

Yuri Kitayama  
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12



# Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Battlefield Symphony •

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"IT'S  
DELICIOUS..."

Christina took a bite of the risotto and slowly savored the wonderful taste. Her expression softened faintly in a bittersweet and fleeting way.





*Seirei Gensouki:  
Spirit Chronicles*





### Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

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. His previous life was that of 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. Her previous life was that of 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 the protection of Rio, along with Miharu and Aki.

## CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

**Flora Beltrum**

Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Currently taking action with the hero named Sakata Hiroaki.

**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 Flora as her 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 past 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.

**Charlotte Galarc**

Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Monitors Satsuki but is also her friend.

**Sendo Takahisa**

Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

**Lilianna Centostella**

First Princess of the Centostella Kingdom. Currently at Takahisa's side in order to watch over him.

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# Prologue: Christina's Recollections

In her youth, Christina Beltrum considered herself to be someone special.

She was born as the first princess of Beltrum, first in line to succeed the throne of the most influential kingdom of the Strahl region, blessed with both academic and magic talent, and hailed as a genius by all her instructors in everything she learned.

Hard work wasn't difficult for her, either. She considered working hard to be a natural obligation imposed upon her because of who she was—a person that stood above others. Plus, if she worked hard to get better results, her parents would praise her, and her beloved little sister would look up to her with respect.

That's why she was naturally able to work harder than the average person from as early as the age of three or four. She wanted to meet her parents' expectations. She wanted to be an older sister worth respecting.

Her hard work paid off. She never experienced failure and was hailed as a genius no matter what she did. It was truly smooth sailing throughout her entire youth.

However, that background caused her belief that she was a superior, special person that stood above others to gradually grow stronger. Because she was special, there was nothing she couldn't do. There was no one above her. Her pride grew until it was all she could believe.

And yet, despite that, she never considered her less-talented little sister to be stupid. She adored Flora. She was also happy to be complimented by her parents. As royalty, there were few people that could treat her on an equal level, so she always treasured her family.

Which was why when she was seven years old, her world fell apart when she learned that Flora had been kidnapped on her ceremonial outing outside of the castle. She followed Vanessa and Celia, who had gone to investigate on the

confidential order of her father; she forcibly snuck out of the castle in what was a most foolish act.

She arrived in the slums of the capital. It was her first time stepping into such a place—a place she normally would have never ventured in her lifetime.

There, she met an orphan.

His name was Rio.

His messy hair was long enough to cover his face, his skin was rough and covered in dirt and grime, and his tattered clothes had a sour stench to them. On top of that, the boy himself was withering away.

He was the same age as Christina, and lived a life that was completely opposite from the one she spent in the castle as royalty.

*So there are children like this in the world*—that was what she thought after seeing an orphan for the first time in her life. But she didn't know how to approach such a boy, and—with her rising panic over Flora's kidnapping—ended up hurtling inexcusable words at him.

Rio's response was unexpectedly polite. They weren't able to gain any beneficial information from their first conversation with him, but later, they spotted Rio carrying an unconscious Flora through the slums. Christina flew into a rage—this orphan had lied to her face, saying he knew nothing about her sister.

Christina slapped Rio and screamed at him, but Rio stared back at her with a gaze that chilled her to her core. It scared her into reflexively attempting to slap him again, but Rio caught her hand. When she tried to slap him with her free hand, he caught the other one, too.

And that...

That was the first time she had ever had her freedom taken away from her by force.

That was the first time she had ever been glared at coldly.

That was the first time she had ever thought of another human as terrifying.

Because she was the first princess, no one had ever treated her rudely or

roughly. Everyone had always respected her.

She was mortified. Her pride had been wounded. She realized that she wasn't actually a special person at all, but rather, an extremely unreliable girl.

Christina had been fiercely enraged at the time, but looking back on it now, the events of that day were probably what made her come to the realization that she wasn't someone special. She was a normal person no different from anyone else.

She was simply born in the position of the first princess. What was special was her position, not herself. That became even more clear once she started attending the Royal Academy.

Indeed, she was able to produce results better than the average person in every field. But her talents stopped there. She was able to maintain her top scores in the academy, but that was simply because she was well-behaved and studied hard.

She didn't have any prodigy-like talent, and couldn't compete with the true geniuses of each field. For example, Celia Claire was considered a genius sorcerer—and Christina was no match for her. She had once read the thesis Celia submitted to skip her grades and though she could understand its contents, she couldn't imagine writing something similar at the age Celia had been.

Besides...

There was one more person that could have been a genius. She didn't want to accept it at first, but that person was Rio.

He couldn't have had a proper education in the slums, yet he was able to read and write shortly after entering the academy, eventually pulling ahead of the rest of the students to reach the same top grades as Christina. He had tremendous learning capability.

Christina had prided herself on her ability to study, so she had been secretly shocked at the time. If she were in Rio's position, would she be able to achieve the same grades as him?

On top of that, she saw him practicing with his sword after class multiple

times. His form was extremely beautiful—his movements were clearly different from the other students.

He was elegant, yet sharp, with movements honed until he stood far above anyone else in terms of skill level. Perhaps that was why Christina found herself captivated by the sight of him swinging his sword before she realized it.

Yes, he must be a genius, she thought.

But that realization didn't change the relationship between them, and she continued to do her best to avoid him on the academy grounds. Part of the reason why was because of the guilt and awkwardness she felt about their first meeting. Even if she were to reach out to him, she didn't know what to say. Because of what had happened, she didn't think he wanted to talk to her, either.

More importantly, she was the first princess. She couldn't just thoughtlessly apologize to other people, as it could end up causing a bigger problem.

She was special, but it was a restrictive kind of special.

Considering the inconvenience she could cause for her father, who was already distracted by the power struggles within the country, she decided to refrain from any actions that could cause discord.

Being born into a special position meant that she had to act like someone extraordinary. Even if it wasn't true...

That was the duty of someone like her—of royalty entrusted with the rule of a kingdom, she believed.

However, when she saw Rio isolated in the academy, she felt a sense of discomfort she couldn't identify.

The sons of nobility mistakenly assumed themselves to be special and acted with no consideration for others. Watching them reminded Christina of her past self, causing feelings of shame to well up alongside the discomfort within her.

When she saw Flora's sad face on top of all that, she felt pathetic. Powerless to do anything against this reality...

Yet, despite that, she maintained her path as a spectator.

And the result of that was a scapegoat being born. Rio must have sensed the danger he was in, as he disappeared without a trace and never appeared before Christina again.

The memories, as sour as they were, sometimes resurfaced on a whim.

They would never meet again. Rio would be better off that way.

With that thought in mind, she nailed the coffin shut over her bitter memories.

That is, until today...

# Chapter 1: On the Move

Somewhere along the road stretching south of Cleia...

"From the avenger to the avengee, if you will... Human karma is a truly difficult concept. Wouldn't you agree?"

Reiss left behind those words in his exchange with Rio before retreating into the forest. Rio continued glaring into the forest afterwards, his expression grim.

"..."

Meanwhile, Christina watched Rio's back, dumbfounded and in shock. The same went for Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. Several seconds passed like that, silence falling over their surroundings. Everyone held their breath. Rio secretly probed the area using his wind spirit arts to confirm Reiss had withdrawn into the forest and taken off, and that there were no other enemies. Then, he turned back to the party.

"Let's go." He was the first one to break the silence.

"...Huh?" The group blinked in shock, taken aback in surprise.

"It's just as he said. If we linger here any longer, the pursuers will catch up to us in no time at all. The roar of the minotaurs would have reached the city, so they've probably noticed that something has happened. There's a high risk in using this road, so come this way."

Rio smoothly ignored the fact Reiss had uttered his real name and succinctly explained the emergency. Then, he started walking into the eastern forest on the left-hand side of the road that stretched south. It was the opposite direction that Reiss had retreated toward.

An awkward air flowed between the party.

"...Yeah, let's go."

"Yup."

"Yes."

Sara, the silver werewolf disguised as a human, took the lead in following Rio. Similarly disguised as humans, the high elf Orphia and elder dwarf Alma echoed her words.

"Indeed, we don't have time to be chatting here. Let us go," the guard knight Vanessa called out to Christina.

"...All right," Christina nodded, walking forward hesitantly. At that, Celia sighed in relief and followed after them.

Kouta and Rei exchanged a look with each other before doing the same. Meanwhile, as all of that was going on—

*Aishia, can you hear me?*

Rio sent a telepathic message to Aishia, who hadn't come running to join the earlier battle.

*Yup, she replied immediately.*

*Where are you right now?*

*At the edge of our telepathic range. I've confirmed the stone house is safe.*

*Perfect. Thank you,* Rio said with a small smile. She had probably decided to move separately from the spirit folk girls and check up on the stone house when she sensed the minotaurs' appearance.

The only ones present in the stone house right now were Miharu and Latifa, so the fact that she prioritized their safety and checked on them was truly a relief.

*What should I do now?* Aishia asked.

*I'd like you to stay there and keep watch over Miharu and Latifa. You can fly after us every day and stop before the sun sets, without getting too close. We're going to give up on taking the detour down the south road and head to Rodania via the east road instead.*

He would have liked to ask her to monitor their surroundings, but with Reiss around, he didn't want to leave the stone house unguarded—its safety was his highest priority. They also had the extra Time-Space Cache that Orphia brought along, so moving the stone house wasn't an issue either.

*Got it.*

*Unless there's a major emergency, I won't be contacting you again until we reach Rodania. If anything urgent happens over there, just scatter a load of ode and mana and I'll come running.*

*Understood.*

*Later, then.*

Their telepathic conversation ended there. He could ask for more details from Sara and the others later.

“Is something the matter, Haruto?” Celia asked, having followed Rio into the forest.

“No, it’s nothing. The monsters made a fine mess out of the surrounding earth, so I was considering how we could use that to our benefit and hide our footprints from the pursuers,” Rio said, looking around at the forest floor that had been trampled by the large number of monsters. “We could move through the treetops and cut our traces off here.”

It was pretty much guaranteed that troops would be sent to investigate the commotion that had happened, and the most prominent information they could leave behind was their footprints. If their footprints were discovered amongst the ground that had been trampled by the monsters, they’d definitely be tracked down.

In this case, it would be best to cut off their footprints here and leave no information for the pursuers, delaying them by extending their investigation time. If they find Reiss’ footprints moving in the opposite direction, they might even split their personnel further. However...

“Through the treetops...?”

How was that possible? Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei looked up at the trees overhead in confusion. While they could certainly erase traces of themselves if they moved through the treetops, the forest was lined with trees over ten meters tall.

As a physically-trained knight, Vanessa could probably manage it, but it would

be a feat for the others to simply climb a tree, much less jump between the spaced out branches. They couldn't waste time struggling to climb either, or the pursuers would arrive.

"We'll carry you. I can take Kouta and Rei, and the other three... Can I leave them to you guys, Sara?" Rio said.

"...Sure!" Sara exchanged looks with Orphia and Alma before nodding happily.

"Then let's get going immediately. I'll carry Kouta, so could you climb on my back, Rei? Here goes," Rio said, picking Kouta up in his arms in a bridal carry.

"Huh? Wai..." Kouta froze, having been picked up smoothly before he could give his consent.

"Hurry please, Rei. Hold on tightly so you don't fall off," Rio urged.

"Ah... All right. Excuse me," Rei nodded obediently and climbed on Rio's back, figuring this was no time to be arguing.

*O-Oh... Wow, he's really buff.* Rei was quietly in awe at how Rio didn't even flinch under the weight of two men.

"I shall carry Celia, then. Sara and Orphia, you take care of those two," Alma said, approaching Celia.

"Thank you, Alma," Celia smiled warmly. She turned to address Christina and Vanessa, hoping to ease their wariness towards the girls they had yet to be introduced to. "As you witnessed in the fight earlier, these girls have enchanted weapons just like Haruto and can enhance their physical bodies by quite a bit. They're very reliable, so you can trust them to transport you safely."

"I understand. I will be in your care, then," Christina nodded at Sara and Orphia.

"I'll take the swordswoman so you can carry her, Orphia," Sara offered, leaving Orphia to handle Christina.

"Yup, got it."

"Thanks." Vanessa quietly bobbed her head at Sara. After Sara and the others arranged themselves and picked up their escorts, they finally departed.

“Let’s go. I’ll lead the way, so please follow me carefully.”

“Understood!”

Rio first took a great leap with Kouta and Rei in tow, landing lightly on a branch overhead.

“A-Amazing...”

“...I knew he had incredible physical abilities, but this is something else.”

Kouta and Rei easily surpassed 120 kilograms together, but Rio had leapt as though gravity didn’t exist, leaving the two muttering in shock.

“You may bite your tongues if you speak, so please keep conversation to a minimum.” No sooner than he had said that, Rio leapt to the next tree. Sara and the others followed suit, lightly jumping to thick branches behind Rio. They continued making their way through the forest, putting the battlefield behind them in no time at all.

Thus, just as Rio planned, the only traces left behind were those of a grand battle that had taken place on the road and surrounding forest. The troops from Cleia—including Alfred and Rui—arrived at the scene of the commotion mere minutes later.



Ten or so minutes after they departed the battlefield on the south road, Rio and the others reached a decent point down the eastern road.

*We should have gained a fair distance from our previous location, but...*

The further they moved away from Cleia, the further they would be located from the areas being thoroughly investigated. More distance would also give them more chances to outwit their pursuers, so ideally, Rio wanted to gain even more distance, if possible.

However, maintaining both physical ability and physical body enhancements at the same time consumed a large amount of magic essence, so it was known as an inefficient magic or sorcery. Being able to sustain them for several minutes was difficult.

Of course, Rio and the spirit folk girls all possessed extraordinary amounts of

essence compared to regular humans, so they could still keep their enhancements up for as long as needed, but prolonged use in front of Christina and the others might be seen as unnatural.

*...Let's take a break for now. Sara and the others need an explanation, too.*

Having decided that, Rio reduced his speed and gently landed in a basin in the forest. The spirit folk girls followed his lead and landed next to him easily.

“We should be safe here for a while. Many unforeseen events happened back there, so let's take a small breather to explain things and discuss what our plans are moving forward,” Rio suggested as he let Kouta and Rei down onto the ground.

“But...” Celia started nervously as she watched everyone's faces. She still seemed to be affected by how Reiss had called Rio by his real name before he left.

There had barely been any conversation on their way here, so the fact no one had been introduced to each other was probably contributing to the awkward air.

“Come to think of it, Your Highness has yet to be introduced to Sara and the others. Let's start from there, shall we?” Rio purposefully avoided the topic of his real name as he moved the conversation along. The others seemed to pick up on his intentions.

“I'm Sara, this is Orphia, and that one over there is Alma. It's very nice to meet you.”

Sara offered their names on behalf of the others as Orphia and Alma bowed their heads.

“May I ask what relation you have to Mister Haruto...?” Rei raised his hand and asked.

“How should I describe them... They're young ladies—or rather, warriors—from a minority group located on the outskirts of Strahl. Certain events brought us together, after which they've shown me nothing but kindness.” Rio gave a convincing but harmless explanation of the spirit folk girls' backgrounds.

“We’re currently traveling with Haruto in order to learn more about the world,” Orphia added. It technically wasn’t a lie.

“I see... You’re all very cute. Like, really...” Rei looked at them with interest in his eyes.

“Hah... Thank you very much.” Sara bowed, accepting his words as a polite comment.

“Rei. Please refrain from saying unnecessary things in this situation.” Kouta elbowed Rei in the arm.

“Hahaha... Right. Ah, my name is Rei Saiki, by the way. This guy is my underclassman, Kouta Murakumo. Pleased to meet you all.” Rei introduced himself somewhat stiffly.

“Hello. I’m Kouta.” Kouta seemed to be a little shy, as he nodded his head awkwardly. Then, Christina exhaled slowly to calm herself before speaking.

“I’m the Beltrum Kingdom’s first princess, Christina. Thank you for saving us earlier.”

“Vanessa Emarle, a knight serving as Princess Christina’s guard. I am truly grateful to you all for saving Her Highness from our predicament,” Vanessa said, bowing respectfully.

“Oh my, so you’re a princess... Well, we only intervened to help Haruto and Celia, so you can direct your gratitude towards them.” Though they must have heard the gist of things from Aishia and known the first princess Christina was here already, Sara acted like she was only learning that fact now.

“So what’s the current situation? We only know that there was an uproar in the city and that you’re on the run from the soldiers...” Alma asked. They couldn’t reveal that Aishia had acted as a messenger while Rio was in the underground room and gathered them to support the escape plan, so she implicitly conveyed their intention to feign ignorance to Rio and Celia.

“Your Highness,” Rio said to Christina.

“Huh...? Ah, yes?” Christina flinched, shaking as she replied.

“Are you feeling unwell?” Rio asked, staring at her.

“N-No, not at all.” Christina averted her gaze somewhat guiltily.

“That’s good to hear. May I explain your situation to the girls? They definitely won’t reveal anything to anyone else.” Rio looked at Sara and the others.

“...Very well,” Christina nodded awkwardly. Whether that was because she had no other choice in this situation, or because of something else...

“Then I shall summarise the situation succinctly. First, L-Lady Celia and I successfully snuck into her father’s estate, as originally planned,” said Rio. He stuttered awkwardly over Celia’s title out of unfamiliarity.

“...” Celia looked like she wanted to object to being called “Lady,” but held her tongue.

“After sneaking into the underground basement, we found Her Highness hiding there. She was on the run from the kingdom’s army, currently being led by nobles agitated about the political conflicts in the capital,” Rio explained shortly.

“I see... So Haruto and Celia will head to Rodania from here?” Sara asked.

“Yes. I’ve decided to escort them.” Rio confirmed, frowning slightly as he sighed, as he had predicted what Sara would say next.

“Then allow us to accompany you and offer what help we can provide.”

Honestly, it was a very reassuring offer. With so many people to protect, even Rio would struggle to cover every vulnerability.

Of course, he had already decided his highest priority was Celia, but he didn’t want to cause any collateral damage that would make Celia upset. Thus, in order to avoid that, he couldn’t cut corners while escorting Christina—making Sara’s offer extremely helpful.

“...We’re being pursued by the army of an entire kingdom. It’ll be a dangerous trip.”

Rio’s worries lay there. Sara and the others left their village to learn about the world, so it wouldn’t be right to drag them into such a dangerous and problematic situation. If their escort target had only been Celia, then they wouldn’t need to hide their spirit arts and could just fly through the air. But that

wasn't an option with Christina and the others present. It was a different matter than lending them magic artifacts to alter their hair color. Unless there was some kind of emergency, he didn't want to use any methods that deviated from the common knowledge of the Strahl region.

They would move by land, mostly on foot. He wouldn't do anything superhuman like carry Celia in his arms and run throughout the daytime and nighttime hours.

"And I thought we were friends. Did you expect us to just watch as you and Celia go off on such a dangerous journey?" Sara asked, sounding slightly fed up.

"Yup, what Sara said." Orphia nodded in agreement.

"And wouldn't it be better to have more people on an escort mission? That's why *we're* here, after all."

*Instead of Lady Aishia, that is*—Alma implied in a way that only Rio would understand.

She had a point. Even though Aishia's strength was on par with Rio's and she could perform numerous roles by herself, she only had one materialized body that could act at any time. Plus, even if Aishia were to participate in the escort mission, she would be more useful in her spirit form than physical form as she could monitor the surroundings and send warnings.

In this regard, Sara and the other girls could strengthen their defenses by staying near the escort targets, while *their* contract spirits could monitor the surroundings instead. In this situation, the spirit folk girls could probably offer more to the escort mission than Aishia. Knowing that, they had come running to rescue Celia and offer their protection.

"...All right. I'll be relying on you guys, then. Thank you," Rio said gratefully. He would make sure to thank them properly on a later day.

"Thank you so much, truly..." Celia bowed her head deeply at Sara.

"Like I said, we're friends."

"Yep, leave it to us."

"Let's all do our best!"

Sara, Alma, and Orphia said proudly. Rio smiled softly at the sight.



“I guess you’ll have more guards now, Your Highness. They’re all very skilled warriors, so I hope you don’t mind,” he said to Christina.

Christina’s eyes trembled with a flash of guilt before she bowed deeply. “...Of course not. Your exchange just now has conveyed to me how strong and wonderful the trust is between you all. We will be in your care—thank you very much.”

“Then, it’s decided. We’ll have more allies with us from here on out. Let’s review our planned route and our opponent’s strength once more.”

Rio took out the map Celia’s father drew for them from his breast pocket and spread it across the ground. The entire party directed their attention to the paper.

“Our destination is Rodania, located here. Cleia is here. The original plan was to detour around the road south of Cleia before heading towards Rodania to the northeast, but the commotion drew too much attention to the south road. So, we’ll cut through the forest from here and head for the east road instead.” Rio drew a straight line with his finger, connecting the south road and the east road through the forest.

“So we’ll be using the east road from here onwards? If we were to head to Rodania through the shortest route, that would be best, but...” Vanessa stared at the map in thought as she followed the shortest route to Rodania.

“That would be the main reason to use the east road, yes. However, the shortest route to Rodania would also be the most heavily guarded. That’s why we’ll keep pressing east at the point where we would normally turn north.” Rio drew his finger along the line that Vanessa had pointed out and continued past the point in the road where they would have turned.

“But then you’d be heading into the Kingdom of Galarc...”

“That’s fine. The army wouldn’t do something as reckless as invade a foreign kingdom’s territory in pursuit of us.”

There was no distinct line marking the kingdom borders, as there was an uninhabited area between the two kingdoms, but there were checkpoints representing each kingdom—that also served as strongholds—located at fixed

positions along the roads. Thus, it was possible to cross the border without passing the checkpoint as long as the roads were avoided, but off-road travel had high risk of monster and beast attacks, so people normally used the road. Since approaching a foreign checkpoint or fortress with an army was a clear declaration of aggression, Charles would surely be left with no choice but to halt his pursuit.

“In that case, I understand,” Vanessa agreed.

“Incidentally, this route will pass through Duke Cretia’s domain, so stopping by Amande to seek Liselotte’s assistance is also an option. She may even lend us an enchanted ship straight to Rodania. I can guarantee she’s trustworthy, but please make the final decision with your own judgment, Your Highness,” Rio looked at Christina and said. It was a recommendation made with the alliance between the Galarc Kingdom and the Restoration in mind, as well as his knowledge of what kind of person Liselotte was.

“...It is greatly reassuring to know that she may be willing to assist us. I’d be most grateful for it,” said Christina. It was indeed an extremely attractive suggestion that she wanted to agree to immediately, but as Christina herself wasn’t familiar with Liselotte on a personal basis, she would have never chosen to rely on the nobility of another kingdom if it hadn’t been for Rio.

“So it’s agreed that our current destination will be Amande instead of Rodania. All that’s left is to check what we know about the strength of the pursuing search party,” Rio said.

“First, the possibility of an aerial search party using griffins is extremely annoying. If we’re spotted, it would be very difficult to shake them off with our numbers—we’d have no choice but to fight them. But even more troublesome than that is the King’s Sword, Sir Alfred Emarle, and the hero, Rui. If we have to cross swords with them, we can expect a fierce battle.”

“My brother... has joined the search party for Princess Christina?”

“Rui’s here too?!”

The ones who reacted in surprise were Alfred’s little sister Vanessa and Rui’s friend Kouta.

"Yes, I crossed swords with them while I was catching up to everyone earlier. It was only briefly, though—Rui just fired a warning shot from a long distance away."

In reality, it wasn't a warning shot but a sniping shot intended to maim, but Rio worded it gently so that Celia wouldn't be as worried.

"..."

Vanessa and Kouta both frowned with bitter expressions. They seemed to have conflicted feelings towards the aforementioned people.

"There's one more person to be extremely cautious of, and that's the man named Reiss that appeared earlier. We didn't witness it directly, but I believe he was the one who launched that attack that was aiming for Her Highness' life. Do you have any knowledge about him?" Rio asked Christina.

"...I've heard of rumors that the Proxia Empire's ambassador, Reiss Vulfe, was on familiar terms with Charles. However, I've never seen his face, so whether it's the same person..." Christina tapped her hand against her mouth as she dug through her memories.

Rio thought back on what he had heard once in Amande. "Duke Huguenot said the same. That the Proxia Empire's ambassador was named Reiss, and that he was secretly allying with Charles."

"He introduced himself as part of the Heavenly Lions, but if that was just a bluff and he's actually the Proxia ambassador, then it would make sense why he would be after the princess' life. With all due respect, Her Highness' presence is probably a hindrance to their empire," Vanessa stated with simmering fury.

"No, his motives for Her Highness' life aside, the fact he brought up the Heavenly Lions wasn't a bluff," Rio asserted.

"Huh, really?"

"Yes. I've witnessed him in the company of the commander of the Heavenly Lions, Lucius Orgueil, before. Lucius is a former noble of the Beltrum Kingdom, and the man who kidnapped Princess Flora in Amande."

"Wha..." Vanessa was rendered speechless. She had heard of Flora's

abduction while she was attending the banquet, but she hadn't been able to ask for more details. Christina's expression was also frozen as she swallowed her breath.

"He participated in the planning of Princess Flora's abduction and Princess Christina's assassination. As a member of a mercenary squad, he must naturally have some sort of employer behind him, but we can be certain that the Heavenly Lions and Reiss are after the royal sisters. There are a lot of mysteries surrounding him, but there's no mistaking that he's a formidable opponent. He may appear again in the future, so be extremely cautious," Rio said, emphasizing the danger of Reiss.

Vanessa grit her teeth in rage. "Curse him..."

*What I'm more concerned about is not the fact he tried to kidnap Princess Flora, but that he tried to kill Princess Christina. And why he bothered to show himself. It was like he was trying to show that his aim was Princess Christina,* Rio thought to himself calmly. He didn't have enough information to find an answer, and it wasn't a problem that could be solved here and now.

"For now, we're done confirming the information we have, so let's get going. Sara, can I count on you and the others to help carry them a little further? I'd like to get away from Cleia as fast as possible, so please push your physical strength enhancements a little more," Rio said, urging them to resume moving.

"Yes, leave it to us!" Sara replied enthusiastically, Orphia and Alma nodding with her. Thus, the party departed once more.



Meanwhile, a little earlier, on the road extending south of Cleia and at the point where Sara and the others had fought with the minotaurs.

"W-What in the world is this?! Just what happened here?!"

Having finally arrived at the scene with reinforcements in tow, Charles Arbor stared at the remnants of the tremendous battle and yelled in shock. The surface of the road was a mess and the nearby forest was thoroughly demolished.

"...Who knows? Though there's no doubt a fierce battle occurred," Alfred

Emarle answered as he cast his sharp gaze around the area, in search of clues.

*Footprints of a bipedal creature too large to be human. Footprints of a considerable number of creatures that trampled the forest, and trees that look like they were beaten in half by a large, blunt force. With all the enchanted gems lying about the place, the creatures must have been monsters. Which leaves the large footprints to most likely be minotaurs. I've heard witness reports of them have increased recently, but...*

"H-Hey, Alfred! What are you standing around for?! Find out what happened right this instant!"

The one who had been standing around gaping was Charles, but he snapped to his senses and chose to reprimand Alfred instead.

"There was a fight here."

"A-Anyone with eyes can see that!"

"I'm not finished. The ones they were fighting were probably monsters, after seeing the countless footprints in the forest. And seeing the size of the footprints that bored holes into the road, there was probably a minotaur among them—two of them, actually. They were probably the ones that roared so loudly that we heard them from Cleia," Alfred explained with a sigh.

"Wha... I-Impossible! Where would such a large swarm of monsters disappear to?!" Charles yelled in confusion.

"Just look at the enchanted gems on the floor. They were probably defeated in the short time it took us to arrive."

"Impossible! You'd have to gather a platoon of knights and sorcerers to do such a thing!"

"But there's proof a large number of monsters were defeated here. The one who defeated them was probably that mysterious man that drove back the squad you were leading. He seems to have an absurd amount of power hidden within him."

"Guh, that man fought in such an uncouth and barbaric way..." Charles grimaced at the reminder that his own squad was beaten black and blue by Rio

earlier. Rio had fought with two daggers, and knights tended to look down on weapons such as those.

On top of that, Rio had leaped about the place and kicked at them frequently, so as someone who was taught the honorable and proper form of swordcraft, Charles saw Rio's fighting style as extremely ungraceful. That, along with the helpless way he suffered defeat earlier, left him too frustrated to earnestly acknowledge Rio's strength.

*Two daggers...* Alfred responded to those words with a contemplative look. Meanwhile—

"His movements were by no means barbaric or uncouth. He saw through his opponent's attacks and dealt with them by using the least amount of motion possible. They were perfectly refined movements." Rui appeared from the forest and joined the conversation with a high evaluation of Rio.

"S-Sir Rui... It's dangerous to enter the forest alone." Not even Charles could speak to a hero haughtily, so he forced down his anger.

"The western side of the forest had a single set of human footprints alongside the monster tracks. It headed straight into the depths of the woods," Rui reported. Those tracks had been the ones Reiss left behind, but—

"Wha— Is that true?! Those must be his footprints!" Charles immediately decided they belonged to Rio.

"I believe it's too early to presume that. The footprints looked like they came out of the forest and turned back in. Even if they belonged to him, I don't see any reason for him to go out of his way to fight the monsters on the road and turn back," Rui replied, showing off his sharp observational skills with his analysis.

"H-Hmm. Then whose footprints could they be...?" Charles hummed, at a loss for words.

Rui placed a hand against his mouth and theorized out loud. "I do not know. However, the footprints seem too unnatural to me. The steps aren't spaced far enough for a run, and they completely disappear after a short distance into the forest—as though their owner simply took off into the air. They could be a

distraction placed to confuse us.”

“The fact the monsters were wiped out means he must have been in a situation where he had no choice but to fight. He had no trouble taking on the squad Charles led, so it would have been easy for him to shake off and escape a few monsters. If he was alone, that is,” Alfred added, hinting at something.

“I see now! He must have fought the monsters in order to protect Princess Christina and the others! The footsteps in the forest are simply a distraction! He must have defeated the monsters and headed straight down the south road. It’s only natural for there to be footprints on a road, after all. There’d be no need to hide them. Send a team down the south road immediately!” Charles declared triumphantly and began barking orders at his surroundings. Up until now, things had progressed pretty much as conveniently as Rio could have hoped for before he left the forest, but—

“Hold on. I haven’t received information that Princess Christina was being escorted by such a person. Even if she is, I don’t see where the connection came from,” Alfred replied.

“He’s obviously an adventurer Count Claire hired or something!”

“As a commander, you shouldn’t jump to conclusions like that. There is no proof Count Claire is involved in Her Highness’ disappearance. We’ve also received witness reports that four people resembling Princess Christina’s group ran through the north gate. It’s possible that the man who defeated your squad is completely unrelated to Her Highness’ escape, no?”

“T-Then we’ll search north and south! Send personnel in both of those directions!”

“It doesn’t sound wise to leave the east road short of hands...”

“Ugh, you always have something to say! I have men stationed in all the stronghold cities near the Marquess Rodan domain. I’ll dispatch an order to them and have them search the route from the eastern road! I’ll also send the minimum number of search parties to the east. There are ultimately two roads into Rodania, so my men can be on standby at those points. Good enough for you?” With Alfred’s admonition, Charles huffed through his nose and decided to allocate personnel on a priority basis. The way he followed Alfred’s suggestion

showed just how highly he valued his abilities.

“Yes. Then I shall leave the overall command to you and search this area a little more,” Alfred nodded.

“In that case, allow me to join you,” Rui immediately offered.

Charles nodded a little unhappily. “...Understood. Hey, Alfred. Don’t you dare let Sir Rui come to any harm.”



Approximately one hour had passed since Rio and the others finished sharing information in the forest and resumed their trip. They moved without a break that entire time, running through the deserted forest and wilderness as they steadily headed east.

“Let’s take a break.”

They were approaching the point where the girls would be questioned for being human, so Rio suggested they stop for a break. He had just spotted a spring that would make a good place to take a break, too.

Vanessa stared closely at Sara after she was lowered to the ground before questioning her. “T-That was a long time to maintain your physical enhancements. Are you all right?”

“Yes, the effects of my enchanted sword also raise my stamina, so I can manage. It’s good exercise,” Sara answered with a relatively refreshed face.

“Stamina... That too, but is your magic essence okay?” Vanessa worried for Sara’s remaining essence with a hint of surprise. There was typically no danger to one’s life even if they used every last drop of their essence, but it did cause a kind of fatigue that made recovery slower.

For the record, completely depleted essence would naturally recover in three days, but it could also be recovered by using enchanted gems and spirit stones with essence stored inside.

“Y-Yes, somehow.” Sara nodded awkwardly. She couldn’t admit that she still had a ton of essence left.

“They’re all skilled enough warriors to wield enchanted swords, so they have

quite a large amount of magic essence. But considering the recovery time needed, it may be time to start saving their essence. We don't have any enchanted gems for recovery on hand, either."

Rio implied that Sara and the others were near the limits of their essence in order to throw off the suspicion.

"I understand why people say using enchanted swords is a talent in itself," Vanessa said with a dry smile.

"After we finish our break here, we'll walk for the rest of today. We should have gained a fair distance from the search party now."

The maximum distance a person could walk in a single day was said to be twenty to thirty kilometers along a well-maintained road. Of course, their journey would fall along routes that didn't have roads. Despite this, Rio and the others had already traveled sixty kilometers. In merely an hour, they had traveled as far as a normal person would over two days. Charles wouldn't be expecting such a wide distance between them in only an hour, so they were currently in a position outside of his search area.

"I wouldn't have been able to carry everyone alone, so I'm very grateful to have Sara and the others here. Let's move with physical strength enhancements on every third day, and spend the other two days walking to recover our essence," Rio suggested, looking at the girls.

"Yes, that won't be a problem." Sara nodded agreeably.

"Then that's that. Sara and the girls must be hot after running, so feel free to wash yourselves in the water. I'll guard the area and search for the shortest route to the road."

"But the same goes for you, Haruto..."

Though they still had stamina remaining, their bodies were hot and sweaty, so Rio's suggestion sounded very attractive to them. But leaving Rio behind to bathe first didn't feel right either...

"I'll have my turn later. It's okay," he said.

"...All right." The three of them exchanged glances and nodded.



Several minutes later, Rio headed off to patrol and investigate the area, leaving the spirit folk girls to check for monsters and dangerous creatures in the area before heading to the spring close by.

“Phew, that’s so nice...” Sara sank into the spring water and let out a sigh with all her exhaustion escaping.

“We did run a lot.” Orphia smiled as she did the same.

“We’ve never had to run while carrying someone for so long before, so it ended up being good training,” Alma added with a relaxed smile. She was currently lying back as she looked up at the sky, her head sticking out of the water.

“I’m sorry for forcing you girls into a situation that didn’t affect you...”

Celia appeared at the spring and called out to the spirit folk girls. Sara and the others looked at Celia to spot Christina and Vanessa beside her.

“Don’t let it bother you. This is no problem at all,” Sara said.

“Yup.”

“Indeed.”

Orphia and Alma agreed.

“Did you two come to bathe too? And Vanessa...?” Sara asked Celia.

“Vanessa’s here to stand guard, just in case. She said she hasn’t done anything knight-like until now, so she’d at least like to work while you three are resting. We’ve been able to move so smoothly up until this point thanks to you. I’m unable to do anything to thank you now, which pains me greatly, but I shall definitely express my gratitude properly once we arrive in Rodania,” Christina replied, nodding softly.

“No, no, you really don’t need to worry about thanking us. We’re just doing what we want, so it’s fine,” Sara waved her hands in a fluster.

“But that wouldn’t be right...”

“Hmm... For us, this is just a show of our gratitude towards Haruto, kind of

like repaying our debts, or perhaps as an apology for the past? Haruto doesn't usually rely on us, so it's a rare chance for us to be able to do something for him. That's why... that's why...? Hmm." Sara tried to explain her feelings out loud to convince Christina, but she struggled to express herself in words.

"We're doing this as part of our repayment towards Haruto, so we're ultimately not doing this for anyone else's sake. That's why you don't need to thank us for it, you see?" Orphia interrupted, explaining what Sara was trying to say.

"Yes, exactly that!" Sara nodded firmly, pointing at Orphia.

"Is that... so..." Hearing Sara and the others say something like that so easily made Christina blink in dazed realization.

It was a different affection to familial love. A different loyalty to that one would have towards a master. Having been born and raised in a calculating and greedy royal court, Sara and the others were the type of people Christina rarely saw.

They were so pure, virtuous, and had an admirable amount of determination...

It seemed like that was the reason why Haruto Amakawa served Celia with everything he had as well.

"Princess Christina? Is something the matter?" Seeing the frozen princess made Celia cock her head in confusion.

"No, it's nothing. I just thought I saw a glimpse of how much everyone respects Sir Amakawa. He must be a wonderful person to deserve so much respect," Christina said with a smile.

"Haruto really is a wonderful person, truly." Sara's voice was warm as she spoke. A conflicted expression flashed across Christina's face. However, before anyone could notice it, she placed a hand over her chest and bowed her head in an earnest show of respect toward Sara and the others.

"...I understand. In that case, I must not do anything to dishonor everyone's virtuous sentiments. But please let me express my gratitude to you all, at least. I hope to follow your examples and be a little more virtuous myself."

“When you put it that way, it’s a little embarrassing...” Sara laughed awkwardly.

“That aside, you’re here at the spring already. How about taking a dip with us?” Orphia suggested cheerfully.

Alma nodded in agreement. “Indeed, it’s a little embarrassing to be naked in front of the two of you while you’re fully dressed.”

“I don’t mind, but... What would you like to do, Princess Christina?” Celia glanced at Christina and asked.

Christina thought for a brief moment before smiling shyly. “...I shall take you up on the offer. I was only able to wipe my body down while I was in the basement, after all.” There would rarely be a chance to bathe properly while outside, and she hadn’t had many opportunities to bathe with girls her age, so she was feeling quite bashful.

“We have soap that’s good for your skin and safe for the environment. I’ve dug us a little bathtub over there, so please wash up first.”

At Alma’s encouragement, their attention was drawn to the ground to the side.

“There’s nothing more I could ask for.”

Christina’s eyes widened before she beamed. Thus, the five of them ended up bathing together.



Elsewhere, a short time after Celia and Christina started bathing in the spring, Kouta and Rei were waiting a distance away with nothing to do.

“Oh god, there are so many drop-dead gorgeous girls bathing just over there...” Rei gazed at the trees in the direction of the spring and muttered longingly. His underclassman Kouta responded in exasperation.

“Don’t tell me you want to join them...”

“You have no sense of ambition for a man, Kouta.” Rei shook his head dramatically.

“Ambition... Don’t tell me you plan on peeking at them.”

“I want to! But, I value my life too much for that. I’ll just use my skills of imagination—any man’s thoughts would run wild with so many beautiful girls changing and bathing nearby.”

“You don’t have the skills. And stop it already, seriously. The more you talk, the harder it’ll be to face those girls later.”

“That just means you have a really powerful imagination yourself, Kouta.”

“I do not!” Kouta denied with a red face.

“What a naive kid. Your thoughts are a free space, you know? It’s freedom of speech, but in your head. As long as you don’t express it out loud, no one can control what you think. Are you giving up your right to such freedom, Kouta?”

“No, I don’t think it’s that complex of an issue...”

“Nay, it is indeed a complex issue concerning the mysteries of life. You should just use your imagination instead of letting it rot away.”

“I don’t have such a thing in the first place.”

“...How stubborn. Then, what if it was Akane that was bathing over there instead?” Rei said, bringing up the name of what sounded like a Japanese girl.

“...Guh.” Kouta flushed bright red.

“See? You DO have an imagination,” Rei said smugly.

“Ugh, shut up already. Akane doesn’t matter anymore.” Kouta pouted and turned away.

“I think you could act a little more carefree, you know.”

“...”

“Good grief.” Rei sighed quietly.

“I’m back.” Rio quietly reappeared out of nowhere.

“O-Oh, hey.”

“Welcome... back...”

Rei and Kouta were both taken aback at how suddenly he had come up to

them.

“Everyone else is at the spring, I see. Perfect. There was actually something I’d like to ask you two,” Rio said to the two of them.

“Huh? What is it?” asked Rei.

“How did the two of you learn the language of this world? You shouldn’t be able to communicate unless you’re a hero...”

“You know about that?” Kouta looked a little surprised.

“The hero summoned in the Galarc Kingdom is a friend of mine, and her friends were similarly dragged here from the other world. They were under my protection for a while, so I know how much they struggled with the language.”

“So that’s why you know we didn’t know this language before...”

“Yes. I taught them the language of this world by using an interpretation artifact, but that was a unique magic artifact that isn’t available to the general public. So I was wondering how you two learned it.”

“In our case, we had help from Rui, the only one who could understand us. The local people would speak, Rui would translate it, then we’d figure out the vocabulary and grammar from that and desperately try to memorize it.”

“I see... That must have been difficult.”

For both Rei and Kouta, who had to learn the language, and Rui, who had to help them out.

“Yeah, the only thing we did after coming to this world was study the language every day. We managed to beat it into our heads that way. Fortunately, we’re both in the foreign language club back in our original world, so learning the language itself wasn’t that difficult.”

“I think the results speak for themselves. You can hold a conversation perfectly.”

“We prioritized speaking, so we still can’t read or write, though.” Kouta shrugged.

“That aside, we had something we wanted to ask you as well, Haruto,” Rei

suddenly said.

“Yes?” Rio tilted his head at Rei.

“It’s about where you’re from, I guess. Your name sounds kind of similar to the names from the country we came from, and your facial features look kind of Asian, or maybe half-Asian. You also said you protected the friends of the hero from the Galarc Kingdom.” Rei seemed to suspect Rio had some connection to Japan, as he selected his words carefully in his question. Kouta also looked at Rio curiously.

“I’ve been asked that a lot from those of you summoned here—including Rui—but I was born and raised in Strahl. My dead parents were from a place called the Yagumo region, and it seems like that area is very similar to the place you guys came from.” Rio had an answer prepared for such a question and recited it from memory.

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard of that place mentioned in the castle before... I did think it sounded similar, too.”

“There may be a hint there about how to return to our world,” Kouta added, showing interest in the Yagumo region.

*...If they wanted to return to Earth, wouldn’t it be better to stay in the castle? Rui seemed to be searching for a way back, too,* Rio wondered, but the way the Beltrum Kingdom was now wasn’t exactly a great place to be. Coupled with his experience of being falsely accused, he didn’t have a particularly good impression of the nobles in power there. Perhaps they felt a similar fear for their safety?

However, Rui had joined the search team to retrieve these two, so it was hard to imagine Duke Arbor would have threatened two friends of Rui that he could have used to control him. Why had they left the castle?

“...Did the two of you leave the castle because you wanted to return to your world?” he tried asking.

“No. While we do want to return... That wasn’t the reason why we left the castle. Personally, I just didn’t want to stay with Rui and the others any more,” Kouta answered in a strangely inarticulate way, sneering at himself faintly.

“...What about you, Rei?”

“I’m here to accompany Kouta, I guess. Well, I also found life at the castle suffocating, and it’d be even more so if Kouta left,” Rei said with a shrug.

“Considering how Rui is pursuing you guys to bring you back, I should have known there must’ve been a reason... Forgive me for asking something so difficult. I won’t pry any further,” Rio said considerately. He realized it wasn’t something to ask so persistently of people he had just met.

“Sorry for the wait.” Sara and the others all returned at the same time.

“It felt great. Are you guys going to have your turn next?” Celia asked Rio.

“That sounds good. Shall we go, you two?” Rio said to Kouta and Rei.

“Yeah, I might as well. Rei?” Kouta looked at Rei beside him.

“The bathwater left over from beautiful girls bathing together... Of course I’ll go!” Rei’s eyes widened as he nodded enthusiastically. The girls all directed their apathetic gazes at him.

“Was that an offer to stay here and wait?” Christina asked coldly.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Haha...” Rei pasted on a fake smile to gloss over the issue.



## Interlude: Secret Talk

Earlier that morning, just as Rio and the others slowed their pace to a walk...

The current location was the eastern district of the Beltrum Kingdom. Deep in the woods where many people had gone missing recently, there stood an isolated cabin. It was by no means a fancy establishment, but it was clearly maintained regularly and showed no signs of age.

One figure floated gently down before the cabin. It was Reiss. He landed silently and immediately started walking towards the door of the cabin, then knocked on the door in a particular rhythm. Once he did, *creak*—the door opened.

“This is a surprise, Master Reiss...”

There were three men in their thirties inside, one of them having opened the door. The moment he confirmed Reiss’ face, his eyes widened as the hand he had clutched around his sword relaxed. The other two men in the room also lowered their swords and eased up a bit.

“Long time no see, Arein. Lucci and Ven, too. Have you been well?”

The three of them smiled at Reiss in a friendly manner. “Yes, we’re the same as always. We were on standby for our next mission, but we didn’t expect you’d come directly, Master Reiss. Please, come inside,” Arein answered politely.

Reiss sat down on a chair in the room and began speaking with a dramatic sigh. “Things have taken quite a troublesome development, you see. It all happened so suddenly, and I’m now in need of your strength.”

Arein, Lucci, and Ven had also seated themselves in chairs to listen to Reiss speak, but they knew that when Reiss started with this tone, things were usually as problematic as he said they were.

“...What happened?” Arein asked with a stiff look.

“Princess Christina has escaped from the castle and is heading for Rodania,”

Reiss revealed calmly.

“...Huh?” Arein and the others were all wide-eyed, but he was the first one to compose himself and scoff. “I know we’ve been running about the shadows to stir things up, but it seems like this kingdom’s approaching its limit.”

The large and muscular Lucci sneered in disgust. “Damn right. What the hell were the guys in the castle doing?”

“A kingdom is a living being that won’t perish so easily. She must have had assistance escaping from the castle—probably the work of Count Claire or the like. The princess and her group were hiding from Charles Arbor’s search parties in Cleia, but they’ve annoyingly escaped the city as of daybreak today,” Reiss said, including his own assumptions.

“Then is our mission to deal with Princess Christina?” the taciturn Ven asked Reiss.

“Yes. Since they’ve broken out of the castle despite all the risks, they must have some kind of plan in place. We had plans to remove Princess Christina eventually, so having her join up with Rodania at this time would be extremely inconvenient. The Arbor faction lost enough of its influence from the wedding incident already.” Reiss shrugged, sighing sadly.

“I see. And that’s where we come in, huh?” Lucci grinned viciously.

“Charles Arbor’s large-scale search party is currently pursuing their whereabouts, but some extremely bothersome people have joined Princess Christina’s side as guards. At this rate, they’ll slip through to Rodania without any resistance.”

“Some extremely bothersome people, you say?” Arein cocked his head.

“I don’t know the limits of their abilities yet, but let’s just say there are four enchanted sword wielders who can take on minotaurs with no problem at all,” Reiss said.

The three men stiffened. “...In that case, wouldn’t it be difficult for the four of us to face them head-on?” Ven said a little hesitantly.

“Oh? The equipment you use are on the same level as enchanted swords,

yes? You don't have any trouble facing minotaurs either, no? And our target is Princess Christina, so there's no need to defeat them all anyway." Reiss smiled daringly, as though he was challenging them.

"...Is the goal assassination, then?" Arein narrowed his eyes.

"If possible, I'd prefer you have the search party apprehend her and send her back to Beltrum, but... Depending on the situation, Princess Christina will need to be killed before she reaches Rodania."

"Can we not deal with the princess after she arrives in Rodania? That sounds much easier than having to deal with multiple formidable enemies." Lucci scratched his head.

"No, her death after joining forces with the Restoration will hold a very different meaning to her death before she has a chance to," Arein answered before Reiss could.

"Exactly. Princess Christina is an outstanding person, after all. She won't be a mere puppet of Duke Huguenot like Princess Flora—she'd be a representative of the Restoration in both name and reality, spreading her name across the neighboring kingdoms. If that were to happen, the Restoration would gain momentum and weaken the Arbor faction's power even further. Just try assassinating her in that situation. You'd be giving the Restoration the justification of revenge in their actions—there's a type of power only gained through death, you know?"

That's why Christina had to be eliminated before she became a part of the Restoration. The death of someone unaffiliated with their organization couldn't become justification for revenge, after all. On the contrary, if she was killed on the way to Rodania, the matters of responsibility would be unclear and lead to a struggle between each side.

"Ah... I see," Lucci groaned in annoyance, accepting Reiss' point.

"Duke Huguenot would probably prepare such a script with glee. Even if it did come down to assassination, she must die in a way that leaves no suspicion of such, so it won't be a simple matter."

Leaving no evidence behind was elementary when it came to a plan like this,

but it wouldn't be enough to just kill Christina if she joined forces with the Restoration. If Christina was assassinated, Duke Huguenot would be able to fabricate justification to retaliate against the Arbor faction—which was why she had to die in a way that left no suspicion. If they left any evidence to suspect assassination, the possibilities for a scenario were endless. They could even prepare a random sacrifice and claim that the assassin was affiliated with Duke Arbor.

In that respect, the most efficient method to prevent the suspicion of assassination would be to have monsters—creatures that apparently couldn't be manipulated by humans—kill the target.

"However, assassination is a last resort. One of the four is a particularly irksome person—not someone I'd like to become involved with, if possible. Unfortunately, he always seems to appear in places that hinder our plans, so it's been quite a problem... Just between us, Lucius was also nearly beaten to death by him."

"Wha... Captain was *what*!?"

When Lucius' name came up, the three men's eyes widened. They were members of the Heavenly Lions, but they didn't seem to be aware that Rio and Lucius fought in Amande.

"That's why, to put it honestly, the four of us alone may not have enough combat power to go against him. If it comes to assassination, we'll have to gather more people on our side *and* avoid a direct confrontation. Keep in mind you should only be trying to buy time."

"..."

Hearing Reiss speak this highly of someone made Arein and the others gulp, their expressions stiff.

"Well, that plan is merely a last resort. The main objective is to have Charles' search party apprehend Princess Christina. Doing so means we can count the King's Sword and the hero as fighting assets on our side, so do your best."

"The King's Sword is the one Captain fought with over the position of the strongest swordsman in the kingdom, right...?" Ven asked with wide eyes.

"Yes. The ability of both the enchanted sword and the man himself are exceptional. The hero with the divine bow also has a good arm, so our plan will have a much higher chance of success with their cooperation."

"Then will you be heading to Charles first, Master Reiss?" Arein asked.

"No, I'll approach them to see if they'll cooperate after I've pinpointed Princess Christina's location. It'd be a problem if I handed them information without the princess' location and they moved of their own accord. Charles is a self-interested man, so he'd probably accept a trade of information for his cooperation."

"Understood." Arein and the others nodded with strained expressions.

"And so, our highest priority right now is to locate the princess. Let's start by dividing routes between us. Bring me a map of this area."

"Here you go..." Ven stood up from his seat and brought over a paper map from the shelf in the room. The map was hand-drawn with all kinds of geographical details filled in—clearly different from the rough maps of main roads that were in circulation on the market.

Reiss spread out the map and hummed, staring at it closely. "Charles isn't aware that four enchanted sword wielders have taken Princess Christina's side, so his search range would focus on areas within one or two days' walk. But they can move much further by using physical body enhancements to carry people. We can leave the search near Cleia to them and spread our net further beyond that."

"In terms of points that can be reached within a three to five days walk from Cleia towards Rodania... these roads here, and these cities and post towns here seem likely." Arein moved his finger and circled corresponding points along the roads. The roads split along the way, so there were five possibilities.

"...Then you three can handle where these roads merge together—at this, this, and this post town. If all goes well, they'll be caught in our net in a few days." Reiss pointed at three cities located further down the road from where Arein pointed, roughly a week's distance on foot. Two of them were connected directly to the road to Rodania, while one was along the road to the Galarc Kingdom.

"Understood." The men stood alert and nodded.

"I'll tell you the composition of the party traveling with Princess Christina to aid your search. They're a group of nine people in their mid-teens, so they should stand out."

Thus, in a location unbeknown to both Rio and Charles, the search for Christina began.

## Chapter 2: The Road to Restoration

Rio and the others departed from the spring shortly after they finished bathing, making their way through the forest and down the road for about ten kilometers on foot.

It was afternoon—still too early for the sun to set. Normal travelers would probably push forward a little more at such a time of day, but—

“Let’s stop here for today,” Rio suggested just as a small city came into view.

“Are you sure? It’s only afternoon...” Kouta looked up at the sky and said.

“It’s too dark to see anything at night, so the law of traveling is to set up camp before the sun sets. Well, it’s still a little early even for that, but I wanted to make a shopping trip for the things everyone will need on the journey.”

“I see.”

Indeed, because they had left Cleia with minimal belongings, Christina and the others were practically empty-handed right now. They didn’t have anything necessary for traveling. They could use the plain cloaks they had worn while escaping on their journey, but the high status clothing they had on underneath was improper for travel, so they’d need a change of clothes.

“But the first thing we’ll need to secure is lodgings for today. It’d be a problem if we made our reservations late and missed out on the good inns. I’ve secured travel expenses from Count Claire already, so there’s no need for worry there, at least. Let’s enter the city now.”

Normally, the central districts of cities were protected with secure walls and strict inspections upon entrance and exit, but the outer walls of the city usually had their gates left open during the day for anyone to come in and out freely.

There were soldiers on guard at the gate, but they wouldn’t stop anyone without a reason for suspicion. However—

“Hold it.”

When they actually arrived at the gate, a middle-aged soldier out of several called for them to halt. He was probably the one in charge.

“What is it?” Rio replied on behalf of the party.

“Ah, you just seemed rather lightweight for such a large party. I wouldn’t normally stop you, but we currently have orders from above, you see. Could you remove your hood?”

It was probably part of the search for Christina. There was no way a lowly soldier would be familiar with the first princess’ face, so he was probably looking out for her hair color. Kouta and Rei’s black hair was rare, and Christina’s purple hair was also an uncommon color. It would have been a problem if they hadn’t altered their hair with magic artifacts.

“Sure, we don’t mind. Everyone, lower your hoods.” Rio nodded agreeably and called out to everyone standing behind him. Celia and the others began lowering their hoods and revealing their faces one after another.

“Hmm...” The soldiers’ gazes first went to their hair. This was probably to check the color. Once they didn’t see the colors they were looking out for, their eyes moved to their faces.

“...H-Huh, this is quite the gathering of pretty faces,” the soldier said, glancing around at the girls’ faces once more.

Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Christina, Vanessa. The women were blessed with exceedingly beautiful appearances that were uncommon.

“Yes. That’s why we’re wearing hoods to hide our faces—we don’t want to attract attention. Do we have to keep them removed inside the city?”

“No, you’re free to wear them in the city, but what kind of group are you people?” the soldier asked to investigate a little further. The surrounding soldiers gazed at them with intense curiosity.

“We’re a group on a pilgrimage through the Beltrum Kingdom, and we’re passing through this city on our way back to our home country of Galarc. The two at the front are the young ladies we serve—the rest of us are armed guards escorting them.”

Rio calmly gave a made up reason, passing off Christina and Celia off as noblewomen of the Galarc Kingdom.

In the Strahl region, it was common knowledge that the sacred lands were all concerned with the legends of the Six Wise Gods, and devout noble or royal worshipers would go on pilgrimages as holidays. Relations between the Galarc Kingdom and Beltrum Kingdom had grown strained as of late, but they weren't in a state of war, so pilgrimages weren't out of the ordinary.

Celia and Christina were actually nobility and royalty, so they gave off enough of an aura simply by standing there in silence.

"Ah... I see. Excuse me."

The middle-aged soldier suddenly took on a formal tone. Acting carelessly before another kingdom's nobility could potentially develop into an international problem, so he probably wanted to avoid getting into trouble. Let sleeping dogs lie, after all.

"Can we go through the gate now?"

"Yes, go ahead." There may have been other things he wanted to ask, but he allowed them through the gate into the city easily.

"Phew, I was so nervous. Even though we discussed what we would do in advance..." Celia muttered in relief once they'd safely passed through the gate.

"Good work," Rio said with a smile.

"Haruto's acting was truly splendid."

"It really was! It was all I could do to keep my face from freezing up."

Alma and Sara said in praise.

Orphia tilted her head in wonder. "I guess we're out of the woods for now?"

"But they were clearly looking at our hair color when we took our hoods off, right? Maybe the search party has reached this city already..." Kouta said worriedly.

Rio dispelled Kouta's worries with his conjecture. "No, there are countless

cities, post towns, and villages even in a single area, so it's impossible to allocate enough personnel without narrowing the search range. The conventional practice is to set a mark on the most likely location and prioritize placing personnel there. We're in a location that would normally take three days to reach from Cleia, so the search party has yet to prioritize searching here after only a single day."

"They've probably sent a wanted notice to every city along the road from Cleia to Rodania, searching for people that match our features. The questions we received from the soldiers just now was probably that," Vanessa added.

Rei grimaced. "A wanted notice, huh. Hmm, it's kinda like we've become criminals."

"Well, that probably isn't completely incorrect. Some of us would be treated as criminals if we were caught."

"Some of us" probably referred to the difference in positions amongst them resulting in different treatment. As Rui's friends, Kouta and Rei would most likely be let off without punishment even if they were caught, but there was no telling how the others would be treated.

"We haven't even done anything wrong..." Kouta mumbled bitterly.

"Unfortunately, what's 'right and wrong' is decided by those with power," Rio said in warning.

"Could they make someone clearly innocent into a criminal?" Kouta asked with a pout.

"They could, if they had enough power to see through the false accusation. It'd be another matter if there was a system to stop the abuse of power, but there's no guarantee that system would function well."

"...How unpleasant." Kouta muttered bitterly.

Meanwhile, Christina listened to the two of them talk with quite a conflicted expression. "We're fleeing to Rodania in order to prevent that. So that the rightful successor can be transferred the power to lay out a good government."

Rio's gaze fell on Christina as he spoke, making her clench her fists. She barely

managed to maintain her expression as she took in his gaze. Rio soon averted his eyes and cut the conversation short.

“We’ll only feel upset if we discuss this any further, so let’s go search for an inn now.”



Several minutes later, Rio and the others had arrived at the shopping district of the city. The small city only had a population of around a thousand people, so it wasn’t that large of a district. There weren’t that many inn options, either, so they picked an old wooden building with three floors to stay at.

Over half their party had never stayed in an inn before, so they followed Rio’s lead with rather awkward footsteps.

“Oh my, a whole group has come.”

As they entered the inn, a middle-aged man who appeared to be the innkeeper stood up from his seat at the counter and rubbed his hands together with a businessman’s smile.

“Do you have any free rooms? There’s nine of us that would like to stay,” Rio asked.

“We do. While we don’t have a room for nine people, we have a room for six and three rooms for three available. Feel free to pick your preference,” the innkeeper answered, then looked at the eight people standing behind Rio. He was probably checking for anyone strange among them, but didn’t seem to see anything suspicious as his gaze soon returned to Rio, who he thought to be their representative.

For the record, Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Christina still had their hoods on, but Rio, Kouta, Rei, and Vanessa had theirs removed. They feared that everyone wearing a hood would make them seem like a suspicious group.

“Then we’ll take the six person room and a three person room.”

“All right. Your total comes to three small silvers. If you’d like dinner, it’ll be two large bronze per person...”

“No, we don’t need a meal. Could we rent the kitchen instead?”

“Of course. It’s three large bronze for an hour and a half rental. We also sell ingredients.”

“Then we’d like to rent the kitchen. You can show me the ingredients list later.”

“Got it.”

“I’ll hand you enough money to cover everything including the kitchen rental. If it isn’t enough, we’ll pay the rest at check out. If it is enough, you can keep the rest as a tip.” Rio took out the wallet from his breast pocket and laid four small silvers on the counter.

The innkeeper agreed happily. Tips weren’t a necessity, but customers that left tips were often treated better. “Understood. These are the keys to your rooms. The two rooms are located at the far right of the third floor.”

“Got it. Thanks.” Rio accepted the two keys and turned around. “We’ve got our rooms—let’s go. It’s on the third floor.”

He encouraged Celia and the others behind him to move. Thus, the nine of them crowded the staircase and made their way up to the room allocated to them.

Rio ascended the stairs and first unlocked the room at the far right. “This is the six person room. Please use this room, ladies.”

There were six single beds and one table before them, a scene showing how cramped the inn’s minimal furnishings were arranged. The room was a little dusty and smelled of mold.

“...”

With the situation being what it was, they weren’t in a position to complain—the girls definitely didn’t look displeased, but they did look around in curious shock at the scene.

Vanessa probably had opportunities to experience this as a knight, but the other five were sheltered ladies with pampered backgrounds. Considering their regular standards of living, it wasn’t surprising that they found it curious.

“Well, short of high-class inns, most places are like this. I doubt anything will

happen, but I figured it would be better to have you all in the same room in case something does. Forgive me.”

There were no high-class inns in small regional cities like this.

The first to open her mouth was Alma. “It has a certain kind of flavor, so I’m fine with it.”

“The beds are crowded together, so it might be easier for us to talk face-to-face at night,” Orphia said with a giggle.

“This isn’t a sleepover,” Sara said, her mouth turned upwards in a smile.

Celia agreed pleasantly. “We can’t stay up too late, but a little should be fine.”

“I’ve never slept in the same room as other girls my age, so I’m a little curious about what a sleepover is like.” Christina was on board with the direction of the conversation, expressing her curiosity.

“For now, I’ll give the key to Vanessa. Stay inside the inn as much as possible. It’d be a problem if people tried to mess with you.”

“Right, got it.” Vanessa accepted the key from Rio.

“Also, I’m going to go on a shopping run in about ten minutes or so. Could you think of the things you need and list them for me? It’d be great if L-Lady Celia and Sara’s group could help with the shopping. I’d like to check that the area around the inn and inside the city is free from the eyes of the search party.”

After having said that, Rio looked at Celia and Sara. He’d been calling Celia with a “Lady” title since Cleia because of Christina and the others, but he still stuttered a little as he wasn’t used to it.

“Sure, leave it to us.” Sara and the other girls nodded.

“We’ll head to our room for now, then. Let’s go.” Rio turned around and called Kouta and Rei along as he left the room.



A few minutes later, Rio went outside with Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. The girls all had their hoods on while Rio had removed his.

First, they walked around to the front of the inn. There wasn’t much

pedestrian traffic, and while there were some people who looked at them questioningly, none of them were hiding their presence in a sly manner. They didn't seem suspicious, at the very least.

"Just to be safe, I'd like to ask you all to send your contract spirits to investigate the area and keep watch..." Rio said to Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

"Mine's actually out investigating the city in spirit form already."

"Ariel is in material form and scouting the area from the sky."

"Ifrita is guarding the inn in spirit form."

The three of them spoke with pride in their voices. They had already taken the initiative and sent their contract spirits out.

"I should have known. Thank you," Rio said with a soft smile.

"No problem at all," Sara shook her head happily. They all seemed to be in high spirits.

"But this means there was no need for everyone to come outside... I was thinking of just having Cecilia accompany me for the shopping."

They were in the city, so Rio called Celia by her alias. As targets of the search, Christina and the others couldn't use their real names, so they had decided on the aliases of "Tina" for Christina, "Nessa" for Vanessa, and "Kou" for Kouta. Rei was the exception, as his name was fairly common in the Strahl region, so he didn't need an alias. Though for some reason, Rei seemed a bit disappointed when he first heard that...

"Huh? Me?" Celia blinked in surprise at being nominated to go shopping.

"Yes. I figured you'd be the most familiar with what to buy out of everyone here."

Rio gave a very valid reason. As a noble daughter, Celia should be able to buy the items Christina needed without issue.

"In that case, I'll be happy to go along... Uh." Celia had been speaking bashfully when she realized Sara and the others were staring at her closely. She flinched and stiffened up—

“Oh! Since we’re outside already, I want to go too!” Orphia requested cheerfully, raising her hand.

Without a moment’s delay, Alma calmly agreed. “I’d like to go too.”

“Me too...” Sara offered hesitantly.

“Shall we all go together, then?”

“Yes!”

Everyone answered energetically to Rio’s confirmation.

“Hmph...” Celia pouted cutely. She knew that she would have done the same if she were in their position, so she didn’t say anything further.

“In this case, I should discuss a few other matters with you all as well. Let’s do that while we make our way to the market,” Rio said, suddenly remembering something.

“What do you want to discuss?” Celia pulled herself together and followed Rio.

“It’s about the man named Reiss.”

“Ah...” The other girls’ expressions fell.

“He’s shrouded in mystery, but I believe that man is a skilled user of spirit arts. That, or he possesses an ancient artifact that allows him to activate powerful sorcery without chanting,” Rio said.

“His presence was terribly faint... No, it was nonexistent. I couldn’t detect him at all until the moment he fired that attack from within the woods. Even when he stood right in front of me, his presence was barely detectable,” Sara said with a stern expression.

“He even had the nerve to say he was assisting us,” Alma added.

“If the attack from the forest was Reiss’ doing, then his target is most likely Her Highness. It’s possible he could just be trying to make us think that way, but at any rate, we need to be prepared for another surprise attack. I don’t think he’d be able to track us down so easily, but just to be safe, I’d like you all to have your contract spirits on guard during our journey.”

There was a limit to how far they could search, but they'd be able to spot any unguarded attempts at approaching them immediately.

"Yes, leave it to us," Sara nodded.

"But if he really is a user of spirit arts, we should consider the possibility there may be others who can use spirit arts on his side too. We may be forced into a difficult fight depending on the enemy's numbers and abilities," Alma said, pursing her lips and humming in thought.

"At the very least, there shouldn't be any spirit art users in Beltrum and Galarc..." Rio looked at Celia for confirmation.

"That's right, as far as I am aware. Other than Haruto."

"It's eerie, isn't it?" Sara asked with a stern face.

"Yeah, eerie..." Even the normally-cheerful Orphia had a serious expression. She recalled how Reiss had called Rio by his name as he departed. "Speaking of which, how did that man know about your real name?"

"Probably because he heard it from Lucius, the captain of the Heavenly Lions. That man has a bit of a history with me," Rio said.

"A history..." the spirit folk girls muttered, exchanging glances. Celia had heard about that story last time after Rio retrieved Flora from her abduction, so she frowned with a conflicted face.

Despite looking uncomfortable, Rio told Sara and the others about the connection he had with Lucius. He couldn't keep it to himself any longer. "I haven't told you about him yet. Lucius is the man who killed my mother."

"...No way..." the girls muttered, at a loss for words.

"Well, that doesn't matter right now. I have other problems to deal with at the moment." Rio gave a pained sigh.

Celia took a guess at what that problem was. "...You mean how Princess Christina heard you being called by your name, right?"

"Indeed." Rio nodded his head slowly.

"...What do you mean?" Sara asked in confusion.

“Do you remember how I told you I was falsely accused of a crime before I met all of you?”

“Yes.”

“The uproar that caused the false accusation was made in a location where Princess Christina was present. We are former classmates,” Rio explained.

“Huh? Isn’t that a fairly bad thing, then...?”

The spirit folk girls’ faces paled in panic.

“...Perhaps.” In contrast, Rio’s voice was extremely composed.

“How can you be so calm about it?” Celia sighed in exasperation.

“Whether Princess Christina has figured out my identity or not, I cannot show any signs that will further her suspicions. She doesn’t have any proof we’re the same person, so unless the necessity arises, I can just feign ignorance to it all.”

This time, Celia sighed tiredly. “That sounds nerve wracking.”

“Ahaha...” The spirit folk girls agreed with their dry laughter.

“It looks like we’ve arrived in the shopping district. We still need to prepare food, so let’s hurry and return.”

Rio headed for the shops without any sign of concern.



Meanwhile...

“...”

Christina was seated elegantly on her bed, silently staring out the window. The profile of her expression was fleeting, as though she was pondering a question with no possible answer.

She had been in this state ever since Rio and the others left the inn. Vanessa was seated on the bed beside hers, remaining silent out of consideration.

“Princess Christina,” she suddenly said.

“...What?” Christina asked with a glance.

“Sir Amakawa aside, what do you think of Sara and the other girls? He

claimed they were from a minority group of people..."

"I wouldn't know anything about it."

"Don't you feel curious at all?"

"What good would come out of being curious?"

"Four enchanted sword wielders, including Sir Amakawa. I'm sure you understand how much combat strength this amounts to."

Normally, a knight that had undergone training to increase their physical abilities through magic or sorcery could overwhelm dozens of ordinary foot soldiers. Experienced enchanted sword wielders were able to overwhelm dozens of those knights. Their strength wasn't easy to measure, but it was estimated that a single one could take on a battalion of foot soldiers (in the numbers of several hundred to a thousand).

In other words, their abilities were truly like a one-man army. With the scarcity of enchanted swords and an even fewer number of people capable of using them effectively, enchanted sword wielders were treasured existences.

And they had four of them on their side, including Haruto. If a value had to be applied to their combat power, then they would easily surpass an entire brigade, or several thousand people.

Vanessa spoke of the scale of their combat power passionately, but in contrast—

"Sure," Christina replied indifferently.

"Then, if I may be so presumptuous to say, I believe we should attempt to seek their further cooperation after Your Highness has been safely escorted to the Restoration. We could take the chance now to see if we can form a favorable relationship with the girls and their village," Vanessa stated.

"Those girls are merely cooperating as Sir Amakawa's friends, as well as for the sake of Professor Celia, who they became acquainted with through Sir Amakawa. They have no reason to support the Restoration."

In other words, Sara and the girls had acted out of obligation towards Haruto, and Haruto was acting out of his obligation towards Celia.

“In that case, we could figure out a way to give them a reason.”

“...Perhaps. I’ll consider it.”

It was a flat response that showed her lack of interest in the situation, which was probably why Vanessa came up with her own suggestion.

“For example, we could ask Celia to act as our point of contact for negotiations. There must be some way.”

“If we did such a thing, we’d cause discord between Professor Celia and Sir Amakawa... No, between Sir Amakawa and ourselves.”

Sensing from Christina’s tone that she didn’t even have the intention of extending a casual invitation, Vanessa frowned. “Of course, that is one possible result if we go too far. But not even making an attempt just seems like...”

“Seems like...?”

“...No, it’s nothing.” Vanessa looked like she wanted to say something, but shook her head.

“I won’t mind. Just say it,” Christina sighed.

“...It almost seems like you’re showing reserve when it comes to Sir Amakawa?” Vanessa said hesitantly, choosing her words with care.

“Of course I would show reserve. Sir Amakawa is an honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom. We’ve only just become acquainted.” Christina’s eyes had widened faintly for a moment, but her answer was logically formed.

“I have taken that into consideration already.”

She was showing *too much* reserve. That was what Vanessa’s gaze was implying.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because that man, Reiss, has referred to Sir Amakawa as Rio, perhaps?”

“...” Christina said nothing.

“Roughly nine years ago, when Princess Flora was abducted, we encountered an orphan in the slums of the capital. I recall that that orphan’s name was Rio. Though I had no further connection with him after that incident, he would have

been your classmate at the academy.”

“...There may have been someone like that. I’m surprised you remember, actually.” Christina was impressed even as she sighed.

“He was an impressive boy.”

The sharp look he had given them in the slums, his gruesome figure after being tortured under the name of questioning by Charles Arbor at the castle, and the words he had directed at Vanessa—all of it had left an impression. He had also caused a stir when he thoroughly defeated Charles at the tournament against the knights, as well as during the uproar at the outdoor drill where Flora had her accident.

“But there’s no telling if Sir Amakawa is the same Rio as the one we knew. There’s not enough information to determine if they are the same person. And there’s no way of proving it.”

“Really? If he is the same orphan as that time, then his favorable relationship with Celia can be explained through their academy connection. If he kept in contact with her after his disappearance during the outdoor drill, then...”

“That’s pure conjecture,” Christina rejected curtly.

“It’s based around the facts.”

In other words, the fact that Reiss had called him Rio, and that he currently had a close relationship with Celia, was far beyond just coincidence. When they were added to the fact that the boy named Rio was acquainted with Celia in the past...



“Even then, that doesn’t make it evidence.”

Someone who had disappeared for years during their growth period was now disguised as someone else. Indeed, that was impossible to prove—unless they acknowledged the fact themselves, revealing memories only that person would know, or had features unique to that person alone.

“What if we checked his hair color, then? According to my memory, the boy from back then once had black hair. His facial features were also uniquely exotic. I consider Sir Amakawa’s features to be fairly exotic, so would it be enough evidence if his hair was black too?”

“Sir Amakawa’s hair is gray.”

“Hair color can be altered by magic artifacts—the very artifacts we’re currently borrowing. What if he is using the same artifact as us?”

“It could just be a coincidence,” Christina stated without batting an eye.

“...I am convinced that you’re showing too much reservation towards Sir Amakawa after all, Your Highness.” Vanessa had a sullen look on her face.

“That’s ridiculous. Why would I feel reserved?”

“Why didn’t you ask Sir Amakawa about it, then? The fact that Reiss called him Rio. You had plenty of chances to ask him on the way here. He could be the same Rio that you once knew. Didn’t that thought cross your mind?”

“Even if he were the same person, he’s currently here as Haruto Amakawa. Do you think he would just admit to it? He was looked down upon by all the students at the academy and was completely isolated. I ignored his situation as well. On top of that, a false accusation was placed on him because of some internal power struggles, and a wanted notice was sent throughout the kingdom. It would only be natural for him to hate us—for him to resent us.”

“So that incident was a false accusation after all?”

“...I wasn’t there to see it in person, so I don’t know. But having him be the criminal was certainly more convenient. The assumption was certainly treated as fact. In all probability, it was a false accusation.”

“...” Vanessa fell silent, her expression falling.

“Do you understand now? Even if he felt indebted to Professor Celia—the only person he had any connection to at the academy—he has no reason to assist the Beltrum Kingdom. I wouldn’t be surprised if he held a grudge. He has far more reason not to cooperate.”

“...That statement makes it sound like you believe Sir Amakawa and Rio are indeed the same person. Am I correct?”

“I believe the possibility is high. That’s why I don’t think we should touch upon his past. If we bring up the past now, we would risk severing our current relationship with him. That’s why this isn’t reservation, but self-interest.”

“Is there any chance you’ll bring up Sir Amakawa’s past later, then?”

“No. Even if it was practically certain that Sir Amakawa is the same person that we knew, I wouldn’t mind keeping the truth in the dark. If he doesn’t intend on disclosing it, I won’t step over the line, either.”

“...Is that out of self-interest too?” Vanessa asked bitterly at Christina’s clear statement.

“Yes. I don’t want to ruin a relationship with someone as skilled as him. That’s why this conversation stays here between us. You’re forbidden from bringing it up hereafter. Understood?” Christina gave an unreadable smile and stressed her words.

*After being used as a convenient scapegoat for politics, the person who should have been discarded is now being used to conveniently escape another predicament. Even I know this behavior is despicable.*

Christina bit down on her lip. What a foolish, pathetic situation she was in.

The boy who was an outcast at the royal academy was now a greater asset than any other student from that school, saving her from the dilemma she brought upon herself.

The person who had a false accusation placed on him was now a masterful wielder of an enchanted sword, appointed honorary knight of a neighboring kingdom, and gathering attention from the noble classes.

No, it was evident back then that Rio was talented. His grades at the

academy, skills at swordcraft—all of it had been made light of by the Beltrum nobles that believed superiority was their right. Thus, this situation was the greatest display of her and the Beltrum Kingdom's failure to judge people.

That was why she couldn't rely on Haruto's power any further after reaching Rodania. Each time she'd see Haruto's face, the wrongdoings of the past would stab her in the depths of her heart. That was the least she could do to atone—to reap what she had sown.

But, despite that...

"...I understand. But allow me to say this," Vanessa requested after a long pause.

"What is it?"

"In my own humble opinion, Your Highness will still require Sir Amakawa and the other girls' abilities in the future. I understand there is no need to dig up his past, but in this case, I recommend you make a move to obtain his power as he is now."

"Doing so would require winning over his trust first." Their current trust levels weren't even nonexistent—they were in the negative. What the Beltrum Kingdom did to Rio wouldn't just disappear. Christina's elegant features twisted faintly.

"I am aware that it won't be easy. However, we don't have the time to be worried about appearances when we consider your future."

Christina nodded. "...Right. I'll consider it. Make sure you don't get any strange ideas and act on your own," she stated in a flat tone. Once again, it seemed like she wasn't too enthusiastic about doing anything about it.

"...As you wish," Vanessa bowed her head deeply. She wondered if perhaps Princess Christina felt indebted to Rio.

*Indeed, it isn't coming from a place of reservation at all.*

However, it wasn't self-interest either, she thought.

At the very least, the reason Christina didn't want to bring up Haruto Amakawa's past wasn't out of as much self-interest as she insisted. If it were

only that she could have just done as Vanessa suggested and assertively asked for Haruto's assistance without touching upon Rio's past. For Christina to be so passive about gaining Haruto's assistance in spite of that meant that she felt indebted to Rio on a personal level. She had done an about-face the moment she learned of the possibility that Haruto was the same person as Rio, completely avoiding the use of his strength.

But Christina needed to understand that as a royal, she had to form a connection with Haruto here. That's why they were at a stalemate.

*If only there was something I could do...*

Vanessa thought about her past and recalled the words she once exchanged with Rio. However, the only times they had conversed was when they first met in the slums, when she was taking him to the castle, and after he had been tortured by Charles.

*Don't... touch me.*

Those were the last words Rio had directed at her. In the underground dungeon where he had been tortured, he pushed away the hand she had extended to him before passing out. That had left an impression, too.

*...Indeed, he probably hates me too.*

With that thought, Vanessa's mouth twisted in self-torment.



An hour later, Rio and the shopping team returned to the inn. It was still too early for dinner, but they hadn't had anything other than water since departing from Cleia first thing in the morning, so they immediately began cooking.

The main cooks were Rio and Orphia. Celia, Sara, and Alma were assistants, and the five of them hustled away in the kitchen. Over an hour later, the food was ready, and they brought the dishes up to the guest room for six people.

There were too many dishes to fit on the table in the room, so they brought the table from the three-person room over. It was a little crowded, but they were able to set all the dishes down. Everyone sat around the tables on the chairs and beds.

“This looks like a really professional meal...”

Christina looked at the dishes on the table with wide eyes.

Beef stew was the main course, and the other dishes included a hard bread, a potato and bacon omelette, a steamed vegetable salad that was soft in texture, and a few other items. It all smelled mouth-wateringly good. The bread was something they’d purchased, but everything else was prepared by themselves.

“Everyone worked together to make it. I’m not sure if it’ll suit Your Highness’ tastes, but please enjoy,” Rio said on behalf of the others.

*Grumble.* The sound of a rumbling stomach echoed through the room. There were too many people present to discern the origin of the noise, but Rio noticed how Christina’s expression stiffened faintly.

“We’re all hungry, it seems. Let’s eat up while it’s still warm.”

Rio pressed a hand against his stomach and took the initiative to seat himself in a nearby chair. In reality, his exhausted body was keenly hungry. Christina blinked at him.

“Yes, let’s eat.” Sara nodded cheerfully, eager to eat as well. She sat down in the chair beside Rio. Everyone else took that as a sign to sit down as well.

“Thank you for the meal,” Kouta and Rei placed their hands together and bowed.

“Thank you for the meal,” Rio and the others also said with familiarity.

“Everyone’s doing the same greeting before you eat... Even Professor Celia,” Christina commented with interest.

“I was taught by someone from the same world as Kouta and Rei,” Celia said with a smile.

“Was that the person who was with Sir Amakawa at the banquet...?” This time Christina looked at Rio.

“Yes, it was Miharu.”

“I see. Then I shall do the same. Thank you for the meal.” Christina smiled faintly and copied the others. Vanessa followed her lead, then everyone finally

began to eat.

“Wow, the stew is really delicious.”

“Ooh, you’re right. Isn’t this better than the stuff we were served at the castle?” Kouta and Rei’s eyes widened after tasting the food.

“Rio and Orphia put extra effort into it,” Sara said.

“If you dip the bread into it, the flavor gets soaked up and the bread gets soft,” Alma added in explanation.

Kouta immediately tore off a piece of bread and placed it on his spoon to dip into the stew. The tough bread fully soaked up the stew before he snapped it all into his mouth.

“Hmm... Oh, you’re right. It’s really good this way! Yum!” It was so delicious that it was almost painful.

“Eating such good food so suddenly is going to put my body into shock.” Rei also munched away on the stew-soaked bread with a grin.

“This egg dish is also magnificent. Rich in flavor, and the egg is so soft...” Christina couldn’t help but smile after trying the omelette, so she waited until her face muscles relaxed before giving her thoughts.

“I made that with Celia,” Orphia said cheerfully.

“You’re very good at cooking, Professor Celia.” Christina looked at her in awe.

“Haruto started teaching me how to cook after I snuck away from the wedding. I can’t make anything complicated by myself yet, but I have some confidence in egg dishes,” Celia said a little bashfully.

“It’s splendid. Every dish is on par with what the chefs of the castle would serve. This one—is it a salad? Cooking a salad with heat before dressing it in regular salad fashion is extremely novel to me. The crispy texture is gone, but the flavor has soaked into the leaves,” Vanessa smacked her lips and declared strongly.

“It’s called a warm salad. The softer texture makes it easier for digestion. It’s been steamed on a low heat for a long time,” Rio explained.

“First the stew, then the egg dish... Where did you learn such recipes?” Christina asked. “How should I put this... It’s like this seasoning is familiar, yet completely new.”

“I’ve always enjoyed cooking, and I learned a lot in my travels. Recently, I’ve learned a lot of recipes from Miharu. It seems like the world where Kouta and Rei are from is more advanced in food culture,” Rio said, looking at Kouta and Rei.

“Are you two knowledgeable about food as well, then?” Christina looked at them in admiration.

“Haha. If I was, I would have done something about it long ago in the castle. Same with the preserved foods that we had to eat while in that basement...”

“I don’t want to sound boastful, but my specialty is in eating.”

Neither Kouta nor Rei seemed interested in cooking.

“Now I know why these dishes taste so familiar to me. So you know a Japanese person who specializes in cooking, huh?” Kouta nodded in understanding.

“I’m envious...” Longing filled Rei’s voice.

“There were two girls who were summoned along with you, no? Do they lack cooking experience as well?” Vanessa asked Kouta and Rei.

“Ah... Yeah. I’ve eaten food that Akane—one of the girls—has made before... Haha.” Kouta laughed dryly.

“Well, kids our age normally have their parents make all their food for them. There are more of us who can’t cook than those who can, unless cooking is your hobby or something,” Rei said, staring at the stew.

“At any rate, we’re very grateful to be able to eat such delicious food. It has melted away our exhaustion from today. Right, Princess Christina?” Vanessa looked at Christina in content.

Christina nodded with a smile. “Indeed. All we could eat in the basement was reheated preserved foods. It’s nice to have a proper meal for once.”

Thus, they spent their evening peacefully, retired for the night at an early

hour in preparation for the next day, then left first thing in the morning to head east.



The day after they departed from Cleia, Rio and the rest of the party left the inn and put the city behind them as they headed down the eastern road. After walking for several hours, they were two small cities away when Rio spoke up.

"We'll be passing the town at the domain boundaries, but they may be doing thorough inspections right now, so we'll go via the forest rather than the road."

"Understood." Vanessa gave a military-like response first, the others nodding after her.

"We went through the forest yesterday by carrying those of you who couldn't run. The forest floor will slow us down and we'll be at risk of encountering monsters, so please follow my instructions. We'll move in a formation with the four of us that can fight in close combat—Sara, Alma, Vanessa, and myself—surrounding the others. I'll step away to handle any monsters or wild beasts that approach, so keep an ear out for Vanessa's orders. Orphia will cover the hole I leave in the formation and watch out for the front," Rio explained.

"Yeah, leave it to me."

"Got it."

Vanessa and Orphia replied in succession. After that, they confirmed no one else was on the road near them before finally moving into the forest. Since talking could attract monsters and beasts, a complete silence had continued between them until they discovered a small stream and decided to take a break roughly an hour later.

"Phew, I'm tired... It's completely different from walking on a road." Rei sighed as he sat down on a nearby boulder. He and Kouta had offered to carry more of their belongings so that Rio would be unhindered if any combat was initiated. That was probably the cause of his exhaustion—his backpack was filled with preserved foods.

"Yeah. It's only midday, yet it's dark and chilly. It feels kind of creepy," Kouta replied, looking around.

He didn't have the time to think of such things as he was being carried yesterday, because Rio had run too fast. The spring they stopped at right before they left the forest was in an open space as well, so it was much brighter. They had also left the forest several minutes after departing from the spring, so he was now seeing the forest in a different light.

"There's no path, so it's hard to walk and easy to get lost. There's also the risk of being attacked, as Sir Amakawa said. Those who choose to leave the road to walk through such a forest must be creepy—the only ones who would enter are those who want to avoid attention, like us," Vanessa said with a smile, having listened in on Kouta and Rei's conversation.

"Hmm... But wouldn't that make it easy for an enemy nation to sneak their army in through the forest? As long as they do something about the dangers of the forest," Rei wondered.

"That would be impossible for larger armies with inexperienced soldiers. They'd suffer greater damages from monsters and beasts than on the road, and they wouldn't be able to carry supplies via carriage without a path. I suppose a smaller-sized elite squad could pull it off, but they'd be entering an enemy kingdom with little information about the land, so charging straight into the forest would be very risky," Vanessa answered smoothly. As a knight, she had probably received plenty of command training.

"Huh, I thought most ambush attacks were done by sneaking through the forest, but I guess things don't always go as well as in fictional stories."

"No, your perspective wasn't bad. In a real battlefield against an enemy army, taking a forest detour to launch an ambush is the oldest trick in the book. As long as you have prepared thoroughly enough to make it through the forest, it's an extremely effective form of ambush. The line between a good plan and a foolish one is just extremely narrow."

"I see, I've learned something today," Rei hummed in understanding.

*Come to think of it, we left the road and entered the forest during the outdoor drill at the academy, too.*

Rio recalled his past after listening to their conversation. During that incident, a minotaur appeared and a false accusation was placed on him, which became

the reason for him fleeing Beltrum. It had been Duke Huguenot's son, Stewart, who put the idea of leaving the road for the forest into the commander's—Alphonse's—head.

As a result, they had gotten completely lost and were attacked by monsters, eventually falling into an uncontrollable panic that resulted in Flora being pushed off a cliff.

*That was an almost perfect example of a foolish plan.*

There was nothing that could be done about the past now, but Rio chuckled at the memory of it.

“...Hmm?” Sensing someone looking at him, he looked around. The end of his gaze landed on Christina, who had her water flask in hand as she was seated on a small boulder. When her eyes met Rio’s, she immediately looked away.

“...I’m going to climb a tree and confirm our current position and direction. Depending on how far we are from the edge of the forest, we may end up having lunch here.”

Rio looked upwards in thought for a brief moment before leaving behind those words to lightly leap up a tree.



After Rio climbed the tree and confirmed that it wasn’t far to the edge of the forest even if they went around the checkpoint town, they decided to have lunch while they had the chance.

The typical nourishment one had while traveling was a packed meal—in other words, preserved foods. In exchange for being able to be stored for several weeks or months, the food tended to be salty or dried out—it never tasted that great.

“It won’t taste very good like this, so let’s make some simple adjustments,” Rio suggested.

“That sounds good. What shall we make?” Orphia, who enjoyed cooking, asked Rio.

“We’ll be moving after this, so something easy to digest. We bought barley

yesterday, so let's make that."

"Barley... Ah, you mean *that*." Orphia blinked before the meaning of Rio's words clicked.

"What are you making?"

"I'll help."

Celia, Sara, and Alma came over.

"We can only help with manual labor, but if there's anything we can do, just say the word."

Kouta and Rei, who had been sitting on some boulders, looked at each other and stood up. Christina and Vanessa also approached.

"The preparations aren't complicated, so everyone else may rest. Kouta and Rei must be tired from carrying the extra supplies. Orphia and Lady Celia's help will be enough," Rio said.

"R-Right. Sure thing. What do I have to do?"

Celia still wasn't used to being addressed as "Lady" and responded somewhat uneasily.

"I'd like you to use your magic to provide a little water and tamper with the ground."

Rio also couldn't use spirit arts in front of Christina, so he had to rely on Celia's magic.

"Oh, I see. Sure, leave it to me." Celia nodded a little proudly. She was normally surrounded by superior spirit arts users that didn't require her help as a sorcerer, so she was happy to be able to contribute for once.

"Now, Lady Celia, could you please make a working surface for food preparation?"

First was a space for cooking. They could cook without one, but having one made things much more efficient.

"Sure, one moment. Umm, *Terra Murum*."

Celia touched the ground nearby and chanted a spell. A magic circle appeared

on the ground before her and a rectangular block of dirt rose upwards to make a nice and flat block for a work surface.

“...Amazing. Even the blocks you make are perfect,” Christina said in awe from where she watched to the side.

While there wasn’t as much freedom as with spirit arts, those who could use *Terra Murum* could control their magic essence in order to adjust the size, shape, strength, and durability of the object they created. However, making something similar to what Celia had just made was harder than it looked. In fact, because the magic was typically used for battle, most wouldn’t assume it could be used in such a way.

Magic and sorcery was largely limited by the phenomenon of activating the spell formula, but manipulating spells freely within that limit was possible for Celia because of her incredible magic essence control.

“Thank you. I am Princess Christina’s former teacher, so I must show my strengths every now and then.” Celia grinned shyly. Christina seemed interested in their work, as she remained standing beside them to watch.

In that time, Rio went over to the backpack that had been set on the ground and retrieved a pot that had been tied to it with a rope. “Now then, Lady Celia. Could you fill this pot with water next?” He brought the pot over to the side of the stream where the work counter was set up.

One would assume water could be filled from the stream, but even though it looked clear, at a glance it could have animal excrement, algae, and other unknown substances mixed in, so it was too risky to drink. This was why sterilization by boiling water was standard in order to avoid water-borne diseases, but water made by magic was guaranteed to be safe, so it was a much better idea to ask a sorcerer companion to create water.

“Sure, I can do that, but... Could you—umm, could you stop calling me Lady? It feels really embarrassing. I’m not used to being called that, so every time I hear it I get chills.” Celia had a faint pout on her lips, looking unhappy.

“What would you like me to call you, then?” Rio asked with a troubled look, aware of Christina’s presence.

“What...” Celia trailed off, speechless.

Rio normally addressed Celia with the title of Professor, but he couldn’t call her that in front of Christina and the others.

“Y-You can call me by just my name. Like you usually do.” Celia turned red as she spoke in a high-pitched voice. Since she couldn’t be called Professor, she had no other option than being addressed without a title.

Until now, Rio had spoken to her without a title when he used her alias “Cecilia” in Amande and such, so there shouldn’t have been a problem in having him call her “Celia” without a title as well.

There shouldn’t have been a problem... But for some reason, she felt extremely embarrassed. The embarrassment grew stronger and stronger within her by the moment.

“Like... I usually do? But...”

Rio glanced at Christina and hesitated. He could understand choosing to go without a title by the process of elimination, but his serious personality made him consider the fact that it wasn’t a good look for him to be addressing a noble of another kingdom without a title.

“Umm. There’s no need to act all formally just because I’m here. You may act as you normally do,” Christina said, guessing at Rio’s thoughts.

“I understand. Then, Celia. If you could please prepare the water,” Rio nodded with a small, resigned sigh.

“Uh. Y-Yeah. Got it.”

Feeling embarrassed at actually being called without a title, Celia’s cheeks turned red as she nodded. However, her mouth was turned upwards in a happy smile.

“...Hmph.” The spirit folk girls were silent, but clearly objecting with their gazes. Christina and the others watched them with curious looks.

“H-Here’s the water, then. *Creo Aqua.*” Celia placed her hand over the pot and chanted the spell. This was a simple magic used in daily life that could create water. A small magic circle immediately appeared over Celia’s hand and

water began pouring out of her palm like a tap had been turned on.

“Please keep that up for a moment.” Rio washed the pot briefly with the water before filling it up. Enough water came out to fill it up in ten seconds.

“Thank you very much. Orphia and I can handle the rest, so could you make a dining table and chairs for everyone to sit on? You may rest after doing that.”

“Yup, got it!” Celia nodded cheerfully and ran off.

Rio watched her go with a smile before addressing Orphia. “Shall we begin, then?”

“Yep! You know, you could speak to me more casually too, Haruto,” Orphia said with a mischievous grin.

Rio’s eyes widened faintly before he chuckled. “...I’d consider it if you spoke to me as casually as Celia does.”

“Ah... That might be a little too embarrassing.”



Orphia imagined herself speaking so casually to Rio and laughed shyly.

“Let’s get cooking.”

“Right.” Orphia nodded earnestly.

Then, Rio went back to the backpack and took out two thin metal sheets. Each sheet had a spell formula design on its surface. He placed them on the work table Celia had made and put the pot on top of one of them.

After placing several enchanted gems around the sheet, the spell formula absorbed the essence from the gems and started to release light and heat. This metal sheet was a magic artifact that could be used to control heat in place of a stove. Once a frying pan and some ingredients were also removed from the backpack, they were ready to start their food preparation.

First, vegetable oil and spices were added into the pan with some vegetables and mushrooms they harvested while they walked. Once the mushrooms were soft, slices of dried meat were added. After the flavor of the dried meat seeped into the mushrooms, the heat would be turned off and the contents served onto a plate. Half of this was then given to Orphia to make into soup.

Rio took the now-empty frying pan and added butter and diced onions, heating it until it was soft before adding the barley to fry it.

“Amazing. It’s evident you’re very skilled at this. What is it that you’re making?” Christina asked in awe, having watched them as they went about their preparations.

“This is a type of food called porridge.”

“Porridge, you say?” Christina cocked her head at Rio’s answer.

“It isn’t a type of food that nobility would come across, so I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it before. You fry the barley in oil before adding water to boil it.”

“It smells good. I can’t wait to try it.” Christina’s nose twitched as she sniffed the air before smiling.

After that, once the barley had been heated to a suitable degree, a small amount of alcohol was added to further fry it. All that was left was to add the

solid pseudo-bouillon that had been preserved in a container while making the stew at the inn last night, then boil the water in the pot and melt the bouillon for the flavor to seep in.

*...It feels like she's standing oddly close.*

Rio felt a little uncomfortable from Christina's gaze, who was standing at a distance neither too close nor too far to watch them. Every now and then she looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn't ask anything other than what they were making.

*It doesn't seem like she's observing me, though.*

If anything, it seemed like a rather hesitant gaze, as though she was gauging his expressions.

*Is it because she's realized my identity after all? But if so, wouldn't she normally act more guarded...?*

Rio recalled the standoffish image Christina had in his academy days.

*She seems to have changed a lot—she's much softer now than she was back then.*

Back then, she always seemed to be irritated and consistently distanced herself from others. So much so, they never exchanged a single conversation while he had been there. Perhaps that was why...

*It feels kind of strange having her so close by.*

It wasn't a bad thing, but it felt strange after having such a strong image of her past self. Just why was she standing so close and watching him so curiously?

Rio tried to think about it, but he didn't understand. Since thinking any further wouldn't help answer his question, he decided to focus silently on making the food before him instead.

The barley had absorbed the moisture well, so the heat was turned off before the contents of the frying pan began to scorch. Then, the mushroom and dried meat was added back into the pan and mixed well with salt and pepper for seasoning, before shredded cheese was finally added.

"It's done." The barley cheese risotto was completed.

“I’m done as well.” Orphia finished the soup at just that moment. An appetizing smell wafted from the pot. Cheese risotto with mushroom and wild vegetable soup. It would normally be considered a treat to eat such a thing while camping outdoors.

Furthermore, while Rio had been cooking, Celia had prepared a wonderful dining space. There was a dining table and enough seats for everyone.

Everyone started gathering, drawn by the delicious scent.

“Whoa, isn’t this risotto?! What grain did you use for it?!” Kouta asked, excitement in his eyes.

“It’s barley.”

“Barley, hmm? So that’s how...”

“There’s a thing called *barley and rice*, after all.”

At Rio’s answer, Kouta and Rei’s eyes widened. They were just like the others that had come from Japan and missed rice too. For the record, Kouta’s barley had been in the language of that world, but Rei’s *barley and rice* had been in Japanese—*mugimeshi*.

“*Mugimeshi*?” Christina finally spoke up. She was cocking her head at the unfamiliar word.

“It’s a type of grain. The main grain that’s eaten in Kouta’s world is called rice, and it’s very similar in shape to barley. The taste and texture is different to barley, but similar dishes can be prepared,” Rio explained to Christina about barley and rice.

“You’re very knowledgeable... Ah, I see. You must have heard it from that Miharu person,” Kouta said.

“Yes. Though limited, there are parts of Strahl where rice is cultivated. I don’t have any on hand right now, but I’d be happy to treat you if there’s an opportunity in the future.”

“R-Really?!” Kouta jumped up eagerly.

“Yes. But for now, you’ll have to make do with barley risotto. Let’s dig in while it’s still hot,” Rio agreed with a smile, then urged them all to begin eating.

“Right, right. This is a treat! It looks really delicious, I can’t wait!”

“Yup, it smells really nice.”

Kouta and Rei both said excitedly.

“Y-Yum!”

“Whoa. The cheese is so thick.”

Kouta and Rei—who knew what a risotto was—praised the food first. After giving their opinions on the first bite, they spent the rest of the time absorbed in eating.

Christina also carried the spoon to her mouth elegantly before blinking in surprise. “Even though the cheese is so rich in taste, it doesn’t feel heavy at all. Impressive,” she offered.

“In order to remove the unique scent barley produces when water is added, the barley is first fried with alcohol. After it’s fried, the recommended order is to soak the barley in soup before finally adding the cheese. That way, the taste of the cheese is condensed,” Rio explained.

“So you first remove the unnecessary flavors from the ingredients, then add the flavors that you want. I see... There’s a lot of thought behind it. And the result is truly delicious...”

Christina hummed in awe before taking another bite of the risotto to savor the taste. Her mouth softened faintly in a bitter and fleeting way.

## Interlude: Meanwhile...

At the same time in Beltrum, but further east past where Rio and the others were, there was a small post town along the road towards the Galarc Kingdom. It had a small resident population of around 200 people and was surrounded by mountains. The road ran through the valley and made it extremely difficult to go around. There were no alternative routes to this road, making it fairly populated.

The Ricca Guild also used this route for transportation, and the town was always filled with three times the number of travelers than residents—many of them adventurers.

Many pubs and inns lined the sides of the single main street stretched through the town. Several pubs had regular adventurers which gradually turned into adventurer cliques within each pub, building upon their own influence.

“Ah, that hits the spot! There’s nothing like beer after a long day of work! Hey, everyone! It’s my treat today. Drink up!”

“There’s nothing but cheap beer, though!”

“What are you saying? It’s the cheap stuff that’s good!”

“It’d be even better if there was a hot chick to go with it. There’re only your ugly mugs around here.”

“No doubt!”

In a pub where most veteran adventurers gathered, hearty laughter could be heard from an early hour.

“Huh?”

The door to the pub creaked open slowly, attracting the gazes of the adventurers in the pub. A man near his thirties entered, his appearance like an adventurer—it was Arein, visiting the post town on Reiss’ orders. He wore a cloaked hood and leather armor, sword hanging at his waist.

“That’s an unfamiliar face.” A large built man with a mean look—the one who had been offering everyone drinks—muttered to himself. It wasn’t strange at all to see new adventurers in town, but this pub was considered the territory of the veteran adventurers here. Adventurers like them lived in a narrow-minded society where their strength was their livelihood, so they had primitive values of the strong being superior. And so, when a newbie adventurer entered their territory—

“The hell do you want?”

There was no warm welcome to be received. Being drunk and feeling generous, the veteran adventurer first used intimidation to feel out for a reaction. If the other man responded modestly, he’d assert his dominance a bit before finding out why he was here.

The most common response was an unfortunate lack of awareness about the pub. The next most common were suck-ups who wanted to greet the local adventurers. Finally, there were the rare idiots who came to pick fights on purpose. Most people fit into these three categories, and those who visited unaware usually turned tail immediately to avoid confrontation. However—

“Barkeep—a meat dish and beer, please.”

Arein boldly made his way to the counter and put in an order. In an instant, the gazes of the men in the pub grew menacing, but Arein didn’t even blink as he indifferently slid into a counter seat. He carefully counted out the cost with a tip and placed three large bronze on the counter.

“Right.” The store owner nodded with a sigh, sensing trouble on the horizon. As long as money was offered, the man was a customer. He began to prepare the ordered items, when—

“...”

The large man that had been ordering drinks stood up silently and approached Arein from behind. The other adventurers followed him, watching on in amusement. They helped themselves to seats in the chairs surrounding Arein.

“Hey, newbie. You sure got guts, ordering without greeting us first. What’s

your deal?” The large man started talking with a sneering grin, winding an arm around Arein’s shoulder.

“Oh, I just heard this pub was filled with skilled and hearty adventurers,” Arein replied confidently.

The large man narrowed his eyes. “Hmm... And what business do you have?” he asked.

“Nothing much. I’m in search of some criminals with a bounty on their heads.” Arein took out a sheet of paper. There was no face or name mentioned, but the details of a wanted notice were written down.

“F-Five hundred gold?!”

The expressions in the men’s eyes changed at the size of the bounty figure. Of course it would—that much money could buy all the booze and women they wanted. They could live extravagantly without working for the next ten years.

“Hey, was this wanted notice posted in town?!” The large adventurer completely sobered up, looking around at the others for more information.

“Was it?”

“Dunno.”

Not a single person was aware of the wanted notice. If they had, they wouldn’t be drinking here at such an hour anyway.

“Of course you wouldn’t know. It was only posted from Cleia yesterday. It won’t reach a countryside town like this for some time,” Arein said smugly.

“H-Hey, hold on a minute. You said it was posted from Cleia yesterday? Cleia, the capital of that Count Claire’s domain, right? That’s a week’s trip on foot. Why would you have such a thing?” the large man asked in suspicion.

“Ah, I’m an adventurer working for a big noble, you see. I’ve been lent a griffin for transport purposes,” Arein answered nonchalantly.

“Ah...”

None of the adventurers present had ever rode a griffin before, so they had no idea how fast they could move—but it certainly sounded reasonable for a

griffin to fly here in one day. They must have been shaken by the large sum that was suddenly presented, as they fell silent without questioning the circumstances.

“This notice says they’re wanted dead or alive, but my lord wants to apprehend the criminals alive. Apparently, he has some matters to settle with one of the wanted, which is why I was hired as a gofer...” Arein added, looking around at the adventurers. “It’s obviously a far too difficult task for me alone. I’ve set my eye on several likely points the criminals may pass through and am procuring local personnel to help out. So, how about it? I have to head towards the cities in the north after this, but would you like to keep watch in this post town for the criminals? If you take on my request, I can make a little advance payment...”

He placed a small bag stuffed with large silver coins on the counter.

“...Large silvers, huh?”

The large man glanced at the sparkling silver peeking out of the bag. Its impact was weakened after seeing the bounty of 500 gold coins, but it was still a large amount to these men. Though it was merely pocket change to Arein...

“The job is to check if the criminals pass this town. They’ll be on guard too, so don’t expect them to admit to anything. There’s no need to explain the situation, and no need to pursue them too far. Just inform me if you think they pass by. I’ll return in several days and pay you a bonus if you spot them.”

“Hmm...”

Despite that, the adventurers didn’t nod immediately. They were calculating their losses and gains.

“By the way, I’m rather short on time. Please—make a decision immediately. If you refuse, I’ll head to the next town and ask there instead. If you take the job, I’ll hand you this notice,” Arein said, folding the notice neatly. Naturally, there was no other copy of that notice in the town.

“Tch, you’re a real smooth talker. Fine. We’ll take it.” Despite clicking his tongue lightly, the large man accepted the job in high spirits. Such an easy and profitable job rarely came knocking.

“I’m glad we could come to an agreement,” Arein said, smiling contentedly.



Sakata Hiroaki, the hero of the Galarc Kingdom, was staying in a guest room of the royal castle in Galtuuk. He sat on a luxurious sofa as he was waited upon by Roanna and Flora on either side and Duke Gustav Huguenot across from him.

“You must be fatigued from attending successive days of gatherings to strengthen our friendship with the Galarc royalty and nobility,” Duke Huguenot said, bowing his head deeply. Most of those gatherings had been dinner parties or tea parties that functioned simultaneously as potential marriage interviews.

“It was nothing—I was the one being treated the entire time. There were breaks in between, too, so I had fun doing it. I’m in my best condition, if anything,” Hiroaki replied with a shrug.

“That is most wonderful to hear.” Duke Huguenot smiled.

“Hmph. I know you, and you wouldn’t come all the way here just to check up on my health. What do you want?” Hiroaki snorted in good humor.

Duke Huguenot laughed in response to Hiroaki for a while, before putting on a serious expression. “Hahaha, it seems I am no match for your sharp observations... Then if I may ask so abruptly, do you have any plans of settling down?”

“Settle down... You want me to get married?”

“Indeed.”

“Marriage, huh? In the world I was from, I’d be considered far too young to get married,” Hiroaki sighed a little, annoyed. To a boy born and raised in Japan, the word “marriage” sounded heavy to someone who was only nineteen.

“With regards to this topic, I respect the will of the people involved above anything, so I do not wish to rush any decisions too hastily... However, your countenance and character was spread widely after the banquet the other night, and we’ve received an unexpected amount of marriage proposals from Galarc’s noblewomen. Many of them are fine with marriage as concubines, too. These last few dinners you have attended have been related to such offers,

but..." Duke Huguenot checked Hiroaki's expression to see his smile visibly grow more smug.

"Yeah, I figured it was something like that. Ah, I didn't want this kind of popularity..." Despite his words, Hiroaki's expression wasn't dissatisfied at all. He shook his head in an overly lamentful way.

"I apologize for my lack of assistance concerning this, but I believe your charms were simply too brilliant to ignore."

"Oh, stop. I don't need your self-interest-fueled flattery," Hiroaki huffed.

"But these are my honest thoughts, and the sheer truth." Without denying that it was in self-interest, Duke Huguenot flattered Hiroaki even further. The fact he didn't try to hide his true opinion was what made Hiroaki regard him highly.

"Heh," Hiroaki smirked smugly. "So you want me to settle down quickly. Is that it?" he guessed.

"Like I said, I will prioritize your wishes above all else, and it is the honest truth that I do not wish to rush into anything hastily. But it is also true that we will be unable to put off the topic of marriage forever if the number of proposals continue to increase, leaving me between a rock and hard place." Duke Huguenot sighed with a troubled face.

"I see... Just wondering, at what age do the royalty and nobility of this world normally get married?"

"Noblemen normally marry from around age twenty to their mid-thirties at the latest, I would say. It is most common for noblewomen to marry in their early teens at the earliest, and around twenty at latest."

"Hmm. That means I'm at an age where it would be considered normal to get married, huh?" Hiroaki hummed.

"That being said, deciding on a marriage partner here and now would be far too hasty, and similarly, selecting several wives at once would be too shameful. I'm sure you also have hesitations concerning these reasons, of course."

"Well, yeah."

"And so, I would like to make this as a suggestion: select your first wife for the time being, and form an engagement instead of marriage." Duke Huguenot finally arrived at his request.

"My first wife, huh..." Hiroaki had a slightly somber look.

"Are you not interested after all?"

"...No, there's just something about the terms 'first wife' and 'concubine.' That's like putting your women in some kind of order, no? I'd want to connect with them equally, not bind them by something like that. Same with whatever annoying rules that come with social status and all that. It's so suffocating, I can't stand it. It's normal for regular nobles to have wives on bad terms or concubines that feel inferior, right?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that such cases are uncommon," Duke Huguenot confirmed with a strained smile.

"I hate things like that. If the women form cliques and feud with each other over the man, the one who ultimately suffers is said man. You know I'd hate that, right? It'd be so stressful."

"Of course."

"That's why I have several conditions." Hiroaki raised a finger on his right hand.

"What are they?"

"I have no problem with building a harem, but I will be the one to decide who will be my brides. Of course, I'll hear your suggestions, but I don't want to hear any nagging or commands. I understand there's a need to decide on my first wife, but I won't have an order to my concubines. I don't want to hear any complaints about how I decide to love my women. You are not to use my wives to create factional disputes. These are my absolute conditions. If you break them and any consequences fall upon me, well, I'm sure there's no need to say what'll happen," Hiroaki said, laying out the conditions. Since he was in a position to push forth his ego, he did so while making his warnings perfectly clear—anyone who disregarded them would look like a fool, was what Hiroaki was stating.

"Hahaha, you are truly a broad-minded person. However, conditions such as those were well within my consideration to begin with, so rest assured," Duke Huguenot said with confidence.

"Hmm. I can always count on you to get it. No, I suppose that much should be expected from you."

"Any nobleman has gone through similar hardships, after all." Duke Huguenot grinned in response to Hiroaki's hum of awe.

"Haha, I see. Ah, it would be more enlightening to just seek the knowledge of my precursors around this subject. Tell me more about it over drinks sometime." Hiroaki couldn't help but beam broadly as he spoke.

"Gladly. I'm sure many would love to attend, but such discussions would be better made in less company. I shall carefully screen some attendees and set a date."

"Man, I really can count on you. We have to have more man-to-man talks. Ah, by the way, who did you have in mind for my engagement?" Hiroaki asked, now in a good mood.

"A hero needs a first wife of appropriate social status, so my thoughts were on Princess Flora," Duke Huguenot answered smoothly.

"Hmm. Well, that would be reasonable. But are you all right with that, Flora?"

Hiroaki glanced at Flora seated beside him. He figured the first person he would be engaged to would be Flora or Roanna, who were usually beside him as his aides.

"Huh? Ah... Y-Yes. I'll do my best." Flora flinched. She nodded her head a little awkwardly—she had no choice but to do so.

*I'll do my best, huh... Honestly, Liselotte and Roanna are more charming. They're great conversation partners and show the right degree of consideration towards men, so they score high there. Though I have no complaints about Flora's looks...*

When he compared her to Liselotte and Roanna, she was unfortunately less lively in conversation. Hiroaki considered that as he stared at Flora's face.

*Well, it'd be more convenient to have this kind of passive personality as the first wife of a polygynous relationship. It'd be annoying to have the first wife get jealous and meddle with the other women. In that regard, Flora would know her place and understand. Well, you can't miss out on having a princess when you're in a fantasy world like this. There's no way I'd let such a fine woman go to another man, either, so this will do.*

"Sure. If Flora's fine with it, let's get engaged," Hiroaki said easily.

"Oh, you'll really do it?" Duke Huguenot smiled broadly at how things developed exactly as he wanted.

"Yeah. Shall I get engaged with Roanna while I'm at it?" Hiroaki grinned, peering at Roanna's face beside him.

"...O-Oh, don't say such silly things out of the blue." Roanna blushed shyly and turned her face away.

*Haha, how adorable.*



Hiroaki smiled in satisfaction, turning back to Duke Huguenot. "...So, out of the leading nobles in the Galarc Kingdom, which houses have currently sent proposals?"

"The major ones are the Galarc Kingdom's third princess, Princess Rosalie, and Duke Gregory's Lady Lisette, I believe," answered Duke Huguenot. Liselotte's name was not mentioned.

"Lisette aside, Rosalie was only twelve or thirteen, right? Ah, but I guess that's right at the start of the expected marriage age in this world."

Hiroaki recalled the girl named Rosalie he met at a tea party not long ago. For the record, she was also Charlotte's little sister.

"Indeed so."

"Hmm, I see... Anyone else?" Hiroaki asked.

"In terms of prominent ones, those two are far ahead of the others. The family status of the other ladies are a little lower in comparison."

"Hmm..." Hiroaki hummed vaguely.

*So there was no proposal from Liselotte, huh? Even if Flora was my first wife, Liselotte would definitely make it to the second or third seat. But I guess she's busy—she left right after the banquet to go to work, after all.*

It was still possible for a proposal from Liselotte to drop in at any time, but he still found it a little disappointing that there was no proposal from her right now.

"Will we be remaining in Galarc for much longer?"

"There are still several events to attend, but once they're done, we should be able to return to Rodania."

"Right... Ah, then let's slowly make our way back to Rodania once they're over. I'd also like to drop by Liselotte's place on our way back—I didn't get to say farewell to her properly at the banquet."

If she wouldn't show herself readily, then he'd just have to go to her. Honest to his desires, Hiroaki suggested they return just so he could meet Liselotte.

That fact was probably seen through easily by Duke Huguenot and the sharp-minded Roanna beside him.

That being said, Duke Huguenot would gladly welcome a marriage between Hiroaki and Liselotte. Honestly, Liselotte's marriage alone would overwhelmingly outweigh marrying both Rosalie and Lisette in terms of benefits.

"Understood," Duke Huguenot chuckled with a smile, bowing his head respectfully.

## Chapter 3: Signs of the Pursuers?

Four days had passed since Rio and the others left Cleia. Today was the third day of the three-day cycle they had decided on for using their enchanted swords to move (though it was really thanks to spirit arts).

They departed from the inn at the post town they stayed at early in the morning, walking along the road until there was no sign of other people around. They then left the road, enchanted their bodies, and picked up the others, running just fast enough not to cause suspicion in order to put as much distance behind them as possible.

After moving roughly a two-day journey's distance, they returned to the road and continued walking. By the time the sun was almost setting, the party had arrived at a post town along a road that stretched through a valley.

They came to a natural stop when the town came into view.

“Gah, we’re finally here!”

“It’s been tiring.”

Rei and Kouta relaxed in exhaustion.

“...Phew.” Celia also brought her water flask to her mouth to rehydrate herself, sighing tiredly. Christina took the chance to do the same.

With the exception of Rio, the spirit folk girls, and Vanessa the knight, none of the others were the outdoorsy type. Waking up every day before the sunrise and walking until the sunset naturally trained their legs, but the fatigue was accumulating a fair bit.

“Good work, everyone. We’ll be staying here as planned, so let’s find an inn and rest up,” Rio said. They passed the gate of the post town with heavy footsteps. The town was located at the top of the road, so the main street passed right through the middle of the town.

The benefit of staying at towns like this while on the run was the lack of

permanently-stationed soldiers—and the few towns that had them only had a small number of personnel that slacked on their duties.

However, they also had the disadvantage of easily becoming unsafe. Because of this, there was no need to worry anxiously about the presence of officials, but—

*...Hmm?*

The moment Rio passed the gate, he looked up.

He had been on high alert for the presence of their pursuers, so he periodically activated a giant wind barrier with a radius of several hundred meters to secretly detect any enemies. Now that they had entered the town, he was doing the same just in case. It was how he noticed a winged creature flying several hundred meters high in the sky. It was probably some kind of bird... But just as he thought that, he sensed a gaze on him from the side.

He turned to see several adventurers loitering about, one of them looking carefully between Rio's group and a piece of paper in his hand.

*Adventurers, huh?* Rio guessed at the background of the men ogling them.

Adventurers were practically everywhere, so it wasn't an odd sight for them to be gathered at the entrance of a city or post town at the end of a day of work. Local adventurers would obviously be curious if unfamiliar adventurer-like groups appeared in town fully armed, too.

"...What are they doing? Staring at us so closely." Sara had sensed the same gaze as Rio and pouted sullenly.

"They seem to be adventurers. It'll be a chore to get involved, so don't make eye contact. Let's head to the inn quickly," Rio said plainly and started walking swiftly in the lead, wanting to proceed quickly further into the town.

"Hey, hold on a minute there." The adventurers approached them briskly, calling out to them.

"..." Rio ignored them and continued to walk in the lead.

"Hey, I said wait. I'm talking to you guys, the group of nine in the hoods! Yeah, you, with the gray-haired kid in the lead!" He yelled out their specific features

to get them to halt.

“...What?” Rio came to a reluctant stop and responded on behalf of the group.

“Are you all adventurers?” the large man asked.

“We’re just travelers. Sorry, but we’re tired right now,” Rio said in annoyance, wrapping up the conversation. However, the men didn’t back down, quickly moving around them to block their way. They seemed to underestimate Rio for his youth, mocking grins on their faces.

“I said we were tired,” Rio repeated, glaring at the adventurers coldly. The men took half a step back from the light pressure they felt, but—

“Tch... Unfortunately, our livelihoods are on the line here. We’re looking for someone.” Unable to stand the thought of a brat half their age looking down on them, they replied in an intimidating tone.

“Looking for someone? Then you have the wrong people. I don’t recognize any of your faces.”

“Hah. Yeah, we’re not looking for someone we know. I said our livelihoods were on the line, no? The ones we’re looking for are wanted criminals with a bounty.”

“...I don’t recall having a bounty placed on us.”

Considering they were currently on the run, suspicion immediately ran through the back of Rio’s mind, but he tried to play it off as doubtful ignorance.

“Yeah, you would say that. Especially if you were the wanted criminals.” The large adventurer laughed scornfully.

“Are you saying we’re criminals?”

“I called out to you to confirm that.”

“And how will you confirm it?”

“It’s written on the wanted notice that one of the criminals is a gray-haired boy in his mid-to late-teens. Exactly the same features as you, it seems.” The large adventurer stared at Rio.

"Those features are extremely commonplace." Rio shrugged without any change in his expression.

"But there are other features that match too, y'know? The number of criminals is around ten, most likely a group of nine young men and women. There are nine of you. From what I can see under your hoods, you all seem quite young. There are women among you, too."

The large man stooped over, waving the wanted notice as though to show it off. He leered at Celia and the others to try and peer under their hoods, and the group ducked their faces in displeasure.

"Being one-sidedly accused of a crime I have no recollection of isn't something I can let pass. Show me that wanted notice," Rio said boldly, extending his right hand.

"Yeah, sure. Don't rip it up." The man handed the notice to Rio obediently.

"..." Rio read the notice silently. Interested in the contents of the notice, Christina also approached him from behind to peer at it.

The notice first detailed the appearance of the wanted criminals, and—

"The abduction of an important figure... and murder?"

That was what was written there. It also included other details about the criminals, as well as the things Rio and the others were under the suspicion of.

"...What a joke," Christina mumbled, her anger simmering.

At the same time, Rio up spoke in a calm voice. "I see. Indeed, there are a lot of similar points between us and what is written on this notice. I understand your suspicions, but you have the wrong people. I don't know anything about this." He returned the wanted notice.

"Ah..." the large adventurer hummed as he took back the notice. Rio had acknowledged how their features matched with the notice so boldly, he couldn't find the right words to say next.

"You're free to continue suspecting us, but we're free to decide not to associate with you any further. As I said in the beginning, we're tired. If we continue arguing with you here, all the inns will be occupied and we'll have to

camp outdoors. So excuse us," Rio said, starting to walk past the men that had blocked their road. Behind him, Christina and the others slowly moved their feet too. However—

"Hold on!" the large adventurer suddenly yelled.

"What now?" Rio replied in annoyance.

"The wanted notice says there are three men and six women. Remove your hoods and show me your faces," the man ordered high-handedly.

"...I don't believe that's how you ask someone a favor," Sara said sullenly.

"Indeed. I wonder what right he has to be ordering us?" Christina agreed in exasperation.

"Huh? What did you just say?" The man furrowed his brows unhappily.

"Try asking again with the word 'please,'" Rio ordered the man.

"...Uh?" The adventurer froze, a vein bulging at his temple.

"Isn't it infuriating being spoken to like that? There's a better way of phrasing your words when asking someone to do something. It's only natural to feel repulsion to being spoken to like that by an unknown stranger. That's what the girls are saying," Rio said, boldly presenting his logic.

"Hey, hey, are you trying to preach at me? You've got guts, brat." The large man's face twitched.

"We have no intention of arguing with you. Since you're not giving us a choice, we'll show you our faces. But this is the last of it. If you still think we're the criminals, then provide some concrete proof of it." Rio turned around and addressed the others. "Everyone, please remove your hoods."

Those wearing their hoods silently moved their hands and revealed their faces.

"Wh..." All the men had their breath taken away, because the most beautiful girls they had ever seen in their lives were standing before them.

And so, after the men had remained speechless for several seconds—

"I believe that's enough. Farewell."

Rio started walking once more. Christina and the others also covered their heads again and followed him. The adventurers watched them leave without calling for them to stop again.



After that encounter, they secured a place at the inn in town.

Rio ordered the others to wait at the inn before leaving alone to investigate the town, believing it was important to gather information calmly first.

He stopped at food stalls to buy snacks and chat with the store owners, confirmed what the wanted notices at the town bulletin board said, and then returned to the inn 30 minutes later. Everyone gathered inside one of the rooms they rented to discuss.

“First, it seems like a soldier drops by from the nearby city once a week. But today isn’t that day, and it doesn’t seem like the search party arrived here before us either,” Rio said.

“Which leaves the problem of the wanted notice, and those rude men,” Sara said with a pout.

“There’s something I realized about the notice, and it bothers me. The notice the man had didn’t exist on the bulletin board in town.”

“...Isn’t that because that man had it?” Alma cocked her head.

“That’s exactly what bothers me. That wanted notice didn’t have a publication stamp. A mere adventurer in a town like this shouldn’t have the original copy of a wanted notice, so it was probably a transcribed copy. But if so, don’t you think it’s strange? There’s no original in town, yet there’s a copy.”

“Indeed. Removing an original notice from the bulletin board is considered a serious crime for assisting criminals in avoiding arrest. The only ones allowed to be carried around are copies,” Vanessa explained.

“Yes, which means there is the possibility the wanted notice is forged.”

“The forgery of official documentation is a capital crime...” Vanessa said, pursing her lips solemnly.

“It’s also possible that all the copies prepared were taken, so the original was

temporarily removed to make new copies. Well, there's no way to confirm that at present, so let's go through some of the other points instead."

"Do you mean the contents of the wanted notice?"

"So you noticed as well, Your Highness," said Rio. At that time, the only ones who glanced over the notice were Rio and Christina.

"Was there something strange about it?" Celia asked.

"If that wanted notice was really for us, then it was *too* well-informed about our numbers and the details of our ages and genders. Charles Arbor, the leader of the search party, shouldn't have realized that five other people have joined up to escort Her Highness."

Rio, Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. These five had yet to be witnessed together with Christina by the search party. And yet, the wanted notice had stated there were around ten of them, most likely nine.

"Ah..." Celia understood.

"...Do you believe that wanted notice was prepared for us, Sir Amakawa?" Christina asked Rio.

"To be honest, I can't say for sure. The number of people, genders, and ages fit perfectly with us, but the names of the criminals weren't written down. The only person who had their appearance noted in detail was myself. Based on this, it seems like the notice was written by someone who didn't know the background of who they were writing about... so it could just be a coincidence. The fact the crime was listed as the abduction and murder of an important figure also bothers me," Rio answered.

"Right, that makes sense. But it bothers me how there's too much information that matches up." Christina looked a little uneasy.

"I'm also stuck on that point. There is one person I can think of who could have made such a notice, but I may just be overthinking things."

"Could that person possibly be..."

"Reiss. Not even Count Claire is aware that Sara, Orphia, and Alma are accompanying Your Highness, and Reiss is the only one who witnessed the nine

of us together after the battle in the woods. He would have been able to confirm our numbers and genders.”

“D-Don’t tell me... Did that man appear at that moment in order to make this wanted notice?” Vanessa stammered.

“Could Reiss be cooperating with Charles...? He’s the person that may be the Proxia Empire’s ambassador,” Celia added. Both had anxious faces.

“Who knows? If Reiss is working with Charles, it’d be strange for there not to be more detailed descriptions of Your Highness, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei on the notice.”

On top of that, if Reiss was behind this, he would have touched upon Rio’s background—but he didn’t say that out loud.

“I am of the same opinion as Sir Amakawa. If Charles and Reiss are collaborating, then that should make the important figure mentioned in the notice myself, but I don’t believe Charles would fabricate my death even in a false crime—not unless I were actually dead, that is. If he tried something so impertinent and ran into a contradiction after, he’d be unable to explain himself,” Christina said in agreement with Rio.

“...Which means Charles wasn’t involved in the crafting of that wanted notice, and it was simply a forgery made by Reiss?” Celia asked in confirmation.

“Yes, that is possible. However, we have no means to confirm that at the moment, and it’s still possible that this notice is completely unrelated to us. It’s extremely troubling,” Rio answered.

“But isn’t that bad? If it’s true, then we should leave this town as soon as possible...” Celia suggested with a stiff look of fear.

“I wouldn’t recommend that right now. After we put the men behind us at the town gate, they ran after us and followed us here. I’m sure there are people standing watch outside the inn right this moment. Isn’t that right, Sara?” Rio said.

“Yes. They aren’t the people who came up to us at the gate, but there are two of them,” Sara said while peering out of a gap in the curtains.

“Reiss wouldn’t use such obvious men to purposefully raise our guards, so we can assume he isn’t in this town for now, at least. In that regard, there’s no need to leave town right away.”

“Which means our present problem is the adventurers of this town who suspect us,” Vanessa said with a frown.

“Indeed it does. The sun has already set, so if we leave town now, we’ll be suspected for acting shady. Instead, we should just leave boldly first thing tomorrow morning,” Rio suggested. Then, he added, “However, we won’t leave through the east gate towards Galarc, but the west gate that we originally came through.”

“W-Wait, hold on a minute. Wouldn’t it cause more suspicion if we go back down the road we came?” Vanessa interrupted in a hurry.

“They have people standing watch on us outside the inn, so they already suspect us one way or another. I also want to confirm whether they’re associated with Reiss, so it’d be all the better if they strike. Although I can’t imagine Reiss would use anyone who made a move so easily.”

But it was possible that was what they wanted him to think, too. However, once he started scrutinizing the possibilities, the limits were endless, so he made a note of it in his mind.

“What if they don’t make a move?”

“In that case, we’ll keep going west until we lose them, then leave the road and return east. It’ll result in a time loss, but we can climb above the valley surrounding this road and go around the town instead. That way, they’ll think we retreated west.”

“I see... It’s bold, but effective,” Vanessa hummed.

“I have no objection. Let’s go with that plan,” Christina approved. Thus, they ended their discussion and went about preparing meals and resting for what was to come the next day.



Meanwhile, at a pub in the same town, the group of adventurers that had

called out to Rio and the others were gathered together in a group of roughly twenty people.

“Fuck that cocky grey-haired bastard!”

Among them was a large adventurer, reclining in his chair as he cursed hatefully at the memory of his encounter with Rio. He slammed his wooden mug of cheap beer against the table, causing the plates nearby to bounce slightly.

*Try asking again with the word “please.”*

He was infuriated at how cocky the sudden command had been. Just who did that brat think he was? The man pigeonholed himself, making his unreasonable anger grow more intense.

“Calm down, dude,” said a smaller adventurer who hadn’t been there.

“Can’t. It pisses me off.”

“No use asking you.” The smaller man shook his head, turning to the others who were actually there. “...So how did it actually go?”

“Well, their features matched exactly with what was written on the notice,” one man said, looking rather grim.

“What, did something happen?”

“No, it’s just hard to pin down whether they’re the same people or not based on the information on this notice alone. We were too shocked by the bounty to notice at first, though.”

“Well, yeah,” the small adventurer agreed.

“It has to be them! Their age, gender, numbers... Three young men and six young women in their mid-teens? It’s just too perfect! There’s no way anyone else fitting the requirements so precisely will pass through!” the large man holding a grudge against Rio yelled.

“In other words, those kids are the criminals on the wanted notice?”

“Yeah, they’re the dirty criminals! They should know their place! Damn it, I can’t forgive them.” The large man raged in a firm display of affirmation.

“You say that, but what can you do? All we have to do is report to the man that gave us this request and we’ll be paid a bonus, you know? We even received a hefty advance payment.”

“Those brats are no big deal! Three boys and six girls, versus the twenty of us physically adept adults! Even if we receive a bonus, it’d only be a few gold pieces at most. That’s nothing once it’s split between all of us. Instead of accepting such a pittance, we can tie them up and hand them over to the officials ourselves for 500 gold! It’s obvious which is the better choice.”

500 gold coins. The number was indeed tempting. Tempting enough to abandon reason, even.

“Right? I thought the same. If it isn’t a job we have to go through the town to accept, then there won’t be a penalty from the guild either.”

The small adventurer seemed to be waiting for the conversation to take this direction.

“Hehe.”

“The women were all fine beauties, too.”

“Yeah, that was insane.”

“If they’re criminals, then it won’t matter what we do to them.”

“Right. They’re just criminals.”

And so on. Voices of agreement emerged loudly.

“Heh, looks like it’s decided.” The large man smirked in satisfaction. “Which means we need a plan. If we’re gonna do this, then it obviously needs to be outside town. How about we carry this out tomorrow, once they’ve skipped town?” the small man suggested with a wicked grin.

“You’ve been planning on ditching the request from the start, haven’t you?”

“Why, that goes for the both of us.”

“Hmph. Let’s teach those brats how scary the world can be.”



The next morning, Rio and the others left the inn and headed through the

west gate as planned. Upon checking out of the inn, they spotted two adventurers standing at the dead end across the street from the building, but they feigned ignorance and headed for the west gate.

“Do you think they were standing watch there all night?” Alma asked tiredly.

“No, they were probably taking turns,” Rio replied, similarly exasperated. He continued just loud enough for their party to hear. “Everyone, make sure you don’t turn around.”

Everyone looked at Rio.

“As we expected, they’re tailing us. Several people joined up along the way, so there’s quite a few of them. They probably have no intention of hiding that they’re following us. I’m certain they’ll try to pull something as soon as we leave town.”

Everyone’s faces stiffened immediately.

“Let me handle them. If we end up fighting them, I’ll lead the counterattack. Everyone else should be on full guard and on the lookout for projectiles and ambushes from every direction, in case they’re just a decoy for Reiss. There is absolutely no need to assist me.”

“Roger that.” Sara, Orphia, and Alma all nodded straight away with no hesitation. They had full trust in Rio’s ability; there was no way he would be bested by people who couldn’t even tail someone properly.

What was more worrying was an attack from Reiss. The scariest possibility was a surprise attack from beyond their field of vision, just like the one he fired outside Cleia. Thus, they would leave the fighting to Rio and focus completely on defense—this, they understood implicitly.

At any rate, the party finally left the post town. The adventurers followed from about fifty meters away, maintaining that distance as they walked. However, Rio and the others stayed firm to their course. Thus, after ten or so minutes had passed—

“We’re going to stop at that flat area beside the road. Please head to the back of that field and pretend you’re looking for something. We’ll see what move they make next.”

Rio pointed at a field stretching beside the road. Once they arrived, everyone began looking around the ground as though they had dropped something.

At that, the adventurers behind them became slightly confused. They had been certain that Rio and the others were the wanted criminals when they doubled back on the route they had come from yesterday, but once the party stopped to begin searching for something in such an open space, they began to question their intentions.

“What are they doing?”

“They’re looking for something.”

“Did they turn back to look for something they dropped?”

The questions led to confusion, slowing down the men’s walking speed. Perhaps they really weren’t the criminals? At least a few of them had that doubt swimming in their heads.

“Calm down! Nothing’s changed in the plan! They’re criminals with a bounty of 500 gold coins, wanted dead or alive,” the large adventurer said, inciting the others.

“Right. We have enough of a basis—don’t chicken out now.” The smaller man nodded, stepping forward in high spirits.

The distance between them closed little by little, until they were close enough to overhear each other’s conversations if they listened carefully. There was no turning back now that they had come this far. Whatever happened would happen. Such mass psychology was at play as the other adventurers resolved themselves, their footsteps losing their hesitation.

After that, the large and small adventurer pair in the lead stopped on the road right before where Rio and the others were pretending to search for something.

“Hey, what are you all doing there?” the large man asked.

“...We’re looking for something, as you can see. One of my companions realized they dropped something last night, so we came to look at the last place we rested,” Rio answered boldly. It was a very reasonable excuse to turn back down the road they came from.

“And what are you guys doing, standing over there?” Rio added calmly, as though he had seen through them.

“...You’re the ones on the wanted notice, aren’t you?” the large man asked back coldly.

“Even if I tell you we’re not, you probably won’t believe me. Since you’ve gone and brought all your friends with you, after all. Following us all the way here, where there’s less people around.” Rio sighed tiredly.

“Hah, at least you’re quick on the uptake. With how perfectly you lot match the features on this wanted notice, we can’t just let you pass. There’s a 500-gold bounty on the line, after all. So we’ve decided to tie you all up. As long as you don’t resist, we’ll spare your lives. Just your lives.” The large man looked at the women standing behind Rio with a vulgar gaze. Their faces were covered with hoods, but the glimpse of their hair and shape of their figures made them obviously women. The other men were also smiling lewdly. They probably noticed the wicked gazes being directed at them, as the women in the group all pursed their lips unhappily.

“T-That’s absurd. What would you do if it turned out we weren’t the criminals?” Kouta couldn’t help but yell out, his voice high-pitched.

“Huh? That’s why you should just turn yourselves in quietly. We can arrest you with the perfectly rational reason of suspecting you of being criminals. No one will punish us for killing you if you resist. Dead people can’t speak and all that. We can make up as many excuses as we want afterwards.” The larger man sneered and Kouta’s objection and brushed him aside.

“No way! How can anything so barbaric be acceptable?! You could kill as many people as you wanted with a false accusation like that!” Kouta rejected the situation that completely opposed his own common sense.

“There’s no point in arguing. The system that issues the wanted notices itself doesn’t account for the unfortunate people who are mistakenly accused of being criminals. They’re simply covered up as unlucky accidents. There’s nothing we can do but solve this by force,” Rio informed Kouta plainly.

“That can’t be...” Kouta fell speechless.

“Hah, it seems you get it. So, which will it be? Will you turn yourself in quietly? That said—and I’m sure this feeling is mutual—but I don’t like you. I’ll be nice to the women, but I’ll make sure you see a world of pain. If you want to blame someone, you can blame your cocky attitude yesterday.” The large man was clearly trying to provoke Rio. The other men were also sneering giddily.

“I don’t particularly feel any dislike towards you,” Rio stated flatly.

“Uh?” The unexpected response made the men furrow their brows.

“Your lives don’t matter to me. I won’t harm you if you back away quietly here. But I will respond accordingly if you don’t. That’s all,” Rio stated.

The men looked taken aback for a moment, only to follow with a howl of delighted laughter. “...Ha. Bwahaha! Hey hey, this one doesn’t understand the situation at all. I’ve never heard such arrogance begging to be spared. Ain’t that something, huh?”

“I see. Then I have no choice.” Rio placed his hand on his sheath and pretended to use his enchanted sword to enhance his body before adopting a battle-ready stance with his bare fists.

“...Ah? You doing this barehanded?” The men all looked confused at how Rio grabbed his sword, but didn’t draw it.

“I don’t want my companions to see me kill anyone, unfortunately. Fighting with my bare hands is enough for you people. If you’re going to come at me, make it quick.” Perhaps he wanted to be able to claim legitimate self-defense, as Rio clearly beckoned at the adventurers with his right hand in provocation.

A vein bulged in the large man’s head as he laughed dryly. “Hahaha... This bastard really doesn’t know his place. Grab these brats already! Go!”

The twenty-odd adventurers on the road rushed at Rio and the others in the field. Rio, Kouta, and Rei aside, they probably wanted to apprehend the women without harming them. Because of that and the fact that Rio had no weapons drawn, none of them drew their weapons either. The most motivated of them was the hot-blooded smaller adventurer.

“Die! Haha!” He ran at full speed and leaped, meaning to punch Rio with that momentum. But before he knew it, the small man’s vision was rolling in circles.

Rio appeared upside down. No, not just Rio, but the other adventurers—the whole world—was upside down.

The incomprehensible floating sensation he felt was due to the fact that he was flipping through the air—Rio had probably parried him. The right fist he had thrown out was bent past the movable limit of his body, and standing before him was the boy himself.

“...Huh? Wha? Eek!!” Chaos, confusion, and fear came upon him in succession. The man witnessed Rio spinning his body before his very eyes. It was some kind of attack, but he couldn’t evade it. Instead, he watched on in slow motion. It was almost like a flashback of his final moments—but it didn’t go on forever.

Rio had twisted his body and used the flow of his strength from his back to his shoulder to aim a tackle and the man that was temporarily upside down in the air.

“Ugh...?!” The small man’s body was sent flying towards the road behind him. He crashed into several men behind him and rolled along the ground. The cushioning of his blow meant he didn’t die, but he did have difficulty breathing.

“T-Tetsuzanko...?!” Rei yelled with his eyes peeled. The attack Rio made just now was very similar to the movements he had seen in games and online videos in Japan.

“Amazing...” Christina also muttered in a daze. Part of the reason was because Rio’s attack had landed so splendidly, but she was also awed by how smoothly he had moved on to his next action already. Rio used the body of the man sent flying as an obstacle to close the gap between him and the other men in the blink of an eye.

“...Guh?”

When Rio suddenly appeared before their eyes after being several meters away, the man who unfortunately became the next target froze stiff. The point of an elbow was being stuck against his solar plexus, sending his body flying through the air.

At the same time, Rio was already attacking his next target. There was

nothing wasted in any of his movements as he rendered the adventurers incapable of action swiftly and with certainty.

One after another, adventurers fell to the ground in spans of only one to three seconds. Before long, the number of men still on their feet was down to the single digits.

“W-What?! What happened?! You bastard, what did you do?!” the large man that had been standing towards the back ranted, unable to process the situation.

“...Gah!” Rio made no move to answer the question sincerely and instead knocked out another adventurer.

“W-Wha, what are you all doing?! Surround him! Seize him before he gets you!” the large adventurer yelled at the remaining men, who stood in shock. His terrified comrades moved to surround Rio.

However, Rio had already reduced their numbers this far—he wasn’t about to be defeated by an attempt like that. The difference in their power was so great, it was as though the human wall wasn’t even there.

“E-Eek! Augh!” Rio approached the closest adventurer with no hesitation and easily toppled him off balance before throwing him against the ground.

“Raaargh!” The large adventurer charged at Rio from behind, swinging the sword in his hand overhead with all his might. It was clearly a strike intended to kill.

“Watch out!” Christina yelled reflexively.

Rio twisted his body, firing a roundhouse kick right into the guts of the man swinging his sword, sending him flying into the distance. “Wha?!”

That one blow was enough to obliterate their fighting spirit.

“D-Does he have eyes on the back of his head?”

“Wasn’t this supposed to be an easy win against some brats?”

“This is impossible...”

“There’s no way we can win in this lifetime...”

The remaining men mumbled under their breaths as they backed away, then immediately whipped around and started dashing for the road as fast as they could.

This wasn't how it was meant to go. His strength was far beyond the standards of a human—they had provoked the wrong opponent. Feelings of regret overwhelmed them.

"W-Wait! Hey!" The large man who had lost his weapon snapped back to his senses, then clumsily scrambled after his fleeing comrades.

"Did you think you could run away?" Rio's voice echoed quietly in his ear, filling him with a fear that nearly stopped his heart.

"Ugh!" The man's body trembled reflexively as he tripped over his own feet, falling spectacularly. Rio pinned down the man and poured his essence into him, using his spirit arts alone to reap the large man of his consciousness.



Rio left the unconscious man lying there and began pursuing the other men who had fled. The men were sprinting as fast as their legs would allow, but Rio could run at a speed far surpassing any human.

There was no way for the fleeing men to get away.

“Eeek!”

“S-Save me!”

They all screamed, before Rio caught up to another one from behind and knocked him unconscious.

“Gah, I’m starting to feel bad for them...” Rei watched the scene on the road from across the wild plains and gave the adventurers a pitying look.

“Don’t—they brought this upon themselves. There’s no need for compassion. If anything, they should be grateful to Haruto for not taking their lives.”

Sara sniffed as she looked around at the men lying unconscious on the ground. Indeed, all the men scattered about were only knocked out—none were dead.

“...Indeed. Their motives for attacking us were what they were, after all.” Christina had watched the events happen with a blank expression on her face, but at Sara’s statement she returned to herself and agreed with a huff of laughter.

“Yes. And it seems there are some people who are still conscious as well,” Sara said, looking at the small man Rio first sent flying and the two men that were caught up in that exchange.

“...?!” The three men had been feigning their unconsciousness on the ground and flinched when Sara saw through their act.

“Haruto’s on his way back, so let’s have a nice, long chat,” Orphia said, looking at the road. There, Rio was walking along, dragging the men who had fled earlier behind him.



Several minutes later, Rio gathered all the unconscious men into one spot and

removed their weapons, then tied their feet together with rope so they couldn't run away.

Meanwhile, the three men that remained conscious had completely lost their will to fight, kneeling on the ground beside the others and huddling to themselves.

"All right, let's hear what you have to say. We were attacked for a charge we have no recollection of, so this has been quite bothersome to us," Rio stated, looking down at them.

"Of course, Sir! We'll answer any questions you have!" the small man said cooperatively, looking to win Rio's favor. The dramatic change in his attitude made the others—mainly the women—look upon him with pitying gazes.

Rio looked at the man in exasperation, but having him in fear was more convenient, so he began questioning him about the wanted notice in a flat tone. "Where did you get that notice in the first place? I checked the board in town, but I didn't see anything like that."

"Of course it wouldn't be in town—it was only issued in Cleia a few days ago. An adventurer working for a nobleman brought it here," the small man answered with a laugh.

"From Cleia... An adventurer working for a nobleman? What kind of man was he?" Was it Reiss? Rio had that suspicion in mind as he asked.

"He was around 30 or so. Confident, muscular... He had the aura of a veteran adventurer. Well, he'd still be no match for you, Sir." That was a very different impression of Reiss, whose slender build was clear even through his cloak.

"...What was his name?"

"Ah, as embarrassing as it is to admit, everyone was too blinded by the bounty to ask... Oh, but one of the criminals on the notice—who obviously isn't you, Sir—is probably related to the nobleman that hired the adventurer, I believe."

"Someone on the notice is related to the noble?" When he heard that, the first person that came to mind was Celia.

"Yes, that's what he said. The nobleman didn't want his relative to die, so he hired the adventurer to find them before the notice made its rounds in the general public. When the adventurer arrived at this post town, he asked us to report to him if anyone matching the features on the notice passed by. He said he'd be back in a few days to check. Ah, but he hasn't shown up yet, by the way."

"...And you accepted that request."

The small man laughed awkwardly. "Yep. Received a hefty advance payment for it."

"If that's the truth, then you attacking us doesn't make any sense. Your job was just to make a report, right? Wouldn't attacking us be a complete contradiction to the man's request?"

"W-Well, you see, we were blinded by the reward of 500 gold coins. You also went and made an enemy out of the big guy knocked out over there, plus you have so many pretty ladies in tow with you, Sir... Right?"

The small man turned to his two accomplices, awkwardly passing the baton to them.

"Hehe..."

Both men tried to laugh it off awkwardly as the stares of the women grew increasingly cold.

"...In other words, you attacked us out of your own self-interest?" Rio confirmed.

"Y-Yes, I guess that would be the case. We're very ashamed of ourselves, yes." The small man nodded, nodding his head over and over.

Rio thought for a few seconds. "I see... That's enough. You do what you want. We're not the people wanted on the notice, but you can report whatever you believe." He had memorized the text already, so he returned the wanted notice to them too.

"...Huh? R-Really?" The men blinked in confusion.

"I already said I don't want my companions witnessing anyone dying. That

being said, we don't want to get involved in any more trouble, so we'll be leaving now. Let's go, everyone." Rio left behind those plain words before looking around at the others and prompting their departure. He took the lead and began to walk down the road to the west, with Celia and the others in tow. They glanced at the men as they left, but no one said anything as they walked.

"...H-Have we been saved?"

The men looked on blankly as the party disappeared down the western road.



Meanwhile, as soon as Rio stepped off the field and back onto the road. He beckoned Orphia away from the others and over to him. "Orphia, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, what is it?" Orphia cocked her head and asked.

"Is Ariel watching our surroundings right now?" Christina's group didn't know about Ariel, so he asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes. Ariel's flying in physical form and watching the ground from above."

"Have there been any reports of suspicious people in this area?"

"Nothing in a one-kilometer radius. Sara and Alma have Hel and Ifrita in their material forms nearby, but they haven't reported anything either, so I think we're okay."

"...If there's nothing on the ground, what about the skies? Is there anything in the air above where Ariel is patrolling?"

"Let me ask... There's nothing resembling a person, it seems. There are some flying animals around, but it's too cloudy to see them clearly."

"...I see."

"Shall we widen our search range?" That would result in the accuracy of their search being reduced, but—

"Please do, just in case. It may just be me overthinking things, but I'm worried."

"Of course. I'll ask right away." Orphia shook her head happily and sent a

message to Ariel immediately. Rio went up to the others while she did so.

"There are some things I've realized through that conversation with them, so let's share some information before we step off the road and turn back east," he said. "I first thought the features on the wanted notice were similar to us by coincidence, but the more details I hear, the more I think it's *too* similar to be dismissed as a mere coincidence. Which is why I currently suspect either Charles or Reiss had a hand in that notice."

"...I agree," Christina said with a thoughtful look.

"If we consider either Charles or Reiss' involvement in the notice as fact, then there's three new points that we have to take note of. The first is that the wanted notice was drawn up in Cleia. The second is that someone related to nobility is included among the wanted. And the third is that the noble hired an adventurer to secure their relative as soon as possible in order to save their life." Rio folded a finger on his right hand each time he listed off a point.

"When added together, those three points seem to be pointing to Professor Celia," Christina noted truthfully.

"It does seem that way..." Celia said worriedly.

"Yes. However, I felt the third point was clearly something that Count Claire would never do."

"...May I ask why you think that?" Celia asked worriedly.

"Count Claire would have placed his bets on you running away safely. There's no way he would drag you back in front of Charles, whom he hates quite a bit," Christina stated plainly.

*Indeed, he did say he'd rather see Celia spend the rest of her life single than give her to that bastard.* Rio recalled Count Claire's radical remark with a huff of laughter.

Celia also chuckled happily in relief. "Yes, that's true."

"For the same reason, I cannot imagine Count Claire would leak information about us to Charles. That's why I don't believe Charles obtained the information for the second point through Count Claire. He wouldn't know about Sara and

the others either,” Rio added.

“Right. If anything, it’d make more sense for Reiss to tell Charles about Professor Celia’s presence. But...”

“If Charles had our information, that wouldn’t explain why the wanted notice was written so vaguely, would it?”

“Indeed. As the head of the search party, there would be no reason for Charles concealing information and putting such a half-hearted charge on the notice. Which leaves only one of two possibilities.”

“Either the wanted notice matches us by coincidence or Reiss fabricated it alone. Is that correct?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Christina nodded, satisfied at how smoothly her opinion matched up with Rio’s.

“...It’s impressive how you determine that so certainly with such a small amount of information.”

“Yeah, I only understood half of what was said just now,” Kouta said.

“Maybe you need to try a little harder there...” Rei noted.

“Her Highness has been famed for her sharp insight and prodigious intelligence since she was young. This much is only natural,” Vanessa said proudly.

Christina thought for a moment, frowning. “It’s no big deal. Supposing that the wanted notice was Reiss’ fabrication, there are still vital points we don’t know. For example, why Reiss knew Professor Celia is accompanying us right now, when he realized this, and so on.”

“...If the Reiss we know is the same person as the Proxia Empire ambassador, he may have attended the wedding where I took Celia through Charles’ invitation. It wouldn’t have been strange for him to witness that then,” Rio guessed.

“I see. Then it wouldn’t be strange for him to know that Sir Amakawa is traveling together with Professor Celia, and he could be familiar with your faces

that way. It's definitely a possibility," Christina nodded with a hum.

"Yes. The reason why the notice was so vague may be because Reiss doesn't want Charles to know that his aim is you, Your Highness. And he didn't write anything about our real names because he didn't know them. Such an explanation would make sense," Rio added.

Christina's expression twisted bitterly. "That means Reiss is aiming for my life for an unrelated reason to Charles."

"Most likely," Rio nodded.

"...But what can we do?" Vanessa asked with a look of unease. "If the possibility of Princess Christina's life being in danger has increased, then..."

"Nothing will change with what we're doing. The increased risk of being targeted by Reiss means we'll have to exercise more caution, but we have no choice but to continue moving towards our destination."

They couldn't relax and allow Reiss to catch up to them, so they didn't have the time to be standing around. As they were on the run, they could only move forwards. That was what Rio thought as he wrapped up the conversation.

"Right, of course. We can only keep moving," Vanessa agreed with a sigh.

"Then as planned, let's continue going west before making an about-turn east," Rio suggested.

*Using adventurers like that and writing such a vague wanted notice... It seems rather sloppy, almost like traces of him keep coming in and out of view...*

Though he'd summed up his thoughts, he still felt a strange sense of restlessness. But he didn't want to jump to conclusions based on assumptions, and thinking about it wasn't going to get him any answers. It could just be him being overly cautious.

"Yes. Let us hurry."

Christina seemed to feel a little uneasy, but she understood the need to move forwards. Her expression was tense with determination.

Thus, the group stepped off the road and headed above the valley in order to turn back towards the eastern border.

## Interlude: Another Secret Talk

Meanwhile, right after Rio had asked Orphia to widen Ariel's alert range...

Far above, in the skies and several kilometers away, two people observed Rio and the others. One was Arein, the man who had given the wanted notice to the adventurers, mounted upon a griffin. The other was Reiss, who had received a report from Arein the night before and made his way here. He was floating of his own accord without a griffin.

As for why the two of them were here—Arein had been hiding in the vicinity ever since he gave the adventurers the request and left, sometimes mounting his griffin to watch over who was in town and who was detouring around it. The moment he spotted Rio and the others staying overnight at the post town, he headed to Reiss to give his report.

Now, at Reiss' direction, he observed Rio's group from behind the clouds a far distance away.

"...Is there really a need to be this far away?" Arein asked dubiously, wondering if Reiss was taking this far too seriously. From this distance, the party looked like grains of rice even with his physical body enhanced through his enchanted sword. He would lose sight of them easily if he wasn't careful.

"Yes, there is," Reiss nodded without hesitation. "The bird circling above them is especially problematic. You should assume that a half kilometer radius around them is within their detection range. You'll be detected instantly if you try anything suspicious like trailing them, so you should hide yourself in the clouds and retreat as soon as that bird looks like it's coming close. Understood?"

"...Yes, I understand." Arein nodded stiffly, his tone short, as though he was bracing himself for something.

"Good—continue to monitor him. I shall call Lucci and Ven over while I'm on my way to Charles. Do you have any questions?" Reiss asked.

“...It isn’t really an important question, but there is something I’ve been curious about. Don’t you think that wanted notice made them more wary of us—or rather, of you, Master Reiss?”

“Naturally. Princess Christina is a given, but that grey-haired boy also thinks quick on his feet. They’d naturally arrive at the conclusion that the notice was fabricated by me and conclude that I’m working separately from Charles. That’s why I went out of my way to appear before them and attack the princess, after all,” Reiss confirmed with a pleasant smile.

“Is that all right?”

“Yes. The more I instil the impression that my scheming is separate from Charles, the more their caution will be directed towards me. That’s what gives my upcoming collusion with Charles meaning... It makes it easier to outsmart them.”

“...I see,” Arein gulped.

“The real fun starts here. Make sure you avoid their detection by all means. I’m counting on you, Arein.” Reiss then departed, leaving those words behind.

“He’s a terrifying ally to have, honestly,” Arein muttered with a stiff face.



That night, in a guest building on the Count Claire estate, Charles was seated in the office being used as the headquarters of the search, a displeased look on his face. Before him were the knights under his command.

“5000 personnel were deployed these last few days, yet not a single clue was obtained.”

“...Please excuse our failure.”

The knights before Charles lowered their heads. They were the commanders of each search party.

“If you’re so sorry, then show me results. The search range widens with every day that passes, after all,” Charles stated with an unhappy snort.

*Damn it. Where are they hiding? If they purchased several horses to increase their travel speed, they’d be traced right away. If they’re moving by foot, then*

*we've checked every road and town within a walkable range. The aerial unit is on the lookout from the skies. There's no way a sheltered princess and two untrained boys could last long sneaking through the mountains or woods...*

His impatience rose violently within him. But, just then—

*Knock, knock.*

“...Enter,” Charles ordered with a sullen look of displeasure.

“Sir Charles. Jean Bernard, who visited the other day, has made another visit...” the security guard that entered reported nervously.

“...What?” Charles frowned reluctantly for a moment, but he soon stood up. “Guh, fine. I’ll be right there. Show him to the drawing room.”

“Yes, Sir!” The soldier immediately turned back around.

“The rest of you return to your positions. Report immediately if anything happens,” Charles ordered the remaining knights, leaving to head for the drawing room.

“Sir Charles, Jean Bernard is here.”

Reiss entered the room less than a minute later, led by a security guard. Charles stood up once the door closed, leaving the two of them alone.

“Welcome, Lord Reiss.” Charles stood up, a smile pasted on his face as he offered slightly awkward words of welcome.

“Why, thank you. I’m sorry to be bothering you so frequently, Sir Charles,” Reiss replied with an unreadable smile.

“No, I don’t mind. Has something happened?”

“Well, like I said before, I thought the city seemed rather heavily guarded. There was a loud commotion early in the morning just the other day.”

“...As I stated the other day, there were felons on the run.”

“I see,” Reiss said with a cheerful smile. The awkward one was Charles. After the wedding incident with Celia, it wasn’t easy for him to admit Christina had escaped. Doing so could make his position even worse.

“...Have you been in Cleia this entire time, Lord Reiss? May I ask what your

business is here? I believe you previously said you were pursuing someone,” Charles asked, watching Reiss’ expression to probe into his true intentions.

He considered Reiss to be a dear friend, their friendship crossing kingdom borders thanks to his distinguished efforts in the revival of the Duke Arbor house. That’s why he trusted him, but he was still curious when it came to matters involving his own kingdom. It was difficult to inquire into, but he decided to ask anyway in order to brush off the awkwardness.

“Oh, no. I’m here today because I had something to discuss—or rather, suggest,” Reiss started.

“...A suggestion?” Charles questioned dubiously.

“I am aware of the fact that Princess Christina has disappeared,” Reiss stated calmly.

“Guh... W-Where did you hear such a thing?” Charles was startled. He was nearly at a loss for words, asking his question in a high-pitched voice.

“I understand your anxiety, but did you think I wouldn’t notice after all this commotion?”

“F-Forgive me. But I will definitely catch her and bring her back,” Charles stammered with a panicked face.

“Indeed, it would be an inconvenience for us too if you didn’t. The Arbor family is an important business partner for the future, after all.”

“R-Right, I shall exert every effort. They shouldn’t have gotten too far away.”

“On the contrary, Princess Christina is already fairly close to Rodania now.”

“...Huh?” Charles was stunned. Reiss’ words just now made it sound like he was aware of Christina’s current location.

“The truth is, I’ve managed to pin down her location. My subordinate is currently observing their movements,” Reiss said smoothly.

“O-Ooh! My goodness! As expected of you... what tremendous efficiency!” Charles raved in praise of the man before him.

*You’re simply too incompetent, that’s all.* But that was what made him easy to

manipulate, Reiss thought, concealing his contempt.

“However, a slight problem has arisen. Several powerful guards have joined up with Princess Christina, making it difficult to make a move carelessly,” he said sadly.

“Powerful guards, you say?”

“Think four enchanted sword wielders.”

“Wha...” Charles was rendered speechless. Having four with you was considered the minimum requirement for escort personnel, but for all of them to wield enchanted swords... It was an excessive amount of combat strength to protect a single person.

“I’ve prepared at least three enchanted sword wielders on my side just in case, but there are differences in abilities even between fellow wielders. One of the four on their side is particularly troublesome—enough so that I wish to avoid a head-on battle at all costs.”

“W-Wait! Hold on a moment!” Charles objected in a fluster from the torrent of information coming from Reiss.

“What is it?”

“Four enchanted sword wielders is impossible! That’s enough power to take on an army. Where would Princess Christina gather such personnel from?!” Charles asked in a flurry.

“You should recognise the name of one of them. The other three are his companions.”

“It’s someone I know?”

“Haruto Amakawa. The boy who was appointed honorary knight of Galarc just the other day.”

When Haruto’s name came up, Charles’ expression changed. “Wha... I-Indeed, I did receive reports of him interacting with Princess Christina several times during the banquet... D-Don’t tell me she made the request then?!”

*Not quite. He’s also the person who snatched Celia Claire away from you, and she was probably the figure that tied them together. Although I’ll keep that part*

*quiet to prevent things from getting unnecessarily complicated, Reiss thought, sneering on the inside.*

“I’m not aware of the details myself, but there was the rumor he drove back a demi-dragon’s breath in a single blow of his enchanted sword, no? That rumor was by no means an exaggeration. On top of that, he has three other enchanted sword wielders as companions. Because of this, the Proxia Empire has been secretly observing his movements. The person I was chasing was actually him—and my, what a surprise it was once I caught up to him. There he was, acting as Princess Christina’s guard.” He presented a plausible outline of events with the truth mixed in.

“I-Is that so? Hmm...” Charles hummed with a solemn look.

“He’s been using the physical enhancement of his enchanted sword to travel, and will cross the border into the Galarc Kingdom in a matter of days at this rate. Once he does, your people won’t be able to engage and Princess Christina will safely flee to Rodania.”

“That means they’ve already left the search range we had predicted, huh? Tch, no wonder we couldn’t find them.” Charles ground his teeth.

“The situation is already more harrowing than I thought. Thus, I came to make this suggestion: shall we unite our forces? The enchanted sword wielders on my side are no match for Sir Alfred Emarle’s skill, but they are powerful enough to hold their own. If we work together, we should be able to prevent Princess Christina’s escape. I’ve prepared a plan already, too.”

Reiss presented his proposal with a pleasant smile.

## Chapter 4: Before the Border

Three days had passed since the adventurers at the post town picked a fight with Rio and the others. They had proceeded even further east and were finally approaching the border of Galarc.

Before noon, the group had arrived at a walled city that functioned as a line of defense near the kingdom's border. However, before everyone entered the city, Rio went alone to check on the state of things. Celia and the rest of the group hid themselves in the forest off the road to the west gate of the city and waited for Rio's return. They prepared a slightly early lunch and started eating, when Rio silently appeared near them, calling out to them first so as not to scare them.

"Sorry for the wait."

For the record, Sara and Alma's contract spirits Hel and Ifrita were watching the area on the ground in their spirit forms, and Orphia's contract spirit Ariel was on alert in material form in the air, so they would have noticed Rio's approach. Ariel was the only one in material form because being in material form provided far greater physical abilities, such as the ability to see greater distances, increasing their search capabilities.

Celia ran up to Rio once she spotted him. "Welcome back, Haruto. How was it?"

"There was no wanted notice on the bulletin board of this city, either. I didn't see any search party personnel performing any searches, but it is a walled city. There are quite a few soldiers on patrol," Rio reported.

Incidentally, they had passed through numerous cities and towns on their way to this walled city, but none of them had had the same notice.

"If a walled city on the border doesn't even have the wanted notice, then there's no doubt that the notice from the post town was completely fabricated," Christina declared, sighing. It was good to get more accurate

information, but said information wasn't exactly pleasant to hear.

"In other words, Reiss predicted that we would pass through that post town. He should have received information about us turning back west through the adventurers we let go, but who knows how much that can fool him..." Rio furrowed his brows solemnly.

"However, if we look at it from another angle, that means our actual enemy is Reiss alone. That much is certain after the lack of search parties in the places we've stopped at up until this point." Vanessa gave a positive analysis contrary to the pessimistic Christina and Rio. However, Christina reacted to that with a solemn look to match Rio's.

"Perhaps that may be true for Charles, but..."

The problem was Reiss. Since the incident at the post town, things had gone smoothly—too smoothly. It made Christina feel uneasy about whether they could really make it to Rodania safely.

Rio also had a bad feeling about how well things were going.

"...For now, our shortest goal is to cross the kingdom border before us. We'll head for the border through the shortest route so that we don't have to worry about the search party anymore. If we depart now, we should be able to cross the border within the day easily," he suggested to everyone. Once they passed the walled city before them, there were no more post towns or walled cities until the border.

There was only a short distance left.

*No matter what happens, we'll move forward. Whatever Reiss has planned doesn't change what we need to do,* Rio thought to refocus his mind.



After their discussion, Rio and the others headed for the walled city. Ever since the incident at the post town, they were wary of the possibility that Charles and the pursuit party knew how many of them there were. They usually split up into groups of two before going through the gates of the towns and cities they stopped at, but this time they chose to enter the city as a group of nine.

If they could pass through the gate like this without a problem, that would mean they had conclusive proof that the pursuit party led by Charles was still unaware that Christina was running with a group of nine people.

"We made it," Celia said in relief once they entered the city without incident.

"Well, that's only natural. Charles probably thinks we've only traveled half as far as we actually have. The fact the gatekeepers are still checking hair colors makes me think we've outsmarted them completely," Vanessa said, looking around at the city. The inside of the walls wasn't strictly guarded, bustling with people in what seemed to be the picture of serenity.

Rio walked at the head of the party with Celia close beside him, followed by Christina and Vanessa, then Kouta and Rei, and finally Sara, Orphia, and Alma in a long line as they proceeded from the west of the main street to the east. Out of caution for the presence of the pursuit party, Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei covered their faces with hoods. Everyone else had their hoods down as they walked.

Celia and the spirit folk girls' appearances did draw attention, but there were many pedestrians, so the most people could manage was a double or triple take. There were some people who bumped into others and couples that bickered briefly about it, but it was mostly uneventful.

Thus, they walked straight down the main street from the west gate to the east gate and stepped out onto the road.

After leaving the east gate, Rio stared down the road to the border and turned to the party. "All right, let's go. We should cross the border in about an hour's time on foot. Our formation will be the same as usual: I'll take the lead and Sara's group will surround Her Highness and Celia."

Rio, Sara, Orphia and Alma formed a diamond formation and walked with caution directed in every direction.

The weather was clear, so there were others leaving the east gate to head for the kingdom border just like them. Their view of their surroundings was clear, but in ten minutes' time, the city behind them could no longer be seen.

*There's surprisingly few people heading from Galarc to Beltrum. Well, with the*

*kingdom being in the state it is, I doubt many would come here voluntarily...* Rio thought to himself. When he looked around them, all he could see were the adventurers that had left the walled city at practically the same time as them.

Suddenly, four adventurers appeared in front of them, walking from the opposite direction. Three were armed with swords, and the fourth was a slender man whose face was covered by a hood.

“Everyone, please keep to the left,” Rio directed the party. It was polite to stick to one side of the road so that others could pass along the other side in cases like this; it was a worldly wisdom that prevented a lot of trouble when people were traveling.

However, the slender, hooded man purposefully cut in front of them and stopped them from moving any further.

“...Please halt,” Rio ordered the party without turning to look. Celia and the others behind him came to a complete stop. Meanwhile, the three remaining men on the other side started surrounding their group.

“Why, what a coincidence this is,” the hooded man said. His voice was familiar.

“Reiss, huh?” Rio immediately drew the sword at his waist and glared at Reiss. Sara and the others behind him had also drawn their weapons, pointing them at the three male adventurers who similarly had their swords drawn.

“Oh? You’re less surprised than I expected,” Reiss said, wide-eyed.

“We knew from that wanted notice that you were trying to locate us. We tried to camouflage our route, but we were prepared to be attacked at any moment.”

“Haha, I see. You really are a terrifying person.”

“You don’t look like you actually think that in the slightest.”

“That’s not true. I find you scary.”

“...You showed yourself rather boldly, if that was true. Is your aim Princess Christina’s life?” Rio asked flatly with a cold glare.

“Hehe.” A fearless smile tugged at Reiss’ mouth.

"There's something I want to ask you before I defeat you here."

There was no point in asking anything else. Rio braced his sword.

"Is it about our captain, Lucius? Or is it about your past... Oh my, that's dangerous." Reiss chuckled with scorn. However, Rio slashed at him mid-sentence, making him take a large leap backwards.

"There's no telling what you're scheming, after all. I'll listen to what you have to say after I beat you." Rio glared at Reiss sharply.

"Now, don't be like that. I've even gone and brought out members of the Heavenly Lions for you today. They're the subordinates of that man you're so familiar with, and they're all quite skilled. I'm sure they'll be a good match for your girls," Reiss said casually, looking at Arein, Lucci, and Ven who were all glaring at Sara and the others.

"That's right. Play with us a little, ladies," Lucci said to Alma, whom he was facing.

"Don't play around. Act seriously," Ven said, facing Orphia.

"So, you're my opponent. You sure seem strong." Arein laughed boldly as he taunted Sara.

"..."

The girls didn't respond to their taunts, and instead silently watched for their opponent's first moves. The two sides were roughly five meters apart. They knew that whoever stepped forward first would mark the immediate start of the battle.

*Training and ability aside, Sara and the girls are overwhelmingly lacking in combat experience against people who have intentions to kill. Their opponents are humans that will kill without hesitation. We also have to protect Professor Celia and Princess Christina on our side. Depending on their abilities, we may be forced into a tough fight.*

In this situation, Rio couldn't wander too far from Celia or Christina. He put several meters distance between himself and Reiss, thinking about Sara and the others behind him.

“Four capable fighters glaring at each other. Well, a situation like this would inevitably end in a stalemate. However, what if we had more allies on our side?” Reiss said with a grin.

*What...?* Rio furrowed his brows dubiously. The only ones there were Rio, Reiss, and their respective parties. Other than that—

*Don’t tell me...*

The adventurers who had left the walled city at the same time as them were still there. They had been watching when Rio and the others were suddenly caught in a tense situation on the road, but Rio anticipated that these men were the allies Reiss just mentioned. There were roughly ten of them.

“All right! Everyone, charge!” Lucci yelled.

“*Augendae Corporis!* Raaaah!” The men on the road all chanted a spell at once, drawing their swords and began charging toward the formation Rio’s party had set up.

“Wha?!” The party was taken aback. Among them, the first one to react was Rio.

“What?!” He cut in front of the adventurers closest to him, swinging his sword to create a huge gale to blow the men away.

“Sara, Orphia, Alma! Take Celia and Her Highness through the gaps in their formation and go on ahead! I’ll handle this!” he ordered.

“But...” Sara and the others hesitated.

“Like I’d let you!” Lucci yelled as he slashed at Rio.

“Silence.” Rio flicked his sword horizontally towards Lucci. The two of them clashed, sword against sword.

“W-Whoa... Oh, damn!” Lucci’s body was easily blown ten meters away. If he hadn’t been holding an enchanted sword and had his body enhanced with sorcery, the force would have cut his sword and torso in half.

“Is this guy for real? Just what kind of body enhancement sorcery is he using?” Lucci gave a stiff smile as he shook it off. The charging adventurers who witnessed the blow came to an abrupt halt.

"Hey! What are you slacking off for?! You'll be killed!" Arein yelled suddenly. While they were standing around, Rio had already moved on to target the next adventurer, sending several men flying away with another blast of wind.

"Quickly, everyone!" Rio ordered Sara.

"E-Everyone, this way! Alma, Orphia, you two take the rear!" Sara snapped to her senses and started rushing through the gaps Rio made in the enemy circle. Celia and the others followed her.

"Lucci, Ven! Don't let your guard down. This is the guy that got the better of our leader. You'll die if you're not careful! Use everything you've got! *Augendae Corporis!*" Arein yelled, chanting a spell before charging at Rio. A physical body enhancement via spirit arts and a physical ability enchantment through magic or sorcery. Normally, it was impossible for the latter to surpass the former in terms of physical abilities, but—

"Uh..." Rio briefly gazed in wonder. Arein's speed had been dramatically increased with *Augendae Corporis*. In fact, it was a speed on par with a body strengthening spirit art that would've used up a fair amount of magic essence.

*It's not just a normal Augendae Corporis?* Rio thought, receiving Arein's attack.

"Blocking that with such a composed look..." Arein's expression was strained.

"*Augendae Corporis!*" Lucci and Ven both chanted. A geometric-patterned magic circle appeared, wrapping around their bodies.

"I hate how this makes my whole body ache!"

"It's better than dying!"

Lucci and Ven both charged at Rio from different directions.

Their speeds were equivalent to Arein. Lucci must have also enhanced his physical body with his enchanted sword earlier, as his current speed was significantly faster.

"The three of us will hold this guy back! All of you, catch the ones that got away!" Lucci ordered the remaining adventurers. They began pursuing Sara and the others.

*So they've enhanced their physical abilities with magic on top of strengthening their bodies with their enchanted swords...*

Rio found it to be reckless. It was a so-called double enchantment—sure, doing so would allow them to surpass the physical ability boost that the enchanted sword allowed them, but it would place a huge burden on their bodies.

However, the effect was remarkable, as it allowed Arein, Lucci, and Ven to press Rio back when they teamed up.

"Master Reiss, we can't last long over here!" Arein yelled. Rio used the faint moment of distraction from Arein and the others to slip past them, rushing over to the adventurers pursuing Celia's group in an instant. However—

"I won't let you do that." Reiss moved at an equally impressive speed, firing several high-speed balls of light towards Rio, who was closing in on the adventurers.

"Guh..." Rio swung his sword, erasing the ball of light. However, Reiss' attack didn't end there. Without even chanting a spell, he continued to freely create balls of light and fire them towards Rio. The orbs rained down like a storm, but Rio weaved between them in a zigzag trajectory to magnificently evade them all.

"Goodness me, what a tremendous reaction speed," Reiss muttered in awe. Then, Arein, Lucci, and Ven appeared.

"My apologies, Master Reiss," Arein apologized.

"This won't do. You have to hold him here properly," Reiss said in exasperation.

"The bastard started moving at a ridiculous speed," said Lucci.

"He's manipulating the wind to accelerate. From what I can see, it appears to be an application of flying spirit arts, but it is quite the reckless approach. The slightest mistake could send you hurtling into an obstacle for quite a lot of damage, so you'd need a powerful body enhancement going at the same time—it's not a technique I'd consider possible for a human to use. Let's see, if I were to try it..."

Reiss trailed off and disappeared instantly. The next moment—

“Wha?!”

Rio also disappeared.

The destination of the two who had disappeared was where Celia and the others were currently fleeing. They were over 50 meters away, but they traveled that distance in an instant.

Rio barely managed to get in front of Reiss and wedged himself before the group. Once he did, Reiss came to a sudden stop as well.

“W-When did he...”

They had been running with their physical abilities enchanted by magic. Yet, Rio and Reiss had suddenly appeared from behind them, which came as a shock to Kouta and Rei. Christina and Vanessa also stared, wide-eyed.

“Ah, it seems like I’m no match in terms of speed, as expected. That aside, are you really human?” Reiss ignored the shock of Christina and the others as he looked at Rio with a cool expression.

“What does that make you, then?” Rio asked back plainly.

“Haha.” Reiss laughed eerily. Arein, Lucci, and Ven all caught up once again.

“Wouldn’t it have been better for you to take on this bastard from the start, Master Reiss?” Arein asked tiredly.

“In all probability, I would have lost. But, well, I suppose that isn’t a bad idea,” Reiss boasted in an arrogant tone.

“...” Rio remained silent as he stared at Reiss with a sharp gaze.

“My, my. I thought I had grabbed you by surprise with my movement technique just now, but it seems we’re back at square one. What a terrifying person indeed.” Reiss shook his head in disappointment.

“Orphia, please take Celia and the others and go on ahead. Alma and I will remain here to support Haruto,” Sara ordered as she stood alongside Rio. She held a dagger in each hand and was braced for battle.

“Got it.” With a nod, Alma held her mace in her hand at the ready and stood

beside Rio, too.

“Sara...” Rio frowned apologetically.

“Reiss’ power seems to be equal to the higher-ranked warriors of our village. And those three men over there can put up a fair fight against Haruto. It only makes sense for us to remain here, in case all four of them try to attack at the same time,” Sara said firmly.

“...Thank you. Could the two of you lend me your strength, then? I’ll take on Reiss,” Rio said gratefully to them, lifting his sword.

“Of course. Alma and I will handle the rest,” Sara said. Arein and the others furrowed their brows at being lumped together with the group of adventurers.

“Orphia, I entrust Celia and Her Highness to you. Cross the border if you can.”

“Yes, leave it to me! Let’s go, everyone!” Orphia said, urging Celia and Christina and the others to depart again. Celia turned back for a brief moment.

“Haruto, Sara, Alma! Win!” she said.

“Of course.”

“Yes!”

The three shouted back. At that, Celia turned and ran after Orphia, with Kouta and Rei in tow. Christina stopped to say something to them, but—

“Princess Christina, hurry!” Vanessa urged.

“...Right.” Christina began running with a somewhat pained expression.

“Good grief,” Reiss said, smiling for some reason. “Arein, Lucci, Ven, and everyone else. Please entertain those ladies over there. It’s irritating, but I shall take on the boy,” he said.

“Right. Now that we’ve been treated as the accessories, our reputation is on the line,” Arein said with a hostile expression.

“Let’s teach them some manners,” Lucci agreed.

“I’m relying on you, then,” Reiss said, before suddenly disappearing once again. Immediately afterwards—

*Above.*

Rio followed Reiss's movements and leaped up into the sky. One beat later, a violent exchange of blows began in the air, rumbling with a tremendous sound.

"Wow, he's one outrageous monster. I can see why the captain was seriously wounded." Lucci looked up at the sky in exasperation.

"I've always thought we hadn't seen Master Reiss' true potential, but to think it was this much..." Ven muttered in reverence.

"Don't tell me you two are on par with that monster, too." Arein looked at Sara and Alma.

"Rest assured, the two of us are weaker than Rio," Sara noted.

"Indeed," Alma agreed.

"However, we're not weak enough to lose to you," Sara added, provoking Arein and his group.

"Hmm..."

"Let's see, then..."

Without any signal at all, Arein and Lucci leaped at Sara and Alma simultaneously. They closed the distance in one bound and slashed at the two of them.

"Hah!" Sara used her two daggers while Alma used her mace to parry the attacks.

"Ha, so you CAN put up a fight!" Lucci smiled with hostility.

"Do you have the leisure to be smiling?" Alma asked plainly, putting her weight into her mace.

The clash of their weapons sent Lucci flying. He soared several meters through the air and landed on the ground, wincing as he yelled. "W-What?! Whoa there... H-Hey hey, this tiny brat has just as much brute strength as that bastard!"

Elder dwarves were born with musculature that differed from humans. Even the petite and dainty Alma had enough hidden strength to far surpass the large-

framed Lucci.

“How savage.” Alma gripped her mace and went to pursue Lucci, but—

“I won’t let you! Ngh!” Ven intervened to stop Alma’s advance. However, after seeing the brute strength that she displayed with Lucci earlier, he decided to parry the heavy blow by leaping backwards. Even then, he grimaced at the burden placed on his arms.

“You don’t seem to have as much power as that tiny one,” Arein analyzed while exchanging blows with Sara.

“That’s right. My strength is in my speed, so.” Sara nodded without showing any vexation and stepped back. Then, she stepped to the right.

“Hah, I can see you clearly, though! ...What?!”

Arein responded to Sara’s movements and tried to cut around her with a smug smile. But before he knew it, Sara had stepped to the left, luring Arein’s body into reflexively heading left. Using that brief opening, Sara stepped right once again and slashed at Arein.



“Even if you can see me, that means nothing if your reactions are delayed.” As a silver wolf werebeast, Sara’s natural body surpassed that of a human’s in flexibility and agility.

*Tch, so annoying. Shit!*

Arein suddenly braced his sword and retreated while sticking to defensive tactics. He fell back further, unable to handle all the blows.

“Whoa! Guh!”

Sara released a blow with the pommel of the dagger, catching him in the left arm as she used power surpassing that of a physical body enchantment. He tried to step sideways to parry the blow, but failed and landed on the ground, rolling onto his knees.

“Hey, Lucci! Ven! Facing them one-on-one isn’t working in our favor. Let’s switch this up into a three-on-two!” Arein said.

“I was just thinking the same!” Lucci and Ven promptly ran towards him.

“All of you! Stop standing around and surround the brats! Back us up!” Arein called out to the adventurers around them; they immediately began surrounding Sara and Alma.

“As disgraceful as it is, the moment they knew they couldn’t win alone, they relied on their surroundings,” Alma said, half-impressed and half-exasperated.

“We’re mercenaries, after all. We’re fine with a bit of shame here and there in the name of money. Our lives are precious to us, you see. We don’t take on battles we can’t win fair and square,” Lucci said with a snort.

“Anyway, our weapons are unfortunately enchanted sword knock-offs. We can only use them for physical body enhancement, and the collateral of using double enhancements is wearing on us. I can see your weapons are quite sharp. You’re still hiding more abilities, aren’t you? Just like that bastard above.” Arein glanced up while he spoke. Blasts of wind were whipping about the skies above, crossing paths with countless balls of light.

“Even if we did, we wouldn’t need to use them against you people,” Sara stated plainly.

"Hmm. Arrogant brat." Arein frowned hatefully.

"Let's go! Dragging this out is only going to hurt us in the end, since we're suffering the effects of the double enhancement! Cheat as much as you need to!"

With that order, the group charged at Sara and Alma.



Meanwhile, as the fight continued on between Rio, Reiss, and the others...

"Hah, hah!" Celia, Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei were running after Orphia with the border of the kingdom almost within their sights. Their view was blocked, but once they crossed the hill before them, they would reach the tranquil mountains that served as the kingdom's border.

However—

*What is this bad feeling I'm getting...?* Orphia felt nervous for some reason. Reiss was being kept occupied by Rio, and Ariel was flying in the skies above, searching for any other weird enemies nearby, so there was no need for her to feel as such.

There were no enemies pursuing them from behind, and there were no signs of the enemy to their sides, either. Ariel decided to go on ahead to make sure there were no threats ahead of them.

"...Stop!" Orphia immediately came to a screeching halt as Ariel crossed over the hill; Celia and the others behind her naturally did the same.

"W-What's wrong, Orphia?" Celia asked, panting for breath.

"We have to turn back..." Orphia said with a rare look of panic in her eyes.

"T-Turn back? But Reiss and the others are behind us... What's over there?" Celia asked in confusion.

"It's..."

An outrageous number of soldiers was waiting on the other side of the hill. A thousand—no, two thousand, three thousand? Or more? There were too many to count, and they were marching right towards them.

“The enemy is over the hill—a lot of them,” Orphia said.

“How can you tell?” Vanessa asked in confusion.

“Umm, it’s the ability of my bow.” She couldn’t explain that it was her contract spirit flying around scouting for enemies, so she tried to explain it away as an ability of her enchanted bow. There was no time for a proper explanation; they had to get away immediately.

Then, from far above in the skies, a high pitched call of a bird could be heard. Orphia sensed something was off and looked up.

“This cry...”

It wasn’t Ariel’s familiar cry. Or rather, there were too many of them.

But she had heard this somewhere before...

As she was thinking, the sound of flapping wings also reached her ears. Over fifty griffins descended from the skies to form a semi-circle behind Christina and the others.

“Wha...”

Celia, Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei were rendered speechless.

“...Everyone, please fall back towards the hill,” Orphia said to them, ordering them in the direction where there were no griffins. She knew there was a huge army waiting in that direction, but she had no other choice.

*Ariel, tell Haruto and the others about this situation.*

Orphia was able to handle fifty or so of the average knight by herself, but there was nothing she could do against a rush of thousands of soldiers. Even if she summoned Ariel back to the ground, she knew they’d just be subjected to concentrated fire.

That’s why, in order to survive this situation, they needed Rio and the others. If Rio came, he’d be able to buy them some time.

“It’s no use. My army of 5,000 is waiting that way. There’s no escape,” the man who dismounted from his griffin said triumphantly. It was Charles Arbor—Celia’s former fiance. Furthermore, standing beside him was the kingdom’s

strongest swordsman, Alfred Emarle—Vanessa's older brother.

When Vanessa spotted her brother, she glared at him resentfully from underneath her hood. Alfred ignored her with a cool expression.

"Guh..." When Celia spotted Charles, she hurriedly pulled her hood lower over her head. Christina noticed, and for some reason, removed her own hood and stepped forward.

"Stand down. What do you think you're doing, Charles Arbor?" she questioned using her position as royalty.

"You've played around enough, Princess Christina. You don't need me to spell it out for you, do you? Your father has ordered for your return, so I've come to retrieve you," Charles replied with a surface-thin air of respect.

"Father did?" Christina asked with a scornful smile. She knew that the order was given by none other than the Arbor family itself.

"Indeed. He wants you to return what you took."

"...What is he going on about?"

"Well, if you claim you know nothing, we'll just have to ask your friends. Oh, don't worry—interrogation is my forte. I'll dote upon them carefully until they feel like being honest." With a sadistic smile, Charles looked around at the people beside Christina.

"What a disgusting man..." Christina glared at Charles detestfully.

"What kind of interrogation do you intend on doing? Do you plan on doing the same to my friends?" A pretty blonde boy—the hero, Shigekura Rui, stepped forward and asked Charles.

"Oh, no. Of course, Sir Rui's friends will be exempted from the interrogation. They wouldn't know anything about the item Her Highness took off with anyway," Charles explained to Rui in a slight fluster.

Rui breathed a quiet sigh and called out the names of his friend and upperclassman from the same world. "...Hey, Kouta. Rei, too."

"Rui..." Kouta grimaced, clenching his fists.

“Why... Why did you come after us?! Why are you here?!” he asked Rui in a pained, irritated voice.

“...I’m here because you two left the castle without a word. As your friend, I was worried. Akane and the others are worried too. That’s why I came.” Rui had a pained look on his face as he answered.

“Friend?” At that word, Kouta frowned.

“I consider you a friend... Do you not feel the same?”

“...I do, I suppose,” Kouta agreed bitterly.

“Then, will you return?” Rui asked anxiously.

Kouta hesitated for a moment, then shook his head firmly. “...No.”

Rui hesitated. “...Then I’ll have to bring you back myself,” he said resolutely.

“H-Huh? Why?” Kouta was taken aback.

“You left the castle without a word out of desperation, even when that meant we might have never met again. I’m worried about you. I also promised Akane I’d bring you back. So, that’s what I’ll do... Then, we can all have a proper conversation about it all,” Rui said eloquently.

“...Then there’s even less of a reason for me to return to the castle. My resolve won’t be hindered by a talk,” Kouta refused bitterly.

“...Is that so?” A dark look lit Rui’s expression.

“Sir Rui was filled with terrible grief when his friends suddenly disappeared. That is another result of your selfish actions, Your Highness. Your father has also been terribly worried since you left the castle. Your departure has caused considerable repercussions, influencing our kingdom in a negative way. For the sake of the kingdom, won’t you return to the castle with me immediately?” Charles said with exaggerated sorrow.

“I refuse.” Christina shook her head bluntly.

“...There’s still time to lessen the punishment of those who have deceived you. Vanessa Emarle and the others... the identity of whom, I do not know.”

Charles flashed the implication that the fate of Christina’s accomplices would

be decided by her own response. In explaining so, he looked around at the party's faces and fixed his gaze on Orphia's exposed face. The lecherous look in his eyes was probably due to the elf's beauty.

“...”

Hesitation flashed across Christina's face. If she dauntlessly stood up against Charles here, Celia, Orphia, and Vanessa's situation would be worse. That thought caused her to become indecisive.

“Princess Christina, hinting at the use of hostages is an old trick of Charles’,” Celia said.

“Haruto and the others will definitely come. I'll buy as much time as I can, but everyone should be on the defense,” Orphia said, stepping forward to protect them. She held her bow in her hand, ready to deal with whatever happened.

Vanessa also drew the sword at her waist. “I don't know how much use I will be, but I shall fight, too. The swordsman standing there may be difficult even for Lady Orphia. It may be a challenge, but don't let him get close to you. *Augendae Corporis*—” She stared at her brother, before strengthening her physical abilities with magic.

“Princess Christina, Kouta, Rei—you should get behind me,” Celia said, before standing behind Orphia and Vanessa herself. Then, she braced herself in preparation to use magic at any moment.

“...I don't want to believe this, but are you saying you have no intention of returning?” Charles looked at their battle-ready stances and sneered at Christina in contempt. Sure enough, Christina took a deep breath.

“...Yes, I have no intention of returning to the castle. Feel free to return by yourself,” she said resolutely.

“What a shame. His Majesty has ordered me to bring you back by force if you are uncooperative. I hope you don't end up regretting this... Hey, don't hurt Her Highness and Sir Rui's two friends. And the woman with the bow, too.”

Charles shook his head sadly, then gave orders to Alfred and the knights and sorcerers around him.

Thus, the fierce battle made its spectacular beginning.



Meanwhile, a little further west of the point where Christina and the others were, Sara and Alma were locked in combat with Reiss' men.

Arein, Lucci, and Ven were proving to be a problem. However, the other adventurers also had their physical abilities enchanted with magic, so they couldn't be underestimated. In fact, they weren't just hired adventurers—they were soldiers Reiss had summoned from a mercenary group precisely for this plan. They had the combat strength of the average knight, not to mention their astonishing teamwork.

*"Photon Projectilis!"*

They were currently using rapid-fire magic to focus their attacks on Alma.

"How annoying." Alma evaded the bullets of light and swung her mace, muttering in annoyance. A barrage of this caliber was nothing to her, but it was unpleasant in that it made it difficult for her to move and attack with precision.

"Great—keep that tiny brat in check with magic! We'll take the silver-haired one in the meantime." Arein rattled off orders at the adventurers and attacked Sara, whereas Lucci and Ven had gone around the left and right sides in a fierce attack. Chasing Sara, who took a step back to gain distance, the three of them closed in.

*These three are slower than me, and yet...*

When they attacked all at once, she wasn't able to be on the offensive. Because she was faster than them, she was able to deal with them if she concentrated on simply evading the men. Sara would definitely have the advantage in a one-on-one battle, but their natural abilities weren't that different. If she tried to cross swords with them properly in a three-on-one, she'd almost certainly lose. Even two-on-one was a little risky.

She felt just a little bit vexed at that. She still lacked in training, she thought.

"Hah, what a cute face for such a frightening little lady. Aiming for the timing of our counters. But we won't let things go your way without a fight, you

know?" Lucci stared at Sara's movements, observing her every action.

"...Hm, I wonder about that. I pretty much understand all of your moves now," Sara objected, pouting her lips.

*There's no helping it. I'll use spirit arts.*

She poured essence into the daggers in her hand. Though she was going to use spirit arts, she was limited by the need to make it look like she was activating the abilities of her enchanted sword. But if she didn't fuss over using her daggers alone, there was plenty of room for victory.

Sara stepped extra hard against the ground and made the biggest leap backwards yet. Since she had to travel a greater distance, the time that she was in the air was longer. Arein and the other men noticed.

"Uh oh, feeling hasty?" They each held their swords ready and closed in, aiming for the moment Sara landed.

*...Now!*

The moment Sara landed, she released the essence she had poured into the dagger and thrust her right hand forward.

"W-What?!"

A large sphere of water several meters wide formed in front of Arein and the others. If it collided into their bodies, it was sure to do enough damage to knock them unconscious.

However, the three men reacted immediately, leaping high and twisting themselves to change direction. Once they barely managed to avoid the sphere of water, they used their remaining momentum to run left and right, away from Sara's side.

"Whoaaa!"

"Is it the unique sorcery of that enchanted sword?!"

"Didn't it have some kind of speed-related unique sorcery...?"

They all yelled out in relief as they broke out in a cold sweat. For the record, the unique sorcery of an enchanted sword was special combat sorcery

embedded within an enchanted sword, separate to its standard physical body enhancing sorcery.

“You let your guard down.” Sara looked at Arein and the others cheerfully, lifting the dagger in her left hand up as she spoke.

“...Huh?”

For a moment, her opponents looked doubtful. No sooner than they did, a shadow was cast over them, drawing their gazes upwards. There were three spheres of water roughly one meter in diameter.

“Ugh, shit...!”

The spheres fell smoothly down over their heads. With a splash, the water burst, directly hitting the three of them.

“So the one from the front was bait...?”

“Ngh...”

“How can you drop something with such accuracy...”

The three of them weren’t knocked unconscious, but they had taken enough damage to prevent them from moving any further.

“Any fully-fledged warrior should be able to freely control the trajectory of the projectiles they create. It’s because you relied on the sorcery in your swords to fight that you were late in detecting the spell that was being used in my left dagger.”

“Shit...”

“This is the end. All that’s left is to assist Alma... but it looks like there’s no need.” Sara glanced over at Alma, who had been evading the essence bullets with ease.

*Sara used spirits arts. I have no choice—I guess I will too.*

In the next moment, she poured magic essence into her mace and slammed it down on the ground with all her might. The ground instantly split and rose up.

“Wh...?!”

The adventurers that had been volleying the barrage of light at Alma all

swallowed their breath. They could no longer see her due to the wall that had risen out of the earth—or so they thought, when Alma suddenly came swooping down over their heads. She landed in the middle of the formation the men had taken with about a two-meter gap and once again slammed the ground.

This time, the earth didn't rise. Instead, a crater was formed, sinking into the ground and sending a shockwave throughout their surroundings.

"Whoa!" The men were caught in the impact and sent helplessly flying.

"Looks like it's over," Alma said coolly. She picked up her mace, which was embedded in the ground, and walked over to Sara.

"That tiny brat really has ridiculous strength..." Lucci muttered from where he lay face-down.

"That's a rude thing to say to a lady." Alma huffed in offense. Then, she spotted Ariel flying towards them in the distance.



A little earlier in time, when Sara and Alma were fighting Arein's group, Rio and Reiss were exchanging fierce blows in the skies above.

Rio was flying at a high speed to cut down Reiss. Reiss manipulated nearly a hundred balls of light to keep Rio in check and prevent him from approaching. Each time Rio accelerated to close the distance between them, multiple balls of light would fill Rio's vision. However, Rio would track what was in front of him and seize each approaching ball of light without missing a single one. With his incredible reaction time, he evaded every last ball before him.

"Splendid," Reiss praised while maintaining a safe distance. Rio swung his sword at him, firing a blast of wind, but Reiss dodged the attack easily. This exchange repeated for a minute or so.

"...You don't actually intend on fighting, do you?" Rio furrowed his brow and asked suspiciously.

"If I didn't, I would have attacked you in the first place." Reiss shrugged his shoulders.

“Yet I can’t imagine this as you fighting seriously.”

“No, no. Honestly, this is my current limit. I don’t even remember the last time I had to use this much power. If anything, I’d say you’re the one who isn’t fighting seriously right now, no? That humanoid spirit girl is nowhere to be seen either.”

*...How does he know about Aishia?* Rio thought, but—

“...I wanted to ask you about Lucius, but if you’re going to move that fast it makes it harder to hold back,” he stated.

“I see. So you wanted to know more about him...” Reiss chuckled.

“I heard you’re the ambassador of the Proxia Empire,” he jabbed.

“Who knows? I’ve also heard that you used to attend the Beltrum Royal Academy,” Reiss countered with a sharp hook.

“...” Shock lit Rio’s eyes.

“Are you wondering how I know that?” Reiss guessed.

“Who knows?”

“All things considered, you’re quite the whimsical one, heading on a journey to save the princess of the kingdom that falsely accused you. I even hinted at your past before Princess Christina back at Cleia, hoping your relationship would sour so we wouldn’t have to fight.”

“I have no idea what you’re going on about. More importantly, if you’re the Proxia Empire’s ambassador, then that means it wouldn’t be strange for Lucius to be in Proxia as well.” Rio feigned ignorance with a poker face, then tried to probe further.

“I wonder about that,” Reiss boasted lightly.

*...As expected. Drawing information from this guy will be tough.* Rio had no idea what was true and what was a lie.

“...Enough. I’m giving up on seizing you alive,” Rio said, readying his sword.

“Hahaha, that’s some impressive bloodlust. You were more amazing when you faced him in Amande, but this is also quite considerable... It’s like the

sleeping dragon has finally woken. I do not wish to die, so I'll be resisting." Reiss' expression turned the most serious it had been yet. He created countless balls of light at a smaller size than they had been until now, and fired them at Rio.

Rio covered himself in a barrier of wind and did a vigorous barrel roll towards Reiss, knocking all the balls of light away.

"Haha, what a terrible torrent of essence. How violent indeed..."

By making use of his tremendous magic essence capacity, he rushed forward at a speed too fast to follow with the eyes to overwhelm the opponent with pure power. Charging forward for only that purpose. How else could this be described if not violent?

In order to escape Rio, who had closed in on him in an instant, Reiss tried to fly swiftly. However, Rio's speed surpassed Reiss'.

Rio kicked Reiss with all his might. The bones of the arm he had kicked creaked.

"Ngah!" A groan slipped from Reiss' mouth, his body blown towards the ground with the force of the kick. He proceeded to crash into and roll along the ground.

Rio moved in to add a merciless follow-up attack, lowering his altitude. At that, Reiss summoned three of the largest balls of light yet around him, bombarding them at Rio.

The first one was evaded by a twist of Rio's body. The one following that was mowed down with an essence-filled swing of his sword. As for the final ball, a blast of wind was released from the tip of his sword, blowing it back and towards Reiss, who had fallen against the ground.

The rebounded ball of light crashed into the spot where Reiss was and opened a hole in the floor. If Reiss hadn't moved, his whole body would've been disintegrated.

However, Reiss had evaded towards the side just before the ball came down, then proceeded in his counter charge towards Rio. He gathered magic essence in his right hand, raising it like a sword to challenge Rio head-on. The next

moment, the two crossed each other mid air, and the result—

“...See? I knew I would lose, in all probability.”

Reiss’ detached arm went soaring through the air. Reiss grabbed his sliced off arm and immediately distanced himself from Rio. The damage from being kicked against the ground and having his arm sliced off meant he was in quite a state right now.

And yet, there wasn’t a glimpse of pain in his expression. His flippant smile hadn’t wavered at all. He was a truly unnerving man.

“How about you surrender already? Your men over there have been cleaned up by my comrades. If you want to reattach your arm, you should probably do that soon. I can save you in exchange for information.” Rio glanced at Sara and Alma as he spoke. Their battle had just ended, the men Reiss had brought along all lying battered on the ground.

“Information, is it? Then how about this: your friends that left first are running in the direction of thousands of soldiers, led by Charles,” Reiss said, chuckling eerily.

“...No way.” Instead of treating those words as a bluff to get out of this situation, Rio had a bad feeling. Just then, Sara and Alma came running over.

“Haruto! Orphia and the others are...!” they yelled with terribly panicked faces.

“I’ll go ahead! You two come as soon as possible!”

Rio abandoned Reiss immediately and used wind spirit arts to accelerate himself towards Celia and the others. Sara and Alma exchanged looks and nodded, then followed him.

“Now, I’ve bought as much time as I could. Who knows how things will end up.” Reiss’ utterly exhausted voice echoed vacantly.

## Chapter 5: Ruler of the Battlefield

A little earlier in time, at Celia's location...

"Arrest them, Alfred!" Charles ordered, signaling the start of the battle. Alfred charged head-on at the group, his expression somewhat unenthusiastic.

"Everyone, please hold back the others and leave him to me!" Orphia directed, firing her bow at speeds too fast to follow with the naked eyes.

"!" The speed exceeded Alfred's expectations, lighting his eyes with a faint look of shock. But he was able to respond to the attack itself without much difficulty, mowing it down with his sword.

However, Orphia wasn't surprised by something like that—she readied her bow and fired her next arrow of light at Alfred.

Alfred yet again saw through the attack and cut it down. From that point onwards, Orphia started rapid-firing her arrows of light faster than before, but each arrow was aimed so perfectly, it made her attack just slightly docile. On top of that, she aimed for areas that wouldn't result in his instant demise—something which Alfred had noticed within intercepting ten of those light arrows.

Meanwhile, Orphia fixed her gaze on Alfred as he blocked her arrows.

*This man... He really is strong.* She stared at him with reverence for his strength.

"Your arrows are fast, and your aim is frighteningly accurate, but you are too soft," Alfred said, shooting Orphia a conflicted look.

"Hey, Alfred! What are you dallying around for?" Charles scolded.

Alfred sighed. "I do not wish to harm women and children. As long as you don't resist, no harm will come to you."

"I'm sorry, but we will be resisting," Orphia apologized sincerely.

"It's futile. No matter how accurately you fire those light arrows towards me

with your enchanted bow, I will surely close the distance between us. An archer of your skill must be able to comprehend that, no?" Alfred said, attempting to wear down Orphia's will to fight.

Orphia giggled cutely. "I shall stop firing straight, then. It seems I have misjudged your strength..."

Alfred furrowed his brow in confusion, but Orphia immediately took aim in the opposite direction and fired her arrows of light.

"What...?!"

The arrows that Orphia fired drew an arc through the air, swooping down on Alfred with unmatched precision. Alfred reacted instantly and cut the arrows down, but he was more surprised than he'd been before.



“Here goes nothing!” Orphia said, and fired at a speed even greater than before.

“Guh...” Alfred had been cutting down the light arrows one-by-one at first, but the more he cut the more arrows approached from all possible angles. Eventually, his processing speed fell behind, and he decided that it would be faster to evade them instead of cutting them down. He waited for the right moment, then began dashing to the side, but—

“What...?”

The arrows of light he should have evaded came homing in after him. As a result, he was given no choice but to deal with every last arrow.

“ALFRED! Are you even trying?!” Charles yelled harshly, seeing Alfred take the defensive side of the fight.

Alfred frowned in annoyance. “It seems I misjudged your abilities, too. I suppose I have no choice, then,” he said, then began charging straight at Orphia.

“...” Orphia watched Alfred carefully, aiming for the exact moment he began his approach to pour magic essence into her bow and fire a thick arrow of light. Alfred tried to cut the arrow that was headed straight for him, but the single arrow of light split into countless smaller arrows, scattering like a shotgun.

“A-Aah!” For a moment, Alfred’s eyes were blown wide open. But his body didn’t freeze—he released a slash of light from his sword to erase the entire shotgun of arrows instead.

“So that attack didn’t work either,” Orphia said with a wry smile.

“And you can fire multiple arrows at once... How troubling,” Alfred said a little awkwardly.

“Are you really that concerned?” If he was, then she could probably manage to hold him back by herself. That was what Orphia was wondering as she asked her question, when—

“I am. I can no longer hold back in order to arrest you. So, here goes nothing.” No sooner had Alfred said that, he resumed charging straight for Orphia.

“U... Urgh...!” Orphia immediately countered, but Alfred was faster than before. The moment Orphia had released her arrows, he was already right before her eyes. A heavy fist drove into Orphia’s stomach.

“Orphia?!” Celia yelled in horror as she watched Orphia fall.

“Ugh... That hurts.” Orphia pressed down on her stomach to endure the pain.

“I intended to knock you unconscious with that single blow, but it seems that bow has physical body enchantments in it. Forgive me—I’ll put you to rest with the next strike.” Alfred reached for Orphia with a look of indifference.

“B-Brother!” Vanessa slashed at Alfred from close range with all her strength. She took a large leap, throwing all her weight into her sword to push it forward. However, Alfred deflected her attack easily using the shield equipped on his left arm.

“Guh!”

Vanessa continued to slash away at Alfred with determination, but this time, Alfred swung back. Swords clashed together, and Vanessa was blown backwards with the recoil.

Vanessa slowly peeled back her hood.

“You’re... What is that hair?” Alfred’s eyes widened faintly at the unfamiliar sight of his little sister’s hair.

“That doesn’t matter right now!” Vanessa charged at Alfred, who easily parried her attack with his sword. But, after a brief moment of being locked sword-to-sword, he took a light step back.

“When you strain all your strength, this is what happens.”

Vanessa staggered forward faintly. Alfred used that chance to sweep her feet out from underneath her, sending her rolling.

“Doesn’t matter, huh? Well, that may be true. Now that things have come to this, I will have to punish you,” Alfred said, slightly bitter, but swallowing back his words. He flicked away the sword in Vanessa’s grip and sent it rolling.

“Nngh...” Vanessa was now laying on the floor unarmed, but she grit her teeth and lashed out at Alfred with detestment. “Why?! Why would you do

this?!"

"Do what?"

"Why are you here?! Forget Charles! You're the King's Sword!"

"...It was by the order of His Majesty."

"That's not what I mean! No, do you truly believe that to be His Majesty's will?! Brother!"

"I have nothing to say to you right now. This is all the compassion I can show —go to sleep," Alfred said, crouching down to chop his hand at Vanessa's neck.

"Ugh..." The world spun. The light in Vanessa's eyes went out as she fainted.

"Everyone, move back..." Celia retreated while holding her hands at the ready to activate her magic at a moment's notice. It was evident that at this distance, Alfred's attack would hit her before she could fire any magic. Sorcerers were meant to fight without letting their opponents get close.

"Well done, Alfred. Hmph..." Charles smiled, approaching in satisfaction. He walked over to where Orphia was lying on the ground and snapped an essence-sealing collar around her neck, lifting her head.

"Urgh..."

She had been secretly treating herself with spirit arts, but now her magic essence was sealed. Her stomach must have hurt, still, as her face twisted in pain as it was lifted.

"I can't say I'm impressed by the rough way you're handling the lady." Rui came over belatedly, addressing Charles with a faint frown on his face.

"Unfortunately, we would be no match for her if she used magic. I will ensure her abdomen gets healed properly." Charles chuckled pleasantly as he gazed at Orphia's face. Then, he pointed at Celia. "Hey, Alfred. Remove that small woman's hood."

"Uh..." Celia backed away slowly.

*"Photon Projectilis!"* From behind Celia, Christina chanted a spell and rapidly fired magic essence bullets towards Charles.

*She's good.*

They were finally aiming at Charles, Alfred thought. He was the real burden here.

"Wha..." Charles froze, as he hadn't expected to become the target himself. Alfred had no choice but to move before Charles and protect him.

"Don't let your guard down."

"I-I know that! I knew you would protect me, so I didn't react. That's all. But to have the guts to aim for me..."

Charles grit his teeth. If it hadn't been Christina who had fired the shot, he would have approached her and beaten her up.

"*T-Terra Carcerem!*" In order to trap both Alfred and Charles, Celia placed her hand against the ground and chanted a spell. In reaction to the earth prison spell, a magic circle appeared by the feet of the men.

"It's pointless. This sword can absorb magic essence." Alfred stabbed his sword into the ground and extinguished the magic circle.

"Princess Christina, Kouta, Rei! Please run away..."

Celia tried to urge the three of them to run while she bought time, but she found herself at a loss for words. There was nowhere to run. Knights riding griffins were circling in the sky. Alfred was in front of them. There were several other knights that had landed on the ground as well.

She glanced behind herself to see the army of thousands had closed in at some point and felt her heart nearly fracturing.

"Hmph, as if I'd prepare an opening for you to run. The plan was perfect. All this useless resistance was for nothing. Psh..."

Charles marched right up to Celia and slapped her face with all his might. He knew *Terra Carcerem* was an earth prison magic and not used with the intention to cause harm, but he was still angry that Christina aimed her attack magic at him earlier, so he took it out on her instead.

"Aah!" Celia was blown back and tumbled across the ground. The hood fluttered off her face.

“...Hm?” Charles narrowed his eyes at the sight of Celia’s face. He had assumed she was some plain brat, but she had an appearance on par with Orphia’s—the thought that he shouldn’t have been so rough crossed his mind. Because of her different hair color, he didn’t notice at first glance that the one he had hit was his former fiancee, to whom he had once whispered sweet words.

“Huh? Is she perhaps...?” Alfred had a suspicious expression after seeing Celia’s face, which eventually turned into a look of realization. But just at that moment...

“S-Sir Charles! Someone is approaching at a tremendous speed!” one of the griffin knights keeping watch from the skies suddenly yelled out a warning.

“What...?” Charles looked doubtful for a moment, but his expression soon changed with a gasp. “I-Is it the one Lord Reiss spoke of?! He couldn’t hold him back?! Ugh, fire all your magic at once and intercept him!”

At his shocked order, the ten griffin knights in the sky all started chanting their spells.

“*Ignis lecit!*” Magic circles appeared at their hands, from which they shot a ball of fire aimed at the rapidly approaching black shadow.

“G-Ground team! Make a wall with your shields and recite your magic to drive him back if he approaches!” Charles yelled his panicked orders to the knights surrounding them, and the army approaching from the hill. The knights beside him reacted promptly, thrusting their shields into the ground to protect Charles with a wall.

“That’s... him.”

Rui watched the figure approach at an inhuman speed and glanced over at Kouta and Rei once, hesitating slightly. Then, he moved to stand behind the wall of knights and aimed his bow towards the sky.



Rio was running at full speed in Celia’s direction. The area was hilly with a clear outlook, making it easy to spot the huge army of soldiers roughly one kilometer away. He charged towards their direction without hesitation.

The knights riding the griffins in the skies seemed to have focused their guard on the direction Rio came from, as they discovered him immediately. Rio watched from afar as one of them hurriedly descended to the ground. A few seconds later, dozens of one-meter-wide fireballs came hurtling towards him; there was 500 meters between them.

*At this distance, they should have just fired those to keep me in check.*

Their aim was all over the place. If he continued closing in at his current speed, the first wave would land far behind him. Rio glanced once at the rain of fire, then directed his attention to the ground.

*That's...*

Just before the knights formed their wall of shields, Rio spotted Orphia pressing down on her stomach and Celia rolling on the ground. His expression immediately turned ice cold. At the same time, the first wave of *Ignis Iecit* landed far behind Rio. Now he was 200 meters away.

*"Magicae Displodo!"*

*"Photon Projectilis!"*

The knights forming the wall before Charles fired their attack magic. One beat later, a thick arrow of lightning shot into the sky. It was Rui's attack.

*"Ignis Iecit!"*

The griffin knights also fired their second wave of fireballs. This time, their aim was adjusted for Rio's movement speed.

*"..."*

Rio watched the barrage of attack magic without emotion. Normally, one would choose to leap to the side to evade it, but Rio purposefully charged forward instead, accelerating.

What the knights holding their shields up witnessed was the sight of their attack magic catching Rio one after another. *Photon Projectilis* were photon bullets that had enough force to blow back an unguarded person, while *Magicae Displodo* was a magic cannon that had enough force to wipe out a group of people. And yet—

“Wha...”

The knights were rendered speechless. Their attack magic veered away from Rio the moment before they should have made contact. It was like there was an invisible wall or path rerouting them—they just wouldn’t hit. The lightning rain that fell at a slight delay also fell as though it was avoiding contact with Rio.

Thus, Rio charged into the wall of knights with no hesitation whatsoever.

“Aagh!!”

He cut them down as though he was batting away flies—it was enough to send the knights flying sideways.

At that point, Rio paused. His eyes met Rui’s, who had been standing behind the knights. But Rio paid him no mind, his gaze instead moving towards Orphia, Celia, and Vanessa, who were laying on the ground.

“...Are they alive?” he asked no one in particular.

“Y-Yes. They’re just knocked out,” Christina answered nervously. She understood that at this moment, Haruto Amakawa—who had only shown his gentle side until now—was angry. She was overwhelmed by his presence and shuddered.

“...You did this?” Rio looked at Charles and walked towards him slowly.



“Wha... N-No! He did it!” Charles flinched, pointing at Alfred as he backed away.

“You ordered it.”

Rio continued to approach, then held his sword ready and swung it.

“Eek...!” Overwhelmed, Charles was unable to move. However, Alfred stepped in front of him and stopped the blow of Rio’s sword.

“Charles, retreat if you do not want to die,” Alfred said with a stern expression.

“W-What?! You dare order your commander...?!”

“Hurry! Did you not witness how fast he got here?!”

Even at a time like this, Charles snapped back reflexively, but Alfred shot down his objection forcibly.

“Guh...!” Rio swung his sword fully and sent Alfred’s body flying back, colliding with Charles along the way.

“H-How dare you! K-Kill him! Someone! Anyone! Hurry and kill that man!” Charles rolled along the ground and remained there as he wailed his orders. The griffin knights in the air immediately moved in response, but Rio thrust his sword upwards. Just as he did, a tornado-like blast of wind burst forth. In a single strike of his sword, he sent all the knights in the sky scattering.

“Wha...” Charles was wide-eyed and speechless.

“Do you understand, now? Numbers and tactics will no longer decide the outcome of this fight,” Alfred said to Charles as he faced Rio.

“Then you do something about him! Use that sword of yours! Flash Judgment, wasn’t it?”

“I would have done so already if I could... I’ll buy you time. Take the soldiers and retreat.”

“...Guh!” Charles whipped around and started running towards the soldiers on the hill.

“Haruto!” Sara and Alma had finally caught up and were calling Rio’s name

from behind him.

“Can I leave this to you? I need to capture the enemy’s commander.” Rio fixed his eyes on Alfred, who stood in the way of the fleeing Charles.

“Yes!” came the reply from behind, and Rio rushed forward, but was intercepted by Alfred.

Alfred’s sword immediately began glowing, then shot out light to mow down the area as he slashed with it. However, Rio released a tornado-like blast of wind to offset Alfred’s strike. Alfred continued firing slashes of light one after another. Rio did the same with his wind. It was an exchange of light and wind from the two warriors.

The slashes of light consumed a lot of magic essence, so it wasn’t something that one normally used recklessly—but this was Alfred’s last resort after he sensed the gap in their abilities with his first attack. If he faced Rio with only his sword, he would lose.

However, there was no change to the fact Rio’s physical abilities far surpassed his. Alfred was gradually being pushed back towards the hill.

“Ugh...”

At some point, Rui had made his way around to the hill where Charles had fled. He fired a lightning arrow towards Rio.

Rio took a step back and cut down the arrow, then paused and looked at Rui. “...Are you going to get in my way?”

“Long time no see, Haruto—I haven’t seen you since the Galarc royal castle, I believe?” Rui greeted Rio.

“Indeed,” Rio replied shortly.

“I didn’t want to see you again like this, if possible...” Rui admitted a little awkwardly.

“Neither did I. If you don’t get in my way, I won’t need to attack you.”

Rui gave a pained smile and shook his head slowly. “Unfortunately, I cannot allow that. I’m the hero of their kingdom, after all.”

“...Then I shall do my best not to kill you,” Rio said with a sigh, his aggression waning.

“Haha. I don’t want to kill you either, but I don’t think I can stop you with weak attacks.”

“The attacks you’ve fired until now haven’t been a problem.”

“Is that so? Then...”

Rio and Rui both readied their weapons. Alfred also adjusted his grip on his sword, ready to face Rio once again.

Rio closed in on Alfred, but Rui’s lightning arrow interrupted him. His aim was truly precise—it wouldn’t have been fatal if it had made contact, but it was able to limit Rio’s movements for a brief moment. Alfred wouldn’t let that moment go to waste.

Now that it had come to this, Rio had to change his fighting style as well, as it was difficult to force his way through with his strength alone.

“Hah!”

He decided to overwhelm them with speed. Accelerating his body with wind spirit arts, he closed in on Alfred.

Rio’s method of moving so quickly involved a combination of martial arts that minimized his own movements and wind spirit arts—it was a technique of Rio’s own making. The greatest merit to using it was that the excess movements of the body were practically nonexistent, which made one faster. Thanks to that, it was possible to move in a way that was almost like teleportation.

“Guh...” His many long years of experience allowed Alfred to see through the faint, faint omen of an attack and respond instantaneously. But even as he stopped the attack, he was pushed backwards.

*So he was able to react to that just now...*

Rio stopped, his eyes widening faintly. Without the intent to kill, he had suppressed his acceleration a little, but even then he had charged with a considerable amount of speed. It was a speed that even elite warriors like the spirit folk village’s head warrior Uzuma or veteran warrior Gouki would have

trouble reacting to.

In other words, Alfred was in a league of his own.

“So fast!”

Rio sensed another attack from Rui and sped up again. He disappeared in an instant, surprising Rui, who had just fired another lightning arrow. But even then, the physical body enhancement from his Divine Arms adapted accordingly, firing an arrow of lightning at Rio as he moved. However, Rio moved too fast for the attacks to hit. He would disappear from his position the moment the shots were fired; he was moving too fast for Rui to fire predictively as well.

*When he's this close, his speed makes it hard for me to do anything. Guh...*

Rui distanced himself from Rio a little to gain an advantage, then tried to snipe him. But Rio predicted that and drew closer to Rui to knock him out first.

“Haaah!” However, Alfred charged at Rio to protect Rui. He still had some fight left in him after all.

Rio raised his sword to engage Alfred, whose sword started glowing once again. Rio also poured magic essence into his sword to cover it with wind. Then, the two of them swung at each other, creating a tremendous shockwave. The recoil nearly knocked them backwards, but Rio remained standing where he was through the use of his ultra-enhanced physical abilities. Then, he went chasing after Alfred—who had been blown backwards—and swung his sword vertically upwards.

“Guh...” Alfred was able to counter the sudden attack with his sword, but the tremendous physical strength and wind pushed him back, instantly sending him flying upwards into the air.

Rui had aimed for the timing that Rio swung his sword upwards to fire his sniping shot, but his arrow was unable to find its target. No sooner had Rio swung his sword had he chased Alfred into the skies with a giant leap, using the wind from his sword to propel himself and accelerate.

“What the...” Alfred watched Rio flying towards him from the ground in amazement.

*Does he plan on finishing this in the air? Then I have no choice.*

Alfred sensed that this was to be the final blow and poured the entirety of his remaining magic essence into his enchanted sword. The more essence this sword absorbed, the more powerful of a strike it could release. Thus, Alfred's sword began glowing the brightest it had yet.

Rio's expression was stern as Alfred's eyes focused solely on him.

*In that case, I'll force him into submission.* He had planned on ending things in the next attack anyway.

Meanwhile Rio also poured an extraordinary amount of essence into his sword, compressing the energy into a tremendous blast of wind. The two of them gripped their swords and took aim, then released the essence in their swords. A stream of light rushed out of Alfred's sword, while Rio's sword released a violent tornado. Their attacks collided.

“Aah!”

Light illuminated the entire area as the windstorm caused a huge explosion. Christina and the others on the ground were nearly blown away.

“S-Sir Amakawa defeated Alfred...” Christina witnessed the sight of Rio holding his sword in the air and a limp, unconscious Alfred. Rio was looking down at the hill, his sword tightly in his grasp. At the end of his line of sight was Charles, who had fled into the army on the hill.

“Huh?!” Charles noticed Rio was staring straight at him from above and flinched.

“Now!” From the ground below, Rui took aim at Rio and fired a thick arrow of lightning—which was really more like a cannon than an arrow. However, Rio was able to move freely in mid-air and evaded the attack. He moved over to where Alfred was passed out and grabbed him.

“Ngh...” Unable to shoot with Alfred in the way, Rui lowered his bow. Rio descended slowly and lowered Alfred to the ground.

“...Huh?” Everyone present on the battlefield watched on as he yet again disappeared without a trace. Rui had a bad feeling and lifted his bow, when

suddenly, Rio was standing right before his eyes.

“Tch...”

It was already too late. A palm was thrust into his abdomen and he fell to his knees.

“It’s over,” Rio said.

“Indeed. You really are an amazing person... But, it may have been better to lose here.” Rui chuckled after muttering that, then let himself fall unconscious. With that, there was no one left on this battlefield that could face Rio.

“...” Rio peered at the thousands beyond the hill and slowly began walking.

“A-All of you! Stop him!” Charles yelled frantically, seeing Rio approaching from afar. But the soldiers’ movements lagged, and no one tried to obstruct Rio’s way. In fact, as Rio eventually reached the hill, the soldiers parted like a wave to allow him to pass.

“H-Hey!” Charles looked around at the soldiers, seeking salvation, but reality was cruel indeed.

“Eek!” Charles cowered at the sight of Rio drawing near. He didn’t even think to run away, understanding that attempting to do so would be futile, whether he liked it or not.

“Marching here so brazenly was your mistake,” Rio said once he reached Charles.

“W-What... What are you...?” Charles fell backwards onto his rear, forgetting all his anger.

“Just a regular human.”

“H-Human? You, a human? Hahaha. Bwahahaha...” Rio’s answer made Charles break down with laughter.

“Come with me.” Rio grabbed Charles by the scruff of his neck and forcibly started dragging him back towards Christina and the others.

Unsurprisingly, there was no one who could stop Rio.





An army of five thousand had been driven away by a single boy.

On this day, the events that unfolded proved a single truth: That the overwhelming power of a single individual could sometimes overthrow a violent force of great numbers and tactics and decide the outcome of a battlefield.

At the same time, something else was made known—that there existed someone who possessed enough power to do exactly that. That person's name was Haruto Amakawa—an honorary knight whose name was still on the rise.

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, it would create a great ripple in the nations of the Strahl region.

Ten days later, Rio and the others arrived in Rodania.

# Epilogue: Yearning to be Special

There was no use crying over spilt milk.

In the near future, every force in the lands would become frantic to win over Haruto Amakawa.

This wasn't a hunch.

It wasn't a belief, either—

It was a prophecy.

He was special.

He was one like no other.

Special, and worthy of standing above all others.

In reality, an army of five thousand had fallen helplessly before him.

And yet...

How foolish.

He had once stood below everyone else.

They were the ones who had once placed him there.

Fierce regret surged forth.

Intense guilt welled up.

Violent rage formed from regret.

And above all the regret, guilt, and rage...

Was a strong sense of admiration and curiosity.

It piqued countless times across this journey and subsided every time...

It was a burning sense of yearning.

What if...

What if he had been born of Beltrum royalty instead? The Beltrum Kingdom would have surely ended up different from the way it was now.

What if... What if he lent his power to them...?

She started hallucinating such possibilities.

Because she only possessed a fake kind of “special.”

She clung to it...

All the while yearning for something genuine.

*What if, what if...?* she wondered.

The genuine kind of “special” was dazzling.

She was powerless—it was pathetic.

And yet, that genuine power shone so brightly...

But such “what-if”s did not exist.

Because she was calm...

Because she berated herself in an effort to be calmer than anyone else...

She was quick to return to her senses.

It was why the intense guilt and regret returned quickly, too.

It told her that she was too late to change anything now.

Strangely enough, there was no rage.

Even if there was to be conflict over Haruto Amakawa, they would never be allowed to join in.

That was the penalty their kingdom had to pay for the crimes they committed.

That's why this yearning...

It had to be sealed away after all.

As she watched Rio walk towards her, dragging Charles by the scruff of his neck...

Christina Beltrum berated herself in a calmer manner than anyone else.

# Afterword

Hello, everyone. This is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles 12: Battlefield Symphony*.

Three years and two months have passed so quickly since my debut, and now Volume 12 of *Seirei Gensouki* is being published. Furthermore, a drama CD version was also made, at last. This is all thanks to everyone who has given this series their love, the illustrator Riv, editor N, and a great many other people who have shown concern. I give you all my sincere gratitude. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

The drama CD can be listened to by purchasing *Seirei Gensouki 12: Battlefield Symphony* - Drama CD edition.

Rio is played by Yoshitsugu Matsuoka, Miharu is played by Sayaka Harada, Aishia is played by Yuuki Kuwahara, Professor Celia is played by Akane Fujita, Latifa is played by Tomori Kusunoki, Liselotte is played by Nao Toyama, and Satsuki is played by Haruka Tomatsu. The seven lavish cast members played their characters in a 70-minute-long performance. In addition—and some of you may have already listened to it—the script is filled with instances that will be sure to make you grin. (My editor told me that character interactions are important in drama CDs, so I paid extra attention to that while writing a script of side-story-like content that I wanted to fit into the main story, but couldn't. You may be in danger of grinning openly if you listen in public. Hehe.)

I visited the recording studio as the original author and scriptwriter, and after greeting the staff and cast members, I was able to watch the recording take place live. They breathed life into the characters as though they were really there—it was so moving! Thank you to all the staff and cast!

Listening to a script that I wrote myself is a little embarrassing, but I can say with confidence that the content is interesting, so please give it a listen if you can. (If the sales of the first drama CD do well, a second drama CD could also be a possibility, so if anyone has any stories they'd like to hear, please tweet about

it on Twitter... I may be looking... Maybe!)

By the way, the contents of the drama CD take place after the story of volume 12, so while it isn't absolute, it may be better to read Volume 12 before listening to the CD (the content of the main story is fairly serious, so it could serve as a good breather afterwards, too. Haha).

Furthermore, I plan on touching upon something mentioned in the story of the drama CD in a future volume of the main story, so drama CD listeners can enjoy connecting that moment in the future with a grin on their faces.

Now, let's wrap up the drama CD talk here and talk about Volume 12! Unlike the drama CD filled with smile-inducing content, the Volume 12 story focuses on the complicated state of Princess Christina's heart—something which can also be seen from the regular edition cover.

The story in this volume was something I wanted to show since Princess Christina first appeared in Volume 1. The things she was thinking in Volume 1, what she thinks now—it would be nice if you could consider not only what was depicted in Volume 12, but what was left unsaid in between the lines too. Flora's also engaged to Sakata now, so who knows what may happen in the future? *evil grin* Things that couldn't happen in the web novel have happened, and I've put in lots of foreshadowing about things that didn't happen in future volumes seemingly likely to happen here, so the web novel readers can look forward to the future too!

Now, I shall wrap up around here. I'm sorry Volume 12 had another intense cliffhanger of an ending, but I hope we can meet in Volume 13 as well (the preview will be on the next page).

Early November 2018

Yuri Kitayama

# Bonus Short Stories

## One Particular Morning

Early one morning, at a time when most people would normally be asleep...

“Good morning, Onii-chan.”

Rio woke up to Latifa clinging onto him from above.

“Good morning... Is it already time to get up?” Rio asked sleepily with a slight yawn.

“Nope! It’s still a little early, but...” Latifa shook her head nervously. She looked like she wanted to say something, which Rio found to be a little strange.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that until I hear what it is...”

Latifa pouted. “Mmrgh... Promise you won’t laugh!” she insisted. It seemed she wasn’t going to answer until he agreed.

Rio folded to her demands and nodded. “All right. I won’t laugh.”

“I had a scary dream, so I didn’t want to be awake by myself...”

Which was why she woke Rio up. Latifa looked a little embarrassed as she explained herself.

“I see...” Rio chuckled.

“Ah, you laughed!” Latifa whined unhappily.

“I’m not laughing,” Rio denied, petting Latifa’s head as it rested on his chest.

“Hmph...” Latifa puffed up her cheeks in objection, but she didn’t resist the head pats from her beloved adopted brother, obediently surrendering herself to him.

"What kind of dream was it?" Rio asked as he continued to pet her head.

"It was a dream about the past. We were traveling together, but you suddenly disappeared."

"Don't worry--I'm right here."

"Yeah..." Latifa's reply was a little uneasy. She tightened her grip around Rio.

"Would you like to sleep together?" Rio looked up and asked.

"Yeah." The reply this time was much more assured.

"Then you should get off me first. Sleeping like this will make you catch a cold."

"Okay!" Latifa obeyed and happily relocated next to him.

"Here, come under the blankets."

"Okay!" Latifa immediately crawled into the bed and snuggled up to Rio, beaming with happiness. "Ehehe--it's warm. And it smells like you. So cozy."

"Let's go to sleep, then." Since he'd been roused at such an early hour, his body was still yearning for sleep. Rio yawned once again.

"Yup. Good night, Onii-chan," Latifa replied obediently, hugging Rio's side and closing her eyes.

"Good night," Rio said gently.

It seemed Latifa was still sleepy herself, as she fell asleep in no time at all.

*She must've forgotten about the dream already.*

Relieved by the sight of Latifa's peaceful sleeping face, Rio also let himself drift off. Less than a minute later, the two of them were both sleeping soundly.

However, when Rio woke up an hour later and tried to get them both up...

"Nooo, I want to sleep with Onii-chan more!"

Latifa's insistent clinging and refusal to release Rio resulted in the two of them settling down for their third round of sleep.

## A New Way of Calling

It happened on the way from Cleia to Rodania, while they were preparing lunch in a clearing off the road.

“Celia.”

Certain circumstances had led to Rio addressing Celia without a title. There had been an awkward bashfulness at first, but he was gradually growing used to it after continuously doing so over the span of a few days.

“Yes, Haruto?” Celia was now completely used to it, as she showed no embarrassment in her reaction.

“Could you produce some water with magic for me?”

“Sure, I can do that.”

Rio summoned Celia over to the food preparation bench and had her prepare some water.

“We’ve been walking for consecutive days now. How are you holding up?” Rio asked while she filled a pot with water.

“I’m fine. It’d be a lie if I said I wasn’t tired, but I’m not in any pain. I’ve never had the chance to travel so much on foot before, so I’m actually finding it pretty fun,” Celia replied with a giggle.

“Is that so?”

“What about you, Haruto? Are you tired? I know it’s not every day, but you’ve been carrying us as you run every three days.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I’m also finding it fun traveling with you, Celia,” Rio said with a soft smile.

“R-Really, now...?” A faint pink tinted Celia’s cheeks.

“Thankfully, our trip has been going smoothly. Let’s pray that nothing happens before we reach Rodania.”

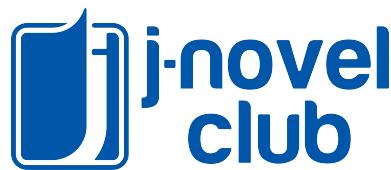
“It’s a little saddening to have the journey come to an end, but... You’re right.” Celia nodded, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Speaking of which, once we part ways with Her Highness and return to our regular lives, should I go back to calling you what I used to?" Rio asked.

"Well... No, it's okay. You can keep doing what you're doing now. It'd get too confusing otherwise."

She finally got him to call her by her name... was the reason Celia didn't voice out loud, and her cheeks reddened once more.





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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 12

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