forcefully change his direction, accelerate, and catch the falling Christina and Flora. He then landed on the ground with the two of them.

“Protect them if you can.” Lucius stood behind Rio, his sword swinging down from overhead.

He’s so fast! Wait, this is—

Rio hugged Christina and Flora close to him as he parried the blow one-handedly with his sword. But even he couldn’t handle that much—his balance was completely thrown off, and he could barely manage to parry the attack.

“Hey, what’s the matter? Huh?! Your movements have dulled!” Lucius swung his sword without a care.

“Guh...” With Christina and Flora embraced in his grasp, Rio stood his ground to fight back, but he was at too much of a disadvantage. Even Christina could tell that just by looking.

“Sir Amakawa, you can throw me aside!” Christina twisted her body around to plead at him in a panic.

“It’s dangerous, so please stay still. Keep a tight hold of Princess Flora and don’t let go of me!” Rio ordered, hugging Christina even closer.

“Your back’s wide open!”

Lucius suddenly disappeared from before Rio. In the next moment, he was standing diagonally behind him, swinging his sword at his back. However, as though predicting that move, Rio charged forward with Christina embraced in one arm. Lucius’s sword cut through empty space at the last moment.

He really is teleporting after all. The last time we fought, he also moved as though he was teleporting, but he didn’t base his fight around this ability. Is it the power of his sword? Or does it have something to do with his eye? There’s quite a lot of magic essence flowing from it...

Rio evaded the attacks while analyzing the situation with precision. He surmised that the reason why it seemed like Lucius had teleported was probably because he really *had* teleported.

In reality, he’d been able to predict Lucius’s warp destination just now by feeling the fluctuation of ode and mana around him. But it was still an extremely troublesome ability—he wouldn’t be able to let Christina and Flora escape somewhere safe like this. Thanks to that, Rio was unable to separate from the two of them, which made it impossible for him to move at high speeds.

This made close combat rather difficult, as Lucius was able to move freely by teleporting around. His prospects were far too poor like this...which was why Rio decided to discard his hand. He gathered the essence within him and stomped against the ground.

A two-meter-wide circle of earth underneath Rio and Christina’s feet protruded from the ground, lifting them ten meters into the air.

“Huh?” The sudden floating sensation had Christina shell-shocked. She was tremendously confused by the sight of the ground beneath her feet rising like a living tower.

“Impudent brat!” Lucius swung his sword diagonally upwards from the ground.

The black blade of his sword released a pitch-black strike, severing the earth tower Rio had created at the base.

Rio put essence into his feet and leaped off the tower before it crumbled. Immediately after, the earth tower that had acted as his foothold fell apart into rectangular blocks that floated in the air.

Wh-What's happening? What's the meaning of this? Are we floating as well?!

Christina glanced around in a panic, looking at the blocks floating in the air and themselves in mute amazement.

No one had uttered any spells to activate magic until now, yet all kinds of supernatural phenomena kept happening one after another. Her surprise was only natural.

Meanwhile, Rio looked down at Lucius on the ground and pointed his sword at him. No sooner had he done so than the group of blocks floating in the air all started falling towards the ground at a rapid speed. No, it was like they had been fired by an invisible power.

If each block weighed several kilograms, they should make quite the impact by the time they fell to the ground. In reality, the blocks that crashed into the ground created small craters and dust clouds.

Wh-What is that? What's happening? Is Sir Amakawa using the ability of his enchanted sword? But wasn't his enchanted sword a wind sword?

Christina could no longer keep up with the situation. However, Flora had once witnessed Rio fight using spirit arts, so she wasn't as surprised as her older sister. Still suffering from the poison, her expression was dazed as she looked down at the ground.

But, just then—

Boom!

A tremendous explosion roared from behind Christina and Flora.

Wh-What?!

Christina whipped around in confusion. There stood Lucius, who should have been on the ground, with his sword held overhead.

“Tch...”

And yet, he was unable to slash Christina and Flora in the back. Rio had created a barrier of magic essence to block Lucius's sword. Still, a single blow from Lucius's blade had enough force to crack the barrier...

At any rate, Lucius's attack was blocked, making him click his tongue in irritation. Christina and Flora could also see the faint light wall blocking Lucius's sword from reaching him. They also knew that it was Rio who had put up the barrier, though they hadn't seen him do so.

“Now it's my turn,” Rio said, summoning orbs of light several centimeters wide around him. Of course, Lucius had no intention of just taking the hit and disappeared on the spot.

But Rio was able to predict where Lucius would move to with a high degree of precision. He fired the orbs at the area on the ground where he foresaw Lucius appearing. There were about a hundred or so orbs of light that orbited in the air before falling to the ground. In addition, Rio made full use of his tremendous magic essence to continuously create more orbs, firing them at the ground. It almost looked like a meteor shower of light orbs.

Wh-What? What is this, really...? Christina became even more confused.

At the Royal Academy, Rio had been mocked as a failure for being unable to make a contract with magic. And yet, now he could create magical phenomena without even chanting a spell... He was even flying in the air, with no sign of falling anytime soon.

The rain of light orbs Rio was firing each had the might of a lower-grade spell, but together they were an overwhelming threat. And he was firing them a hundred at a time towards the ground every few seconds. Did he have an

endless amount of essence? The scale of the phenomenon being created was greater than advanced magic—it was practically on par with the highest grade of attack magic possible.

However, Lucius was also impressive. He dashed about the ground, swinging his sword to cut down the light orbs while evading the rain of attacks. He sometimes disappeared and reappeared in a different position in the distance.

After a while, Lucius came to a stop and looked up at Rio floating in the air. Suddenly, a voice sounded from above their heads.

“Here, you can have these back.”

Lucius was looking down from ten meters above Rio’s head, pointing the tip of his sword at him. Immediately after, several hundred orbs of light surrounded Rio in every direction.

Did he absorb my light bullets to use himself?

Rio immediately deduced that there was no possible escape route and poured essence into his sword. He created a storm to blow the orbs away, forcibly making a hole in the encirclement. He then tried to escape through it.

“I won’t let you!” Lucius teleported to cut into Rio’s exit route. He poured magic essence into his sword to stock up dark energy and strike Rio with it.

However, Rio also poured essence into his sword to counter Lucius’s attack with a blast of wind. Their respective energies clashed, forming a tremendous shock wave.

What a fight this is...

Christina had been desperately clinging to Rio with Flora in her arms for some time now, watching the battle that she couldn’t believe was happening between two humans. Flora seemed to be having a tough time being moved around midair so much, as her feverish eyes were unable to stay focused.

“Damn it...” While Lucius could teleport, he wasn’t able to fly—the shock wave from his attack hitting Rio’s sent him falling down. The fact he wasn’t able to defeat Rio despite his favorable position made his brow furrow in frustration as he teleported straight to the ground.

Rio also lowered his altitude, glaring at Lucius as he descended. Once he landed, about ten meters of ground lifted up in square tiles.

“Wha...?!” The sudden spectacle left Christina speechless once more.

The tiles that lifted up blocked their view of Lucius before them—in fact, they collapsed over him, crushing him underneath.

However, Lucius teleported to evade the attack, moving out of the range of the tiles that lifted up and fell—based on his original position, he had moved horizontally to the side.

He didn't teleport through the wall... That confirms it. Lucius's teleportation ability only allows him to move where his left eye can see.

Using the attack just now, Rio was able to confirm what he had noticed while firing the orbs of light at Lucius from above.

“Tch...” Lucius clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“Is Princess Flora all right?” Rio suddenly asked Christina, who now stood beside him. Dazed, she snapped back to her senses and answered him in an apologetic tone.

“Y-Yes... Umm. To be honest, she's not in the best condition. She's been poisoned with a toxin that couldn't be treated with magic.”

“I see. Then we shouldn't move her around too much,” Rio said, staring at Lucius standing ten or so meters before them.

There's no doubt that Lucius's enchanted sword can control space. His main powers are the ability to teleport short distances visible to his left eye, and the ability to absorb spirit arts and fire them back. He hasn't used it yet this match, but he can also open a hole in space and thrust his sword through it like last time. That essence-engulfed left arm of his must also have some kind of trick to it...

Rio recalled their fight thus far and analyzed the ability of Lucius's enchanted sword. Those were the highlights he had to be careful of.

Just then, Lucius transferred his sword from his right hand to his left hand.

He switched his sword to his left hand? Wasn't he right-handed?

He had always fought with his right hand until now. Rio grew more wary of Lucius's left arm.

"There's one thing I find incomprehensible," Lucius suddenly said to Rio.

"..." Rio watched him silently.

"Be it your spirit arts, swordsmanship, or martial arts—where did you learn all of it?"

"Who knows?"

"You're far too proficient in your movements. Even if you have talent, there's a crazy amount of experience behind your skills. It's not something a brat in his teens should be capable of. Supposing that you learned your swordcraft during your childhood, you would have learned it from the Royal Academy in Beltrum—but those movements aren't the Beltrum Kingdom style."

"...They're my own style."

"Your own style? Well, whatever. It's time for round two—a fresh start. Unfortunately, however, I'm right-handed. I may not be able to go as easy on you with my left arm, so don't hold it against me." Despite his clear suspicion at Rio's answer, Lucius dismissed the matter and checked his grip on the sword clutched in his left hand.

The left arm is the one I burned away without a trace in the last match. It must have been regenerated through some kind of forbidden technique along with that left eye...

The fact he switched his sword meant the ability couldn't be activated unless the sword was in his left hand.

"Wh...?!"

Suddenly, Lucius swung his sword ten-odd meters in front of Rio, but the blade of the sword had disappeared and was closing in from behind. Rio promptly held his sword ready behind his back and caught the blow. The sound of clashing metal screeched, surprising Christina into looking for the source of the sound. When she spotted the blade that had warped through space to float in the air, she broke out in a cold sweat.

"Ha! So you'll react to this attack like it's nothing as well, huh? Come to think of it, I've used this move once before the last time we fought. But..." Lucius said unhappily as Rio thought to himself.

If he can use that attack just now without any restriction, it might be a little risky trying to do this while protecting two other people.

Rio felt a sharp pang of danger—and that danger had already approached. Another sharp clashing screech echoed.

"Huh...?"

Christina looked in the direction of the sound. This time it didn't come from behind Rio, but Christina. Rio had gone around her to catch the blow—even though Lucius was still standing over ten meters away. Then, at the next metallic clash in succession, she finally understood. Once again, although Lucius was before them, this time it came from the left of Flora...

...Is he warping just the blade of his sword using space sorcery?

The reality was exactly as it appeared, and Christina was filled with terror the moment she understood it.

"I knew it—you can tell where my attacks are coming from, can't you? Cheeky bastard. But this isn't all I've got—thanks to the left arm you lopped off, I can use my sword even better than before. Here, let's turn up the pace," Lucius said, then resumed swinging his sword. One swing, then another, followed by one more—all at different angles and speeds.

Clang, clang, clang. The sound of swords clashing gradually got faster. Rio saw through Lucius's attacks and knocked back all the blows, but he was treading on thin ice doing so.

"..." Christina was frozen stiff. All she was doing was standing, yet she felt closer to death than living. The attacks seemingly came from nowhere, but Rio blocked them all for her—that was the only thing keeping her alive.

This made it even harder for Rio to leave Christina and Flora. The moment he did, the two of them were as good as dead.

"Don't worry. Simply slashing from afar isn't artistic enough for my tastes. I'll

come closer, then," Lucius said, using his teleportation to warp behind Christina and Flora. By the time he finished warping, he had already made a stabbing motion.

Rio immediately cut between Lucius and the princesses, but the distance to Lucius was oddly far.

Oh no!

Rio hurried back to his original position as soon as he realized why. The next moment, the blade of the sword Lucius held came flying. If Rio hadn't returned, it would have pierced through Christina's body, but—

"Guh..."

Though it had only been a moment, that moment cost Rio everything. He was unable to block the attack successfully and took the blade in his left arm.

"S-Sir Amakawa?!" Christina paled. It was clear that he had been stabbed in order to protect her.



“Ha, finally a hit. Looks like blood does flow through your veins after all, eh? Well then, let’s keep the show going!” Lucius chuckled smugly, then started to attack using a combination of teleportation and warping his sword blade.

“Tch...” With his left arm wounded, Rio had to protect Christina and Flora while evading all of Lucius’s attacks. It would be one thing if he were alone, but it was obvious that protecting them was a burden.

“Hey, hey! What’s the matter?! Huh?!”

Lucius’s body and sword teleported around, rushing Rio from every possible direction. Rio had to block the 360-degree onslaught on the three of them by himself—if he tried to counterattack, Lucius would kill the other two as soon as he left their side.

Having said that, he couldn’t escape through the air carrying the two of them. Being in the air would open him to attacks from below, and carrying the two of them meant even more openings.

On top of that, if he fired his spirit arts carelessly he could risk having them absorbed. The conditions weren’t just bad—they were the absolute worst. The range he had to defend had tripled, after all. Plus, Lucius kept teleporting to the worst areas to attack Rio.

This time from the ground...

The sword blade came shooting out, aiming for Christina’s foot. Rio struck it from above to block the attack. Deflected, Lucius’s blade retreated into the darkness with a sinking noise—but as soon as it did, it flew out from a different location to aim for Flora. And the moment Rio dealt with that—

“I’m over here!”

Lucius teleported to slash at Christina. Rio closed in to slash back at him, but Lucius disappeared before he could do so. Instead, a sword came flying out behind Christina, aiming to pierce her back.

“...” Christina and Flora were standing frozen in fear of the attacks seemingly coming from nowhere. Lucius was clearly aiming for them as the encumbrances.

“Ngh...”

Christina, Flora, Christina, Christina, Flora, Flora, Christina, Flora. The attacks came in an irregular but continuous pattern. Finally, Rio was unable to block an attack aimed at Christina and stepped in himself to take the attack.

Christina was unable to see Rio moving at his ultra-rapid speed, but his vigorous movements caused his flowing blood to splatter against her cheek. She snapped out of her daze when she wiped her cheek to see Rio’s blood. That was the final straw for her.

“...S-Sir Amakawa! It’s fine! Just leave us! You’ll be defeated at this rate! Please stop this already!” Unable to watch on any longer, Christina pleaded to Rio with an anguished look.

“...” But Rio didn’t answer, and he didn’t cease his movements to cover the two of them either. Sharpening his senses, he calmly predicted where Lucius’s body and sword would warp to and moved to block them.

Christina...

Leaning against her sister, the poison had made it barely possible for Flora to remain conscious, but the pained call of her sister had reached her. That was enough for her chest to feel like it would burst.

“Please stop, I’m begging you, please...”

He was so close, yet her voice couldn’t reach him. Christina’s pained voice trailed off weakly. Her heart was truly on the verge of breaking.

Meanwhile—

Concentrate. Eliminate all waste to the limit.

Rio hadn’t given up in the slightest. In fact, over the course of the attacks he had to deflect from every angle, he was gradually sharpening his mind until he had maximized the efficiency of his movements and memorized Lucius’s attack pattern.

There’ll be a chance to counterattack. For now, I just have to keep evading the attacks and muster the magic essence for that chance. And for that, I have to picture it. My most powerful technique...

The logic was simple. Spirit arts were a technique that involved using life energy of ode and natural energy of mana to alter the world to one's will. If two spirit art casters tried to activate two different arts at the exact same position, as long as the two arts weren't similar enough to be merged, the stronger phenomenon would overwhelm the weaker phenomenon.

In other words, the one with a greater amount of influence over the phenomenon would activate in its complete form. This was affected by the nature of the art, the scale of the art, and the skill of the caster. If the strength of the two arts rivaled each other, the two arts would clash with each other when activating, but when there was a significant difference in the strength of the casters, the opponent's art could be completely voided.

Thus, if Lucius was teleporting around them by activating his space-altering phenomenon, Rio simply had to fill the area with a powerful enough art to overwhelm that. Once he did, Lucius wouldn't be able to attack Christina and Flora anymore.

However, moving through space was a phenomenon that had extremely powerful influence; it wouldn't take just any old art to obstruct that activation. He would have to create a phenomenon at a large enough scale to fill the entire area with mana. That was why he had to imagine it—an art greater than anything he had ever activated before.

He had a vision. The ability a previous opponent of his used before—or rather, the ability of that weapon. He would recreate that with spirit arts.

More power, greater quality... Rio desperately kept up his defenses as he waited for the moment he could counter this hopeless situation.



A long, long minute passed.

“...”

Flora was as pale as a sheet because of her poisoned body and high fever, but the same applied for Christina as well. She would have done anything she could to help, but she knew that making the wrong move could result in hindering Rio instead.

“Hah... Hah...”

During a brief pause in Lucius's attacks, she could see the rare sight of Rio panting harshly for breath. His stamina had been exhausted by taking Lucius's attacks and he was bleeding openly, which was something he couldn't recover. Considering the scale of the art he was about to activate, he could only allocate the minimum amount of essence to heal himself. Meanwhile—

Tch, he's holding out for longer than I thought. My attacks are even starting to miss.

Lucius was feeling impatient.

Rio had the handicap of having to protect two dead weights. Lucius should have had the advantage, yet he couldn't clinch a victory—performance-wise, he was definitely the one losing, so it was no surprise he was feeling impatient.

“Let's end this already,” Rio said after catching his breath.

Fighting an intense battle injured while gathering the most essence he'd ever had in his life was a difficult task even for Rio, who had finally finished his preparations.

“Huh? Are you sleep-talking now? I'm the one winning here,” Lucius snapped.

“I won't let things go your way any longer. I won't let you take anything. Never again...” Rio glared at Lucius with a sharp look. Even though the surroundings were completely dry, Rio manifested a tremendous amount of water in an instant. The water completely surrounded him and the princesses, then swelled rapidly to try and swallow Lucius as well.

“Wha...” Lucius nearly froze for a moment, but he quickly looked up and teleported to the sky.

That bastard brought out a ton of water in an instant.

Lucius looked down at the scene from above. The amount of water Rio had created was great enough to swallow the entire village nearby. Yet the huge mass of water didn't break shape at all, maintaining its elastic droplet shape.

What the hell is going on...?

Lucius poured essence into his sword and released a slash of darkness at the

water mass. However, the strike merely bounced off the surface of the water—it was unable to open a hole. On top of that, the water that rebounded off the surface returned to the mass. It was just a waste of magic essence.

“Tch... I can’t see what’s happening inside. I can’t teleport like this... What is that bastard trying to pull?” Lucius hatefully glared at the mass of water Rio had created. Meanwhile, inside the water, Rio had created a dome of air several meters in radius around him.

Wh-What...is this...?

Christina looked around the inside of the dome.

360 degrees. No matter where she looked, it was just water, water, and more water. There was so much water, she couldn’t see outside the bubble. The water was tinged with essence and sparkled, illuminating the inside of the dome.

Pretty...

Christina forgot about reality for a moment—that was how wondrous the scenery was.

“I’m going to counterattack by manipulating this water. You’ll be safe as long as you don’t move from here. Please just wait for me to finish this battle,” Rio said to her.

“R-Right...”

Did you create this? What exactly is happening right now? Such questions filled her head, but Christina didn’t say them out loud. She didn’t feel the need to. The situation had long exceeded what she was capable of understanding.

“Then I’ll be off now,” Rio said.

The wall of water around them started undulating, twisting and turning to change shape, separating into a total of sixteen bubbles of water.

Each one of those water bubbles changed shape further. Eight of them turned into long dragons that flew about freely in the air, while the remaining eight were fixed on the ground, taking the shape of dragon tails to protect Christina and Flora.

Eight dragon heads and eight dragon tails. They all moved as though they were one gigantic being, and Christina felt a sense of *déjà vu* when she looked at them.

“Is that Sir Hiroaki’s...Yamata no Orochi?”

Indeed, it was very similar to Hiroaki’s specialty—in fact, it was on a higher level compared to that one.

It was majestic enough to be its final form.

Rio used wind spirit arts to fly out of the circle of tails. After he had ascended to a certain level, he looked down at Lucius from above the eight heads of the water dragons.

“Ha... Hahaha! You’ve left the royal sisters completely open!” Lucius, who had been overwhelmed by the spectacle until that moment, smirked and attempted to warp his body beside Christina and Flora, but—

“I can’t teleport...?!”

That couldn’t be! Lucius tried to warp his sword blade inside the tails to attack Christina, but he couldn’t teleport the sword blade, either.

What the hell is happening...?

Lucius broke out in a nervous sweat. Rio sent one of the water dragons to fall towards him on the ground. The amount of mass-energy falling was immeasurable.

“What—?!” Lucius attempted to teleport overhead in a hurry. This time the warp worked, and he instantly moved where he expected to go.

So I can teleport.

The very moment Lucius thought that, another water dragon appeared before his eyes.

“Damn it!”

Lucius warped to another position. The spot he moved to was also in the sky, but another dragon was waiting for him where he appeared.

Th-That bastard! He’s completely predicting where I’ll move to!

As though to prove that, yet another water dragon closed in on Lucius to attack.

Each of the eight heads of the dragons were over ten meters long and flew freely across the entire sky, attacking Lucius immediately no matter where he warped to. They even moved to provide support for each other—nay, it was Rio who was controlling them to do so. The speed that they moved at was no laughing matter either.

“Don’t mess with me!”

Even though he could teleport, there was nowhere to run in the skies. Rio would release a water dragon wherever he warped, forcing him into using his short-distance teleport successively. At this rate, he’d have his hands full with just evading the attacks. Their positions were completely reversed from before.

My new body’s increased the number of times I can teleport, but using it this many times in succession is bad. If only I had taken those two princesses on the ground as hostages... Shit!

Lucius tried to get a grasp on the situation by making another attempt at attacking Christina and Flora from above, but he still couldn’t teleport.

Then I’ll just have to teleport beside you, Rio!

Figuring the caster wouldn’t manipulate an attack towards himself, Lucius tried to teleport beside Rio. However—

“...I can’t teleport?! Guh!”

For some reason, he couldn’t warp to Rio, either. Then, in his panic, one of Rio’s water dragons managed to strike Lucius. It was like colliding with a gigantic iron ball. Lucius’s body was blown away at an incredible speed, smashing into the ground.

“N-No way...” Seeing the other water dragons closing in, he promptly attempted another warp—this time, successfully.

Wh-What...

His body should have been enhanced, yet it took everything in him to stay standing. Apparently, the attack just now had been especially effective, as his

legs were trembling.

I can't teleport beside the bastard. I can't teleport beside the royal siblings. Did he find a way to seal my abilities?!

Lucius couldn't reach the skies without teleporting, so approaching Rio was made exponentially more difficult by being unable to warp.

"Then how about I aim for the princesses, then?!"

Lucius strengthened the degree of his body enhancement and ran towards Christina and Flora within the dragon tails on unsteady legs. If he couldn't warp, he'd just have to run—he had no intention of giving up. However, the meters-long tails undulated like whips, sweeping across the area Lucius was trying to cross. The ground was completely overturned, almost like a natural disaster had occurred.

"Sh-Shit!" Lucius barely managed to evade the attack by teleporting upwards. Wary of another attack coming immediately, he tried to teleport successively to run away, but—

...What?

His teleportation didn't activate, because Rio himself was rapidly descending towards Lucius.

"Wha...?"

The tip of a sword pierced through Lucius's torso like a meteor, throwing him down to the ground.

"..." Rio stabbed his sword into the ground, right through Lucius's body. He looked down at Lucius's astounded expression without letting go of his sword. The blade had definitely gone through Lucius's heart.

"Guh... Ha... Ngh... Nnngh..."

Lucius coughed violently, expelling the air and blood in his lungs. That was the moment he finally realized Rio's attack had hit him.

"It's over this time..." Rio grasped his sword hilt in both hands and twisted it. To finish him off, he completely destroyed Lucius's heart.

The light in Lucius's eyes faded rapidly.

"H-Heh... So you finished it yourself? Those water dragons must have been a decoy. Damn it... I let...my guard...down..."

Eyeing Rio through his blurry vision, Lucius chuckled. Contrary to the hatred that filled his head and chest, he was grinning. The only thing barely keeping Lucius alive right now was his physical enhancement. This time, Reiss wasn't here to save him. He would surely die this time.

For some reason, that thought made laughter surge within him.

"I don't get it at all... Why would you do that for those princesses... Beltrum's nothing to write home about. It's been possessed by Reiss—a walking plague of a man. That kingdom won't last long... Gahaha...hah."

Lucius squeezed out the last of his energy to speak to Rio. Blood spurted from his lips.

"I'm the one who doesn't get it..." Why did his mother have to be killed? Why did his father have to be killed? He had to spend eleven years tied up by his revenge because of that.

Rio looked down at Lucius on his deathbed and strengthened his grip around his sword. The flames of revenge burned intensely within him.

At the same time, he recalled his fond memories of his mother, Ayame.

The happiness he had lost. The days he could never get back. The affection he'd never feel again—all of it was taken by this man.

That was why Rio felt no pity as he watched Lucius on the verge of death. He wouldn't forgive him. He would never look back. As long as he was alive, he would live only for the purpose of killing this man. That was all.

Yes, that was why—

"..."

Silently, Rio thrust his sword deeper through Lucius's heart.

"..."

Lucius fell completely silent. His life had ended.

He's dead.

Without batting an eye, Rio looked down at his face. He had killed him. With his own hands.

This was the final destination of his revenge, but there was no sense of accomplishment here.

He hadn't sought revenge for a sense of accomplishment.

If anything, he felt a sense of loss and a darkness that overflowed from it. But this was indeed the conclusion that Rio wished for—what he had wanted from the very beginning.

He had no regrets.

“...It's over.”

Rio activated his spirit arts through his blade and set Lucius's body alight. The body instantly burst into flames, and Rio pulled his sword out of Lucius's heart and took several steps back. The flames burned at an intensely high heat, turning Lucius into ash in a matter of moments.

Eleven years since his mother was killed.

Eleven years of living for revenge.

It was a long time coming, but it was finally over.

He hadn't given any thought about what to do beyond this—he had lived with the intention of devoting his all to it.

There was no need for a future, he had thought.

But now, Rio had a place to return to. He had thought everyone would hate him if they knew the truth, but that wasn't the case. That was why—

“Time to go home.”

Rio turned and started walking. There were people waiting for the return of someone like him, and he wanted to go back to them. And so, he would return.

Rio glanced up at the water dragons in the sky and dispersed them into mist, then did the same for the tails on the ground. The mist created a sparkling rainbow that covered the area. Walking through that arch, he headed towards

the ragged forms of Christina and Flora.



Epilogue: Engagement

In the Beltrum Kingdom, in a certain room of the Rodania guest house, Sakata Hiroaki was seated beside Roanna, facing Duke Huguenot.

“One week has passed since Princess Christina and Princess Flora disappeared. And Vanessa hasn’t woken up yet, so we have no idea what happened. With no correspondence from the two of them, the Restoration has fallen into chaos. At this rate, the nobles may rebel and cause the organization to collapse. The Restoration is facing its greatest dilemma yet.”

Hence, they had to administer a powerful remedy to address this as soon as possible. Duke Huguenot explained the situation to Hiroaki with the gravest expression he’d ever had.

“Well, I suppose I get what you’re saying... But are you serious?”

Hiroaki crossed his arms with a peeved expression, then stared at Duke Huguenot with a discontent look. He’d witnessed the chaos of the Restoration from a close proximity this week, but he was unsure if he should just accept Duke Huguenot’s proposal.

“Yes. For form’s sake, Galarc Kingdom’s Third Princess Rosalie will be your first wife, and Roanna will be your second wife. I humbly ask that you agree to declaring these engagements as soon as possible.”

“Hmm. Rosalie will be thirteen next year...”

That would easily be a crime in Japan, right? While he didn’t say that out loud, even Hiroaki felt some reluctance towards marrying a girl of that age so easily. While he wasn’t entirely unwilling, if he was being entirely honest, he was hoping for one more reason to give him the final push.

There was one particular reason that came to mind, but it was against his beliefs to ask for it himself. Or rather, he feared what others would think of him if he did. Thus, he hadn’t tried to make a move himself until now.

But now that he thought about it, there was no better chance than this—it

was possible he'd never have a better chance if he hesitated here.

That was why he resolved himself.

"...I have a condition," he said coolly.

"What might that be?" Duke Huguenot bowed his head as though he was willing to accept anything.

Hiroaki cleared his throat and gave his condition. "It's not really for me to negotiate, so I'll leave that to you, but...I want Liselotte as my third wife. Can you make that happen?"

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Volume 14, Ballad of Vengeance*—be it the regular version (no drama CD) or special edition (with drama CD).

The main story is the same in both the regular version and the special edition, but apart from the drama CD, they also differ in front cover—if you've only purchased one version, you can see the other cover on the HJ Bunko homepage!

Furthermore, the voice actors in the drama CD did a truly wonderful job. Just listening to them gave me the illusion that the characters were actually there. As the scenario writer, the casual snippet of their daily lives was even better than I imagined. Please give it a listen, everyone!

On top of Volume 2 of the drama CD, an official PV for *Seirei Gensouki* was created! The PV is narrated by Aishia's voice actor, Yuki Kuwahara, who also read Aishia's inserted lines in character. The difference in her voice during the narration and character lines was so dramatic, I had goosebumps while I observed the recording. Thank you so much, Ms. Kuwahara!

The official PV will be used in all kinds of promotion for the series from hereafter, so please give it a retweet if you see it on Twitter and spread the word. It'll probably be uploaded to YouTube on the day Volume 14 goes on sale—August 1—so go check it out!

Since I'm running low on space, I'll move on to discussing Volume 14. I'm sure there are some people who read the afterword first, so without any major spoilers: there was lots of foreshadowing in this volume, new twists added at the very end, and other things that may cause a huge shift in the story, don't you think?

With that said, there are still plenty of plot twists up to Volume 10 that haven't been addressed yet, and the ending I imagine for the series is still far away—I'd say we've taken one step into the middle stages of the story,

perhaps? I plan on progressing the story and making it more exciting in the future, so I'd appreciate it if you could continue giving *Seirei Gensouki* your support.

And so, let's meet again in Volume 15!

July 2019

Yuri Kitayama

Bonus Short Stories

Rio's Sleeping Face

One day, sometime before departing for the Proxia Empire, Rio visited the stone house by himself; Celia and Aishia had remained in Rodania. Since the meal with Liselotte was planned for tomorrow, he informed the residents of the house he wouldn't be returning to Rodania that night.

"Does that mean you're staying the night, Onii-chan?!" Latifa asked happily. She had secured a seat beside Rio in the living room.

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"Yay!" Latifa clung to Rio with a cheer.

"That hurts, Latifa," Rio said with a pained expression.

"That means we'll have to have a feast tonight," Orphia said with a smile.

Latifa immediately endorsed the idea. "Agreed! I'll help too!"

The other girls also offered to help with the cooking. "I'll help make something too," Rio added.

"You're finally back, so you should just rest. We'll do the cooking tonight," Sara said to him.

Alma nodded. "That's right. Though, it's still a little early for dinner."

"You should take a bath and relax," Miharu said, encouraging Rio to make himself at home.

"All right... I'll take you up on that offer."

And so, it was decided that everyone would make dinner for Rio. He took a bath in the stone house for the first time in a while to relieve his fatigue, then returned to the living room with damp hair. It seemed like the girls had begun cooking in the kitchen, as he could hear them chatting to each other

harmoniously.

It's kind of hard to relax while leaving all the housework to everyone... Rio thought while sitting in the living room. He split the housework evenly with Celia in Rodania, but even then he was always cleaning things up in advance, so having such idle time was a new feeling.

Maybe I should read a book.

With that decided, Rio stood up and headed to the bookshelf in the living room, picking out a random book and returning to the sofa.

While listening to the lively voices of the girls, he opened the book and silently moved his eyes over the pages. However, the bath must have warmed his body and made him feel sleepy, as he started dozing off. Several minutes later, his eyes were closed as he'd fallen asleep on the sofa.

Some time passed. "Zzz..." Rio breathed quietly in his sleep.

"Haruto...?" Miharu appeared in the living room, noticing Rio asleep on the sofa. She walked up to him and called his name, confirming there was no response, before bringing a throw blanket from another room and gently covering Rio's body with it.

"Hehe." Miharu smiled happily at Rio's innocent face; she'd wake him when it was closer to dinnertime. She was about to return to the kitchen with that thought, but she was reluctant to leave the precious sight of Rio's sleeping face behind and kept watching.

However, she couldn't delay her return forever, so with an iron will, she turned to go back to the kitchen, when—

"La—?!"

Before she knew it, Latifa was standing behind her, covering Miharu's mouth.

"Shh! You'll scare Onii-chan if you scream," she whispered, sitting beside Rio and clinging to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Wh-What are you doing, Latifa?" Miharu asked, blinking.

"You looked like you wanted to be spoiled by Onii-chan, so I'm showing you an example of how to do it."

“I-I wasn’t thinking that,” Miharu denied in a flustered whisper.

“Mm... Latifa?” Rio naturally woke up from the noise and noticed Latifa sitting beside him.

“Yup. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to eat, so you can keep sleeping.”

“Okay.” Rio fell back asleep without noticing Miharu, probably because he was used to Latifa clinging to him, or perhaps because he had his guard down.

After that, Latifa had her fill of clinging to Rio until she was satisfied. “And this is how you act spoiled around Onii-chan,” she said to Miharu smugly, standing up without a sound.

“You’re the only one who can do that, Latifa...” Miharu’s reply was slightly exasperated and a bit envious.

Professor Celia’s Wardrobe

Before Rio departed for the Proxia Empire, in the estate that Rio received from the Restoration in Rodania...

One morning, Celia was in her underwear, glaring at the clothes spread out on her bed. They were all casual clothes she’d bought at a branch store of the Ricca Guild, and every piece was cute in design.

“Hmm, I wonder what I should wear?” Celia muttered in thought, trying to decide her outfit for the day.

“Celia.” Aishia suddenly materialized in the room; she had been sleeping in Celia’s room in spirit form last night. She appeared while yawning sleepily, as though she had just woken up.

“Oh! Good morning, Aishia.” Celia was in her underwear, but she seemed totally used to the situation.

“Morning. Are you choosing your clothes?”

“Yup. I can’t decide which would be best to wear while I’m out shopping today. I know—could you give me your opinion on which outfit I should wear?”

“You bought everything here with Haruto, so I’m sure he’ll be happy with

whatever you choose,” Aishia said, making a precise guess of Celia’s requirements.

“I-I never said I was choosing for Rio’s sake!” Celia denied with a flushed face. She then continued speaking in a whisper. “B-But... I’ll be going out with Rio, and while we’re together he’ll have to look at me, so it wouldn’t hurt to wear something that suits Rio’s tastes.”

“Do you want to ask Haruto, then?”

“I-It’s fine. I’m sure he has his own preparations to make.”

“You don’t have to call him here. I can telepathically share what I see and hear with Haruto over short distances.”

“You can do that?” The possibilities were so unlimited with spirit arts, they surprised Celia even to this day.

“Yup. It’s only possible between a spirit and contract holder with a path connected.”

“How convenient!”

“It has more limitations than just telepathically speaking, but I should be able to show you to Haruto from this distance,” Aishia said, staring at Celia intently.

“I see... Then maybe I’ll take you up on that offer... Wait, I’m in my underwear! S-Stop! Don’t do it! You’re not showing Haruto what I look like right now, are you?!”

It was an eventful morning for Celia.

Elemental ☆ Summer Festival!

On this summer day, Amakawa Haruto was going to the Tanabata festival with his friends. He set off for their meetup spot near the festival location when the sky started to dim.

“Amakawa-senpai,” a cute voice called out. Haruto turned in the direction of the voice.

“Rikka-chan.”

It was Minamoto Rikka, his junior from middle school. Her long hair she normally had down was tied up in a short style, and she was seated on a bench wearing a white, flower-patterned yukata. In her hand was an uchiwa fan that must have been handed out on the streets near the festival; she used it to fan a cool breeze.

“Good evening, Amakawa-senpai,” Rikka greeted Haruto in a bright voice.

“Good evening, Rikka-chan. You came in your yukata.”

“Yup. Does it look good?”

“Yes, very. You give off a different feeling with your hair tied up—I was captivated.”

“Thank you,” Rikka said with a bashful smile.

“Is anyone else here yet?” Haruto looked around.

“Nope. No one else is here yet, so I’m the first to arrive. That makes you the second, Amakawa-senpai. Here, have a seat.” Rikka gestured at the empty space on the bench beside her.

“If you don’t mind, then.” Haruto sat down right next to Rikka.

“I’m glad it was sunny today.”

“Yeah. It was kind of hot, though.” Haruto noted that he was sweating even though he had only walked a short distance.

“Then I’ll share the cool breeze with you.” Rikka fanned the uchiwa in her hand in Haruto’s direction.

“Thanks. It feels nice,” Haruto said with a smile. He casually looked around and noticed a stall selling drinks. “Say, Rikka-chan. Do you like ramune?” he asked.

“Huh? Yeah,” Rikka nodded.

“Wait here, then,” Haruto said, standing up and heading towards the stall. He handed the stall owner some change and received a ramune bottle and two paper cups before coming back.

“One bottle’s a little too much for one person, so will you drink it with me?”

It's also my thank-you for fanning me," he said, handing Rikka a paper cup.

"Thank you very much. I'd love to," Rikka giggled, accepting the cup.

"Here you go." Haruto first poured the ramune into Rikka's cup.

"I'll pour it for you as well, Amakawa-senpai." Rikka put her cup and uchiwa down on the bench and took the bottle from Haruto, pouring the drink into his paper cup.

"Thanks."

"Ramune's nice, but I don't really get a chance to drink it outside of festivals. When I was a child, I drank it every time I went to a festival." Those words appeared to be the truth, as Rikka poured the drink smoothly while keeping the marble characteristic to ramune drinks held in the cavity of the bottle.

"I didn't really play with them, but I remember taking the marble out of the drinks afterwards and saving them."

"I can relate. I also have all the marbles from my childhood saved in a drawer at home."

"I think mine are still at home too. All right, let's have some."

"Thanks for the drink. Mm, sure brings back memories." Rikka peered inside her cup and smiled happily, then took a sip of the drink.

"Hah... I've been brought back to life." Haruto gulped down his ramune and sighed.

"Yeah, it's so good," Rikka said, entranced. "I'll keep fanning you as thanks for the ramune, senpai." She resumed fanning a cool breeze towards Haruto with her uchiwa.



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Character Introduction](#)

[Prologue: Before Departing](#)

[Chapter 1: The Royal Siblings' Ordeals](#)

[Chapter 2: Reiss's Intentions in Rodania](#)

[Interlude: The Fifth Hero](#)

[Chapter 3: Fang of the Avenger](#)

[Chapter 4: A Fierce Battle](#)

[Chapter 5: Paladia Kingdom Infiltration](#)

[Chapter 6: The Whereabouts of the Royal Siblings](#)

[Chapter 7: Before the Death Battle](#)

[Epilogue: Engagement](#)

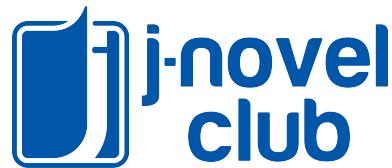
[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[Bonus Illustration](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 15 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 14

by Yuri Kitayama

Translated by Mana Z.

Edited by Joi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 Yuri Kitayama Illustrations Copyright © 2019 Riv Cover illustration by Riv

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: April 2021

Premium E-Book