

WRITTEN BY jaki
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The background of the cover features three anime-style characters in a snowy, nighttime cityscape. On the left, a female character with dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a blue and white outfit with a large cutout, holds a camera. In the center, a male character with white hair and a red jacket stands with his arms outstretched. In the foreground, a female character with black hair and orange eyes, wearing a black and red coat, holds a handgun. The city in the background has snow-covered roofs and glowing lights.

**THE MOST
NOTORIOUS
TALKER**
RUNS THE WORLD'S
GREATEST CLAN

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LEON FREDRIC

KOGA TSUKISHIMA


ALMA JUDIKHALI

ZERO LINDRAKE

JOHANN EISSFELDT

NOEL STOLLEN

HUGO COPPÉLIA



*"It's about time you realized
how crazy a person can get..."*

*I smelled fear, a scent that I was
very sensitive to in my current form.*



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K E Y W O R D S

SEEKERS ASSOCIATION

An organization that manages all Seekers and formal clans. They maintain close relationships with Seekers through a variety of services, including mediating beast-elimination contracts and Abyss expeditions. Inspectors in the Association oversee the coordination and management of entire clans. Because their work sometimes leads them into altercations with wild and unruly Seekers, inspectors are required to be at least Rank A.

MAGIC-ENGINEERED CIVILIZATION

This refers to the collection of inventions and developments that came through the use of materials gathered from fallen beasts. This technology has allowed for the world to live at the height of prosperity. The Velnant Empire in particular is prone to Abyss appearances, so its people have needed to hunt a great number of beasts throughout history. As a result, no country is more advanced in its applications of magic than the empire itself.

THE REPUBLIC OF RODANIA

A republic connected to the Velnant Empire at the southwest border. Rodania has seen rapid economic growth, thanks to the implementation of a railway system. This technology is difficult for the empire to make use of, due to its constant Abyss appearances.

THE MOST
NOTORIOUS
TALKER!
RUNS THE WORLD'S
GREATEST CLAN



WRITTEN BY

jaki

ILLUSTRATED BY

fame



Seven Seas Entertainment

The Most Notorious “Talker” Runs the World’s Greatest Clan Vol. 3

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THE MOST NOTORIOUS "TALKER"
RUNS THE WORLD'S GREATEST CLAN



Lorelai

The third-tier regalia clan. Proceeding with a secretive plan involving the use of monsters.



Johann Eissfeldt (Rune Lancer)

Master of Lorelai. Scheming to take the lead role in the battle against the Valiant.



Zero Lindrake (Dark Knight)

Vice-master of Lorelai. Has pledged unyielding loyalty to Johann.

Supreme Dragon

The strongest clan in the Empire, and the First Star of the regalia



Zeke Feinstein

(Master Swordsman)

Vice-master of Supreme Dragon. One of only three people in the imperial capital to have reached Rank EX.

Victor Krauser (???)

Master of Supreme Dragon. Achieved Rank EX and is known as The Beginning One.

Sharon Valentine (Gunner)

Third in line in the Supreme Dragon. A true warrior who trained Zeke.

Seekers Association

The organization that oversees all Seekers and clans.



Harold Jenkins

(Gunner)

A Seekers Association inspector and the coordinator of Wild Tempest.

Valiant

A beast with an abyssal depth of 13, the strongest in history. Seeks to annihilate the entire human race.

First World: Limbo of the Underworld

Unknown

Second World: Francesca the Lustful Eclipse

Unknown

Third World: Pluton the Star Scavenger

Unknown



Eighth World: Malebolge the Chaotic

Appeared in the imperial capital through means beyond reason. Plotting ways for the Seekers to be their own undoing.

Fourth World: Styx the Sorcerer

Unknown

Fifth World: Dis the Black Death

Unknown

Sixth World: Fotinos the False God

Unknown

Seventh World: Phlegethon of Starvation

Unknown

Ninth World: Cocytus the Silverfish

Killed by Noel's grandfather some ten years ago.

Tenth World: Purgatorio of Inferno

Unknown

characters



Wild Tempest

An up-and-coming clan. Rumored to be first in line to join the regalia even though it was officially founded only recently.



Alma Judikhali (Scout)

The descendant of a legendary assassin. Has an exceptional aptitude for combat.



Koga Tsukishima (Swordsman)

A former gladiator from the lands of the far east. A front-liner skilled with the blade.



Leon Fredric (Knight)

Former leader of the Winged Knights. Now vice-master of Wild Tempest.



Hugo Coppélia (Puppeteer)

An A-Rank adventurer and former death-row prisoner. Joined because of Noel.

Noel Stollen (Talker)

Clan master of Wild Tempest. Aiming to be the world's strongest Seeker, as per his grandfather's last wish.

Mirage Triad

A clan formed from the merging of Lightning Bite, Red Lotus, and King of Dukes.

Wolf Lehman (Warrior)

Master of Mirage Triad.

Veronica Redbone (Wizard)

Vice-master of Mirage Triad.

Logan Howlett (Monk)

Former leader of King of Dukes.



Lycia Mercedes (Archer)

One of the long-lived elves. Especially interested in Noel.



Vaclav Rosegund (Summoner)

Former member of the Winged Knights. A hulking, straightforward, and rational demi-human.

The Underworld

Organizations working in the shadows of the empire.



Finocchio Barzini

(Criminal)

Head of the Barzini family and Noel's business partner.



Albert Gambino

(Metal Carver)

Former head of the Gambino family. Overthrown and now a slave.

World Map

Imperial Territory

VELNANT EMPIRE

Former
Principality of
Archillio

● Imperial Capital: Etrai

Former Mediola
Kingdom

Former
Free Cities,
the Mönch

Port Town: Soldiran

Republic of Rodania

Stop:
Velnant
Empire

(Southwestern Domain)

Proposed
Railroad Tracks

Imperial Capital Etrai

Bascoud Territory

● Juan Maria

● Tron

Cormand Territory

Stop:
Republic of Rodania



Prologue

“BRANDON, ARE YOU REALLY SERIOUS? You plan to quit as a Seeker?”

The setting sun dyed the surrounding city in tones of ochre and amber, providing a fine contrast to the dark, thin shadows of the two men that it sent across the ground. Harold, the man who had asked the question, was clad in a tuxedo. The man about to answer him, Brandon, was a towering mountain strapped in armor with a huge battle-axe strapped to his back. He turned to look at Harold.

“Yeah, I am,” he said. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for me.”

Harold frowned. Such words were a poor match for the Brandon he knew. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this from the man who defeated one of the Ten Dark Lords. You must know that you’re the kind of hero who appears just once in a lifetime.”

“I didn’t do it alone. We won because of everyone who fought along with me.”

“What happened to you, Brandon? Have you gone mad? The imperial capital is a Seeker’s sacred ground. You are Overdeath—the strongest, most notorious, and most feared Seeker there is. You’re going to throw all of that away for a *woman*?”

Brandon did not answer. Instead, a heavy silence settled between them. Brandon Stollen was Overdeath. He was a hero among heroes and a member of the empire’s strongest clan: first star of the regalia, Bloodsword Federation. Harold had been certain he would reign at the peaks of history for as long as he lived.

After all, Brandon had performed a miracle. Nobody before him had defeated one of the Ten Dark Lords. He claimed to have had help, but without Brandon, they most certainly would have fallen. Having seen the battle himself, Harold was certain that Brandon had saved not only the empire, but all of humanity.

When they first met, Harold was rather put off by Brandon. The man was rough, unrefined, violent, cruel, cunning, and rude to women. He drowned in

alcohol all day long. Harold hardly saw him as the sort of man worthy of respect.

Still, he couldn't deny that Brandon was *strong*. However dire the situation, Brandon never lost a battle. He boasted a level of power that chilled Harold to the core—not out of fear, but from sheer admiration. It set his heart ablaze to know that such a man existed.

Harold was an inspector with the Seekers Association. He was no pushover himself, apparent in the fact that he'd achieved his post at the ripe age of fifteen. Since then, he'd watched over numerous Seekers and clans. He'd seen people with more than brute strength—people with honor and honesty, who would throw away their own lives to save another. These adventurers and warriors had polished Harold's character.

But the only Seeker to ever truly impress Harold to the bottom of his heart was Brandon. He'd been overseeing the Bloodsword Federation for ten years, but he'd never met a Seeker as exceptional as Brandon. What was it about this man that tugged at Harold's heart so?

The answer was confidence. Brandon had unshakable confidence that, no matter who the enemy was, he would defeat them. It had nothing to do with honor or virtue. Harold was drawn to Brandon because of his unwavering, unyielding strength.

When Cocytus the Silverfish, Dark Lord of the Ninth World, had appeared, it wiped out three entire countries across the empire almost immediately. Those who bore witness saw it as the end of times, believing the world would be plunged into despair. Everyone except Harold, that is, who believed that Brandon would defeat the Valiant.

And that is exactly what happened.

Brandon's acts saw him recognized as a great hero even by the emperor himself. Rank, fame, wealth—Brandon had access to anything he could have ever wanted. He had earned the right to it, and nobody could deny him.

Having seized the world in the palm of his hand, Brandon shocked everyone when he announced his retirement. It was a truly earth-shattering reveal. Not even Brandon's clan members saw it coming, and it sent shock waves through

those who knew him—Harold included. When Harold found out that Brandon had retired because of a woman he'd fallen in love with, it was like a nightmare from which he could not wake.

Harold had, of course, known that Brandon was head over heels for a particular woman. Harold himself was a married man, which was why Brandon had been begging him for advice in courting a lady—for more than a single night this time. All the same, Harold had never expected it would come to this.

When Harold asked, he discovered that the woman in Brandon's heart was frail and weak, and that living among the polluted air of the imperial capital put a great strain on her. It was because of his lover's health that Brandon had decided to leave the imperial capital for the countryside.

Harold understood the situation well enough, but his heart could not accept it. Brandon's friends were no different, and they desperately tried to stop him. Even then, Brandon was intent on leaving. After all the highs and lows he and his clanmates had been through, his beloved was his priority now.

With no other way to stop him from leaving, the clan master of the Bloodsword Federation had turned to Harold—Brandon's closest friend—for help.

"Don't do it, Brandon. The empire needs you. You may have beaten the Valiant, but the people are still filled with fear and uncertainty. They need a symbol of courage, and you're the only one who can guide them." Harold spoke with sincerity, but Brandon simply shook his head.

"I've made up my mind. I am no longer a Seeker."

For a moment, Harold was so overcome with rage that he couldn't think straight. Unable to hold back, he exploded. "Quit being such a fool! Just how selfish are you?! I know your heart belongs to her! I *know* that! But why now? The world needs you, can't you see?! And you're just going to leave them all?! You think we'll simply accept that?! Answer me, Brandon! As Overdeath, you owe me at least that!"

"I'm sorry."

Even Harold's heartfelt words did not sway Overdeath. Seeing Brandon hang

his head in sadness, Harold clenched his fists. Although he knew he was being irrational, he couldn't stand to see this hero in such a dismal state.

He drew back his fist and punched Brandon with everything he had.

Blood trickled from Brandon's mouth, and Harold braced himself for a counterattack. But Brandon stood still, unmoving, and his hands were slack. There wasn't a hint of anger on his face; instead, he wore a lonely smile.

"You really *are* serious, aren't you?" Harold muttered, awestruck by his friend's resolve.

While Harold stood there in shock, Brandon slowly approached him. He lifted a crimson pendant from his neck—an emblem made up of two swords and an axe. It was the symbol of the Bloodsword Federation, proof that the wearer was part of the clan.

"I want you to have this. I'm entrusting it to you."

"I don't need it."

Brandon smiled at his companion's uncharacteristically sulky response. "Don't be like that. You're the only person I can ask."

Harold felt the pendant pressed into his hand. He wanted to shout in protest, but Brandon had already begun walking away. The great Overdeath raised a hand in farewell without turning back.

"Be well, Harold. Take care of your wife and kid."

Overwhelmed by the sheer selfishness of Brandon's actions, Harold clenched the pendant, ready to throw it away, and yet...he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"You utter fool..."

He squeezed his hand tighter and tighter, knuckles going white. Blood dripped down as the emblem tore into his flesh. That was the last time he ever saw Brandon.

The river of time flowed on relentlessly for years after their fateful parting. Harold, now older, sat at his favorite café, sipping tea and reminiscing about the

past. In his hand was the pendant his friend had entrusted to him. Made from mithril, the pendant had not lost its sheen even after more than ten years.

However well the pendant had aged, the last decade had not been so kind to those in Harold's life. The Bloodsword Federation had long since disbanded, and Brandon—the owner of this pendant—had died in battle against a Dark Lord. Time eventually took everything that was important, and it left Harold awaiting his own slow demise.

At least, it had until recently.

"I guess there really are some perks to growing old," he said to himself.

In his head, Harold saw the image of a young man. A young man with a fearless smile, dressed in black and known as "the snake."

"Someone looks happy," a voice said from beside him.

Harold flinched, startled. The voice belonged to a young girl who worked at the café. As a regular, Harold knew her well, though they only ever indulged in small talk.

"You can tell?"

"Course I can! You always looked so lonely there by yourself. But now there's something energetic about you! I don't suppose you've fallen in love, have you?"

"Not quite! I'm afraid that my heart will forever belong to my wife, God rest her soul."

"What? Seriously? But you're so cool! I figured you for a real ladies' man."

Chuckling, Harold pulled out a cigarette and set it alight. "The only person in the world kind enough to say such a thing is you, my dear." He took a deep drag, then blew out the smoke, letting it curl in the air.

"Wait a minute... That's the symbol of the Bloodsword Federation!" the girl exclaimed.

Harold placed the pendant on the table, and her eyes lit up. "You seem to know quite a bit. They're old hat now."

“Hee hee, I’m actually pretty obsessed with Seekers. I know all about them, even the older clans. The Bloodsword Federation was great—first clan to ever defeat a Valiant! Are you a fan too, Harold?”

“A fan, eh? Hmm, yes. I suppose I am.”

Seeing his gentle smile, she grinned. “I knew it! Seekers are so cool! I wanted to be one too, but I don’t have the talent or the skills for it, even though I have a class myself.”

The girl sighed. Having a class didn’t always mean that you were suited to making a career of it. She was right to say so; Seekers constantly put their lives on the line, so their talents were their greatest weapons. Average performers quickly found themselves dead, bringing their quests to an abrupt end.

“At least my class has kept me healthy and strong. I got run over by a horse and cart when I was little, but I came out of it with just a couple of scratches.”

Harold laughed. “Lucky you got the class you did, then. You wouldn’t be standing here today otherwise!”

“You got that right! I’ll forever be grateful for it.”

Even for those who didn’t go into battle, classes could still bring various benefits. Harold guessed from the girl’s story that she probably had a frontline class of some sort. Her body was tough, and she wouldn’t tire easily, which would come in handy.

“Are there any Seekers you’re particularly interested in, Harold?”

The girl’s earnest question made Harold chuckle again. She really wasn’t joking when she said she was obsessed.

“To be honest, I’m not so knowledgeable when it comes to the newer crowd... but I’ve been hearing a lot about Wild Tempest.”

“Wild Tempest! I’m a huge fan!”

The girl excitedly rolled up her right sleeve, revealing a tattoo of a winged snake—the clan symbol of Wild Tempest.

“Ahem! Well, erm, you really *are* quite the fan, aren’t you?”

“Does it look like the real thing? It’s just a sticker. They’re super popular right now.”

“Ah, I see. Official clan merchandise, then?”

“Yep yep! Wild Tempest is huge, so everything sells out almost as soon as it hits the shelves!”

“I’ve heard they’re seeing a meteoric rise.”

“Yeah, and they’re always in the news. But, um...there are a lot of not-so-nice rumors about them.”

“Oh?” Harold tilted his head, curious, and the girl lowered her voice.

“People say they sabotage and attack their rivals, and I’ve even heard that they have connections to the underworld. You know, gangsters and the like...”

“My, that’s not very good now, is it?”

“They stick out like a sore thumb, really. When you stand out too much, people just want to cut you down to size. See, I think the people spreading those rumors are just jealous of them. I mean, how else do you explain how approachable they are, and all their volunteer community service?”

“Oho. So that’s what’s going on.”

Harold nodded and blew out another lungful of smoke. He reached for his cup of tea and realized it was empty.

“Some time ago, I knew a famous doctor,” he said. “He was an acquaintance of mine. Whenever he encountered patients suffering illnesses that could not be cured by way of medicine or healing skills, he had a godlike ability to save them through surgery.”

“Wow, that’s... Uh, that’s incredible.” The girl was thrown off by Harold’s sudden change of topic, but she followed as best she could.

“One day, I asked him why he was such a fantastic doctor. What do you think he said?”

“Huh? Er... He wanted to save lots of people so he worked as hard as he could?”

Harold shook his head. "This is what he said to me. He said, 'I just like to cut people.'"

The girl's eyes flew wide in horror.

"You see, for every job, there is the perfect tool," said Harold. "Even those we would ordinarily think of as evil or wicked can be heroes, given the right situation."

"I-I see," the girl said, nodding, though clearly put off by Harold's story.

"May I have another cup of tea?" asked Harold, pointing to his empty one.

She flashed him an awkward smile. "Yes, of course. I'll bring it right away."

Harold watched her walk away, and then he turned to stare out the window.

"I wonder... How long can you continue to walk that path?"

There was nobody around to answer Harold's question, but he was already sure of the answer. *He* would never betray the trust that Harold had put in him, just as Brandon never would have.

As I made my way back to town after my morning run, I noticed a familiar shape slinking toward me.

"Yo, boss. You ever get tired of doing this every day?"

The voice belonged to Loki, my informant. I took off the mask I'd been wearing to impede my breathing.

"It only makes a difference *because* I do it every day," I replied.

"How very admirable, coming from a famous clan master."

"Wouldn't matter if I was a clan master or a first-day rookie; the schedule never changes. Hard work now is what supports your present and your future. You start slacking just because you gain a little prestige? You'll never make it."

Loki chuckled. "That attitude is what makes you *you*, Noel Stollen."

"Quit talking down to me! Anyway, what do you want?" I motioned for Loki to walk on, and a wide grin stretched across his face.

“I’ve got a story you might like to hear. How about it?”

“Color me intrigued. But let’s go somewhere we can talk first.”

I dipped into an alleyway, where the shadows of the buildings trapped a chill in the air. It was winter, and though snow hadn’t come yet, the weather forecasters claimed we were due for quite a bit.

“Well,” I said. “What’s this story?”

“I’ve got something on one of the third-tier regalia clans. Lorelai.”

Just as I’d expected. I’d asked Loki to let me know if he dug up anything useful. In order for our clan to enter the regalia, we needed to get rid of one of the current clans. To that end, the more information we had on them, the better.

“The clan master of Lorelai, Johann Eissfeldt, is starting a railway company.”

I was blown away by the news. “A *railway* company?”

With a move like that, Johann clearly intended to build a railway system in the empire. Sure, it was possible; we had the technology to whip up magic-powered engines, and railroads themselves could be created from beast materials.

However, the problem was that the empire was more prone to Abyss openings than any other nation. In other words, the chances of railroads and Abysses mixing was high, and the danger inherent in that possibility was precisely why railroads had yet to be implemented.

The neighboring Republic of Rodania had instituted their railway system four years ago, and word was that it had given their economy a huge boost. By contrast, the empire was still reliant on horses for transportation, even though its magic-engineered civilization far surpassed Rodania’s. The empire’s most advanced transportation system was the airship, but because the cost of maintenance was so high, their usage was limited to a scant few. It would be some time before they were open to the general public. If the empire *did* implement a railway system, it’d be sure to surpass everyone’s expectations and carry itself to new heights of prosperity and development.

“Are you sure this information is legitimate?” I asked Loki.

“I’m sure of it. Johann has links to Vulcan Industries.”

“Vulcan Industries... They’re one of the two biggest businesses in the entire capital. But how do they intend to handle the Abyss-opening issue?”

“Finding that out depends on whether you want me to keep digging.”

I knew what Loki was really getting at, and I chuckled in response.

“You drive a hard bargain,” I said, “like any good businessman.”

In other words, if I wanted more of the truth, I’d have to pay for it. I didn’t mind, though. Everything in this world had its price. More importantly, I needed to do whatever it took to stop Johann’s plans. A clan was deemed valuable not only because of its members’ combat prowess but also by their contributions to society. If I let Johann pull this off, I’d never make it to the top of the Seeker heap.

I already knew that Johann was a man of great ambition, and his attempts to shoot up the ranks were noble. But I was not about to stand by and watch him climb. Instead, I would make sure that Johann Eissfeldt dropped out of the race entirely.

“I don’t like that look on your face, boss.”

“Just the light playing tricks on you, Loki.”

“Hmph. Whatever you say. I’m assuming we have a deal?”

I could tell from the smile on his face that Loki was enjoying himself. I nodded.

“Yes. We have ourselves a deal, Loki.”

Chapter 1:

The Demon Lord

“BATTLE, COMPLETE.”

We’d defeated the beast, and the Abyss was purified.

Wild Tempest had accepted a beast-elimination contract on the southern coast of the empire. Before the area was decimated by the Ninth World’s Silverfish, Cocytus, it was home to a league of free towns collectively known as Mönch. Now we watched as the seas that had once been stained red from the Abyss returned to a beautiful cobalt blue.

The beast that appeared with the Abyss was Forneus, a huge shark with an abyssal depth of 11 that could fly through the air and control storms. Though not a lord-level beast, it was powerful enough to easily level an entire city. Forneus was gigantic—a hundred meters in length—and even before we arrived, it had already unleashed a fierce storm of wind, lightning, and hail, reshaping the very coast. Now it was nothing but a huge corpse, lying on the beach as the waves lapped against it.

We’d snatched victory from a battle to the death, and with it, we’d set free brilliant rays of sunshine among a vibrant blue sky and sea.

“Aaaagh.” Koga chucked away his broken sword and fell backward into the white sand. “I’m exhausted! Ya know, this time, *this* time, I really thought we were done for...”

Koga’s chest heaved up and down with each ragged breath. His armor was a crumbling mess, leaving his upper body almost entirely bare.

“I don’t think I can even move anymore...” said Alma, collapsing into a heap. Her face was pale, and she was so drained of energy that she looked like she might pass out at any moment.

“You’re both...you’re both okay...” muttered Leon, who tried to offer them words of encouragement before creasing in half and vomiting out the entire

contents of his stomach, along with some blood. He sank to his knees.

They'd done something truly amazing in defeating a beast with a depth of 11, but none of them had the energy to savor our victory. My *Battle Voice* meant their vitality and magic recovery levels were raised, but even then, they were all at the very limits of their endurance. Frankly, I was just as exhausted as the rest of them. I felt like I'd pass out if my concentration slipped for even an instant. The only thing that kept me standing was my pride as the clan master. As the leader of the party, I did not want to show a hint of weakness.

"Return to me," said Hugo, his voice like a cool breeze.

Obeying Hugo's command, the puppet soldiers spread across the coast sank into the earth all at once. During battle, Hugo had controlled dozens of them at a time, using them for offense, defense, and support when necessary. Naturally, this power required a huge amount of magic, more than any of the rest of us. But his expression betrayed no exhaustion. He didn't show any joy, either. Instead, he brushed away the sand stuck to his clothes, his face a portrait of calm.

"Guess I should have expected this level of performance from an A-Ranker," I said. "Looks like you're back to the peak of your powers."

It had been two months since Hugo joined the party, and with each battle, his skills sharpened. If not for Hugo, we couldn't have defeated the Forneus. If not for him, we'd be bloated lumps floating on the sea. Yet Hugo didn't look satisfied in the slightest.

"Back to the peak of my powers? Master, I do not wish to sound conceited, but you're wrong. If I were at my peak, those three wouldn't have needed to fight so desperately. It bothers me that I could not contribute to the battle more adequately."

Hugo didn't seem to be lying. The frustration was clear in his eyes as he glared at the beast's gargantuan body. I liked that about him; it confirmed that I'd made the right decision by adding him to the team. It meant all the work we'd done to get him was worth it.

But as I let myself relax in that instant, I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me. Just as I was about to crumple, Hugo caught me in his arms.

“Best not to overdo it. It is true that Talkers don’t need to use magic for their skills, but they cannot buff themselves either. You fought that whole battle without any stamina recovery whatsoever. You must be more exhausted than any of us.”

“Yeah, I know,” I snapped. “Now let go of me.”

I pushed away from Hugo and staggered back to my feet. I retrieved a potion from my item pouch and gulped it down.

“You do know it is practically poison to use potions in such a weakened state, right?”

“I’ll take a shortened life span over looking weak in front of you.”

Hugo chuckled awkwardly at my declaration and shrugged.

“Members of Wild Tempest, well done! Congratulations on your successful defeat of the Forneus!”

The clearly joyous voice came from behind us, as if out of nowhere. I turned to see an elderly gentleman dressed in a tuxedo. He was Harold, an inspector with the Seekers Association, and our coordinator.

“Exactly as I thought: you’re simply amazing. I admit, even as an inspector, I’m overjoyed to see this.”

“Save me the flattery. What’s more important is that the Abyss is purified. You can start bringing the evacuees back to their town.”

Near the coast was a port city, Soldiran, where Koga had once lived back when he was a gladiator. But the city had been closed off upon Forneus’s arrival—its inhabitants were evacuated to distant camps. They would remain there until the beast was eliminated and the city declared safe.

“I’ve already radioed my people at the shelter camps and told them the Abyss is purified,” Harold said. “The townspeople will be back in their homes by the end of the day. You are their heroes. They’ll be sure to welcome you with open arms if you choose to stop by.”

I turned to Koga, who was still lying on the ground. “What do you want to do, Koga?”

He raised a shaky hand and waved me off. Evidently, he had no intention of going back. Soldiran probably held little more for him than ugly, unwanted memories. For a moment, Alma's eyes lit up as she opened her mouth to tease him, but she gave up the moment the exhaustion hit her.

"There's your answer," I told Harold. "We'll skip Soldiran and head back to the town we've been staying in."

"Understood." He nodded, smiling. "I'll prepare a carriage for you. However, would you do me the honor of riding in my carriage, Noel? I'd like to chat with you about some future plans."

"Future plans, huh? All right, I'll ride with you." If Harold wanted to discuss something privately, it must've been important. I looked over at Leon. "You're in charge from here, Leon. Our sponsors will be coming to collect the Forneus's corpse, and I need you to make sure it goes smoothly. I'll be heading back to town with Harold."

Leon was on the brink of fainting from sheer exhaustion, but he still thumped his chest with a fist in a show of confidence. "Got it. I'll see it done."

"Master, shall I accompany you as protection?" Hugo asked me.

I shook my head. "I'll be fine. This old man is stronger than he looks."

With a jerk of my chin, I signaled to Harold that we should get a move on.

"Please rest assured," he said, "I will see Noel safely back to town."

Harold and I sat on opposite sides of the carriage as it made its way along the road. He reached into a bag for some documents and passed them to me.

"Here is your next contract."

I scanned the papers, and for a moment, my eyes widened in shock. Then the corners of my mouth curled up into a grin. It was the contract I'd been waiting for, and now it was here in my hands at last.

"A lord with a depth of 12, eh?"

The threat level of a given beast was referred to as its abyssal depth, and the

bigger the number, the more dangerous the beast. Anything with a depth of 12 or higher was considered especially powerful, and these beasts were called lords.

“You have my thanks,” I said. “Just as you promised, you’ve brought us nothing but excellent contracts. This is easily the best one yet. It’s usually impossible for a clan as young as ours to land a lord contract. It’s only been six months since we were officially certified.”

Now I knew why Harold had been so cautious about where he revealed this new contract. Wild Tempest was growing in renown as a leading clan, but even then, most would assume we were far too weak to take down a beast lord.

Harold was taking a pretty big risk by giving us this assignment without regard to public opinion. If we won, there’d be no problems whatsoever, but if we were wiped out, Harold’s standing in the Seekers Association would be in serious jeopardy. Moreover, he could face a hefty punishment from the Empire.

“It’s still far too early to be grateful yet, Noel. The power of a lord, as the name suggests, is a far cry from your everyday beast. It might only be a single level above the Forneus you just fought, but in terms of power, it’s like comparing a grown man to an infant. This battle will be more difficult than anything you have ever experienced. With that clear, do you accept this contract?”

My answer was almost instantaneous. “Of course we do. No reason not to.”

It was true that our chances of victory over a lord were low. We’d barely managed to defeat the Forneus. The odds were ten thousand to one—no, more like a hundred million to one. But these odds only counted if you were fighting a regular battle. As I perused the documents, I could already see a strategy that upped our odds.

“Wild Tempest doesn’t lose,” I declared. “We devour our enemies, lords or otherwise.”

Harold’s eyes grew wide, and then his face settled into a smile. “You sound exactly like your grandfather. So arrogant that you’ve forgotten fear, yet strangely assured of your own victory. You look nothing alike, but you may as well be one and the same. It’s frightening sometimes to think of the power of

bloodlines...”

Harold caught himself falling back into memories of the past, and he straightened up once more.

“We’ve identified this particular lord as ‘the Noble Blood.’ It sits at the very peak of vampiric beast types. It’s also worth noting that it has the power to control time and space.”

The Noble Blood was an apex predator, capable of wielding all known magical powers and bending the laws of nature.

“This beast has already arrived. The Seekers Association is holding back the growth of the Abyss, but the effort will last a week at most. We need you and Wild Tempest to get there within the week and eliminate the beast. Understood?”

“Loud and clear.”

I nodded and passed the documents back to Harold. I’d committed the entirety of them to memory.

“To be chosen for the regalia, your clan must have an excellent battle record and enormous wealth. You seem well on your way to accumulating the funds you need, but your clan is still lacking in field experience. Successfully defeating this lord will give you exactly what you require.”

“You mean we’d be eligible for a spot in the regalia?”

“Precisely. That said, there is one problem.” Harold leaned forward with his hands on his knees. “The regalia has only seven seats. Even if Wild Tempest earns the necessary credentials, you’ll never claim a spot without surpassing one of the current clans—and they’re all the best of the best. They’ve defeated lords on more than just one or two occasions. Overcoming one of these clans before the arrival of the Valiant will be, dare I say it, utterly impossible.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

According to the Association, there were only eight months left before the Valiant was set to appear. But there was a high possibility of it arriving even earlier, so I felt we might have as little as four months.

“Harold, I want you to tell me something,” I said, avoiding his gaze as I spoke. “If one of the seats on the regalia were to open up, would it be possible for us to fill that space immediately?”

“No. The Association first selects a number of candidates, and then the permission of the imperial family is necessary. Even if one of the regalia’s clans were to suddenly vanish, It would take at least a month to select their replacement. However...” Harold lowered his voice. “Given the current situation, preparing for the Valiant’s arrival is the top priority. If a clan were to be suddenly *unavailable*, it would be imperative that another clan fill that space. In such a situation, Wild Tempest would be a clear frontrunner. Your name is already more well known than almost any other clan. And if you eliminate this lord, your position will be secured.”

I smiled at Harold’s answer. “Just what I wanted to hear. Thank you, Harold.”

It was clear what I needed to do next.

“I can make an educated guess as to what you’ve got in mind, Noel, but don’t be reckless. I’ll be frank: I’m not worried about *you* per se, but if your actions harm the empire in any way, I won’t be able to stand by and watch from the sidelines.”

“Like I said, I get it.”

I looked out the window. We were about an hour out from the town where we were staying. I felt zero apprehension as the scenery sped past. I’d set my goal long ago, and my resolve would not waver.

“Everything will go fine,” I said. “I’m going to become the strongest Seeker in history, after all.”

The lord had appeared in the capital of a country called the Principality of Archillio. It was a location that was lost a decade ago when the Valiant attacked. The country was tucked away in a mountain valley. Ruins and debris from the incident had yet to be tidied up or hauled away to this day.

Now that the location was part of an Abyss, it was covered in a translucent dome of red. You could see through to the inside of the dome if you were close

enough, but visibility was limited. It was as though you were looking at the world within the Abyss through muddied water.

When we arrived, there were several members of the Seekers Association waiting for us. They'd been busy locking down the immediate area and evacuating all the people who lived in neighboring towns. Harold was here to oversee the handling of the Abyss, and by his side was a young woman with blonde hair, also dressed in a tuxedo. When she saw us, she grimaced in disgust and stormed over.

"Surprised you're actually here. Thought you'd run away," she spat. "You've got guts, I'll give you that much."

"Nice to meet you too," I said. "Now, who the hell are you?"

Harold was the one who answered my question.

"That would be my granddaughter, Marion. She's arrogant for her age, but she's an exceptional Association member, and I'm not saying that simply because we're related. Please try and get along. I assume you won't have any issues, seeing as you share a similar flair for egotism."

"I don't need to hear your senile speeches, old man. Like I care if she's your granddaughter."

"Hey! Don't you dare treat my grandpa that way!" Marion barked, brow furrowed as she jabbed her finger at me. "Straight up, none of you belong here. Maybe the newspapers can't get enough of you, but you obviously don't have what it takes to bring down a lord. Small fry like you? You're just rushing to your graves."

Marion's contempt for us was clear as day, and equally apparent was the agitation rising in Koga and Alma. Their short fuses made them a real handful; they were always quick to start fights. Kind of like me, really.

"I don't want to hear it," I said, sneering. "We're just wasting time. You've got your own job to do, so how about you get to it? Can't be that hard, working as the old man's assistant."

Marion's frown deepened. "How dare you!"

Her hands balled up into fists. Her eyes filled with rage, and I stared directly into them. She was clearly itching for a fight.

“Get out of my way,” I told her. “Be a good little assistant and make yourself scarce until someone needs you.”

Marion clicked her tongue in response, then muttered, “Fools, all of you. Fools with death wishes.”

Despite the parting jab, she got out of our way and said nothing more. Harold let out a quiet chuckle as he watched.

“You make quite the comedic duo, I must say. I’d love to watch more of your antics, but that lord won’t wait. The Abyss erosion is only speeding up with each moment, and if we leave it much longer, we’ll have another powerful beast to deal with. Hurry up now, Noel.”

“Relax. We’ll bring you back the lord’s head in no time.”

Victory was sure to be ours. It didn’t matter if the odds were a hundred million to one. We would emerge triumphant.

“The word ‘defeat’ doesn’t exist in my dictionary,” I added.

As I led the members of Wild Tempest toward the Abyss, I heard Marion shout from behind us.

“You’d better not be lying to me, you snake! I’ll be waiting here for that head!”

Once we entered the Abyss, the previously muddied world within became sharp and clear. The battered, broken remains of the town stretched out before us.

“I can feel it.”

I sensed an energy unlike anything I’d ever felt emanating from deeper within. It came from the lord.

“Whoa, that ain’t no ordinary beast...” muttered Koga, fear making his voice waver. “Makes the Forneus seem like a li’l bunny rabbit.”

“You’re such a scaredy-cat, Koga,” said Alma.

“Wh-who are you callin’ scaredy-cat?!”

“You, Koga. You. Are you so terrified that you can’t understand the words coming out of my mouth? Pitiful. Just pitiful.”

“What?! You got a big mouth for a depraved pervo!”

“‘Depraved pervo’?! I. Will. *Kill*. You.”

“Hey! Enough. Knock it off already!” Leon shouted, sick of their bickering. “We’ve got an incredibly important fight ahead of us. Can’t you just get along until we’re done?”

“No way!”

“Never!”

Leon looked utterly lost by their quickfire replies. “Come on, now...”

I ignored the three of them and turned my attention to Hugo. “What do you think?”

“I think the lord here is considerably stronger than those I have seen in the past. It’s easily the most powerful I have ever encountered.”

Hugo was the only one among us with experience running *lord*-elimination contracts. Just as humans of the same rank could vary wildly in their strength, beasts too differed from one individual to the next. If Hugo’s preliminary analysis was to be believed, then this lord was above and beyond our party’s capabilities.

“Perfect,” I said. “I wouldn’t have wanted anything less for our first lord.”

Since receiving the contract from Harold, we’d spent the last week purchasing new equipment and learning new skills. This was the perfect place to try them all out. A grin spread across my face as Koga walked up to me.

“Still,” he said, “I don’t get it.”

“Hm? You don’t get what?”

“The whole point of beasts comin’ here is that they wanna invade our world, right? That much I get. What I don’t get is, why do they need to send beasts this

strong, like some kinda assassins for the cause?”

“It’s instinct.”

Puzzled, Koga cocked his head to one side. “Instinct?”

“It’s not like the beasts are invading our world with any sort of clear goal or objective. They act entirely on instinct, and their instincts tell them to pillage and destroy the place we call home. There’s no strength-based hierarchy or anything like that.”

“Oh, gotcha.” He nodded awkwardly.

I faced the core of the Abyss, where the lord awaited us.

“Everyone, prepare for battle!” I said, my order ringing out.

Tactics skill: *Battle Voice*. The party’s vitality and magic rose by 40 percent, and their healing rates increased too. “Move out! Let’s make this hunt a good one.”

The lord of the Abyss—the Noble Blood—was in the very center of the now-destroyed town square. Its underlings were already in position and ready for our attack, so it must have noticed our arrival. It had summoned what seemed like three hundred elemental soldiers— and not merely the standard line up of water, wind, fire, and earth, but also more powerful elementals of light and dark. Each took the form of a man or a monster, and while the standard elemental soldiers had a depth of 8, the light and dark ones had depths of 10. The Noble Blood could continue to summon as many soldiers as it needed as long as its magic held out. If we were pulled into a battle of attrition, we were as good as dead.

On our side, we had five people and a hundred of Hugo’s puppet soldiers. The soldiers could be separated into melee types armed with swords, spears, and axes; ranged types with bows, guns, and magic; and support types that healed or cast barriers.

Hugo was an A-Rank Grandmaster in the Puppeteer class. As the name suggested, this specialization allowed for the simultaneous summoning and

directing of thousands of puppet soldiers. However, the overall power and efficacy of each puppet soldier lessened as they grew in number. The Noble Blood and its elemental soldiers were not to be trifled with, so Hugo limited his puppet soldier platoon to a hundred strong. This gave each puppet soldier the strength of a B-Rank Seeker.

As our forces faced off in preparation for battle, I looked up at the Noble Blood. Its form was that of a beautiful young man with eyes as red as blood, skin as white as bone. It practically shone as it sat upon a levitating, skeletal throne, decked out in a blue leather suit with gold embroidery.

The Noble Blood looked down at us without a hint of emotion, head lazily resting in one hand. It did not look at us as though we posed a threat, but rather like gnats buzzing around in its path. This reaction was understandable, given the sheer difference in our strength. However, that very arrogance would be the Noble Blood's undoing.

Thus, I said one thing to the lord and one thing only, enunciating each word so it would hear me loud and clear:

"I am going to crush you like a bug."

The Noble Blood's cheek twitched in response to my insult. Then, it sent a one-word order to its elemental soldiers.

"Go."

There was a murderous fury in the command. The elemental soldiers moved as one, completely under their master's control.

"Noel, watch out! Poison gas incoming!"

All five of Alma's senses were finely honed, so she noticed it first. Ushered on by the earth and wind soldiers, poison gas was rapidly eroding the ground, whipping toward us on a fierce gust. One whiff of that and we'd rot from the inside out, deteriorating in an instant. Even Alma, with her ample poison tolerance, couldn't stand up to it.

"Leon, *Nova Circle!*"

"I'm on it!"

I engaged the Tactics skill and barked an order at Leon. In turn, Leon plunged his sword into the ground, creating a field of light around us. Knight skill: *Nova Circle* negated any and all status effects inside it. Any party members within also benefited from improved health and magic recovery rates.

Leon's *Nova Circle* cleared the air of the poison gas. The elemental soldiers shifted tactics, letting loose powerful attack magic from long range. Leon was already using *Nova Circle*, so he was unable to cast any barrier skills.

"Koga! Hugo! You're on defense!"

"Got it!"

"Understood!"

Koga sliced his sword through the air, creating a huge wall of ice. At the same time, Hugo used his puppet soldiers to create barriers. Samurai skill: *Ice Blade* allowed its user to turn anything it cut into a perfectly frozen block of ice. Cutting the air created an ice wall. Together with the puppets' barriers, Koga and Hugo blocked the fire storms and mudslides unleashed by the elemental soldiers.



Unfortunately, the enemy was strong, and as soon as the ice wall and the barriers fell, the frontline troops were already closing in on us. There wasn't even enough time to cast another barrier or build another wall.

"Alma, *Shadow Arm*!"

"Roger!"

In an instant, Alma's shadow stretched forward. It separated into countless branches, each one transforming into the shape of a hand that seized the feet of the incoming forces.

Assassin skill: *Shadow Arm* worked by giving the user's shadow a physical form they could control at will. The enemy troops tripped over and fell. They'd been focused on their attack; they wouldn't be getting to their feet any time soon.

"We'll take them in a clean sweep! Leon, *Merciful Glaive*!"

"All right, let's do it. *Merciful Glaive*!"

Leon's shout was accompanied by a thousand blades of light bursting out from the field of light surrounding him. Knight skill: *Merciful Glaive* created a storm of lustrous blades within a set area. It could only be used while *Nova Circle* was in effect, but because the blades were imbued with the holy element, they could penetrate and restrain any beast no matter how strong its defense.

As a result, the skill succeeded in hitting and holding back about half of the elemental soldiers. But even those who had successfully avoided *Merciful Glaive* struggled to move around those who were impaled.

"Now! Do it!" I shouted.

Koga, Alma, and Hugo replied with a unified battle cry. They focused their attacks while Leon's skill had the soldiers stuck in place. First, Koga used Samurai skill: *Crazy Cherry Blossoms* to generate a flurry of strikes that sliced through the enemy like dancing cherry blossom petals.

Alma, meanwhile, fired off a combo of skills. Assassin skill: *Perfect Throw*. Assassin skill: *Armor Piercing*. Assassin skill: *Shadow Arm*. Her metal spikes would no longer miss their targets. They decimated the enemy armor as they

flew through the cores of elemental soldiers one after the other, destroying them.

As a final flourish, Hugo used the Puppeteer skills *Ether Link* and *Link Burst*. The skills released the limiters on the ranged puppet soldiers attached by magic strings to Hugo's fingertips, causing them to become a hundred times more powerful. As the puppet soldiers crumbled away, they channeled the last of their energy into ranged attacks with bows, guns, and magic, tearing through the elemental soldiers.

My clan's triple threat laid waste to more than half of the elemental soldiers. However, the more powerful light and dark elemental soldiers still remained. The four of them burst through the clouds of dust and smoke.

The light elemental soldiers were equipped with dual blades and wrapped in golden armor. They were unbelievably quick, meaning they excelled when it came to hit-and-run tactics, but they could also attack from a distance with high-intensity beams of searing heat. What's more, they could create holograms of themselves by refracting the light.

Meanwhile, the dark elemental soldiers were black vanguard-types bearing gigantic war hammers. They reinforced their own powers and deflected attacks by controlling gravity. Because they kept the area around them in a high-gravity state, it was near impossible to move close to them, let alone go in for a melee attack. They were incredibly dangerous.

At a depth of 10, not even one could be taken lightly—but four at once presented an immense challenge, even for a hardened group of Seekers. Not that Wild Tempest would have much trouble.

"Alma, Koga, Leon! We'll head them off!"

"On it!"

"On my way!"

"Leave it to me!"

The three of them followed my orders in an instant, facing off against the elemental soldiers. Without wasting another moment, I gave my next order.

“Hugo! Scenario fifteen!”

“Scenario fifteen, is it? Understood,” Hugo replied with a nod.

The melee puppet soldiers raced after Alma, Koga, and Leon, who had broken into a sprint. Even with the puppets’ support, Alma and the others could not win in close-quarters combat. This was why I went with scenario fifteen.

“Engaging *Shift Change*.”

Just as the elemental soldiers collided with the party, Hugo raised the speed of his puppet soldiers and put his new skill into effect. The instant the elemental soldiers should have turned the puppet soldiers into dust, they swapped places. Unable to stop their attack, the elemental soldiers attacked themselves.

Puppeteer skill: *Shift Change* allowed a puppet to swap places with the target. Hugo and I had given numbers to the various scenarios in which the skill could be used. And thanks to scenario fifteen, the elemental soldiers had attacked themselves, suffering heavy damages.

“Don’t let up! Keep up the attack!” I shouted.

“*Accel—Duodecuple!*”

“*Iai Flash!*”

“*Divine Impact!*”

“*Link Burst!*”

Our full-on combination attack utterly decimated the elemental soldiers. With the last four down, we had cleared the battlefield of the Noble Blood’s grunts. The elemental soldiers did not have true physical forms, however; so long as the Noble Blood still had magic, it could summon them back anytime.

“Don’t give the lord time to summon reinforcements!” I shouted. “Koga and Alma, you’re on attack! Leon and Hugo, you’re on support!”

Alma and Koga, both quick on their feet, dashed toward the Noble Blood. Meanwhile, Leon and Hugo cast barriers on them or otherwise kept the lord busy with ranged attacks—every one of which hit. The second that the Noble Blood was wrapped in smoke, Koga leaped high into the air.

“Your neck is mine!” he yelled.

At the same time Alma kept moving at top speed while she sunk into the shadows. Assassin skill: *Shadow Dive* gave her the ability to move freely through the darkness. It consumed a huge amount of magic, but she could evade most attacks.

Koga leaped to face the lord head-on, while Alma appeared behind it. They were closing in to put an end to the Noble Blood, but...

“Fools.”

The Noble Blood’s utterance was thick with contempt. Even though Leon and Hugo had struck the lord, it was completely unharmed. It remained calmly seated on its throne, sneering at Koga and Alma’s surprise attack.

“Wha—?!”

“You kiddin’?!”

Alma and Koga were shocked. Their strikes ricocheted off an invisible wall, leaving the two in midair and completely out of balance. The Noble Blood snapped its fingers, and the two were suddenly struck by lightning.

“Alma!”

My spine grew cold, and I heard myself scream her name. The area around the Noble Blood’s throne was melted into lava by the sheer heat of the lightning. The air itself prickled with electricity. Even with a barrier in place, a direct hit from a lightning bolt would kill.

When the black smoke cleared, I looked around for Alma and was relieved to find her safe. Assassin skill: *Phantom* had turned her into an untouchable spirit for three precious seconds. Alma had sensed the danger and used it just in time for the lightning to pass through her completely. However, *Phantom* could only be used once every 24 hours. Alma’s face was pale, her breath ragged.

“Alma, you okay?” Koga cried from atop a clock tower he’d jumped onto.

In that instant, my accelerated mind suddenly saw a horrific scene play out before my eyes.

“Koga! Move! Now!”

He sprang away without asking why, landing on the ground. In battle, my orders were absolute. I'd made it clear to everyone in the party: they were to obey my orders immediately and without hesitation.

A split second after Koga jumped from it, the twenty-meter-tall clock tower crumbled into sand—exactly as I'd seen in the limited predictive abilities I had due to my accelerated thoughts. The only difference was that Koga didn't turn to sand along with it.

"Hmph. You dodged it," the Noble Blood muttered with an intrigued smile.

It was time-space magic. I was sure of it. He'd sped up time for his target—the clock tower—and it had aged to dust in a mere moment. There was no defense against it, only immediate death. Even if my predictive abilities could see it coming, the area of effect was too wide, the spell terrifyingly fast. Even the smallest mistake here would spell the end of our party.

"Ah, I see," said the Noble Blood, looking at me with its jaw still resting on one hand. "You can make little predictions. Accelerated thought, perhaps? You sensed the minute movement of space-time, and as a result, you foresaw my spell. Quite impressive for an insect. How annoying." The lord's blood-red eyes narrowed as he spoke to me. "I believe I'll crush you first."

An incredible magic power surged forth from the Noble Blood.

"Quick!" shouted Leon. "Protect Noel!"

Leon began running over. Koga and Alma, realizing the danger, also ran to protect me. But none of them could make it in time. Hugo quickly maneuvered his puppet soldiers to guard me, casting multiple barriers to reinforce his defenses. However...

"It's useless, you stupid bugs," the Noble Blood said with a chuckle.

It was standing right in front of me.

"What?! How did—"

The lord should have been sitting calmly in its throne, and yet here it was. Before I could say another word, it grinned wide and thrust its hand through my chest.

“I stopped time. It doesn’t matter how strong you make your defenses; they’re useless when time stops. I know your role. You command the party and strengthen your allies. And without you, everyone is dead. I think I’ll take my time toying with them. Their deaths shall be my revelry.”

“Hrk... Ack!”

I coughed up blood and grabbed a hold of the Noble Blood’s arm. The lord wiped the blood from his cheek with its left hand and looked at it.

“But before I do that,” it said, licking its fingers, “I shall feast.”

The lord savored its moment of victory, its face a cruel and diabolical mix of delight and sadism. The next moment, its features contorted into a horrified grimace.

“Wh-what is this blood?!”

The Noble Blood hurriedly spat the blood on the ground. Seeing it so panicked had me roaring with laughter, even while impaled on the lord’s hand.

“Looks like my blood isn’t tasty enough for you, huh?”

“Y-you... What did you do?!”

The Noble Blood realized something wasn’t right and stopped speaking mid-sentence, whipping its head to and fro. None of the other party members had moved to help me despite having its hand plunged into my chest. If anything, they were keeping their distance...as if getting too close would put them in danger.

“You filthy insect!”

Finally realizing the reality of the situation, the Noble Blood angrily attempted to wrench its hand out of my body. Unfortunately for the beast, it was too late. We weren’t going to give it another chance to stop time.

“Looks like you were the real fool all along,” I said mockingly.

With a bright flash, my body exploded.

Buffers, starting with Talkers, are the weakest of all classes. Compared to all

the others, they alone lack the means to defend themselves. Their constant need of support in battle makes things much harder for their allies—for example, a Warrior would struggle to fight if they had to worry about defending another. But even with the best of defenses, it is nearly impossible to protect someone should a specialized stealth class, such as an Assassin, set their sights on the buffer. On top of all of that, when a buffer is killed, their buffs drop from the party in an instant, leaving the team considerably weakened.

The Noble Blood was smart for a beast. It had seen that I was a buffer and determined that I was the weak point of the party. Killing me would not only strip the party of their commander, but it would also sap away the boons I'd bestowed upon them.

This particular beast had access to the most powerful magic of all: the ability to stop time. The spell made even the strongest of defenses meaningless. Knowing it would manipulate space-time during our fight, I had prepared a body double in advance.

Puppeteer skill: *Imitation*. This skill allowed a Puppeteer to reproduce a copy of whatever the user touched. It was not a perfect replica, as it lacked the soul of the real thing, but the replica *looked* every bit like its target. I'd had Hugo make a copy of me, which he controlled to act exactly as I would. My orders and buffs were sent not by my voice, but via our *Link*.

We'd placed an explosive inside of the replica, and it was no mere firecracker. The bomb had three head's worth of Garmr bone marrow packed into it. Once it went off, it pulled in any nearby magic as fuel to compound the explosion. Considering the Noble Blood's insane magical power, the blast would be astronomical—it could level the city ruins and leave nothing but a barren plain behind.

Hugo's puppet soldiers had cast barriers around the area, confining the powerful explosion and protecting us all from the incoming blast.

Although the blast eventually broke through, it didn't spread beyond the town square. The rest of us, protected by one of Leon's barriers, were unharmed. I took off the armor that had disguised me as one of Hugo's puppet soldiers and stepped out into the open.

“Don’t need the disguise no more?” Koga asked me.

I shook my head. “That trick won’t work a second time.”

Looking down at the newly formed gouge in the earth, I felt a palpable energy emanating from deep within. Then came the echo of a bitter, rage-filled voice.

“You... You...!”

“What? You just want to stay in your hole, cursing?” I laughed, goading the lord. “You coward. You don’t even deserve the rank of lord.”

A sudden gust of wind blew away the smoke within the crater, and a huge, winged monster soared out from it.

“You *filthy insects!*”

The beast’s roar reverberated through the air. The Noble Blood had taken so much damage that it had reverted to its true form, the beautiful countenance of the young man peeled away to expose the monstrosity within. Batlike wings sprouted from a coal-black mountain of muscle, and two horns curled out from its skull. A glowing red seal trailed over its skin like veins.

I laughed. “So *that’s* what you were hiding!”

“You have only revealed the truth! And you will suffer a thousand deaths for what you have done!”

“Lots of bark, ugly, but where’s the bite? How about stopping time again? Oh? What’s the matter? You can’t do it?”

“You...you insolent little *gnat!*”

The Noble Blood was so angry, its snarls emerged as stammers. I was the one controlling the battlefield now. However much it threatened me or transformed, it no longer looked like anything more than a clown to me.

“You can’t, can you?” I said. “Even a lord can’t use magic like that consecutively. On top of that, the blast hurt, didn’t it? You’re injured. You won’t be able to stop time while you’re using magic to heal your wounds.”

It was exactly as I’d calculated. Even if our enemy was in possession of peerless time-stopping magic, we of Wild Tempest would bring the creature to

its knees.

“Heh heh heh... Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

I couldn’t hold back the laughter that bubbled up inside me. The battle was far from over. Even without time-stopping magic, our enemy was a lord—not a beast you could take down easily. Our chances of victory were miniscule, the tiniest needle in a great haystack. And if we could not find that needle, all that awaited us was death.

But even then, I laughed. I loved this. Nothing gave me a greater high. We had seized hold of an indomitable enemy, trapped it, and then sent it plummeting into the depths of fear and humiliation. Was there anything in the world more fun?

No, there was not. I chuckled.

“Well, then! Let’s start round two, shall we?”

“Everyone, prepare for aerial warfare!”

I shouted the command just as the Noble Blood shot high into the sky. In order to avoid our airborne enemy’s fearsome magic attacks, we needed to meet it in the air.

“Soaring Waltz!”

“Sky Walk!”

Koga and Alma—the party’s front-liners—took off first with the Samurai skill: *Soaring Waltz*, and the Assassin skill: *Sky Walk*, both of which granted the user aerial movement. *Soaring Waltz* created magical platforms in the air, whereas *Sky Walk* freed an Assassin from the constraints of gravity.

“Summon Pegasus!”

“Servant Valkyries!”

Leon and Hugo were unable to take to the skies with their own power, but both could summon flying support. Knight skill: *Summon Pegasus* conjured a winged horse, fully armored in silver-white barding and competent in aerial

combat regardless of its summoner's presence. Puppeteer skill: *Servant Valkyries* created stingray-shaped puppet soldiers. They couldn't fight, but their wide backs made them excellent mounts.

Without a moment's delay, Leon jumped on his Pegasus, and Hugo stepped on the back of his puppet-valkyrie. Unable to dish out aerial offense myself, I stepped aboard a puppet-valkyrie that Hugo had summoned for me.

As we rose into the sky, the Noble Blood began to summon a fireball so big, it seemed to rival the sun.

"You're nothing but fleas! Fleas, I say! I shall turn you to dust!"

The high-speed fireball collided with the earth, wrapping it in a huge explosion. The high-intensity heat shock waves leveled the ruins of the town square, and as the blast was sucked back into an air vacuum, the explosion caused damage deep underground.

We looked down at the explosion we'd managed to avoid by the skin of our teeth and found that the ground below had spread into a bubbling pool of lava. From the blast center to the outskirts, most of the buildings had been toppled and left as rubble. What was once a huge city had been reduced to wasteland. This confirmed what we'd known from the beginning: the lord was a terrifyingly powerful opponent. Though it could no longer stop time, it was the far superior fighter.

Even then, however, our victory was set in stone.

"Koga, Alma! Move in to attack! Leon, you're on support for the front-liners! Hugo! Time to bring back the puppet soldiers!"

"Yessir!"

"You got it!"

"On the move!"

"Understood, Master!"

Koga and Alma moved into range of the Noble Blood without showing a hint of fear, using aerial maneuvers to slice at the lord. Leon circled the skies on his Pegasus, casting defensive barriers on the vanguard. At the same time, he fired

off balls of light with *Divine Impact* to provide covering fire from a distance.

But even as they kept up their assault, the Noble Blood moved like the wind, deftly dodging each and every one of their attacks. It had been able to fly even when in human form, but sprouting wings had given it a whole other level of mobility.

“*Legion!*”

Puppeteer Grandmaster skill: *Legion* generated hordes of puppet soldiers. The A-Ranker now had a literal army at his fingertips.

Sixty new puppet soldiers entered the fray—twenty ranged, ten support, and thirty valkyries. Hugo sent them into battle the instant that they were created. Arrows, gunfire, and a variety of elemental magic rained down on the Noble Blood, but the beast wove around each and every attack despite the unceasing volley. It didn’t suffer so much as a scratch.

“Just as I thought. Those precognitive abilities are going to be a handful...”

While we’d managed to prevent the Noble Blood from using its space-time magic, this power wasn’t only usable for combat—it also granted the beast the ability to see the future. That was its *real* trump card.

Koga was delivering thousands of attacks at once, and Alma was moving faster than the speed of sound—but because the Noble Blood already knew what was coming, their sudden attacks didn’t faze it in the slightest. It continued to dip and dodge, each attack missing by the barest margin, and returned fire with punches of its own. Its gravity control rendered the blows so deadly that even the shock waves from a punch could’ve been fatal.

For every attack that Koga and Alma dodged, the barriers that Leon and Hugo continually cast were shattered. The state of the battle was now obviously slanted in the Noble Blood’s favor.

Though the Noble Blood was enraged, it was still incredibly composed. It would have been easier to fight if it had gone on a rampage, but it had been conservative with its magic ever since transforming and blasting that giant fireball our way. I’d tried to provoke it into a blind rage, but I didn’t get the results I’d hoped for. If the fight continued this way, our stamina would run out

and we'd lose.

I wasn't about to let that happen.

Just as the Noble Blood had precognitive abilities, my own speed of thought was augmented to the point that I, too, had a similar skill. From the moment the battle had begun, I was constantly predicting the flow matching the beast move for move. My own predictive abilities paled in comparison to the beast's—I didn't see the future per se; I could only make predictions via a high-speed analysis of information and sensory stimuli. On top of that, I had to deal with a time lag between my predictions and informing the party. Even through *Link*, we could not respond as quickly or accurately.

Although my own abilities weren't as powerful, I still had something the Noble Blood did not: a vast knowledge of warfare. My own predictions were reinforced by tactics and strategies used by the weak to defeat the strong, the kind of knowledge that even the overwhelmingly powerful Noble Blood could barely begin to imagine.

"Koga, dodge left in two seconds, use *Crazy Cherry Blossoms*, and spam a barrage of *Secret Swordsmanship Tsubame Gaeshi*. Alma, take that opportunity to slip in a surprise attack in three seconds—the enemy will fifty meters up at your two o'clock. Leon, let your barriers down for five seconds. Move forward and fire *Divine Impact* over and over. You're aiming to bring the enemy into Alma's attack range. Hugo, focus your barriers on Koga for three seconds, then provide immediate cover fire for Alma and secure her escape route after her attack. Koga, jump back thirty meters right now! Alma..."

All the orders I sent to the party were shuttled through our *Link* as I thought of them. The battle had been raging for half an hour now. Everyone responded to my predictive orders instantly, taking the best courses of action to avoid the Noble Blood's attacks and respond with counters. If I was off by even a second, someone would die, and the party would be done for.

The strain of constantly reading the future had me at my limits. My head threatened to crack open, my stomach lurched, and I could feel even the tiniest blood vessels in my head opening and filling with blood. My heart might simply stop at any moment.

There was only one word for this level of suffering.

“It’s my destiny...”

No amount of pain—nor even death itself—could stop me now. I would not cower. I would keep giving orders. I would beat the Noble Blood at its own game. Victory would be mine. If I fell, everyone died. We’d lose *everything*. I remembered the words with which I swore an oath to my grandfather.

“I promise, Grandpa... I’ll become the strongest Seeker ever.”

“You will kneel before me!” I declared.

Then, as my ability to think surpassed its very limits, I saw a ray of light.

“I’ve got it!”

It was a light no larger than a pinprick, but it was our best shot at victory.

“Hugo, focus your barriers on Leon! Leon, *Nightmare Charge*!”

“Understood!”

“Okay!”

“Koga, use *Ice Blade* when the enemy appears below you! Alma, put everything you have into *Shadow Arm*, and aim at the sky!”

“Right!”

“Got it!”

Leon brought his Pegasus around at my *Link* order, and began a full-frontal assault. During Knight skill: *Nightmare Charge*, the Pegasus rider cast a barrier on themselves, then rushed at the enemy. The destructive power of the charge was multiplied by the Pegasus’s speed and the force of the barrier. Leon was protected by not just his own barrier but Hugo’s, too, so he would collide with the Noble Blood with the force of a meteor. A direct hit was sure to inflict critical damage on even a beast lord.

“Tsk!”

Seeing the future, the Noble Blood clicked its tongue in annoyance and dodged out of the way of Leon’s attack. However, as soon as it did, a gigantic mountain of ice appeared above him, and shadow hands reached for it from

below. Our attack was far from over at this stage.

“Hugo, use *Link Burst* on everything! Leon, *Seraphim’s Blade*! Let’s put an end to this!”

“*Link Burst*!”

“*Seraphim’s Blade*!”

Hugo sent *Link Burst* through all of the ranged puppet soldiers. By destroying them, he was able to let loose an even more powerful attack. Leon stopped his horse and turned it around, lifting his sword high into the air and concentrating all of his magic. Even if the Noble Blood *could* see the future, it had been trapped by the four-way attack; there was no escape. The victor in our game of high-speed predictive chess...was me.

“Don’t you *dare*, vermin!”

The Noble Blood turned to Leon with an angry roar and unleashed a lightning attack. It couldn’t avoid all of the attacks, so it focused on the strongest: *Seraphim’s Blade*. In other words, it would take a hit to give a hit.

What a shame, then, that I had already seen this coming.

“Leon, *Conversion*! Now! Use *Invincible*!”

Tactics skill: *Conversion*. The targeted party member could use two skills simultaneously. As soon as I used it, the magical power funneled into *Seraphim’s Blade* transferred into the *Invincible* skill, which granted the user the ability to reflect any attack just once every twenty-four hours.

“Impossible!” cried the Noble Blood.

The lightning that zoomed toward Leon now suddenly turned back on its caster. It was the one attack the Noble Blood did not see coming; it had been backed into a corner from which it could not run, and in its panic and frustration it lost the ability to see what was coming.

“You will dance for me until you die!” I shouted.

Every attack landed clean. Along with everything we threw at him, the Noble Blood was also engulfed in an explosion following the lightning’s impact.

“Filthy humans!”

The Noble Blood threw up a barrier. Though it managed to withstand the wild energy, it lost its right arm in the process.

“It’s over! Koga, Alma, finish it!”

I gave the order. They were our most fluid and flexible attackers, and I would not let this chance slip through our fingers.

“Iai Flash!”

“Quick Attack!”

Koga went high while Alma went low, both moving in for the kill. The Noble Blood scrambled to defend itself with another barrier.

“Gaaaaaaaarrrrgh!”

The beast spat blood and roared. It had completely exhausted its magic. As a finishing touch, I pointed my index and middle fingers at the Noble Blood. In the east, this was called “the mark of the knife”—a mark used for curses.

“All things fall beneath these evil utterings! Bow before the curse!” I cried, swinging my fingers down like a blade at the end.



Tactics skill: *Curse*. The target was marked by the cut of the knife, and all of its abilities dropped by 25 percent. Enemies could not resist this debuff. The skill was my ace in the hole; it wrapped the Noble Blood in a black mist as it sapped away the beast's power.

Just then, the Noble Blood's barrier cracked and fractured, and Koga's blade sliced right through it.

"Yer finished!" he shouted.

"Gaaaah!"

Koga's blade severed the lord's head from his body. The beast's death throes faded into a pit of darkness.

At last, the red mist that surrounded the ruined townscape began to clear. It was proof that the Abyss had been purified—and proof that we had accomplished our mission of killing the Noble Blood.

"Haah... Mission...haah, haah...accomplished... Victory...is ours..." I said.

Koga and Leon let out whooping cries of joy—no, cries of *victory*. Alma, for her part, dropped into a moment of quiet meditation, while Hugo let a thin smile creep upon his face. They were all celebrating in their own way.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I wiped the blood off my face, then collapsed on the puppet valkyrie's back. I couldn't even stand on my own feet. I had pushed my brain to such limits, it was struggling to function.

I squinted up at the peach-colored sky, which was now fading into an ultramarine blue. The stars were at their brightest, dappling the early evening sky. I reached a hand up and clenched it, hiding those stars in my fist.

"Just a little more... A little more, and it will all be mine..."

"You can't be serious! They actually freaking won!" Marion blurted.

She and the other Seekers Association members watched as the Abyss began to fade. It had been purified. The Noble Blood was dead.

"There's no way they could've done it... Not at their current level!"

This was no mere upset victory; this was the stuff of miracles. Noel and his crew had overcome their hopeless difference in power levels and defeated the Noble Blood. The result was beyond shocking.

“So this is the power of the snake, Noel Stollen...” muttered Marion.

The key to this particular miracle was, without a doubt, Noel himself. Starting with the Puppeteer, Hugo, Wild Tempest was made up of truly excellent Seekers, but none of them were anywhere near as strong as the Noble Blood. Their victory, in its entirety, came down to Noel’s leadership.

“Well, I guess I can see why you’ve been so excited about that guy, Grandpa...”

“I told you, didn’t I? He’s a special one.”

Marion chuckled at the triumphant expression on her grandfather’s face. He was an exceptional inspector in his time, but he’d long had one foot out the door to retirement. Now Marion finally understood his reasons for coming back.

In the empire at present, there were three Seekers who had achieved EX Rank. There was the King Slayer, Leo Edin, master of Pandemonium; the Beginning One, Victor Krauser, master of Supreme Dragon; and finally, the vice-master of Supreme Dragon and Innocent Blade, Zeke Feinstein. These three powerful warriors were all prodigies born with the potential to become great Seekers, and they walked the path of the warrior without ever having faltered.

Noel was different. Born a buffer, the weakest of all class types, he had succeeded only through hard work, unyielding willpower, cunning, and quick wit. His path was by no means an easy one, but his perseverance had earned him the head of a lord.

Seekers had killed lords before; there were plenty of records to prove it. However, Noel was the first of his class to seize such a victory. Up until now, only those born with powerful, extraordinary skills were deemed capable of the task.

Marion had been an inspector for three years, starting at the early age of fifteen. In that time, she’d seen a great many Seekers, outstanding in their prowess and their conviction. But none of them had moved her like this young

man, who'd defeated seemingly impossible odds without a shred of doubt. Even Leo, who was without a doubt the strongest Seeker in the empire, had not stirred up such excitement within her.

"Noel Stollen, you are a true hero."

The people of the empire learned of the new lord-killer from the newspapers. At the time, only three clans outside the regalia had ever defeated a lord. Wild Tempest made it four. The news that we'd defeated a lord only four months after establishing our clan sent shock waves not just through the Seeker industry, but the population at large.

To be fair, there had been no shortage of headlines about us over those four months. News spread fast when Blue Beyond merged with the Winged Knights to form a new clan. Then we proved that Hugo Coppélia—then on death row—was innocent of his crimes and made him a member of the clan. We'd also caught the criminals behind the explosive "incident" at the prison where he was being held.

Wild Tempest was now the best known of any new clan in the empire. We'd gained the trust of our sponsors, and our clan funds were growing. We weren't too far away from the 80 billion fil we'd need to construct an airship. I'd plotted and schemed to make it that way, after all.

Now, to top things off, we'd accomplished the task of bringing down a lord. It earned us invaluable public acknowledgement, not to mention a valuable 70 billion fil straight into our coffers. Now we had fame, money, and results, which put us in line for a future position on the regalia. In other words, we were at the top of the heap when it came to potential candidates.

However, our notoriety also painted fresh targets on our backs. Those who deemed us a threat must've wondered why the Association had given a lord-elimination contract to a clan that hadn't proven they were up to the task. This criticism incited much debate, and experts argued that there were severe problems in how the Seekers Association was being run. The logic here was that the Association was not looking at a clan's ability so much as it was their fame.

Nevertheless, we'd still succeeded, so none of this criticism rattled the

general public. Even if the criticism was meant as a warning, the truth of the matter was that we'd *won*. The people were on the Association's side. If we'd failed, then the responsibility for that would have fallen very heavily on not just our clan, but the Seekers Association at large.

The head of the Association held a press conference to back up the decision, but it was clear the outcome had ruffled a few feathers. What sort of strings did old Harold have to pull in order to get us that contract? Thinking about it filled me with a mixture of shock and gratitude.

Whatever the case, we had felled a lord, and every day was a busy one after that. We had interviews with newspapers, parties with potential investors, and industry events we were expected to be present for. The life of a hero was not easygoing, not in the slightest.

These eventful days went on for two weeks. When all the obligatory occasions were over, we held a small party for ourselves, something where we could get together to rest our weary bodies and minds.

"I know it's been an exhausting couple of weeks, but thank you all for your hard work," I told everyone.

We'd all gathered at the Stardrop Inn. I booked the entire place, so the restaurant was completely empty except for us.

"I'm grateful to all of you as the clan master too," I went on. "Even against an opponent whose power far surpassed our own, you believed in me, you fought, and we emerged victorious. You have my thanks."

As I gave a toast to our party, my allies looked up at me with fire in their eyes. Alma, Koga, Leon, Hugo—each and every one of them listened to my speech in earnest.

"Alma and Koga, you leaped into the heart of the lion's den and fought your damn hearts out. I have nothing but the utmost respect for your fearlessness."

Alma smiled, and Koga rubbed at his nose, embarrassed.

"Hugo, your support from the back lines was exceptional. Without you, we would never have been able to stand up to the lord in the first place. You are the pillar that made this happen."

The strategies I had prepared for defeating the Noble Blood relied on all of Hugo's skills. He was the most important player in our battle, without a doubt.

Hugo hardly looked pleased as he offered a respectful bow. Knowing him as well as I did, I figured he felt he had done only as much as I'd expected of him. He was forever stoic and strict with himself.

"And finally, Leon. Koga may have landed the killing blow, but you opened the way. You created that chance for him. And when my orders were lacking, you were always there to fill my spot. You are more than worthy of your vice-master status, and your efforts in battle have proven it time and time again."

In the battle against the Noble Blood, I had guided the party with my predictive abilities. However, because of the time lag from prediction to action, the party was put in some precarious positions. It was during those times that Leon proved his worth, supporting my orders by putting all of his skills to use on the battlefield. He'd fought from both front and back lines, healed and cast his barriers for support, and made full use of his prior experience as leader of the Winged Knights.

"One more thing, Leon: congratulations on your rank up! It seems only natural given your contributions and your talents. I'm looking forward to seeing how you put your new skills to use in future battles."

Leon gave a strong, confident nod. He had the face of a naïve and simple young man, but he radiated a powerful, self-assured energy. After defeating the Noble Blood, he'd earned the ability to rank up, the customary emblem manifesting on his hand. In surviving a battle to the death, a new door had opened up to him—the door to Rank A. Not long afterward, he'd opted to upgrade from a Knight to a Paladin. Compared to his powers at Rank B, he was even more of a force to be reckoned with.

"If any one of us had fallen, the battle would have been lost. People call our victory a miracle, and it's true. But as long as I am master of this clan, there will be no end to them. We, Wild Tempest, are peerless! And we will take our rightful place as the strongest of them all!"

With my thoughts declared, I raised my mug of ale high into the air.

"To eternal glory!"

“Cheers!”

Our glasses came together over the table. The refreshing echo of glass clinking together marked the beginning of a long, fun evening.

“So how’s it feel t’be Rank A, huh?” a tipsy Koga asked Leon.

Delicious food and drink was spread across the table, and conversation was in full swing. Leon, nursing his own ale, smiled at Koga.

“It doesn’t feel that different from Rank B, really. Sure, all my abilities have powered up since it happened, but it doesn’t feel like anything special.”

“Yeah, but everybody says Rank A’s more’n what a human can do. Don’tcha feel like, I dunno, you’re stronger’n a regular person now?”

“In my case...I don’t, no. I just feel a power constantly flowing through me. That’s about it. But don’t forget, I haven’t actually fought anything since I ranked up, so it’s possible I haven’t fully grasped how it feels to *be* Rank A yet. How about you, Hugo? Did you, uh... Did you feel anything special when you ranked up?”

With the conversational spotlight on him, Hugo merely shook his head. “I did not feel anything in particular either. My abilities merely improved. That is all.”

“Ugh, what a letdown,” Koga muttered, leaning back in his seat with his hands behind his head.

“What exactly were you expecting?” I asked.

Koga bared his teeth in a grin.

“Well, in terms’a going beyond being human, I was hopin’ for, like, a spiritual awakening. Somethin’ big, like knowing everything there is to know ’bout the galaxy. Wouldn’t that be somethin’?!”

Before I could jump in with a comment, Alma breathed a deep sigh.

“Could you be any more stupid?” she said. “Even an extraordinary human is still just that: a human. Even if they break limits, that doesn’t mean they’re going to change. You’re a total moron to have thought that in the first place.”

Alma's words cut as sharp as her knives, and Koga's brow creased.

"Just 'cause you don't have any dreams of your own doesn't mean you can make fun of someone else's. That's why yer stuck to Noel, right? You don't have goals of yer own. So how 'bout you start thinking a little more deeply about the damn world ya live in?"

"Huh?! You're telling *me* that?! Try again, numbskull. Noel and I are connected by a bond that extends into our past lives! He just doesn't like to show his true feelings in public. But there's nobody in this world he loves more than his big sis here. Right, Noel?"

"Keep me out of your twisted fantasies."

Past lives? Seriously? That's the first I'd heard of it. Alma reached over to grip me in a hug but I shoved her away. Koga burst into laughter.

"Hilarious! You were probably dumped the same way in yer past lives too!"

"Die."

Koga was laughing so hard, he was about to fall off his chair. Alma threw a fork at him. Koga just barely managed to dodge it—it stuck deep into the wall behind him with a *twong*, wobbling from the force. If he had been even a split second late to react, the fork would have been buried in his forehead.

"The hell?!" Koga blurted. "Are you crazy?! No fightin' here! Right?!"

"I didn't do it. The fork did it."

"Forks don't just throw 'emselves into walls!"

"Noel, you *have* to try this," Alma said, ignoring the bright-red rage flashing across Koga's face. "It's delicious. Open wide, now."

"Wait! I ain't done with you yet!"

Just as I shifted my head away from the food Alma was trying to force on me, the owner's daughter, Marie, arrived with trays of food in both hands.

"Here'sh the extra dishes you ordered!"

Marie delicately placed the food on the table. Our celebration was just beginning, and the food and drink would keep on rolling in for some time.

"This little muffin is such a hard worker," Alma said, clutching a hold of Marie and ruffling her hair. "She's nothing like that freeloader, Koga."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, p-pleashe shtop playing with my hair!"

I didn't know why, but Marie had somehow captured Alma's heart. As a result, Alma had decided to throw boundaries out the window.

"Pleashe, enough! And I'm not your little muffin! My name'sh Marie!"

Marie's cheeks puffed out in anger as she brushed away Alma's hands. Behind her, a bald, muscular mountain of a man appeared. It was Gaston, Marie's father and the owner of the Stardrop Inn. He must've been in the middle of cooking, since he was still gripping a ladle.

"Yo, Noel, you've got a visitor."

"This late in the evening?"

"Apparently, she's with the Seekers Association. Called herself Marion Jenkins. Real pretty, blonde hair."

"Marion? All right, let her in."

What does she want? I was still racking my brain for a reason when Gaston brought her inside.

"Hey, snake. Quite the party," Marion said with a smile, holding out a bouquet of roses. "These are from me. A congratulatory gift."

"A bouquet of flowers for a Seeker?" I replied. "However noble I may appear, you've got to admit that this is way too elegant for someone like me."

Marion laughed awkwardly. "I know how you feel. I'd say the same if somebody gave *me* flowers out of nowhere. But they're nice once in a while, right?"

"I suppose so. Well, thank you."

I brought the bouquet of flowers to my nose and breathed in the scent. Marion was right. Perhaps things like this *were* nice once in a while. I passed the roses to Marie.

"Marie, please put these in my room. Feel free to decorate the inn with

whatever won't fit in the vase."

"Got it!"

I watched Marie leave with the roses, then turned back to Marion. "I've got to admit, you're like a completely different person. It's impressive. First you declare we have no right to fight the lord, then you turn up with a gift when we defeat him."

"It hurts to hear you say that," said Marion, scratching her head and looking a little embarrassed. "But I didn't say those things because I hate you, you know? I just don't want to see Seekers rushing to their deaths. That being said...I'm sorry. Sorry I made you all feel that way."

To see Marion so earnestly apologize made me laugh.

"You're the definition of a hot-and-cold gal, aren't you, Marion? Right?"

The rest of the party nodded in agreement.

"Yep."

"No doubt."

"Two sides of the same coin."

"She's the practical definition of it."

Hit with everybody's statements, Marion was at a loss. "Why, you...!"

I held back my urge to laugh once more and instead thrust a mug of ale at her.

"You're late, and you've got some catching up to do. Join us for a couple of drinks?"

"Oh! Er, thanks!"

Marion looked a little shy at the sudden invitation, but she took the mug and drained it in the next instant.

"Hic!"

Then, with one loud hiccup, she collapsed into a heap.

"What the—?!"

I ran over to check on Marion. Her eyes were rolling around, unfocused, but she seemed fine otherwise. Clearly, Marion couldn't hold her booze. *So much for catching up!*

"Sure is an interesting one, ain't she?" Gaston chuckled as he poked his head out to see what was going on. "I'll bring a blanket, so just find her a place to sleep."

"Uh, thanks."

What a handful. Hasn't she learned anything about drinking in moderation?

"Noel."

It was Alma, standing behind me as I looked down at Marion, still a little shocked.

"What?"

Alma looked suddenly frightened, and I noticed a trembling in her voice.

"Why...why would you kill her?"

"I didn't kill her!" I shouted. I couldn't believe what this big-breasted buffoon was saying. "Take a good look! She's still breathing!"

"Yeah, but just barely. She's probably only got seconds left..."

"She's not going to die! She drank too much and passed out!"

"Liar! Turning your back on your own crimes!"

"This is ridiculous!" I whipped around to the rest of the crew. "Guys, please, talk some sense into her!"

"Noel, whatever excuses you got, poison's a step too far." Koga was frowning.

"You really didn't like her calling your class the weakest, huh?" Now Leon was, too.

"You truly are frightening, Noel. Not even a shred of mercy..." Even Hugo!

"You have guts turning on me, I will give you that," I said through gritted teeth. "We're going to settle this the old-fashioned way. Hope you're up to the task!"

I plopped down and raised my mug of ale. I was challenging them to a drinking contest. Seeing the look in my eyes, everybody donned a wild, intense grin.

Alma cut in first. “Your big sis won’t let you all off easy!”

“This’ll be payback for kickin’ my ass!” Koga told her.

“Not bragging, but I can hold my drink with the best of them. Best crown me the champ right here and now,” Leon chimed in.

“I have pledged my loyalty to you,” said Hugo, “but I have no intention of relinquishing victory here.”

Everyone took a mug of ale in hand, eyes aglimmer with that familiar fighting spirit. Gaston chose that very moment to arrive with a blanket for Marion.

“Gaston,” I said, “I need you to bring us your strongest drinks. All of them. I’m going to teach these Seekers to know their place.”

“Oho! A drinking contest, eh? Coming right up!”

Gaston put the blanket over Marion and ran off to get our drinks. Meanwhile, the rest of us sat at the table, glaring at each other in the moments before the battle started, sparks flying.

I told them, “I am going to drink all of you into the deepest levels of hell.”

Naturally, I won the drinking contest. Just as I’d warned them, I dragged them all into deep, deep waters. They were completely plastered now, lost in drunken dreams and the joy of sleep. I’d inherited a strong tolerance from my grandpa, who drank like a fish, so the vast majority of booze may as well have been water. I’d won before the match had even begun.

Gaston brought blankets for all the others, who lay there snoozing as I continued to drink by myself. It was lonely sometimes, not being able to lose myself in drunken revelry and just pass out.

I felt a sudden sting of sentimentality. I looked down at the back of my hand, sighing deeply. The seal that had been there until my rank-up was gone, and it would not return again until I was ready to rank up once more.

“But I guess that’s not gonna happen.”

“Owww... Ugh, my head...” Marion groaned, struggling to raise herself up. “I feel freaking awful. Why am I sleeping on the floor?”

“You passed out,” I told her. “You slept where you fell.”

Still half asleep, her head a mess, Marion didn’t know what I was talking about. I filled in the gaps in her memory.

She finally caught on after that. “Oh, so I drank too much.”

“Are you talking in your sleep or what? You didn’t drink too much; you drank a *single mug* of ale.”

“Really? Just one mug?”

“Yeah. You shouldn’t drink at all. Ever. Your tolerance level is nonexistent.”

It was just plain dangerous to guzzle ale down like that when it had such an impact on her body. She was lucky that it was all of us with her this time, but what if it had been a group with ill intentions or a vendetta of some kind? Who knew what would’ve happened?

“Whatever. Drink some water. It’ll help wake you up.”

“Uh, okay. Thanks...”

Marion timidly rose to her feet and took a seat at the table. As she slowly sipped at a glass of water, some of the pain hammering in her head seemed to lighten.

“Ahh, that’s the stuff.”

“When you feel a little better, go back to sleep. I’ll wake you in the morning.”

“Thanks. I think I’ll do exactly that.”

Marion nodded, then let out a big yawn. But she didn’t move from her seat, choosing to stare at me instead. I peered into Marion’s eyes, where the questions she wanted to ask seemed to drip from her long lashes.

“What?” I said. “You want to ask me something?”

“I do. You’ve realized it, haven’t you?”

I didn't need to ask *what*, because I knew what she was talking about.

"I'm an A-Ranker too," she told me. "I've watched over more Seekers than I can count, so I can feel it. Noel, you... You're probably never going to reach it. Rank A, I mean. I don't feel that potential in you."

I nodded. "I figured you'd say as much."

It was unlikely that I'd ever reach Rank A. Impossible, actually. Rank B was my limit. I didn't have any conclusive proof of it, but I was certain. To get from Rank C to Rank B, I needed 10,000 experience points. In battle, I gained a single experience point fighting an enemy on my level, but that number rose according to how powerful and numerous the enemy was.

It was a long, tough road, but it was achievable, and it resulted in the ability to rank up. On the other hand, to get from Rank B to Rank A, I needed 100,000 experience points. But even if I acquired them, there was no guarantee I'd be able to rank up. Getting to Rank A required so much more.

When I considered all I'd been through—the fierce battles and, more recently, the fight against the lord—I'd managed to accumulate some 60,000 experience points. But it didn't feel like I was getting anywhere. I couldn't feel myself growing stronger. All I felt was a tension, as though I were trapped in a tiny room. Alma and Koga were different; both of them could feel their growth from within. Having watched them myself, I knew they could get to Rank A. The only person who couldn't was me.

"Noel, you're an incredible piece of work. Yeah, you were born with the weakest class there is, but look how far you've come," Marion said. Still, the weak smile on her face had more to say. "All the same, if you can't make it to Rank A, you'll never get a spot in the regalia. All the current clan masters in the regalia are A-Rankers or above. It doesn't matter how strong your allies are if you, the clan master, are stuck at Rank B. You have to know that better than anyone."

"I do."

We'd taken out a lord, the Noble Blood, but to do so, I had pushed myself to reckless limits. The pressure I put on my brain to access my predictive abilities over and over had left it damaged even now. I couldn't go on fighting this way

forever, but there was no way to solve that problem outside of attaining the powers and abilities of Rank A.

“The way things are, you’re completely stuck, Noel. You can try as hard as you want, but you’ll never reach any higher. That’s why the concept of ‘potential’ makes me sick; it’s just so unfair.”

“Easy to say when you’re on the other side of the fence.”

Marion grinned and leaned across the table. “Any ordinary person would already be at their limit. They’d be done. But you’re no ordinary person. You’ve got the stuff nobody else does: the ability to make the impossible possible.”

“You overestimate me. I’m not the guy you think I can be.”

“Liar. You’ve got the eyes of someone who doesn’t know how to give up. You believe you’ll succeed with the utmost conviction. So tell me, how do you intend to break out of this predicament?”

Marion’s eyes were full of giddy expectation, like a child begging for something. I almost told her...but I knew I had to hold back.

“That’s a trade secret,” I said. “Besides, you’re the coordinator for Pandemonium. As if I’d let that information into your hands.”

“Tch. Fine.”

Marion had gotten so excited, she’d forgotten her own position. She reminded me a lot of Harold.

“But whatever happens, you’ll see the answer for yourself soon enough. I’ll break through those limits, and I will make it to A-Rank. In any case, why are you poking your nose into other people’s business when you should be preparing for the entrance ceremony at finishing school?”

“What?! Wh-why do you know about that?!”

Marion was completely flummoxed. I couldn’t help but laugh at the sight.

“Your grandpa,” I said. “It’s tough having talkative relatives, isn’t it?”

“I can’t *believe* that old geezer!”

Marion’s teeth clenched tight. Her face had flushed red with rage and

embarrassment.

“Here’s hoping you find a good husband,” I said. “I’ll be rooting for you.”

“Oh, shut up! It’s got nothing to do with you!”

“Wow. Scary! I do hope they can iron out that attitude of yours.”

I stood up and began walking toward the doors.

“Where are you going?”

“Just stepping out. I want to get some fresh air.”

Outside, the cool night breeze tugged away the warm body-glow of the alcohol. The air was refreshing, the breeze was just right, and the sky was starry and clear.

“Nice night,” I whispered.

At the same time, I heard footsteps coming toward me. The figure waved in greeting, and as their face came into view under the light of the street lamps, I smiled.

“Here to pick up your granddaughter, Harold?”

Harold nodded and smiled back. “She’s rash and unrefined, but I love her all the same. Can’t have her getting bitten by any snakes in these parts.”

“Let it go, old man. No self-respecting snake would take a bite of your precious granddaughter.”

“Oh? You didn’t hit it off, then? Such a pity.” Harold chuckled to himself and lit a cigarette. “I’ve said it before, I know, but I’d like to say it again: congratulations on defeating the lord.”

“We’re finally at the starting line. The real battle begins now.”

“The real battle, eh? Such a scary thought. I’m quaking in my boots.”

“I don’t intend to get you wrapped up in it all, Harold. You can just watch the show from the front row.”

Harold shrugged. “I was going to do that anyway,” he said, and then his eyes grew wide. “Noel, your nose is bleeding.”

“Hm?” I put a finger to my nose. It came away bloody. “Oh, you’re right.”

It was a small amount of blood, but it was still dripping.

“Not a good look, that... Here, take this.”

Harold took out a handkerchief and passed it to me. I held it to my nose, where it quickly transformed from a white handkerchief to a red one.

“Thanks, and...sorry.”

“It’s worrying. Some kind of aftereffect from your battle with the lord?”

“Yeah. Pushing myself to use my predictive abilities constantly puts a pressure on my brain *and* my body. That’s why I’m getting these nosebleeds.”

“And you’ve seen a doctor about it, I assume?”

“Of course. Said I’d be back to normal so long as I took things easy for a little while.”

Truth be told, my condition now was a considerable improvement. Right after the battle with the Noble Blood, the headaches and the bleeding were so bad that I couldn’t function without strong meds. Fortunately, I didn’t need the medication anymore, so the healing was proceeding naturally. Just as the doctor said, my health was on the mend. I’d started getting back to my regular training, and I hadn’t noticed any big problems yet.

“I’m sorry, Harold, but we won’t be able to take on any new contracts for a bit.”

Harold nodded and studied me for a moment. “Understood. Just contact me when you’re ready. I should probably tell you to take better care of yourself, but you’re already a grown man. You can make your own decisions.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t want to worry anybody either.”

“I suppose not,” he said with a chuckle. “Perhaps you’d like to try one of these? They’ll help with the nosebleeds.”

Harold held out a hand-rolled cigarette, and I frowned.

“You know I’m a Seeker, right? I don’t touch those things because of what they do to your heart and lungs.”

“Cigarettes have a kind of hemostat effect; they’ll help stop the bleeding, and they double as a mild painkiller. And I daresay that a commander on the back lines should be more concerned with maintaining his focus than his heart and lungs, no?”

“Guess that’s one way of looking at it,” I said, letting out a snicker.

Harold grinned. “As long as you don’t end up a chain smoker, they won’t impact your health anytime soon. Just try it and see if it helps.”

“Fine. Just one, though.”

I put the cigarette between my lips, and Harold lit it with a match. The scent of red phosphorus filled the air as I inhaled the smoke deep into my lungs. I detected a hint of vanilla. As I exhaled, the smoke was like a gray-white ghost wavering in the air. When I finally stubbed the cigarette out, the bleeding had stopped and my head felt exceptionally clear.

“Not bad,” I remarked.

“Glad to hear it. To be honest, I was hoping I might see you hack and cough a little on your first time.”

“I’m no stranger to inhaling toxins—part and parcel of Seeker work. Cigarettes are nothing at all.”

“Ah yes, of course!” Harold laughed. “But I must say, you and cigarettes... The image fits. It adds a certain refinement to that cute face of yours.”

“Shut up about my face or I’ll shut yours.”

But the growl in my voice only made Harold laugh again. Then he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a scarlet pendant.

“I’d like to give this to you.”

The pendant he passed to me was in the shape of two swords and a battle-axe. I knew exactly what it was, even though I was only seeing the real thing for the first time.

“Bloodsword Federation’s clan symbol...”

“It is indeed the symbol of a legendary clan. Your grandfather, Brandon

‘Overdeath’ Stollen, was captain of the vanguard. And that’s no replica. It’s the genuine article, as given to all members at the time.”

I looked up at Harold, confused. “It’s genuine? But why do you have it?”

“Brandon retired from Seeking for your grandmother. When he did, he entrusted that clan symbol to me.”

“Ah... So that’s how you ended up with it.”

It was a keepsake. I clenched the clan symbol tight in my hand. I could feel a burning heat spread through my palm and into my body.

“Take good care of it, Noel. It’s what your grandfather wanted.”

“I will, Harold. And thank you.”

Harold nodded. “Keep up the good work.”

Soon after, Loki contacted me. I’d asked him to dig up whatever he could about Lorelai. We’d been sending coded messages by owl because I was concerned that any conversations over *Link* or by other means would be intercepted.

According to Loki’s most recent coded message, things with the railway company were moving forward. Johann had the cooperation of many wealthy and influential people, including the second-born prince of the imperial family, Prince Caius. Although a certain number of the nobles involved in the deal were unhappy with the profit split, Loki’s intel said the plan was moving ahead anyway.

As for how Lorelai intended to deal with the problem of the Abyss, Loki’s investigation was still ongoing. If he was having trouble getting that information, that told me the plans were locked down tight. On top of that, Lorelai was a fearsome clan, and Loki was likely to put himself in danger if he got too deep. I told him in my reply not to put himself too much at risk and to pull out at any sign of danger.

“Send this letter immediately, and ensure that it isn’t seen by anyone outside of the clan.”

“Yes, sir.”

I passed the letter to the clan secretary from my desk in the clan house office. The secretary, a smart-looking man in a tuxedo, took the letter and left the room with an elegant bow. Wild Tempest was growing, so I’d hired a number of employees, including the secretary. All of them were battle-hardened, experienced individuals.

The renovations to the clan house were done, and all its rooms—from top to bottom—were being used for some kind of work. There was always somebody moving around the place on an assignment. While the party and I handled the battle side of things, the clan employees supported all of our general affairs. This included managing clan funds and beast materials, scheduling contracts, organizing preparations for expeditions, creating necessary documents for the Seekers Association and other battle records, securing new sponsors through sales and advertisements, investing in new ventures, and planning events to boost the clan’s image.

“Well, let’s get this meeting underway,” I said.

Everyone was gathered in my office—Alma, Koga, Leon, and Hugo—so I could share the news of Loki’s investigation and our plans for the immediate future. After I finished sharing Loki’s news, I jumped straight into telling everyone about our schedule.

Leon wasn’t entirely convinced of the plans.

“So what you’re saying is, we’re going to mess with Lorelai’s plan and take their spot in the regalia? Look, I know we don’t have any other choice given the circumstances, but...”

I’d seen this coming. I smiled and gave a little more detail.

“Look at it this way, Leon: they’ve already started moving to get ahead of all the other Seekers. If we let them have their way, they’ll gain absolute power and status. Competition and rivalry between Seekers as we know it simply won’t be feasible. If you look at who is set to reap the most benefits, Lorelai takes almost all of it; everybody else will suffer as a result of their plan.”

“That’s true, but...”

“I won’t deny their methods. I actually like them. But all the same, I can’t just sit here and let them do this.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I see what you mean,” Leon said, finally nodding in agreement. “But that said, Lorelai is a strong clan. Based on official data, they’ve got 7 A-Rankers, 65 B-Rankers, and 18 C-Rankers. From what I hear, they’re also hiding their true power. If we’re not careful about how we proceed, they’ll crush us.”

“When it comes to that,” I said, tapping the side of my head with a finger, “I just need you to trust me.”

Leon laughed. “I trust you, I do. But I just can’t shake these doubts. Just... don’t do anything too rash, okay?”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll do my best.”

Leon shook his head and let out a deep sigh. “Please, I’m begging you. I don’t think my stomach can take much more of this stress.”

“It’s pretty interestin’ to see Seekers coming up with such crazy ideas,” Koga said, impressed. “I never woulda thought to go and start a whole business.”

“We do have to give them credit for thinking outside the box,” I admitted. “When I first heard about it, I was pretty surprised. It was a blind spot I hadn’t considered.”

In the Seeker industry, the strong were a dime a dozen. The really important thing was what you had outside of brute strength and what you did with those assets. In that sense, Lorelai and its clan master, Johann Eissfeldt, were clearly operating at a higher level than me. They were more powerful, of course, but even in their more secretive work behind the scenes, I couldn’t touch them.

“But that’s exactly what makes them worth hunting.”

The bigger the prey, the more valuable the hunt. Johann would make a very powerful enemy. Knocking him off the ladder and taking everything he had would put us in a position to climb even higher.

I lit a cigarette and took a drag as I scanned my party. Ever since the day Harold had passed me one of these coffin nails, I hadn’t been able to live

without them. It was an addiction. Talkers had strong mental resistance, making it hard for them to get addicted to anything, but I'd still fallen prey to this. I supposed the fact that I was aware of it made me weaker still.

"Fighting Lorelai will be unlike any other battle we've ever faced. Until you hear from me next, I want all of you to stay ready for battle. Leon will handle your training schedule."

Everyone nodded.

"When preparations are complete," I said, "we'll hunt ourselves a Lorelai."

Chapter 2:

Glory of the Corrupt

ALL THE LIGHTS IN THE ROOM WERE OFF, leaving it dark and grim. Pale moonlight slipped in through a crack in the curtains, illuminating what lay beyond. In the middle of the room were a sofa and table, and by the wall was a large desk and a bookshelf. It was an office.

A silhouette sat at the desk. With the lights still off, all that one could see was that he was a man in his late twenties with silver hair, dressed in a jacket with a standing collar. He had a sharp, handsome face, and it was clear even with his thick jacket that he was in excellent shape. The man's eyes were closed, but he was not asleep. His face seemed frozen, his mouth and eyes shut and still. The moonlight cast a bluish-white outline around his silver locks, giving him an ethereal air.

The man's name was Johann Eissfeldt, the clan master of Lorelai. He had arrived at the imperial capital some ten years ago. Though his name had become well known among Seekers in the capital, when he had started his career he was surprisingly average. He was by no means weak; he was strong enough to be scouted by Lorelai, and he could work as part of a team.

Johann entered Lorelai as a Lancer. This versatile class dished out both short-range and mid-range attacks—a good fit for Johann, who was quick to pick things up and rather dexterous.

Still, even if one was considering Johann in a favorable light, his abilities put him squarely in the middle of the upper-level Seekers. There was no shortage of Seekers who outranked him in power. No one within Lorelai thought of Johann as anybody particularly special. Even though he'd been scouted, there were no plans to bring him into the higher ranks of the clan. Popular opinion held that Johann was exceptional, sure, but he just didn't stand out.

However, that appraisal of Johann began to change about five years into his Seeker career. He had always been little more than average, but a fire seemed

to awaken in him then—it was obvious from the results of his battles. The change was so sudden that it blindsided most, but it was generally seen as a good thing. The clan master at the time was overjoyed to see Johann awaken to his true potential, and thus decided to promote him to the clan's circle of leadership.

Around the same time, unexpected accidents began to occur. The clan was losing members in battles with airtight strategies that, by all accounts, they should have won. Additionally, those that died all either held positions of leadership, or were otherwise expecting promotion. In just a single year, six members of the clan died in battle in this way. The clan master resigned, feeling responsible for the deaths in question. The vice-master who succeeded him soon lost his life in battle, and Johann became the clan master in his wake. After a total of eight clan members had died, there was nobody left in Lorelai more suitable for the position.

The strangest thing about the situation was that despite losing so many of its most important members, the clan's strength grew exponentially under Johann's domain. Lorelai was recognized as a member of the regalia just six months after he took over as clan master.

There was a knock at the office door, followed by a voice.

"Master, are you there?"

It was a clan member.

"I am," said Johann, slowly opening his eyes. "Come in."

The person who entered the room was a brown-skinned young man with black hair and a long black coat. His features struck one as androgynous, though his mouth and jaw were presently hidden behind his coat collar. He was covered in black from head to toe, which caused his crimson eyes to stand out all the more.



This man was Zero Lindrake, Lorelai's vice-master. He was an A-Rank Swordsman—a Dark Knight.

"Allow me to turn on the lights," Zero said, clapping his hands twice.

The chandelier dangling from the ceiling instantly bathed the room in warm light. This light came not from candles, but rather conductive light stones that worked by reacting to certain sounds.

"Two confidential letters have arrived for you, Master. The first is from Vulcan Industries, the other from Prince Caius."

Johann took the envelopes from Zero and slit them with a letter opener. Both letters essentially said the same thing: everything was going to plan.

"How is the bioplant?" asked Johann.

"No issues. We're using Rodanian technology, after all."

"Hm. As I expected."

Johann chuckled and rose from his chair. He walked over to the window and turned his gaze outside. Lorelai's clan house was a twenty-story building, and the view from the highest floor was breathtaking. A sea of countless lights spread out beneath Johann's eyes like an evening sky full of stars.

"Once we have train lines running through the country, the economic growth will be astronomical," said Johann. "Then I will be in command. The Seekers Association—no, even the imperial family—will have little choice but to kneel before me. When the Valiant arrives, none will doubt that I should lead the charge against it."

Johann turned back to Zero with an arrogant smile, then continued.

"I need you to prepare a press conference. There's no better time to announce it and keep everything else under control."

"Are you sure about this? We still don't have everybody's signatures."

"I don't care. That's why we have the prince."

"Some have voiced concerns regarding how the profit will be split, though. Shouldn't we convince them before—"

“Enough! Didn’t I just tell you I don’t care?!”

“My apologies, Master.”

Zero gave a courteous bow, then left the room. Alone once more, Johann took the letters, put them in the ashtray on the desk, and set them alight with a match. The wavering flames flared before Johann’s proud, triumphant expression, staining it with a crimson glow.

Having left the office, Zero breathed out a sigh as he walked down the corridor.

“Tch. How ridiculous...” he muttered.

Then he heard a calm, low voice in his head, a transmission from the *Link* skill from another man.

“It’s me. Anything to report?”

“It’s rare for you to make direct contact like this,” Zero said, a smile crossing his face as he thought of the man behind this particular voice.

“We’re at a crucial stage. I’ll start my work soon as well.”

“Then you’d better hurry up. That guy doesn’t know his place. If we let him take care of everything in all his arrogance, our plans and hard work will have been for nothing.”

The voice laughed at the note of discontent in Zero’s voice.

“Say what you will. But he’s doing the best he can too. He may have too much pride, and he’s definitely got tunnel vision, but he’s done well working *in place of me*.”

“Well, you’re the one who chose him. Of course I’ll back him up.”

Zero’s curt reply caught the person on the other side by surprise.

“What’s got you in such a bad mood all of a sudden?”

“I’m the one always stuck cleaning up after him, you know. That’d put anyone in a bad mood.”

“Ha ha ha. You’re right. Sorry for the trouble.”

“I don’t mind. It is my job, in the end,” said Zero, and then, “but seriously, why call now?”

“I have a favor to ask... Do you remember the snake?”

“Noel Stollen? Of course I do.”

Noel Stollen, the clan master of Wild Tempest. Not a day went by that his name wasn’t somewhere in the news. He had proven the innocence of the Puppeteer Hugo Coppélia and helped capture the culprits who’d bombed the prison where he was held. More recently, he was being touted as a hero for successfully taking down a lord.

Wild Tempest was the clan closest to achieving regalia status. And every clan already on the regalia had their eyes on it, in order to make sure they didn’t lose their own spot. Since Johann had already taken part in a public interview together with the head snake himself, Lorelai had to be more careful than any of the others.

“That snake is cunning and extremely dangerous when it comes to information warfare. To achieve his goals, he won’t just use the royalty—he’ll go as far as using *us* too. It would not be at all surprising if he already knows of our plans.”

“Will he try to stop us?”

“I don’t doubt it. The snake aims to hunt us down,” the voice said definitively. “If I were the snake, that’s what I would do. We cannot let him interfere if we wish to meet our own goals. I’ve heard the snake works with a talented information broker. There is no doubt they will try to infiltrate our ranks. Tighten up security. Conduct all operations as if the spy were already among us. And do not let any information slip out into the public, under any circumstances.”

“Understood.”

So, Noel had an information broker. There were many types, but infiltrators were the most dangerous kind. They weren’t an issue if you flushed them out quickly, but true professionals wouldn’t make themselves easy to catch. There was the added irritation of having to doubt and suspect everyone involved in

the project, which would slow progress down considerably. For that reason, Zero wanted to capture the information broker quickly and ensure that their plan would proceed without any complications.

“I’ll leave the snake wrangling up to you. I’ll tell *him* that too. You may deal with the situation as you see fit. I will take full responsibility.”

“So you’re saying that I won’t have to worry about things like collateral damage?”

Zero’s grin grew dark and twisted. The voice answered him without a second of hesitation.

“This is war. Anything goes. Anyone who stands in our way will share the same fate.”

The gorgeous sitting room was the height of luxury from top to bottom and a reflection of its owner’s personality. I’d come here to meet with Finocchio Barzini, head of the Barzini family, at his personal residence. Afternoon tea was just about to start; the table in front of me was laid out with an authentic, ostentatious tea set.

“Here you are, Noel. This is what you asked for.”

Finocchio passed me a thick envelope. I took out the documents inside and confirmed their contents. All of them had to do with the train system managed by the Republic of Rodania.

Magical engineering—along with beast materials—had led our civilization to prosperity. Compared with its neighbors, the empire had the most cutting-edge technology. In fact, it wouldn’t have been surprising for the empire to have already established a train system of its own. It was a simple enough feat from a technological standpoint. The ability to *maintain* the train system was the real issue, as the lands of the empire were prone to Abyss openings. This was why, even now, we still relied on horses.

The Republic of Rodania, by comparison, had successfully implemented its train system four years ago and was reaping the benefits. Its national power and wealth had steadily increased since then. I wanted to know the specific

details as well as the present state of the train system. Concrete economic gains from implementation, unintentional losses... I needed to understand all of it. Thus, I'd used my connections in the Barzini family to get a hold of the necessary paperwork.

"Does Lorelai really plan to establish a train system of their own?" Finocchio asked.

I nodded as I continued to look through the documents. "Yes, I'm sure of it. From what I've dug up on them already, Lorelai is working with Vulcan Industries, which recently ramped up their purchases of both beast materials and raw metals. There's no way they'd need the amount they're buying if they weren't planning to build train lines."

"But how do they intend to make it work?"

"I have a few theories, but I don't have any details to work with. More importantly, I have a plan, and it'll work no matter what ace Johann is hiding up his sleeve."

"A plan?" Finocchio balked. "You *do* know you don't stand a chance against Lorelai if they seriously fight you. By the way, I'll tell you right now that I'm in no position to lend you support. I'm surrounded by enemies as it is. I can't afford to let my guard down."

"Relax. I never intended to rely on your firepower anyway."

This was an important time for Finocchio. Our secret alliance allowed him to target the head family he was part of and to aim for the top position: leader of the Luciano family. This put him in a precarious position where he needed to be careful of not just threats from outside the family, but also threats from *inside*, including other gangs and smaller families. He was not in a position to sacrifice any of his defenses for my own crazy plans.

"I'm going to spread amphetamines. That's what I'm thinking," I said, taking a sip of tea.

"Pardon? What did you just say?" Finocchio's head tilted in confusion. He couldn't wrap his head around it. "Could you repeat that one more time? Did you just say 'amphetamines'?"

“I did.”

“And what are you going to do with them?”

“I’m going to spread them, like I said.”

I put my cup of tea back on the table and looked straight at Finocchio.

“The technicians and engineers of Vulcan Industries are the beating heart of the railroad system. Without them, it doesn’t matter how much money they have, or how much they’re plotting behind the scenes. The plan will crumble. So think about the sheer pressure that sits on the shoulders of these men and women. They’ll be working like crazy and totally exhausted. So we’ll recommend a little stimulant, a pick-me-up, something to ease their weary souls. They’ll be junkies in no time—and then they’ll be entirely useless. Lorelai’s plan will crumble to pieces.”

Finocchio’s face was aghast as he listened to me talk. The light seemed to fade from his eyes and left him with a dumbfounded expression. He looked like such an idiot, I couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“I’m joking! It’s a joke! I’d never actually do that.”

Finocchio let out a long, relieved sigh.

“Y-you... You gave me quite the fright, little Noel! Jokes have limits, you know! Even we gangsters know that spreading amphetamines like that is off-limits! You’d leave behind a whole sea of dead bodies with that plan—and that’s only if it succeeded!”

“I said I was joking, didn’t I?”

“Hmph!” Finocchio’s face scrunched up with unease. “You’re already guilty of that prison bombing not so long ago. Who knows what you’ll do next? Nobody, that’s who! Listen, I know you’ll do anything to achieve your goals, but one look at your methods and it’s clear you’re just another gangster! A little demon! Utterly inhuman!”

I shrugged and smiled. “It’s the highest honor to be called a little demon by the mad clown himself.”

His lips puckered. “Noel, my dear, surely you understand that you’re an

unparalleled schemer? It's true. Few in this world are so cunning and underhanded. Your enemies are practically dancing in your palm. But you know what they say: 'The deceitful one oft falls into the snares of deceit.' You keep digging into all of these dirty tricks, Noel, and eventually you'll dig your own grave."

"Do you have any examples of that? Any ways you predict I might be digging my own grave?"

"Huh? Examples? Well, I..." Finocchio stammered, caught by the way I suddenly turned the question on him. "F-for example, what if you do something terrible and then let it slip, so you can't remain in the empire? I know you're a pro when it comes to information warfare, but that information may well come back to haunt you in the end."

"I don't see that happening. Not ever," I declared. I knew it for a fact.

"And what makes you so confident?!"

"Simple, I—"

"Stop, stop!" Finocchio cut me off and waved me off with both hands. "You used some kind of devious trick again, didn't you? I know it! It's awful! I don't want to hear it! Why do I have to hear about it during my lovely tea time? They may call me the mad clown, but even I need a little time to soothe my own soul! So no! I shan't listen!"

Finocchio covered both ears and began to speak loudly.

"I can't hear a thing! It doesn't matter what you say! I can't hear it!"

I sighed, exasperated. "Whatever. Anyway, how are things with you, anyway? Plans going smoothly?"

"If you're talking about the tournament, then yes. We've arranged for the land and the construction so we can open it as soon as possible. We're ready to go whenever you are, we just need you to get the permission of the imperial family once you're on the regalia. No problems whatsoever!"

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about you becoming the head of the Luciano family."

“Behind the scenes? So far, so good.”

“Hm. No problems, then,” I said, and then I narrowed my eyes. “So who do you have to kill?”

“Noel, you...”

Including Finocchio, there were thirteen people making up the leadership of the Luciano Family. For Finocchio to make it to the top, more than a few would need to *disappear*.

“I’m the one who pushed you into it,” I said. “You’ve got my help if you need it.”

“Oh, hush. I will do what needs to be done even without your help. I am Finocchio Barzini, the exquisitely beautiful outlaw known as the mad clown... and I will not hesitate to kill even those I call my sworn brothers, should they become my enemies.”

I could have done without the “exquisitely beautiful” part, but I could tell he wasn’t lying. He wouldn’t back down. I nodded.

“Good. I believe you.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Miss Boss, we’ve brought him.”

“Ah, wonderful. Come in.”

The door opened, and two men entered. One was Finocchio’s henchman, an extremely heavyset man made of muscle. The other, a man in a wheelchair, looked like a vagrant who’d been living on the streets. He was missing both his arms and legs. The henchman pushed the man in the wheelchair over to us, and Finocchio and I stood from our chairs to meet them.

“You look in good shape, Albert. Slimmer, somehow.”

I looked down at Albert with a grin. Albert Gambino was once the boss of the Gambino family, but he’d been expelled and had his arms and legs *liberated* from him. He now spent his days at Finocchio’s pig farm. He sat entirely still in his wheelchair, his eyes shut tight.

“I brought him because you asked, Noel, but what in the world do you want from him?”

I turned toward Finocchio before I answered. “I’m interested to learn more about the alchemist he hired. I want to know where he is.”

“An alchemist... So that’s who made those amphetamines, huh? Wait! That story from earlier—was it true?!”

“No. I just want the alchemist to make me something,” I said, shaking my head before getting up close to Albert. “Wakey wakey, Albert.”

Albert remained unresponsive.

“He’s been having such a wonderful time with the pigs that it’s broken him into pieces,” said Finocchio. “It’s very difficult to have any sort of productive conversation with him these days.”

“Hmph. Is that so?”

I took a cigarette from my breast pocket, put it in my mouth, and lit up.

“Ew! Noel, sweetie, no! When did you start that filthy habit? It’s bad for your health. And by the way, I don’t allow smoking in my house. Not anywhere, thank you very much.”

Finocchio’s face twisted in disgust. I ignored him and blew a mouthful of smoke into Albert’s face, before swiftly pushing the lit end of the cigarette into his cheek. Just as I heard the sizzle of burning, Albert let out a shriek.

“Owwwwwww! It burns!” he hollered.

“Ah, so you *were* awake.”

I chuckled as Albert stared at me with pure hate in his eyes. He wanted to scream. He wanted to tell me that all of his misfortune was entirely my fault. He wouldn’t have been wrong.

“You heard what I said, Albert,” I said. “Tell me what I want to know.”

“I-I...I would never tell the I-likes of you!”

“Heh. I guess when you’re already living in the depths of hell, you think there’s nothing left to fear, huh? Oh, but there is, Albert. There is.” I took his

face in both hands and pressed our foreheads together. “The pits of hell are very, very deep. You’ve just barely made it past the entrance gates. Maybe we’ll cut open the top of your skull while you’re still conscious and set up a mirror to give you a front-row seat to the procedure, hm?”

Albert shrieked again. His face went pale, and he tried desperately to get away, but without arms or legs, he had nowhere to run. And with his face still in my hands, he couldn’t even look away. Albert’s eyes darted around wildly, searching for a hiding place that simply did not exist.

“Do I scare you, Albert? Then you’d better tell me everything. I don’t have much patience. But if you talk, I’ll help you.”

“R-really?”

“Really. I don’t lie.”

“Okay, then... I’ll tell you where he is.”

Having finally given up, Albert told us everything about the alchemist.

“Y-you promised...” he stammered afterward. “Y-you promised t-to help me...”

Tears streamed from Albert’s eyes. He was begging. He was so pitiful that it was hard to watch. My heart wasn’t completely devoid of mercy, though; I really did intend to help him. But first, I wanted to know one more thing. I walked around behind Albert, placed my chin on his shoulder, then whispered in his ear.

“Albert, do you remember a young girl by the name of Chelsea?”

“Ch-Chelsea? N-nope. Don’t know h-her...”

“Oh? Well, I suppose you wouldn’t. It’s only natural, I guess.”

I hadn’t expected him to remember—and, in fact, I was relieved he had forgotten.

“P-please. C-come on. Help me. I-I don’t want to go back there...”

“I know, I know. That’s why I’m here.”

I lifted my head from Albert’s shoulder then gripped his head tight in both

hands. Then I twisted it with great force, his neck breaking with a dull crack.

“Goodbye, Albert. Consider your crimes atoned for.”

Albert’s lifeless body tumbled from the wheelchair. He felt no pain. His consciousness would have stopped the instant that his neck snapped. I was like a god delivering him a final moment of divine mercy, considering the heinous things that he’d done. Finocchio and his henchman, however, were left in shock.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Should I not have killed him?” I asked.

Finocchio chuckled.

“Noel, I am *telling* you. You’re a born gangster. It’s your calling!”

While Noel plotted away and continued his shadowy work behind the scenes, the other members of Wild Tempest proceeded with their regular training. They weren’t accepting any new clan contracts, so maintaining their usual drills was the best way to keep their skills sharp. Now that Leon was Rank A, it was necessary for the whole team to learn to work in tandem with his new strength, skills, and abilities. Under Leon’s direction, all four members went through countless battle drills in the empire’s underground training facility.

Once the session was over, Hugo visited the atelier he’d purchased back when he worked as a dollmaker. He still owned the place, even after he’d been thrown in prison on false accusations. It had remained exactly where he’d left it.

Hugo wanted to continue dollmaking, if possible. He planned to keep up his Seeker work, of course, but his true calling was craftsmanship. Pledging loyalty to Noel was by no means a reason to abstain from that calling, and given his talents, he could do both at the same time.

The Puppeteer knew from experience that devoting oneself entirely to their occupation was no way to build a long-lasting career. People needed reasons to live beyond their work. Careers should be built upon a foundation, such as their hobbies, their lover, or their family. When Hugo was a full-time dollmaker, he’d gone traveling to ease his stress—but now that he was working as a Seeker, he was intent on restarting his dollmaking work. He’d been occupied with clan

business, but now he had a little time, and Noel and the other members had no issues with his plans.

It took about thirty minutes by carriage from the training facility to reach the particular part of town where Hugo's atelier stood. The city streets that stretched out from the window were a familiar sight. He alighted from the carriage and walked, soaking in the nostalgia of past memories as he did. Some of the shops had changed, but most were just as he remembered from two years ago, including the eateries and tailor he frequented. They'd undoubtedly be surprised to see him.

Hugo passed through the business district and into the residential part of town, a quiet place with lots of trees. It was the perfect environment for quietly concentrating on doll work. When he arrived at his atelier at long last, he found it overrun with more weeds than it had ever known, but otherwise nothing had changed.

"It's just like I remember..."

As Hugo stood there, struck by the onslaught of nostalgia, a young girl arrived at the entrance to the garden. She was about seven years old, with fine features and a porcelain doll in her arms. The clothes she wore seemed expensive, but they were quickly dirtied by the long grass and weeds as she entered the garden. She made eye contact with Hugo, and he knew immediately that he'd never seen her before. He wasn't sure what to do, but the girl ran over to him before he could choose a plan of action.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you the owner of this place?"

"S-s-sir?!"

Hugo was left wide-eyed, shocked to be addressed as formally as an older man would be. He was only 24 years old. It was true that there was quite an age difference between them, but the words still pierced his heart like needles.

"What's wrong?"

"Uh... No, it's nothing. I am indeed the owner of this house," Hugo said.

The girl's face lit up as she saw Hugo nod.

“That’s great. There was nobody inside, so I didn’t know what to do.”

Hugo noticed that the girl’s hands were dirty and black. He could easily imagine her placing her hands on the dirty windowsills and pulling herself up to look inside the atelier.

“Can I help you with something?” he asked.

“You’re a dollmaker, right? That’s what my mother said. I came here hoping you could fix my friend.”

The girl thrust out her doll for Hugo to see. There was a fracture running down its cheek like a bolt of lightning.

“Well? Can you fix her?” the girl urged, her face nervous and uncertain.

Hugo smiled. “I can, and I can do it right away.”

Hugo put a hand to the doll’s face and activated a skill. It was *Repair*, a skill that came with the Puppeteer class. The skill required materials depending on the amount of damage, but a touch of the hand would suffice for a simple fracture on a little doll.

“Wow! You really fixed her!” The girl hugged the doll to her chest, overjoyed. “Thank you, sir! You made me so happy today!”

“I, um... I’m glad to see you...so happy...”

Hugo still felt the sting of the girl’s address, but that pain was minor in the face of her overwhelming joy.

“I want to give you this as thank you,” she said, passing Hugo a candy wrapped in beautiful paper. “I have to go home now. Thanks again, sir!”

Hugo smiled as he watched the girl disappear into the streets.

“Not bad at all for my first day back on the job.”

Inside, the atelier was in worse condition than Hugo had expected. The place wasn’t merely filled with dust; there were holes in the roof he hadn’t seen from outside that had let water in, forming puddles. That had caused mold to grow on the furniture and floor, so all of Hugo’s dolls were rusted.

“First things first: I’d better get this place cleaned up and back in working shape.”

Hugo created ten puppet soldiers and ordered them to get to work cutting grass outside and cleaning up inside. The emotionless puppet soldiers worked quietly and steadily. In no time at all the grass was cut, and everything ruined by mold or rust was piled up outside.

As he watched the puppet soldiers at work, Hugo made a shopping list for things he’d need. Tools, furniture, and materials for renovating the place filled most of the list, but some items would take more time to access. He guessed it would take at least two weeks to get the atelier back to its former glory. His skills would do the rest once he had all the requisite materials, but things didn’t always go as smoothly as planned.

Hugo sighed just as a light knock came at the door. When he turned, he found the door already open, and a female elf was standing in the doorway. Her long, blonde hair was braided, and she wore a long, double-breasted jacket that made Hugo think of military clothing.

“You...”

“It’s been a while, Hugo,” the elf said with a smile.

The woman was Sharon Valentine, a member of the Supreme Dragon, the strongest clan in the empire and the top tier of the regalia. She was once the clan’s vice-master, but she had voluntarily relinquished the position to grant it to her pupil, Zeke Feinstein.

“Why are you here?”

Sharon’s face turned sad. “I wanted to apologize...”

“For what?”

“Well, I’m sorry that I couldn’t save you, Hugo. I knew you were being falsely accused, but I didn’t have any proof...”

Hugo nodded. That made sense. He’d been thrown in prison some two years ago for a crime he had no recollection of. He’d been slandered and labeled a murderer, and he was summarily sentenced to death. The only reason he was

free and deemed innocent now was because of Noel. Without him, Hugo would be sleeping in his grave instead of talking with Sharon.

“There’s no need for you to apologize,” said Hugo. “If our positions were reversed, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything for you either.”

It would be a lie to say that Hugo hadn’t hoped for Sharon to help him during his two years of imprisonment. He was acquainted with her through her headhunting activities, so she at least had a reason to help...but that help never came.

Hugo couldn’t count the times he’d cursed his cell walls in anguish because of it. He could look back on it now, though, and understand how presumptuous it had been to expect any support. It would have been one thing if he were an official member of the Supreme Dragon, but he’d actually been the one to turn down Sharon’s offer.

“You were right. I was weak. I was so sure that I could pave my own way and live my life without relying on others, but that was truly arrogant in hindsight. In the end, the responsibility for what happened back then...well, it falls on my own shoulders.”

“I’m relieved to hear you say it. I was worried about you.”

“I am sorry if I caused you any undue concern. But as I’m fine now...” Hugo’s eyes narrowed as he watched Sharon carefully. “How about we do away with the formalities and speak frankly? Why are you here? A person of your stature wouldn’t come all the way here for someone like me simply to apologize. How did you know that I’d be here in the first place?”

“I was wondering if you’d catch that,” said Sharon. The smile on her face betrayed no hint of guilt. “I apologize for the ruse, but I really did want to apologize, you know?”

“Enough, please. What do you want?”

“Hugo...”

Sharon stood up straight, her face turning serious.

“Will you reconsider joining us? The Supreme Dragon?”

“Hm? I’m afraid I’m not sure I understand you.”

“I came here to offer you another chance to join us. I know that I didn’t save you, and I know that the person who did is the clan master of Wild Tempest. It’s only natural you feel indebted to him, and so my offer doesn’t have much appeal,” said Sharon, whose smile had grown suddenly cruel. “But even then, I can tell you now that you’ll be better off joining us. The future and fortune we offer is unparalleled. And besides...”

“Besides what?”

“You won’t have to fight us. That there is a blessing of sorts.”

Sharon’s smile never left her face as she spoke, but her gaze was sharp. Her eyes, devoid of mercy, were so laced with bloodlust that Hugo felt her stare alone might be enough to kill.

“We know how much of a plotter and a schemer Noel Stollen is. It’s the whole reason the clan has grown by leaps in bounds in such a short period of time. Our Zeke is quite taken by him in his own way, but I must admit I don’t quite understand it. I mean, really. How could an ant—even a hyperintelligent ant—take on an elephant?”

Her comments were unbelievably egotistical, but Sharon spoke from a place of well-honed skills and battle-hardened experience. She had served a long time as vice-master for the empire’s strongest clan, and though she had not reached Rank EX, she was peerless in battle against A-Rankers. Her inhuman determination had not wavered in the least even after conceding the position of vice-master to Zeke.

“Hugo, I want you to understand that my offer is one of mercy.”

Because things will not end with a simple refusal this time around, her eyes seemed to say. That steely expression, though, was what gave Hugo the courage to respond as he did.

“I appreciate the offer, but I must refuse,” he said.

“Then at the very least...would you mind telling me why?”

Hugo felt the temperature in the room suddenly drop. Could he have

imagined it?

“The reason is very simple: I think Noel Stollen is the world’s strongest Seeker. Therefore, serving under anyone else would be foolish.”

“So that’s your answer?”

Sharon turned on her heels and headed for the door, but she added a final remark with her back still turned.

“I respect your decision, but remember this: so long as Noel Stollen continues to aim for the top of the mountain, we will always be there waiting for him, like the furious dragon of our namesake.”

Sharon did not look back and marched away with a confident gait. When she vanished completely from his sight at last, Hugo let out a deep sigh.

“I knew she was terrifying, but that was a nightmare...” he muttered.

She was more frightening than even a lord. In terms of simple battle prowess, a lord was more powerful, but what gave Sharon the edge was that, in battle, she was well versed in using every tactic necessary to win.

“Still, there is no way we can avoid them.”

Hugo looked down at his trembling hands. Sharon had spoken the truth. As long as Noel aimed for the top, he could not avoid a collision with Supreme Dragon. One day, he would have to fight Sharon and the rest of her clan. And who would come out the victor in that particular battle? The thought scared Hugo, but it also sparked a fierce curiosity within him.

“I’m afraid you’ve made one mistake, Miss Valentine,” he whispered. “Noel Stollen is not an ant. He’s a more cunning snake than anyone else, with extremely poisonous fangs.”

Hugo was certain that the question of which was stronger—the snake or the dragon—was one that would be answered in due time.

The following day, Lorelai was to hold a press conference regarding their new train system. The storm that would erupt in the wake of that event was caused by none other than the snake that devoured everything in its path.

Swathes of the empire's people were gathered at the outdoor concert hall in the city square. Seen from above, it was a tremendous sea of people numbering upward of ten thousand. The group serving as their guidance and security was the strongest of the strong: the clan members of Lorelai. If any disturbances broke out, they would be dealt with swiftly.

Lorelai's clan master, Johann Eissfeldt, had called for a press conference to make a sudden announcement. This was not a press conference for a small, select number of reporters—instead, it was to be held at an outdoor concert hall, completely open to the public. Even though the announcement had come out of nowhere, word spread fast and drew in huge numbers. Their rapt attention proved the great power and influence of the regalia.

“...As for the economic benefits of the train system, one need only look to the Republic of Rodania. Having created the so-called ‘engine’ with beast parts, they’ve made it possible to transport vast amounts of materials and people across the country. Rodania has seen a vast economic upswell in the four years since the establishment of their train lines.”

Johann spoke from the stage before the huge crowd, a microphone in hand. His confidence projected through his words, lending them a weight that made them all the more convincing.

“By contrast, even though our home has the means to build its own train system, we cannot guarantee its safety because the Velnant Empire is so prone to Abyss outbreaks. This leaves us reliant on roads and horses.”

He broke into a proud, triumphant smile.

“This is why, as I mentioned earlier, our clan has partnered with Vulcan Industries to present a solution to this very problem. We plan to open the empire's very own train system—and to bestow its benefits upon all of you, the citizens of Velnant. Our plans have already been approved, thanks to support both from the second-eldest imperial prince, Prince Caius, and the lords of the lands through which the train system will pass. This puts us in position to begin construction as early as next week!”

At Johann's proclamation, reporters seated near the front of the stage began asking questions.

“Can you tell us more about your solution to the empire’s current problem?”

“But of course.”

Johann nodded and glanced to the side, where a female clan member was clambering onstage. The watching crowd gasped at once both in fear and disbelief, but not due to the woman in question. It was because of the grotesque “thing” she had brought with her.

Similar to a wolf in shape, it would have stood as tall as a full-grown man on its hind legs. One look at its muscular frame made it clear that its front paws could take off an ox’s head in one swipe. But in contrast to its terrifying appearance, the creature appeared docile, and it didn’t even let out a single growl in front of so many people. Instead, it followed the woman meekly. Something about the monster’s obedient nature made it even creepier.

“Allow me to introduce our newest invention: the demi-beast, a multipurpose quadrupedal beast combatant.”

At the sound of the word “beast,” the crowd visibly reeled with shock, but Johann remained calm and composed as he smiled and went on.

“It’s only natural for you to be shocked. But I assure you, you are all perfectly safe. Yes, it’s a biological weapon born from beast materials, but it will follow our orders to the letter. In times of peace, it’s set to safe mode, making it no different from any other big dog. The only place the demi-beast is able to use its strength is within the Abyss.”

Johann sent a wink to the woman with the demi-beast, and she gave it a pat on the head. The creature’s eyes closed in bliss at the sensation.

“As you can see,” Johann continued, “it’s very friendly. It’s intelligent too, and it will never take actions that put a person in harm’s way. But make no mistake; the demi-beast is fearsome in combat. In an Abyss, the demi-beast is capable of B-Rank combat abilities when set to battle mode.”

Johann turned from the beast to look over the crowd.

“After running a series of tests in the Abyss, we were able to prove that the demi-beast is more than capable of handling depth-8 beasts on its own. They’re ready for mass production, and we intend to have them placed at every station

when the train lines are established. In this way, we will be able to purify Abysses promptly and at the moment of manifestation, ensuring safety for the trains and the tracks they ride on.”

The better half of the watching crowd were clearly impressed by Johann’s speech, but others were obviously upset—the Seekers. They didn’t like the idea of some B-Rank biological weapon essentially taking the food off their table. They felt threatened, and perhaps rightfully so. Johann noticed this reaction, however, and he continued with a knowing smile across his face.

“I know what the Seekers in the crowd are thinking: ‘Are these demi-beasts intended to replace us?’ I cannot deny that on some level, they will. They are truly exceptional, and no ordinary Seeker can compare. However, my intent was never to steal your careers from you. That’s why we are looking into establishing loan systems for demi-beasts.”

Johann’s statement sent ripples through the crowd. The demi-beast was the ace up Lorelai’s sleeve. Nobody imagined for a second that they would ever loan their ace out to rival Seekers.

“I’ve long held doubts as to whether the elimination of beasts should be shouldered by Seekers. Yes, there’s nobody better equipped to hunt them. I myself hold a deep pride in the work we do. However, is it really necessary for all of us to be Seekers? Shouldn’t we turn to other methods if they offer safer and more efficient ways to hunt? I have pondered these questions for a long time, and the answer now stands before you.”

Johann gestured to the demi-beast once more.

“With this power, we can eliminate beasts with an ease never before seen. But the benefits of this will not be mine alone. It is a power that anyone can take for themselves. Naturally, we won’t be able to loan the demi-beasts for free, but we’ll at least aim to make them as affordable as possible. Our plan is to loan them at as close to cost-price as we can so that anybody can use them.”

Johann raised his voice as he moved into the next phase of his speech.

“I am a Seeker. But before that, I was simply a citizen of the empire, and so it’s impossible for me to believe in keeping all the profit for myself. What’s more, the arrival of the Valiant looms on the horizon. Now is the time for us to

throw away our greed and join forces to face this incoming threat. I will stand on the front lines to face it. I will give everything I have, from every hair on my head to every drop of blood in my body, for the empire's honor and to guarantee its future. This is how I will repay the emperor for the glory of making me a part of the regalia."

Johann raised a fist into the air.

"The train system and the demi-beast are our wings! They are proof of my resolve! And with these wings, we will fly the empire to ever greater heights! That, I promise you!"

In the next instant, the entire city square erupted into applause and cheers. The tens of thousands of people gathered were brought together as one, with Johann standing before them like the god they now worshipped. It was a truly impressive advertising strategy, and this was only the beginning; the news would soon spread like wildfire across the empire. No one else could have made a stronger impact on the citizens—not even the imperial family.

Standing there among all the citizens who simply didn't know any better, I sent Johann some silent applause of my own.

"Demi-beasts, huh? Now *that* I didn't see coming..."

I would have liked to have known about them before today's reveal, but there was no point lingering on past impossibilities. The battleground existed in the present, and you couldn't always fight in perfect conditions. If my enemy surpassed my expectations, that was never reason enough for me to back down. Although I was worried about the fact that all communications with Loki had suddenly stopped, now wasn't the time to worry about it.

At the conclusion of Johann's speech, the reporters pitched nothing but softball questions. Johann had brought them all here himself, so naturally, they only asked the sort of questions he wanted to answer. It was no wonder that one particular reporter's question caught him entirely off guard.

"Mr. Eissfeldt, thank you for your amazing speech. Where its contents are concerned, do you mind if I call over a known expert in the field?"

"Hm? An expert?"

The reporter's voice had the slightest tremble at its edges, and Johann's brow furrowed in confusion. *This was not part of the plan*, his expression seemed to say. As he stood there bewildered, I pushed my way through the crowd, heading directly for the stage.

"Excuse me," I said, "I've got a stage to get to!"

"The announcement—do it now."

"Y-yes, sir!"

I sent the message through Talker skill: *Link*. The reporter I'd subjugated motioned a hand in my direction.

"Without any further ado," he said, "I give you the genius Talker and master of Wild Tempest, Mr. Noel Stollen!"

"Th-the snake?!"

Johann's eyes went wide with surprise at this announcement, but nobody in the crowd knew the reporter was going against his plan. They were oblivious to everything except the excitement of another big name climbing the stage. To thunderous applause, I leaped from the spectator's seats and landed upon the stage. Then I turned to the crowd with an actor's flourish and gave a graceful bow.

"Greetings, ladies and gentlemen! I am Noel Stollen, the clan master of Wild Tempest. It is a great honor to be invited here today to take part in such an historical announcement."

I didn't need a microphone. As a Talker, I had a voice strong enough to reach everyone on its own. I raised my head to excited shouts and cheers.

"Whoa! Even Wild Tempest is here!"

"Woo-hoo! Noooooee!"

"Damn, that guy knows how to make an entrance!"

When the crowd's excitement reached its peak, I let a bold smile cross my face and thrust my fist into the air. The entire city square broke anew into a

massive cheer.

“Woooooo!”

I gave one more bow and then turned to Johann. My sudden entrance had stunned him and the rest of Lorelai so much that none of them had thought to move.

“Long time no see, Johann. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

For a moment, Johann’s face twisted with pure hatred. That was to be expected; I’d just stomped all over his moment of glory. Who wouldn’t be angry? Considering the effort that it took to put the event together, Johann must have been seething with white-hot rage. But it was already too late for him to do anything. The moment I stepped onto the stage, I was in charge. If Johann ordered his clan members to have me removed, the crowd would not stand for it. They were not here for polite societal standards; they were here for the spectacle of the performance—and my sudden appearance had given them even more to be excited about. Getting rid of me now would mean being enveloped in the crowd’s discontent in the aftermath. Johann’s plan was to push his own agenda through a large-scale PR strategy, and he needed the people on his side for that. It would be foolish to sour their mood against him. I knew he wouldn’t get rid of me.

Above all else, Johann was a man of great pride. He was aching for a chance to get back at me since the last time we’d shared the stage, and his pride simply would not let him run away. Just as I thought he would, Johann swallowed his anger and allowed a bright smile to his face.

“No, no, it’s an honor to have you here,” he said. “I’m told you’re here to regale us with your expertise on the subject matter.”

“Indeed I am. I come here humbly to offer what little support I can to aid you, the Seeker I have admired for so long.”

“How heartwarming... Hm? So you knew about all of this before today? That would mean somebody leaked the information to you, would it not?”

“I can assure you, nothing like that happened. To be honest, I’d also been thinking a lot about the economic benefits of a train system, so I looked into the

various ways it might be accomplished. When I heard you were announcing the founding of a railway company at a press conference, I felt compelled to talk with you about it. I was so excited that I got one of the reporters to let me participate.”

Johann had tried to stain my reputation by revealing I was underhanded, but it was no use. Before coming here, I had already considered every single possible conversation. However Johann tried to sway the topic, I would not lose control. The stage was mine. I refused to let it go.

“I see,” said Johann. “Then I would very much love to hear your opinion.”

“Of course. I would like to make it clear at the outset, however, that I agree with your goals. A train line is a necessity if we want to stay equal in economic power with the Republic of Rodania, and we’ll need it in the next few years. Plus, the quicker we implement a train system, the more impact that system will have on our battle against the Valiant. I have no reason to oppose the implementation of a train line; quite the opposite!”

Crushing Johann’s plan was quite easy, with no shortage of ways to do it, but the truth was that Johann’s plans would be a huge contribution to the country. There was huge risk involved in foiling a plot that had the backing of not just the wealthy and influential, but also an imperial prince. We couldn’t hope to win a battle in which our enemy was the country itself rather than a single clan.

At the same time, we couldn’t simply sit back and watch it unfold. Giving Johann the freedom to do as he wanted would only pave the way for him to rule over everything. So how to limit that freedom? I had a few ideas...

“Still, when I heard your explanation, I did think that proceeding as planned could prove extremely dangerous,” I said. “I can sense some big problems on the horizon.”

“Problems? Well, now, we can’t ignore those. I gather you have some basis for these problems you predict. Can you explain them to us all here and now, in full?”

“I certainly can.” Flashing a daring grin, I turned to address the crowd. “We all know that the train system is a remarkable feat of engineering. We also know how big of an impact it will have on the economy. I don’t doubt that for even a

second—rather, I can't wait for it!"

Then, I let some unease creep into my expression.

"For every action, there are reverberations—effects and reactions. Were you all aware that the engines powering these proposed trains emit exhaust fumes that cause serious harm to both people and the environment?"

The crowd collectively tensed at the sound of the words "serious harm." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Johann's slight grimace; I'd hit a weak point. But right as he opened his mouth to argue the point, I raised the volume of my voice a touch higher and reclaimed the narrative.

"It's no lie; it's an established truth. At present, there is no shortage of people in the towns and cities next to the train lines who suffer from health problems. Crop production rates and harvests have also dropped. Among these grave troubles, the lords of these lands are now demanding compensation from the government-operated railway company, and a solution to the problem has yet to be found."

All of what I'd said was true. It was in the documents Finocchio gave me. I was exaggerating some of the details, but I wasn't *lying*. The words had an immediate impact on the audience. The cheers and excitement of mere moments ago had cooled, and now the crowd was lost, entangled in a complicated battle between trust and suspicion.

"Mr. Johann, surely you know about this...and yet, you never thought to mention it. Why is that?"

I asked the question with a smile. Johann returned it as he answered, masking his true feelings.

"It's true. I *did* know what Noel here has told you all. And failing to reveal that to you here falls upon my own shoulders. You have my deepest apologies. Though I do wonder, is the data for Noel's story really accurate? From what I remember, it still has yet to be scientifically proven that exhaust fumes produced by trains are dangerous. It's still very possible that the problems faced in these areas are caused by something else. The Rodanian train system is only four years old. Many have overreacted in response to this new technology, with some blaming it as the source of their problems. It's possible they fear a

pollution that does not actually exist.”

It was a powerful retort, and the crowd seemed to buy it.

“Then, in your opinion, Mr. Johann, the exhaust fumes are *not* a problem?”

“All I’m saying is that nothing was detected in the exhaust that indicates it as an issue. Obviously, there’s always the possibility that something *will* be discovered in the future, but it’d be a foolish move to delay the establishment of an entire train line for such a trifling concern. It’s as you said, Noel: for every action, there are reverberations. Technology does not bring benefits alone—losses are equally likely. With that in mind, should we not utilize the profits and benefits technology provides to prepare for such a future?”

Johann was right on the money. You couldn’t fear sacrifices when it came to implementing new technology. Many people in the crowd seemed swayed by Johann’s words and were nodding in agreement. With his short reply, he’d managed to earn back the trust of two-thirds of them.

“These are irreversible losses we’re discussing. If the exhaust fumes *were* proven to be harmful, what then? If a woman can no longer give birth because of this pollution, do you think she’ll accept your reasoning?”

“That question is unfair and cowardly. Let’s try a different example, for instance: There’s a man in desperate need of surgery. If he doesn’t get it, he will die. The surgeon doesn’t do the surgery because she doesn’t want to bear the responsibility should she fail. When that man dies, who takes responsibility for his death? The doctor? Or society, which pushed the responsibility on her? The answer is the latter. Patients have a right to surgery, just as a surgeon has a right to protection. It is only by balancing these rights that people are saved. Can you see how similar this is to what we’re discussing?”

Johann was a superb speaker. They were only words to weave his way around responsibility, but his calm, confident projection had earned the complete trust of the crowd.

“I see your logic, but I do still wonder: might there still be people who don’t agree with your line of thought?” I asked.

“Oh? Who might they be? If they exist in your imagination, there’s likely no

end to them.”

“The train lines are running through a number of different areas. I think there may well be lords of those areas who would oppose the train system unless they could be assured complete safety.”

“Ah, I see. Didn’t you hear what I said earlier? I announced that we’d already gathered full approval from all involved parties. The people you mention simply do not exist.”

“Are you sure? The discussions may be over, but how can you really know what a person feels in their heart?”

“Er, I don’t understand what you’re getting at. What are you...?”

In that moment, as Johann grappled with his confusion, I sent a message through *Link*.

“Now. Announce the news.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

I had not one but *two* reporters working for me in the crowd. My second reporter now approached Johann as I had ordered. Then, he gave Johann the news.

“Mr. Eissfeldt, we’ve just received word from one of the company’s subsidiary branches. It would appear there are large-scale protests being staged in two of the areas the railway is set to run through...”

“Protests?! What do you mean?!”

Fearful as he was of Johann and his scandalized expression, the reporter went on.

“It seems the lords presiding over the areas are discontent with the plans. Not only have they informed the people of the project and its harmful impact, but they’ve also reported that you intend to push through the establishment of the train system regardless of their consent... Current reports say that a small number of enraged citizens are marching toward the imperial capital in protest.”

“What?! Impossible! Are you certain?!”

“I-It’s true, sir! I w-would never lie to you!”

Johann sent a sharp glance at a clan member. “I want confirmation at each of those locations immediately! Report to me as soon as you have a clear understanding of the situation!”

“U-understood!”

Johann watched the clan member disappear like the wind, then turned to face me. His voice came out tense as he asked his next question.

“Was this your doing?”

I tilted my head to the side. “Pardon? I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean.”

That was a blatant lie, of course. It *was* my doing. For Johann’s plans to work, the cooperation of the lords of each area was indispensable. Loki had told me that some of those same lords were dissatisfied by the proposed distribution of profit—as long as those lords remained in opposition, the plan would never come to fruition. That was why I’d predicted that Johann would use the power of the imperial family to push the plans through at all costs.

Naturally, no lord could stand up to the power of the imperial family. But when they felt their rights were being trampled on, they became disgruntled, and that was what made them so useful to me. By using my connection with Count Lester Graham, current Minister of Justice and member of the aristocracy, I met with each of these dissatisfied lords and convinced them to rile up their people.

All lords put an emphasis on their own rights and interests, but those rights and interests were being ignored by none other than Johann Eissfeldt, who was set to use their land in whatever way he wanted. So, one option was to delay Johann’s plans through protests, then use the quelling of those protests as a way to demand a reconsideration of said plans.

Those idiotic lords had agreed with what I told them, and that was how it had come to this. The results had been better than I’d hoped for. By delaying the plans and putting the blame on Johann, we’d worsen his position in the proceedings. This, in turn, would weaken his influence. And because the

problem had been revealed here on this stage, where Johann had bathed in praise, everyone would feel the entire thing was his responsibility anyway.

Admiration and responsibility had become one and the same. Who should take responsibility for this mess had become entirely self-evident. Now, as Johann stood stunned onstage, the crowd he'd toiled to win back faced him with apparent despair in their eyes. Were it possible, I would have liked to try turning the demi-beast into another problem for Johann to deal with, but I didn't have enough information. Attempting a move like that without due diligence could easily throw the problem back into my face. Sometimes, it was dangerous to push your opponent *too* far into the corner.

"You son of a..." Johann muttered.

His cool and calm facade had all but faded, revealing a murderous gleam in his eyes. I knew that Johann and I would have to settle things between us eventually, but not now.

The empire needed the train system, no matter how you looked at it. It wasn't my intent to bring the plans to a complete halt. The problem was the position Johann occupied as the main contributor to those plans. All I needed was enough time to throw a wrench in those plans and arrange for a way to bring Lorelai down, and I'd achieved that goal. Any more and I'd draw the attention of the imperial family, which I wanted to avoid. It was essential to know when enough was enough.

"I can only guess from the snippets I heard just now, but it appears that there really *are* a few people who have issues with your plans," I said, a look of sympathy on my face as I walked toward Johann. "Like I said earlier, though, I'm in full support of the idea. The empire needs a railway. So, I'd like to pledge my support. I'll help you clear up the problems standing in your way."

"You'll...what?"

"What do you think, Mr. Johann? I may still be young and inexperienced, but I'm sure there's much I can help you with. Why not put our strength together to see this thing through?"

"Grr!"

Johann clenched his jaw tight in evident frustration. In order to get through the situation he'd found himself in, he'd need the help of the person pulling all the strings: me. It was an offer he couldn't refuse. I turned to the crowd to give Johann the final push he needed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you must understand that all great undertakings come with problems. It's true that Johann Eissfeldt could have been more conscientious...but we're all aware of his capacity for greatness. The empire simply will not prosper without him. Thus, I wish to do my best to see this plan to success. I ask you, the people of the empire! Will you lend us your trust once more?"

Applause reverberated through the audience. It started small, but soon everyone present was contributing to an unceasing wave of claps. I turned to Johann, smiling, and put out my right hand. Despite a brief moment of hesitation, Johann quickly regained his senses and shook my hand with a warm grin of his own. The sight of it sent the crowd into even more applause.

Johann and I mouthed the exact same words to one another.

Soon enough, I will crush you.

Zero Lindrake stood on the roof of a tall building some two kilometers from the main stage. The winds at that height sent his cloak fluttering madly in the wind, but Zero didn't budge; instead, he continued to stare at a single point with no discernible expression. He raised one hand and engaged a skill.

Dark skill: *Fatal Strike*. A black spear appeared in his hand, crafted by his black magic. This spear had instant-kill capabilities that could only be wielded against humans. It didn't matter if its target was of a higher rank, since the power of the skill was so effective there was no hope of resistance. The chances of instant death were extremely high. Dark Knight was a battle class that specialized in targeting human opponents. Though they were well versed in fighting beasts, facing *human* opponents brought out the best in the class.

With spear in hand, Zero prepared to launch it. His target was two kilometers away, standing on the stage: Noel Stollen.

“I knew that snake was a threat...” he muttered.

Zero had followed everything that happened since Noel’s arrival. He heard it all through a communication stone held by a fellow clan member, while also being able to watch every movement and daring expression flit across Noel’s face thanks to his ten-kilometer vision. He had concluded that the snake could not be allowed to live.

Zero’s spear would put a hole in Noel even at this distance, killing him without fail. There was always the danger that Lorelai would be accused of directing the assassination, but Zero had already decided it was worth the risk. It was far more dangerous to allow Noel to do as he pleased.

“Die,” Zero snarled, summoning all his strength into a mighty spear toss.

It was then that he felt something stir, causing him to pause. Noel was looking in his direction now, a wicked smile on his face.

“He noticed me? But that’s impossible. How?”

The answer to Zero’s question was above him. At a glance, one would think it only a small bird, but it circled around and around above Zero’s head. It was clearly not what it first appeared.

“Ah, I see. One of Hugo Coppélia’s puppet soldiers...”

Zero guessed that Noel, somehow expecting a potential sniping, had Hugo’s puppet soldiers keeping watch over all likely sniper points. If Zero went through with his attempt on Noel’s life, Hugo would stop it. He didn’t want to get into a confrontation with the Puppeteer here in the middle of the city.

“Guess I’ve got no choice.”

Zero sighed and let his spear vanish. He turned to look up at the little bird circling above him and sent it the middle finger. He’d given up for today, but nothing would end here.

“If you want it, I’ll be here ready to give it to you,” Zero whispered with a chuckle.

The snake was a powerful foe, this much was true. Too bad for Noel, then. It was also true that a real Seeker only grew more determined when faced with a

powerful enemy.

Berry Planet was strictly a members-only bar. Passersby looking to enter were turned away, and membership required not only an introduction from three current members but a hefty member's fee, to boot. If you didn't have the status and the money, you would never see the inside of Berry Planet. Inside the bar were wall-to-wall private rooms, so the members granted entry never saw one another. The bar was a place for people who wanted an uninterrupted quiet to accompany their drinks.

I listened to the *clink-clink* sound of the ice melting in my glass. I'd been here an hour, all by myself, and I was sipping at my fifth glass of whiskey. Thin trails of smoke wavered in the air from cigarette butts in the ashtray in front of me.

The protesters, angered by a proposed train system that disregarded human safety, gave up on taking their message to the empire and headed home. Johann had appeared in front of them to assure them the current plans would be revised. The protesters had given themselves over to emotion and were spurred to action, but in the end, they were little more than a powerless mob of townsfolk. Regardless of how hot their tempers flared, they'd have little luck getting past one of the top clans in the regalia. Faced with the crushing strength of Lorelai, all it took then was Johann's powers of persuasion for the protest to run out of steam.

Behind the scenes, I contacted the lords who had incited the protests to inform them of Johann's decision to revise the train system plans. I instructed them not to do anything rash, and to focus simply on negotiating better terms in the deal, which they all agreed to. None of them really wanted the plans to be built up again from zero anyway. There was no need for them to do anything risky so long as they were receiving a satisfying slice of the profits.

With that, the matter was effectively settled. The railway plans were currently stalled, so they'd need at least one month before they could start on any of the construction work. No matter how equipped Johann looked to handle the matter, his reputation in the proceedings had taken quite the hit.

I, on the other hand, had made an utter killing. Before any of the earlier

events took place, I used the clan's property and fortune as collateral to buy shares in businesses connected to Vulcan Industries, the central pillar of Johann's plans. It was a classic case of short selling. The prices of those shares exploded in value because they'd been bought up by the wealthy and influential who knew about the plans before they were announced. On the day of the announcements, they'd plummeted and then fallen even further due to the subsequent delay. This resulted in limit-down conditions for several days afterward.

Short selling is the act of borrowing high-priced stocks, then immediately selling them. Wait for the stock price to drop, re-purchase the same number of shares, and return those to your lender before their deadline. Profit comes from the difference in price between the high-price stock you sold and the lower-priced stock you returned to your lender.

Through my short-selling tactics, I'd made a total profit of 350 billion fil. It was a large enough sum to pay for the construction of four airships. Instead of keeping it all, I invested 90 percent of it into business development support for the railway planning division of Vulcan Industries. In return, I'd get a return of one percent each year, a sum that came to around 50 billion fil. It also put my name on the planning committee as a major contributor. When the railway was fully completed, there'd be a commemorative plaque at one of the stations with my name on it.

It had taken just a few days of scheming and plotting for me to earn the wealth and fame that Johann had spent years acquiring. It was just like the old Eastern saying: "One does not tire their own feet when they choose the right horse for the journey." Johann was a horse that took me to exactly what I wanted. Victory was now in sight. I was destined for the highest honor of a place on the regalia.

That said, achieving this victory without effort gave me about as much satisfaction as a side dish.

"Johann Eissfeldt...are you really going to let things end here?"

I had no interest in easy victories. I hoped with everything I had that Johann would give me something to enjoy, something worthy of his status on the

regalia. I sipped from my glass of whiskey, then noticed a spot of red on the table.

“Dammit...”

It was blood dripping from my nose. I still hadn’t fully healed since our battle with the lord. When I went to the doctor for a second analysis, I was told that I should have fully healed a long time ago, but because I was constantly putting stress on my brain, I was actually getting worse.

I put a handkerchief to my nose and another cigarette into my mouth. Thanks to the way they constricted my blood vessels, my bloody nose stopped. This was one of the reasons I’d taken to drinking alone here at Berry Planet: I didn’t want anybody to see me at my weakest. Especially not my teammates.

I felt sometimes that you simply had to give it your all. I was aiming for the top, just as I’d promised Grandpa, but because of that I’d done myself irreparable damage. I knew Grandpa would have hated to see it. So why was I sacrificing everything I had in an effort to be the best in the world? It was obvious—the fire that raged in my heart never showed any sign of fading. Not today, not tomorrow. It wouldn’t fade even at the instant of my death.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stollen.”

The voice came from the door. It was one of the hall staff.

“What is it?”

“I apologize for interrupting you, but another member has asked to borrow a little of your time. What would you like me to tell her, sir?”

“A little of my time? Who’s asking?”

“The clan master of the Goat Dinner, Miss Dolly Gardner.”

“What the...? Are you sure?”

“Quite, sir. Miss Gardner is a member of the establishment. She isn’t with company, sir. She’s alone.”

A smile grew on my lips. The Goat Dinner was a three-star regalia clan. I had never met Dolly Gardner myself, but I knew all about her. Rumors said she was quite the femme fatale.

Female Seekers were something of a rarity. It wasn't that they weren't capable, but rather that the profession seemed more compatible with men. Women with an indomitable thirst for battle and a mental fortitude that surpassed the fear of death were a rarity. Dolly wasn't merely a clan leader; she was young *and* she had earned a place among the regalia. It was only natural for rumors to swirl around her.

And yet, if she was here now asking to meet me, she had to have some kind of leverage at hand. I'd need to handle her carefully. I gave it some more thought before answering.

"Let her in."

"Understood, sir."

The door to my private room opened, and a young woman entered. She looked about as old as I was, with an incredibly beautiful face and hair of a rich, blood-red color. She wore a strapless, hooded dress made of black leather that exposed her pearly skin.

"It's an honor to finally meet you," she said, a thin smile on her red lips. Her voice seemed to caress my ears.

"The honor's all mine," I replied. "Please, take a seat."

I gestured to the seat next to me and Dolly sat down. A sweet scent wafted from her and teased my nostrils.

"I have been coming here for a while since earning my membership, but you must be the youngest current member, no? That's a most impressive feat."

"I like showing off. I came into so much money in such a short time, I wasn't sure what to do with it all."

Dolly placed a hand to her mouth as she giggled.

"You're refreshingly humble for someone who made 350 billion fil in just a few days. I expected you to be much more arrogant."

My eyes narrowed. Anyone with a half-decent information network would know that I'd earned a gigantic windfall from my short selling, but I had to be much more cautious around anyone who was able to get an exact number.

“Oh my, what a frightening expression!” said Dolly. “So there really *is* a snake behind that face.”

“Did you come here hoping that bragging about your information network would kill my mood, is that it? I’d be a bit more careful, if I were you. It’s worth remembering that my fangs could just as easily turn on your neck as they have Johann’s.”

“Quite the spirited one. But I like that. It makes it that much easier to have a conversation.”

Dolly shifted over so she was sitting closer to me. We were close enough to feel each other’s breath now. Her cold hand pressed over the top of my right one.

“Won’t you join me, snake?”

“What?”

“Lorelai, Johann Eissfeldt... They’re as much of a bother to me as they are to you. If we join forces, Johann and his clan are as good as buried.”

“Do you even understand what’s going on?” I asked. I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m already in a position to crush him all on my own. If I join forces with you now, what’s in it for me?”

“You may be right. Still...I think after you hear what I have to say, you may change your tune.” The atmosphere around Dolly grew serious, and her blue eyes burned deep into mine. “Johann is a Rodanian.”

“A Rodanian...? Are you saying he’s a spy?”

“No, not that. There’d be far less to explain if he were just a spy.”

I tilted my head. Dolly was really going about answering in a roundabout way.

“If he’s not a spy, then what?”

“Have you heard of Deep Snow?”

“They were a bandit gang that made a mess of Rodania some ten years ago...”

Deep Snow was a gang of bandits made up of extremely tough individuals who’d burned down a great many towns before they were finally stopped. The

army had them surrounded with several thousand troops, but they were strong enough not just to endure their forces but to fight back in turn.

I'd heard that in the end, an alliance was formed between clans as capable as those on the empire's regalia. They used their combined military might to battle until Deep Snow was brought to its knees. The story was so extraordinary and unbelievable, though, that in the empire, it was mainly used as a way to make fun of Rodania. *It must be mighty peaceful over there if they need their entire military to take down a group of bandits*, those kinds of jokes.

"You aren't seriously saying that Johann was a member of Deep Snow, are you?"

"He wasn't just a member; he was their leader."

I looked at Dolly and the grim expression on her face as she nodded, and I laughed.

"You're actually serious?!"

"I know it's hard to believe, but—"

Dolly began to explain, but I put a hand up to stop her.

"Oh, I believe you. And I can understand why *you'd* be afraid of the leader of Deep Snow."

"I don't like your tone. Isn't it better to be cautious when you risk making enemies of the powerful?"

"Hmph. Depends on the situation."

I shrugged, which caused Dolly's face to fall into a frown. I laughed again and lit another cigarette. The room began to fill with a thin veil of smoke.

"I know you've been telling the truth since you first came in," I said. "I can read even minute expressions, and I can see through lies the moment they're told. It's just...there's still one thing I don't get. From what you've told me, it looks like you believe what you've been told about Johann's past, and you see his power as absolute. You're stronger, though, aren't you? At least, that's how it looks to me. So tell me...what else is Johann hiding? He's got other secrets, doesn't he?"

A thin smile formed on Dolly's face. "I intend to tell you everything...if you'll join forces with me."

"I knew you'd say that. Doesn't hurt to ask, though."

I stood up and turned my back to Dolly.

"I appreciate your offer, but I'm not going to join you," I said.

"You don't get it, do you? Don't you want to know the truth about Johann? If you choose to fight him, there's no way you can win."

"I'll win. No matter who my opponent is," I said, my back still facing Dolly. "So you just shut up and watch me. Johann Eissfeldt is my prey."

Dolly said nothing, but I could feel the shock radiating from her. I opened the door to the private room and stepped outside. In terms of sheer efficiency, teaming up with Dolly was the right move. But what did I get for doing so? What could I prove? I loved winning. Plotting, deceiving people, setting traps—for the sake of victory I would do it all. But I wasn't fighting just to win. I fought to prove my strength. It didn't matter to me who Johann Eissfeldt was because there was only one truth I chased after.

"You better show me a good time."

I uttered it in a whisper. The flames in my heart grew stronger.

After Noel left, Dolly stayed in the private room. The hall staff had informed her that the night's tab was paid entirely by Noel. An audacious boy, through and through...but Dolly liked how eagerly his fighting spirit burned. It felt like looking at a younger version of herself. As she sipped at a sweet cocktail alone, a voice rang in her head.

"Ooh, someone got dumped."

The voice was mocking her. Dolly sighed. There was no way to tell if Noel had noticed, but the one it belonged to had been listening to their entire conversation.

"I told you, I hate kids."

“You looked like you had a pretty good time to me.”

“*You* probably need to see a therapist.”

Dolly shot back a venomous retort, but the voice gave only an odd peal of laughter by way of response.

“This is hardly a laughing matter.”

“Then pardon me. It’s a pity that we weren’t able to recruit the snake, but I’d still like your help with the assassination of Johann Eissfeldt. There’s quite the reward in it. You could even earn yourself an important position in Rodania, if you so desire.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ve no interest in a country run by a foolish political system like democracy. A society revolving around politicians spouting scripts to win the votes of the sheep, acting all arrogant as they line their own pockets? Abhorrent. I prefer the royalty; they’re stupid, but at least they’re adorable.”

Dolly could see the potential in democracy. It was the only system that could truly support diversity, developing culture, and civilization, not to mention an increasing population. It was, however, necessary to instill in the people—essentially the core of a democracy—a certain amount of common sense and good judgment. Being carried along on the stupidity of the general public would only result in a mobocracy. Unfortunately, politicians found it more convenient for the general public to remain stupid, which inevitably meant that truly exceptional candidates would never rise to the top.

Dolly felt that perhaps someday in the far future, when those within society could play their roles for the world without compromising their identities, she might be more accepting of democracy. That time was not yet here. She knew that at present, it was mobocracies everywhere you went.

“I failed to secure the cooperation of the snake, so as per our agreement, our relationship ends here. My apologies to you, Rodanian secret agent.”

The voice did not pipe up in response. It belonged to an agent dispatched by the Republic of Rodania, tasked with the assassination of Johann Eissfeldt. When the agent approached Dolly for aid in the matter, Dolly had but one condition: they must enlist the snake to assist their efforts.

Dolly knew the truth about Johann and the threat he posed, but she did not think it likely that she would lose if she fought with all she had. She also knew that, even in victory, the losses would be great. It would be far from a perfect conquest. This was why she wanted support. They had to be capable, of course, but also smart and invested in Johann's defeat. As far as Dolly knew, Noel was the only option. His refusal had taken her by surprise, but now that he'd turned her down, she knew it best not to get wrapped up with Johann.

"I must say, though," said Dolly, "the information you provided was extremely helpful. I can't aid you with the assassination, but while you remain in the empire, I am happy to act as your guarantor. It should be easier for you to move around if I do, no?"

"You have my gratitude."

The voice gave a short thanks and made no complaints.

"By the way, why not continue to watch from the shadows and simply let the snake do the rest? His chances of victory are admittedly extremely low, but he may just perform a miracle."

"There are mountains of miracles I wish I could put my faith in, but the organization won't permit it. I've been ordered to find other means to complete my duties in the case that I cannot secure your cooperation."

"Other means...?" Dolly asked, but there was no response.

The voice had cut the *Link* from its side. Dolly had stopped being able to sense it just a short while ago, meaning the user had likely already left the bar.

"So impatient... It's an awful way to live, leashed by the will of others."

Dolly's one core principle was to live free, unrestricted, and not bound to anyone. The power and fame she received as a Seeker were merely a means for her to live by this principle. For the right reasons she would join forces with anyone, and just as easily, she would fight them. She'd only humored the Rodanian secret agent in the first place because she thought she might be able to use them. In the end, she'd had to pull out, but she hadn't lost anything. As long as she judged that it was in her best interests, she was still prepared to partner with anyone.

“Well, anyone but *her*...”

What came to mind for Dolly then was not the snake, and not the Rodanian secret agent, but the mediator who had introduced the secret agent to her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Gardner. I am called Reisen.”

The one who called herself Reisen was, in fact, a hybrid beast. From her head of black hair sprouted a pair of fox ears. She apparently hailed from the far east, judging from how she wore one of their traditional dresses. This dress had a revealing design that emphasized her chest and her legs, so she was likely skilled in the art of using her body to get her way.

Case in point, the person who had asked Dolly to meet with Reisen was one of their clan investors, who also happened to have a weak spot for women. She imagined he’d been wrapped around her little finger the whole time. But because he was a sponsor, she couldn’t refuse, so she invited Reisen to the clan house to meet with the woman herself.

“And what can I do for you?” asked Dolly.

Reisen got straight to the point: she wanted Dolly to help a Rodanian agent to kill Johann Eissfeldt, the leader of Lorelai. She talked about Johann’s plans and also revealed the truth about him. Dolly laughed.

“You can’t be seriously asking me to plot an assassination. Are you crazy?”

“I’m deadly serious. I think you’re very well suited to the job.”

“You flatter me! As much as I appreciate the kind words, are you sure it’s not your own death that you’re really after?”

Dolly was a clan master. She’d received a place on the regalia from the emperor, and now she was being told to collaborate with an agent from a foreign country? There was no greater insult. Dolly was genuinely ready to murder this Reisen where she stood. But in response, Reisen simply accepted the violence in Dolly’s eyes. She didn’t show a single tremor of fear as a thin smile crept upon her face.

“Do you find my request insulting? Then I must apologize. Surely you

understand that leaving Johann to act freely will result in huge losses for you and your clan. At the recent symposium, he didn't even try to hide his ambition. He wants to bring all clans under this control. That must be far from an ideal outcome for you."

"I won't deny that. Still, it's not so awful I have to resort to something as foolish as collaborating with a spy. The whole point may be to get rid of Johann, but the risks far outweigh the rewards."

"So you're saying you're fine to leave things as they are?"

"I didn't say that."

Assuming that all of Reisen's information was correct, Johann was a deadly threat that needed to be buried as soon as possible. Dolly knew that cooperating with the spy was the better option. Even then, the risks were still high. There had to be a better way to handle the situation. Dolly stood from the sofa and turned her hand to a vase on the table. She spoke as she gently teased the flower inside it with the tips of her fingers.

"If you will leave certain things to my discretion, then I promise to support your agent's mission."

"In other words, if your conditions are met, you'll participate?"

"If my conditions are met, yes..."

"Understood. I will inform the others."

"By the way..." said Dolly, plucking the flower from the vase and turning to face Reisen directly. "Do you know the secret to maintaining beauty?"

"Hm? I must say I'm not particularly interested in the topic."

"That makes two of us. What I hate is the idea that I'm deteriorating. Getting old. The secret to maintaining beauty is eliminating stress. That's why I quickly kill the people I don't like. Just imagining them out there somewhere having fun makes me incredibly angry."

The flower in Dolly's hand shriveled into a husk in the next instant.

"I'm a Healer. That's my class. My skills give me a certain control over life. I can give it, and I can take it away. Ever since I became an A-Rank Archangel, my

skills work even upon the life of a lord. And yet..." Dolly said, the corners of her mouth twisting in a grin reminiscent of a monster baring its fangs, "you're still alive. Why is that?"

Dolly had unleashed her skill without any sound or any motion, yet Reisen simply took it without any apparent change whatsoever. She must be resisting it. The problem was that Dolly's skills were extremely difficult to resist, even for lords, even for...EX-Rank Seekers. Which begged the question: who exactly *was* this woman standing before her?

"You're a scary one," said Reisen. She stood up from the sofa without answering Dolly's question. "If we're done here, I'll take my leave."

Reisen lifted a mask to her face that was designed to look like a skull.

"How creepy."

"I like them, that's all," Reisen said. "People, that is."

With that, she smiled and left.



The moon shone bone-white over the dark brambles of the forest.

“That *goddamned* snake!”

Johann’s voice echoed as he leveled a punch at the big tree standing to his side. Johann and his clan were far from the empire, on an expedition to eliminate beasts that had appeared near this forest. The beast, Cernunnos, had an abyssal depth of 12. It was a lord, and a strong one, but Lorelai had thoroughly beaten it to a pulp.

Lorelai already had a number of powerful Seekers in its ranks, but now it boasted the additional support of demi-beasts. Victory was all too easy now, even if a lord was what stood in their way. Flawless victory over a lord or no, Johann was in no mood for celebrations. In fact, he looked as though that was the furthest thing from his mind.

The tree Johann punched fell from its roots, sending tremors through the earth when it toppled to the ground.

“He dares to stamp all over my face?! My *reputation*?!”

Johann kept up this stream of curses while he stamped on the ground. Far from what you would expect of a rational adult, he looked more like a child having a temper tantrum.

Watching from the side, Zero found himself chuckling on the inside. It literally was a temper tantrum, so it was no wonder he couldn’t control his emotions. Even when *he* was a member of Deep Snow, he’d always been like this.

“Jeez... Why bring him back here, of all places?” Zero mumbled.

Johann turned to face him.

“What’d you say?”

Zero shook his head. His smile remained gentle under the gaze of Johann’s bloodshot eyes.

“Nothing,” he replied.

The other members of Lorelai were all at the campsite not far from the

airship. It was fortunate they weren't here to witness Johann's outburst. That said, it was quite the bother to have to be with Johann every time he had an episode. Zero was getting sick of playing the kindly mother to her crying child. And perhaps that annoyance had crept into his face, because Johann's eyes narrowed as he stared back.

"You want me to calm down? I know you don't think very much of *me*. But however much you look up to and trust *him*, in the end, *you're* nothing more than a defect. A failure. Know your place, Zero."

"I won't forget."

Zero bowed obediently. Johann clicked his tongue in frustration.

"What's going on with our plan to kill the snake? He's plotting our downfall. If we don't do something, everything's bound to go exactly as he's planned."

"It's in the works. However, he's a much bigger threat than we had first expected. If we do anything openly, we're quite literally goading the snake into biting us."

The snake—Noel Stollen—had interrupted their railway plans and put the blame on Lorelai. He'd also had the audacity to make a killing in short selling stocks while doing so. To top it all off, he'd invested the greater half of those profits into Vulcan Industries, turning himself into one of the train system's major contributors. Meanwhile, Lorelai was now being driven by all the stakeholders to take responsibility for the losses in some way, meaning their standing among them was only getting worse.

To break out of the situation they were in, Lorelai needed to dig into its own pockets and spend its own money to essentially buy back its authority. They couldn't dip too far into their own funds, though, or they'd run the risk of Noel taking advantage of the situation again. Money was power, after all. Once you ran out of it, you made yourself prey.

"If we want to rid ourselves of the snake altogether, we first need to make sure he cannot escape."

"You act like we've got all the time in the world! He wants us to be stuck on the back foot, unable to make a move! We clearly have the upper hand when it

comes to battle—he knows that too! If he’s decided to strike at us despite being weaker, then he must have a way of gaining the upper hand so long as he has enough time! Waste time making sure he can’t escape?! That’s exactly what he wants us to do!”

Zero didn’t know how to reply to that. Johann was right. It was all too easy to imagine that the more time Noel had, the more advantageous his position would become. The best course of action would be to crush him under their vast power as soon as possible.

Noel had invested a huge sum of money into Vulcan Industries, and he was a major contributor to the project. He would even get his own monument. Given the situation, they couldn’t try to remove Noel from the picture without him using his political sway to crush Lorelai. Even if he elected not to take that route, it would probably be because he wanted to display his superiority by crushing Lorelai in battle or something similar.

If one considered all potential paths, there was no direction that Lorelai could move in without taking damage. Which meant that Johann and his clan needed to be prepared to take appropriate action, whatever that may be.

“Understood,” said Zero. “I’ll make a move the instant we return home.”

Johann nodded. As he did, a strange feeling suddenly struck the two men that sent them leaping backward...but they already knew that they’d given their opponent the first strike. Behind them was an invisible barrier that blocked any further retreat. It was strong too, and it would not be broken easily. The second that he realized they were closed in, Zero readied himself for battle by engaging a skill.

“Death Scythe!”

Dark skill: *Death Scythe* allowed the user to conjure a massive scythe out of their magical energy, able to cut through both their enemy and space itself. No meaningful defense could stop the Death Scythe. Death would be served in a single cut.

Zero concentrated a huge amount of magic into his right hand, but the scythe never formed. The magic exploded instead, taking Zero’s right hand with it.

“Gahh!”

Zero dropped to one knee. His breathing grew pained as he tried to put pressure on his wrist, which was bleeding profusely. Johann stared at him, shocked.

“We can’t control our magic inside this barrier?!”

Magic was a necessary part of engaging most skills. Though certain skill sets existed that didn’t rely on magical energy, Zero and Johann’s skill sets very much did. If using magic in this space meant injuring yourself, it was no different from locking their skills away entirely.

“How clever of you to figure it out,” came a voice, accompanied with a spurt of dry, patronizing applause. “Yes, within a Punisher’s *Trick Room* skill, only those I permit can use their skills.”

The voice belonged to a tall woman with white hair. She wore a tight leather suit that clung to her voluptuous figure, enhancing every line. She had a cool, icy beauty, and a frosty smile was fixed on her lips. The slight accent to her speech immediately revealed that she was Rodanian.

“I see. So you’re a Rodanian assassin.”

“Ooh, you *are* clever. My name is Rosary. I’m here for your life.”

Johann didn’t react. “They must be bored out of their minds over in Rodania if they’re still coming after me.”

“You’re a dangerous man, Johann Eissfeldt. For the sake of the country, you cannot be allowed to live.”

“For the sake of the country? That’s rich, coming out of the mouth of an assassin.”

Rosary’s brow furrowed at his retort.

“I don’t intend to engage you in discussion. My only task is to end your life here.”

Rosary ended her arrogant declaration with a click of her fingers. A figure in robes of pure black appeared at once, as though summoned by the sound. Whether it was man or woman was unknown; its face was unnaturally hidden

by the shadow of its hood, as though it had no face at all. Johann stared at the strange, unnerving figure, then realized what he was looking at.

“I’ve heard rumors about you. You’re the Lord of Flies, no?”

In response, the figure gave an overly theatrical bow.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am indeed the Lord of Flies. I am here to collect your head, Johann Eissfeldt, leader of Lorelai.”

The Lord of Flies. A Scavenger known to do anything for the right price.

“Yeah, I’d expect the Republic of Rodania to hire a Scavenger. Do you really expect to be rewarded for staking your own life for that country?”

Johann’s question ended in a derisive laugh, but Rosary didn’t respond with anything more than a wordless shake of the head.

“Like I said, I’m not here for a discussion. Do it.”

At Rosary’s order, countless huge insects began crawling up from the ground, some as big as a full-grown man, others three times that size. There were centipedes, mantises, spiders, and scorpions—all equipped with razor-sharp fangs, claws, and pincers.

Rosary had called herself a Punisher. It was an A-Rank Scout class, weak in terms of close-range combat, but equipped with a variety of talents specializing in attacking human opponents. This explained the Lord of Flies’ presence. Their strategy was clearly for the Lord of Flies to compensate for whatever the Punisher lacked.

The barriers that trapped Johann and Zero were vast as well as sturdy. Based on the reverberations of their voices, they ran around five hundred meters in all directions. What’s more, if their voices were echoing within this space, it meant that no sounds were escaping out of it. The likelihood of the other members of Lorelai noticing anything out of the ordinary was close to zero.

Having coolly and calmly analyzed the situation, Johann put a hand to the short sword at his belt. It was specially engineered to spring into a spear once he was holding it. Johann was an A-Rank Lancer, a Rune Lancer. He could likely hold his own with his strength and agility, even with his skills rendered

unavailable. He would kill the bugs first, and then Rosary, who had cast the barrier. Just as he was about to spring into action, however, the ground crumbled beneath him.

“What?!”

“Johann!” cried Zero.

Just as Johann was about to be swallowed up by the ground beneath him, Zero pushed him away—and was sliced entirely in half. His blood and guts sprayed across the ground. He’d been scored into two halves by a giant antlion as it surfaced from underground. Johann could do nothing but watch as Zero’s body sank into the sandy earth.

“It’s over. It’s all over. Your ambitions, your hate, your legend...”

There was a twinge of some emotion, possibly pity, in Rosary’s voice as she spoke.

“Heh. Heh heh.”

Johann couldn’t help but laugh at her.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

He clasped his stomach and cackled. His shoulders heaved with mirth as he stared at Rosary.

“Me? Over?” Johann said. “You don’t know a damn thing.”

“I know how powerful you are, Johann, but I also know about your present weakness. If you weren’t in such a state, you would have already used your true power.”

“Just as I thought,” replied Johann. “You really don’t know a damn thing.”

A wicked smile came to Johann’s lips. Rosary frowned as the earth began to shake. It was as if something were rising from deep within the earth itself.

“What the—?! What is this?!”

Rosary was frozen in shock.

“The ‘monster’ is heeere,” said Johann in a mocking lilt.

As Johann spoke, a huge black arm shot up from the ground, confirming the meaning behind his words. The scaly arm, bolstered with razor-sharp claws, quickly grabbed onto the antlion that had cut Zero in half. The antlion struggled to escape, but was crushed in the black hand's grip without any further fanfare. Its innards fell like rain upon the ground as the body that belonged to the black arm dragged itself up into view.

The shape was undeniable: it was a dragon.

"Rraaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

The ominous, jet-black dragon flapped its wings and gave a mighty roar to the moon. Seconds later, it had crushed the remaining insects into mush.

"Impossible!"

Rosary couldn't believe her own eyes. All she could do was stand watching in utter disbelief. Dragons only existed in mythology. Dragons, in reality, were just high-level beasts that earned the term as a nickname due to their physical resemblance. So then how was this dragon standing before her, when beasts couldn't appear outside of an Abyss? Rosary slowly began to realize exactly what—and who—the black dragon was.

"Zero Lindrake... You...you're one of the draghi people? They're supposed to be extinct..."

In answer to Rosary's question, the black dragon—Zero—curled the edges of its mouth into what looked like a grin. Johann answered on behalf of Zero, who was unable to speak.

"The draghi... A loathed race, born with the essence of dragon-beasts within them. They're humans who can transform into dragons, from stories so old that they date back to the age of mythology. Zero here is merely an imitation. I'm sure you understand what that means, as a Rodanian spy?"

"The Zero Numbers..." Rosary said, her face contorting with hate and fear.

"What now, then?" the Lord of Flies asked, tilting its head to the side curiously. "We're at a disadvantage against a Rune Lancer *and* one of the draghi, no matter if their skills are suppressed. We don't have many options outside of immediate retreat."

“Retreat...?”

If only that *were* an option. Only two paths remained: win and live, or lose and die. Winning would also seal Rosary’s fate at this juncture. If she needed to use her last resort in order to win here, she would have to be ready to sacrifice everything she had for the sake of her country.

Clouds drifted across the face of the moon while Rosary was lost in hesitation. As the world fell into shadow, a small light glowed near Johann’s mouth.

“You, Rodanian spy, have made two errors. The first...”

Rosary’s spine went cold the instant she heard Johann’s toneless voice. It was the same voice that he’d been speaking in, but the tone and inflection had transformed completely. The arrogant, neurotic quality from earlier was gone, replaced by something that felt inorganic and unknowable. He’d assumed a completely different aura, as though something inside of him had been replaced.

The clouds continued to drift. Moonlight illuminated the world once more. Johann lit a cigarette with a calm smile, and as the smoke wafted and waned around his face, he continued to speak in that same unnerving voice.

“The first is that you think I *can’t* use my real power. The truth is, I’m simply trying not to.”

“Lord of Flies!” Rosary shouted.

“The second error...”

“Use it! Now!”

Rosary’s order was filled with desperation. She’d run out of time to hesitate.

“As you command,” the Lord of Flies said, a smile in his voice.

The moment the Lord of Flies answered, countless tentacles flew from Rosary’s body. They coiled tight around her arms and legs, locking into a shape that resembled flexing muscles.

“Guh, urrgh... Ahhh!”

A beastly growl escaped from Rosary’s mouth as she transformed, eking out

in a huff of white breath. The whites of her eyes went black as the pupils glowed red. Her organization had ordered her to enlist the help of the Lord of Flies to ensure Johann's assassination. The Lord of Flies' powers lay not only in direct battle, but also in boosting allies with his tentacles. Rosary could not refuse them. So long as she was a slave to the organization, all of their orders were final. She couldn't disobey them, even if that meant losing herself to something monstrous.

"Joooohaaaaaaann!"

With the last dregs of her sanity, Rosary launched herself at Johann. Now that they were strengthened by the tentacles, Rosary's legs could carry her at several times the speed of sound. She reached him in an instant, her right hand transforming its shape to form a sharp blade. He was a dead man if she could just run this through his heart. Though her consciousness was beginning to waver and grow muddled, Rosary felt assured of her victory. Until...

"Stop."

With a single word, Rosary's body froze.

"Wh-why...?"

Johann walked over toward her as she tried to grasp her situation.

"You said that skills can't be used while we're within the walls of these barriers, but that's not true. There are skills that don't require magic consumption, you know. For example..." Johann trailed off, smirking, cigarette in hand. "Talker skill: *Stun Howl*."



“Assassinate Johann Eissfeldt?”

“Exactly, Rosary.”

The vice-minister of the Rodanian Information Defense Bureau rubbed his beard and nodded. Desk work had turned him into the very portrait of a chubby, middle-aged man, but he'd been a talented spy of his own in his younger years. It was he, in fact, who had trained Rosary to master all the skills necessary to be an agent. His eyes, buried beneath the folds of his face, stared carefully at the girl before him.

“It's an order from the executive office of the president,” he said. “We trust that as head of your section, you will select the right person for the job.”

“W-wait just a moment, sir,” said Rosary, confused by the unexpected order. “You're talking about *the* Johann Eissfeldt. There's no way we can kill him off on our own. Johann's in the Velnant Empire now as well, so our ability to move freely will be extremely restricted.”

“I understand your confusion. We've known that Johann is in Velnant for some years, thanks to operatives already in the area. We've been unable to do anything about him for the exact reason you stated.”

“Then, what's different now?”

“Johann is a very precious sample. All our research materials were destroyed, with him as the sole survivor. But if we got a hold of his corpse, we can bring the project back to life. At least, that's what someone in the executive office thinks.”

“I see...”

Did they have any idea how many people suffered because the project failed? It was part of human nature to forget an injury once the pain had subsided, but merely the idea of reviving that project struck Rosary as utterly insane.

“We aren't completely out of options. He's certainly the strongest of them, but the passage of time is on our side. We may be able to bring that monster down with the right strategy.”

The strategy that the vice-minister spoke of was sitting on his desk. Reading it only left Rosary more frustrated, though she kept her feelings hidden. That somebody thought such a half-cooked ruse would end in the assassination of *the* Johann Eissfeldt made her head spin. Had her superior really fallen so far in his old age?

“That will be all.”

“Vice-minister, may I take on the assassination myself? The chances of success will be much higher if I’m the one doing it.”

Her suggestion brought a look of doubt to the vice-minister’s face. “Why would that be necessary? I know that you’re a top-class field agent, but there’s no need for you to do this yourself. Leave it to one of your agents. Surely there must be others who are as talented and skillful as you are.”

“With all due respect, sir, they’re lacking experience in the field. I *am* the right person for this job.”

“So you’re proposing to lead a team onsite, then?”

“I won’t need a team. We have only two conditions of victory: assassinate Johann, and return his body to Rodania, correct? It will be easier for me to move if I work alone.”

The vice-minister considered Rosary’s declaration, then smiled.

“Very well, I trust your judgment. But you do understand the price of failure, yes? It’s the same, even if you’re the one taking the job.”

Rosary gave a strong nod in response to the vice-minister’s veiled threat. She had pledged loyalty to her country, but she still feared death. Even so, she considered the lives of the agents she had trained and raised as leagues more important than her own. She wouldn’t let them throw away their lives for a plan like this.

The effects of *Stun Howl* wore off in a few seconds, allowing Rosary freedom of movement once more. As soon as she felt the skill release its grip on her, she leaped out of range of Johann.

“Why didn’t you attack?”

She’d been stunned and unable to move, but Johann hadn’t moved a muscle to strike her. He merely shrugged at her apparent suspicion.

“That wouldn’t be fair now, would it?” he said.

“Fair?”

“You didn’t know that Zero and I could still access our real powers. I guess you didn’t do enough preparation...but I don’t tend to go around slaughtering people just because they don’t know any better. You understand what you’re up against now, though, don’t you? At last, our battle can begin.”

Johann grinned as if this were the most natural logic in the world, inviting Rosary to attack. There wasn’t a single part of him that thought he could lose. He loved to fight, and it was clear by his face that he felt it would be a waste for this particular battle to end too soon.

“In terms of raw strength we have the advantage,” he said, “but in here, we can’t use skills that use magic. On the other hand, you can use them as much as you want. There are a myriad of ways to turn the tables. So come on, show me what you’ve got! The longer you wait, the further victory will slip from your fingers.”

“Jo...hann...”

Johann knew that Rosary only had a scant few minutes left in her current state. She was losing her senses and becoming a monster. The Lord of Flies could not be trusted. With only the tiniest window of victory available to her in the fight against Johann, there was no more time to lose. But her body would not move. The stun effect had long worn off. The truth of the matter was, she couldn’t move because her spirit was broken.

“Well? Are you going to attack me?” Johann asked. “That new form of yours is proof that you’re staking your life on this, no? Your death is assured even if you decide to just stand there glaring at me.”

His voice was as flat and cold as ever. Rosary still couldn’t move. Johann let out a sigh before his eyes grew sharp.

“Don’t think I’ll go easy on you. All of my friends, *they* fought until the bitter end.”

The bloodlust in Johann’s eyes was enough to freeze hearts. Curiously, that same murderous aura strengthened Rosary’s resolve. She was ready to sacrifice everything. If she couldn’t win as she was, she would sacrifice her very being. She would become a monster.

“Lord of Flies! I give you my everything!”

“I was waiting for you to say that. *Evil Mutation!*”

The Lord of Flies engaged its skill. A torrent of black magical energy gushed out from the insects that Zero had destroyed and whipped itself into a wild whirlwind. In the center of it stood Rosary, transforming once more, until she became...

“A chimera,” Johann whispered, his eyes squinted.

Among skills that summoned creatures or made use of familiars, there were some last resort skills that allowed users to combine the familiars they had. The downside was that they required exorbitant amounts of magic and would fail in an instant if the core of the creation wasn’t sufficiently powerful. These were advanced skills that came at a very high cost, and they could only be handled by A-Rankers or higher. Now it was clear that the Lord of Flies was Rank A, and that the core of the chimera—Rosary—was Rank A as well. The caster now had the perfect materials to work with. The resulting chimera was a huge monster that surpassed even the might of Zero’s dragon.

“Kyshaaaaa!”

It had the silhouette of a mantis. Its front legs were a pair of sharp, scythe-like blades. The remaining six legs were strong and planted firmly on the ground to support the monster’s enormous weight. Unlike a traditional mantis, the monster was covered in a tough outer shell and had a long horn sprouting from its head. It was as though someone had equipped the oversized mantis with a suit of white armor.

“Raaaaaaaaaar!”

Zero advanced toward the chimera. The two monsters collided with a

deafening crash that caused a shock wave to ripple out from the point of impact. The chimera was unfazed after eating one of the dragon's attacks; it simply had too much mass to feel the effect. Zero was aware of this. The dragon's sharp claws dug into the crevices between the chimera's outer shell. Once it knew there was no chance of being shaken off, Zero opened a mouth full of crooked teeth to let loose a high-intensity ray of heat:.

The barriers blocked magic-based skills from being used in this space, but *Dragon's Breath* was not a skill—it was an ability innate to the dragon. Concentrated on a single point, the attack could evaporate even heavily fortified defenses in seconds.

"*Dragon's Breath* isn't working?" Johann muttered. His eyebrows creased as he tried to decipher what was happening.

Even though Zero's *Dragon Breath* was hitting the chimera at nearly point-blank range, its white outer shell wasn't melting. The attack didn't do so much as open a hole in the armor. The flames sparked off the Chimera's outer shell like vivid fireworks.

"Shaaaaaaa!"

"Raaaaaaaaar!"

A mass of tentacles burst from the Chimera's back, stabbing into Zero. As soon the pain forced Zero to release his grip, the Chimera set to slicing away with its scythes. Zero, along with his severed right arm, was thrown backward from the force of it all. Red blood flooded the ground, transforming it into swampy muck.

"Wonderful," said Johann, a twisted grin reflecting his joy. "Even in terms of basic combat, you're at least as powerful as a lord."

Zero raised himself back up behind where Johann stood, bellowing out a ferocious roar. He was fully intent on jumping back into battle. The dragon's healing abilities were incredible; the bleeding had already stopped, and once he got a hold of his severed arm, it would be reattached in no time.

It was then that Johann put a hand up to stop Zero in his tracks. He stepped forward.

“That’s enough, Zero,” said Johann, his voice cool. “I will take things from here.”

No sooner had Johann spoken than he was on the move again, quick as the wind. The chimera’s tentacles shot out in search of them, but he dodged them with ease. They couldn’t even catch his shadow.

The one controlling the chimera was the Lord of Flies. Killing the controller would typically put a stop to the chimera as well. However, Johann had already noticed that the Lord of Flies was hardly more than a decoy, meaning that killing it would have no effect. There was no way around it—the chimera would have to be taken down in order to score a victory. Considering the difference in ability, *Stun Howl* was no longer an option. Close-quarters combat was all that remained.

Johann closed in on the chimera and leaped through the air to close the distance. The monster’s scythes sliced out at the same precise second, aware that his mobility was limited while in the air. Just as he was about to be sliced into pieces, Johann gathered all his power and lobbed his spear. The attack didn’t require any skills—yet, unlike *Dragon’s Breath*, it shattered the chimera’s scythes and sent the monster reeling backward. The spear itself hadn’t fared much better, but Johann had managed to close the distance and arrived at the chimera’s head. He thrust his right hand into its eye.

“Aaaarrrrrggh!”

The chimera writhed in the sheer frantic agony of having its eye crushed. It sent tentacles at Johann once more, stabbing him repeatedly. Johann showed not a single sign of pain.

“Let’s see what happens when I use magic here,” he whispered.

A vast amount of magical energy surged into Johann’s right arm, but due to the effects of the *Trick Room* skill, that magical energy would combust instead of engaging a skill. This particular explosion wouldn’t just blow up Johann’s right arm, but the head of the chimera too.

She was having such a wonderful dream.

“Mommy! You’re home!”

As soon as Rosary opened the door, her daughter rushed over to give her a big hug. The little girl was still very clingy. This was how she welcomed her mother every time she came home.

“Yeah, here I am. I hope you were good while I was gone.”

“Yep! I was making dinner with Daddy!”

“Oh, you made dinner? That’s great.”

Rosary patted her daughter’s head and savored the bright smile on her face.

“Little princesses who are super helpful around the home always deserve a reward, don’t you think?”

“You got me a present?!”

Rosary passed the paper bag to her daughter. As soon as the girl saw the logo printed on the side of the bag, her face turned as bright and cheery as a sunflower.

“It’s cake! Are there strawberries on it?!”

“You bet. I know they’re your favorite. How about we all have some after dinner?”

“Yes! Woo-hoo!”

Rosary chuckled as her daughter ran away, paper bag clasped tightly to her chest.

“Not even Mommy can resist strawberry cake,” she said to herself.

“Ah, welcome home. You’re early today.”

As soon as her daughter disappeared, Rosary’s husband made his entrance. He wore an apron and a calming smile. He walked over to her to help her take off her coat.

“Thanks,” Rosary said. “Yeah, I managed to finish up a bit earlier than usual.”

“Great! The beef stew is just about done, so we can start dinner early...before you-know-who starts picking at the cake you bought.”

“Good idea,” Rosary said with a giggle.

Rosary’s husband was a novelist. Because Rosary was always away for work, he did all the work around the house. They’d met when Rosary was in her late teens. Her hat had been taken on the wind and landed in the river, and he’d gotten himself drenched just to get it back for her. He was gentle and kind, and because of him, she felt like the house was always in good hands. She, on the other hand, had to keep her own career a secret even from her beloved family. As far as her husband knew, Rosary was a merchant.

“I’ve got a business deal in the works, so I’ll be away for a while.”

“How long is ‘a while,’ exactly?”

“About a month.”

“Okay. Don’t worry about anything here. I’ll take care of it.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“Don’t forget to bring back a nice souvenir for the little one, though.”

“I’ll make sure to get something she’ll love. I won’t forget your present either, of course.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” her husband said with a smile before turning back to the kitchen. Rosary couldn’t bear to let him leave, and she hugged her husband from behind. She breathed in his comforting scent and felt his gentle warmth permeate her own body.

“Something happen at work?” her husband asked.

“No, it’s...nothing like that...”

She couldn’t tell him the truth. She couldn’t put her family in danger like that.

“But please,” she added, “stay like this... Just for a little?”

She felt her husband’s hand gently drape across her arms. He knew better than to ask her for more. Rosary sometimes wondered if, over the years since they were married, he’d begun to suspect her job was not what she said it was. He was an easygoing person, but he was also intelligent. Nevertheless, he always respected her and kept his doubts and uncertainties hidden in his own

heart.

Her husband and daughter could move on even if Rosary disappeared. She'd left a lot of money. Their lives could go on without worry. But Rosary's desperate wish was to survive and come back home to them. She wanted to grow old with the husband she loved, to watch her daughter grow into a woman. Sadly, Rosary knew better than anyone that her wishes were never going to come true.

Now separated from the chimera, Rosary woke. In the corner of her still hazy vision, she made out the face of Johann, smoking. The arm he had lost in the explosion just moments earlier was putting itself back together. His ability to regenerate was frighteningly quick; he was back to normal in mere seconds. Berserker skill: *Regeneration* healed all wounds so long as the user still had magic.

"Any last words?"

Johann asked the question gently as he looked down at Rosary. She'd lost. It was a complete and utter defeat. She had known it from the start, but she was completely outclassed. She could have come here with an entire team, but it wouldn't have made a difference; the results would've been exactly the same.

"Could I...have a cigarette?"

Rosary gave up on cigarettes the day her daughter was born, but she didn't see any harm in dipping back into her bad habit for her last moments.

"As you wish," said Johann, giving Rosary his lit cigarette.

"This is...awful. Is this what they smoke in Velnant?"

"Unfortunately, this is all they've got."

Johann shrugged apologetically. Rosary let a wry chuckle escape her lips.

"Whatever. I'll take what I can get at this stage."

Under the white light of the moon, the cigarette smoke wafted through the night air.

“It was a good life...” Rosary whispered.

Then, with a parting smile, she turned to ashes. They mingled with the cigarette smoke and rose upon the wind before ultimately fading into nothing. In her final moments, Rosary hoped with all her heart that the wind would carry what was left of her back to Rodania.

“Well, then,” said Johann. He turned around and let his gaze fall upon the Lord of Flies. “What are *you* going to do?”

“My work is over once the one who hired me dies,” the Lord of Flies said, rising suddenly into the air. “I should have expected nothing less from a ‘Messiah.’ Doesn’t matter how many dogs the Rodanians send after you. They’ll never win.”

“She gave her life for this battle. Don’t you dare insult her.” Johann was filled with a quiet rage as he glared at the Lord of Flies. “You didn’t even have the guts to stay on the battlefield. You have no right to look down on her or anyone else.”

The Lord of Flies laughed.

“Simpleminded fool! Do you expect that mindset to get you far against the snake too?” The Lord of Flies continued to cackle as it rose further into the air. “I’ll enjoy watching the two of you devour each other!”

Having said those words, the Lord of Flies attempted to vanish and escape, but it soon realized something was amiss.

“Wh-what?!”

It was wrapped in layers of chains. There’d been no trace of them a moment ago, but now they had fully materialized to leave the Lord of Flies stuck helplessly in space.

“Who said you could leave?”

Johann lit another cigarette as a cruel smile crossed his lips.

“Punisher skill: *Slave Chains*. Those chains are clamped around your very soul. And if you chain what was summoned, you chain what summoned it too.”

“That’s impossible! I would have sensed them!”

The Lord struggled in protest, but Johann raised a finger and shook it while he clicked his tongue.

“If it were only *Slave Chains*, then I’m sure you would have sensed them. But I used the *Royal Road* skill at the same time. It’s a skill accessible by A-Rank Gunners with the Black Shot class, and it allows you to hit with any attack, regardless of distance. In other words, you were chained the moment I used the skill.”

“You used the skills simultaneously?!”

The Lord of Flies’ shock only spurred Johann’s smile to widen.

“Isn’t using multiple skills the most basic of lessons? Or perhaps you thought it was impossible to use the skills of *different classes* simultaneously? You made a terrible mistake, in that case.”

Johann stared at the Lord of Flies as he raised his right hand. A black spear formed in his palm, created with magical energy and radiating an ominous air.

“Dark skill: *Fatal Strike*. Those pierced by it die, without exception. Even when it pierces a replicant or a familiar, that magical energy traces all the way back to the caster, who will share the same fate. Do you know what that means, Lord of Flies?”

“Damn you...”

Still wrapped in chains, the Lord of Flies’ voice rasped with a mixture of rage and impatience.

“How does it feel to know that your former sanctuary is now your execution venue? You don’t have to answer that; to be honest I don’t really care,” said Johann, chuckling as he began to ready his right hand. “So long, Lord.”

The magic spear spelled death, the moment it hit its target. But then, the instant before it ran the Lord of Flies through, it cried out with every fiber of its strength.

“Don’t underestimate meeeeeee!”

The spear suddenly passed through a cloud, and countless meteorites began to fall. These meteorites were all insects that the King had prepared to attack

from the sea of clouds above. If they hit, the entire area would be destroyed. Not just Johann and Zero, but the entire Lorelai clan would go up in smoke. Johann quickly put another skill to work.

“X Invincible!”

This was a one-time Paladin skill that reflected all attacks over a wide area. Thanks to Johann’s barrier, every meteorite rebounded back into the sky.

“Phew... That was close,” Johann said, wiping a cold sweat from his brow. “Kept that ace in the hole hidden right until the very end...”

“But the Lord of Flies escaped,” muttered Zero, irritated.

Zero’s injuries had all healed, and he was now back in his human form. The Lord of Flies had successfully avoided Johann’s *Fatal Strike* by blowing itself away. There was no trace of it now.

“Fatal Strike didn’t hit, but the Lord was still wrapped in *Slave Chains*. The damage from that goes all the way back to the caster. If they don’t die of shock, they’ll be essentially comatose for quite some time,” said Johann, and then he laughed. “When the chains locked in tight, though, I saw who the Lord really was.”

“You did?”

“Very clearly, yes. Unfortunately, that Lord won’t be easy to kill.”

“So we’re talking about somebody in a position of power, or someone related?”

“Exactly.”

Johann nodded. It was then that they heard their names being called. The rest of Lorelai had rushed over to investigate, urged over by the Lord of Flies’ desperate last attack.

“I’ll need to rest for some time,” said Johann, “so I’ll leave the rest to you and *him*.”

“Understood,” Zero said, a grimace on his face.

“Something wrong?”

“Him... I hate *him*.”

Johann laughed.

“You two never did get along, did you?”

“We never understood each other, not even at the bitter end. Can’t you leave it to one of the others, instead?”

“He’s the best man for the job. I’m sure you can see that for yourself.”

Johann threw away his cigarette and gave Zero a pat on the shoulder.

“Good night, Zero,” he said.

“Sleep well, Johann.”

Johann then collapsed, like a puppet that suddenly had its strings cut, falling into Zero’s arms.

“As if we didn’t have enough on our plate already with the snake... Now we have to deal with Rodania and the Lord of Flies? It sure takes hard work to make your dreams come true.”

Still, that hard work was what made it fun. It made Zero feel truly alive, and judging by Johann’s sleeping face, he felt the same way.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

The searing pain brought consciousness rushing back. The effects of Johann’s *Slave Chain* had wrapped up the replicant and the inflicted damage traveled all the way back to the caster. But death was not on the cards. *Fatal Strike* should have been the killing blow, but by destroying its—or rather, *her*—own replicant, the Lord of Flies had managed to successfully sever the connection.

The damage was great. When she sat up in bed to survey her body once more, she found it covered in fracture-like bruises. It was proof that the damage had gone as far as the soul itself, leaving the body brittle and fragile.

She placed a hand on her chest, gritting through the constant pain. The insects living within her were wriggling and hard at work, healing her body’s injuries at the cellular level. After a time, the pain eventually subsided.

“I...survived...”

Relief flowed from her body in a great sigh. The wounds were far too deep to ever heal completely, but at least she’d recovered physically enough for the bruises to have vanished. The insects couldn’t heal the damage to her soul; only time could do that.

“Nothing left but to hope and pray for the best...”

There was much that was still unknown about the soul when compared to the body. Although it was true that some took damage and eventually recovered, there were just as many records of those who died, unable to heal from their wounds.

“That’s what you get for going off on your own.”

While she stewed in these gloomy feelings, an unimpressed voice suddenly cut through the air.

“Malebolge...”

The pale light of the moon shone in through the open window of the otherwise dark room. It illuminated the silhouette of a hybrid beast in an eastern-style dress.

“Why are you here?”

“Why? That’s my line. Why did you go off and fight Johann like that?” Malebolge sat on the bed and tilted her head. “I told you, all we need to do is watch them kill each other. We don’t need to take direct action until the end. Getting involved now will only make things that much harder.”

“You say that, but Johann is the real deal. If any chance to kill him appeared, I thought we should take it. If you or your friends were there...”

“Then we might have won, yes. But we might have lost too. Me and my friends, we’re not supposed to be in this world. Even if we defeated Johann, we would lose the power to remain here. Then we’d be left with nothing.”

Malebolge was right. And as she let her eyes drop, she felt arms wrap around her in a tight hug. Her face sank into Malebolge’s chest, where she was surrounded by a bewitching scent.

“You poor thing,” she said. “Were you scared? You’re not like us. You must be so frightened. So scared, you’ll never get anything done with the little time you have left.”

“I...”

“You don’t have to say a thing. I know. I know everything.”

Sitting there in Malebolge’s embrace, feeling her hands on her back, her ability to think drifted off and vanished. She’d been wrapped up in the fear of losing that which was most important, but now even those feelings had drifted into the void. It was such a wonderful thing to not think about anything at all.

“That’s a good girl. Just forget all the things that hurt, and all the things that scare you. Just rest, and relax, and sleep, Bernadetta.”

The voice seemed to caress her very soul. Bernadetta gave a gentle nod, remaining tightly clung to Malebolge’s chest. Bathing in the light of the moon, the white-haired girl fell at last into a deep sleep.

Chapter 3:

The Path of Those Who Would Conquer

ON THIS PARTICULAR DAY, I visited a mostly empty far-eastern restaurant in the backstreets of the downtown area. When a young server came to greet me at the entrance, I gave him a particular password phrase.

“I’m here to pick up the extra-spicy fried chicken I ordered.”

“Very good, sir.”

“You fried it in peanut oil, yes?”

“But of course, sir. Right this way.”

The server led me toward the back of the restaurant, through the kitchen and down the stairs located in a room in the basement. We arrived at a spacious laboratory filled with synthetic kilns and extraction machines, not to mention various materials for alchemical experiments. The walls were covered in monster corpses submerged in formalin, but there was a selection of untreated beast bodies lined up as well.

“Ai-ya! Noel! I am so happy for your arrival here!”

The old gnome who greeted me had a long beard and wore clothes in the style of those from the east. He spoke with a unique accent. This old alchemist, Lee-Gaku, was born in the east, and he had even practiced alchemy there before he came to live in the Velnant Empire. I’d heard that he spent his time here in the basement constantly working on his own unique form of alchemy, one that combined the methods he’d acquired both back home and here in Velnant.

Albert, the former boss of the Gambino family, had targeted Lee-Gaku and forced him to make a special line of amphetamines. Although they had dangerous side effects, they were the purest amphetamines on the market. I wanted to use him for my own means.

“Can you make the stuff I asked for?”

“After much careful analysis, I realized I can make it with no trouble. The *materials* you brought, Noel, are the very best. It is easy for me to make what you asked for, with quality so high.”

Lee-Gaku gave a wink and one of his staff brought over a black cold-storage box.

“There is none better at working with beast materials than I. I am the best of the best. I have worked with many beast materials. Of course, I have handled even lord materials. But this, Noel! This here is a highest-quality material. I tremble with excitement,” said Lee-Gaku, but then he paused as a wicked smile crept across his face. “But...the side effects are very, very harsh. Do you still want it?”

“How harsh are we talking?”

Lee-Gaku gave me a detailed explanation. At the end, I simply nodded. The side effects were bad, but they were no worse than I had expected.

“The side effects don’t bother me,” I said. “Get to work immediately.”

Lee-Gaku cackled.

“I had a feeling that you would say that! Now Albert, he was crazy, but you are on a different level! You must be completely insane! Like me!”

Lee-Gaku’s high-pitched laughter filled the room as he opened the refrigerated box. Cold, white mist wafted from inside it. When the mist cleared, I peered at its contents.

“Exquisite... There is no higher exhilaration than having the freedom to cut into such material as this. Even my shriveled nether regions grow very big and hard.”

This freaking mad scientist... Disgust flooded my veins as I watched his completely enraptured expression. If it meant he’d put in his best work, though, then I had no complaints. I didn’t like guys like him, but I’d let him live as long as he was useful.

I looked at the cool box from behind Lee-Gaku. Inside it lay a bone-white head that had once belonged to a most beautiful young man. His hair gave off a light,

luminescent glow.

When I finished with Lee-Gaku, I left the restaurant and a small bird landed on my shoulder; one of Hugo's puppet soldiers. I opened a *Link* with Hugo.

"Noel, are you okay?" he asked.

"Never better. How are things going on your end?"

"I have eyes on every member of Lorelai, but I still haven't found anyone who might have locked up the information broker you mentioned. In other words, if he is imprisoned anywhere, it's in their clan house."

"I see."

"That said, I cannot get any puppet soldiers in there. If we get too close, they're guaranteed to notice."

"Yeah, I know. You did good, Hugo. We know all we need to know, so you can stop following them around."

The information broker was Loki. I'd sent him a coded message with instructions, but quite some time had passed with no reply. I thought it likely that Lorelai had found him out and captured him. Either that or they'd killed him. It was clear either way that he'd failed his mission. Rescuing him was unwise, and even Loki himself wouldn't have wanted that. Losing someone so talented hurt, but we couldn't do anything too risky to help him while we were locked in a struggle against Lorelai.

"Just to clarify, you do not intend to save that information broker, do you?"

"I don't."

There was an edge of uncertainty in Hugo's voice, but my answer was firm.

"I think you have the right idea," I said. "Loki is somewhere in the Lorelai clan house. Busting in on that place with our current forces would be nothing more than suicide."

"I admit, I was beginning to worry you might try to make your way in there alone. That's a relief."

“Just who do you think I am?”

“I trust you implicitly, but you obviously don’t care that you are shaving years off your own life. I have to keep an eye on you if you intend to live that dangerously.”

“I don’t know if you can call that trust,” I said, and Hugo laughed. “I’m beat. I need to take a break.”

I cut the *Link*. The bird on my shoulder turned to dust and disappeared on the breeze.

We’d lost Loki, but preparations to bring down Lorelai were coming together. We’d be ready to take them on as soon as Lee-Gaku finished the stuff I had asked for. The only problem that remained was our limited intel on Johann. I’d gathered from Dolly that Johann had secrets I still didn’t know about, but the person I’d trusted to get me that information was gone. And if Loki couldn’t get it, no other information broker could.

I considered this for a moment. Should I team up with Dolly? No, I knew better. Dolly was of a much higher position than I, and if we teamed up now it would only end with her using us for her own means. For Wild Tempest to truly prove its worth on the regalia, we needed to prove we could take down Lorelai on our own. Taking them down together with Goat’s Dinner would only weaken our position.

My scheming and behind-the-scenes work had landed us in an advantageous position, but Lorelai still had our number in terms of actual clan strength. This was exactly why we had to do it alone. If Wild Tempest defeated Lorelai, the momentum wouldn’t just get us on the regalia; it would push us toward the top. There was no room for compromise. Wild Tempest would find a way to devour Lorelai. It didn’t matter what kind of a monster Johann was; we still had a chance. Johann may have had secrets I didn’t know about, but in the same vein, I’d soon have a very particular *power* they didn’t know about.

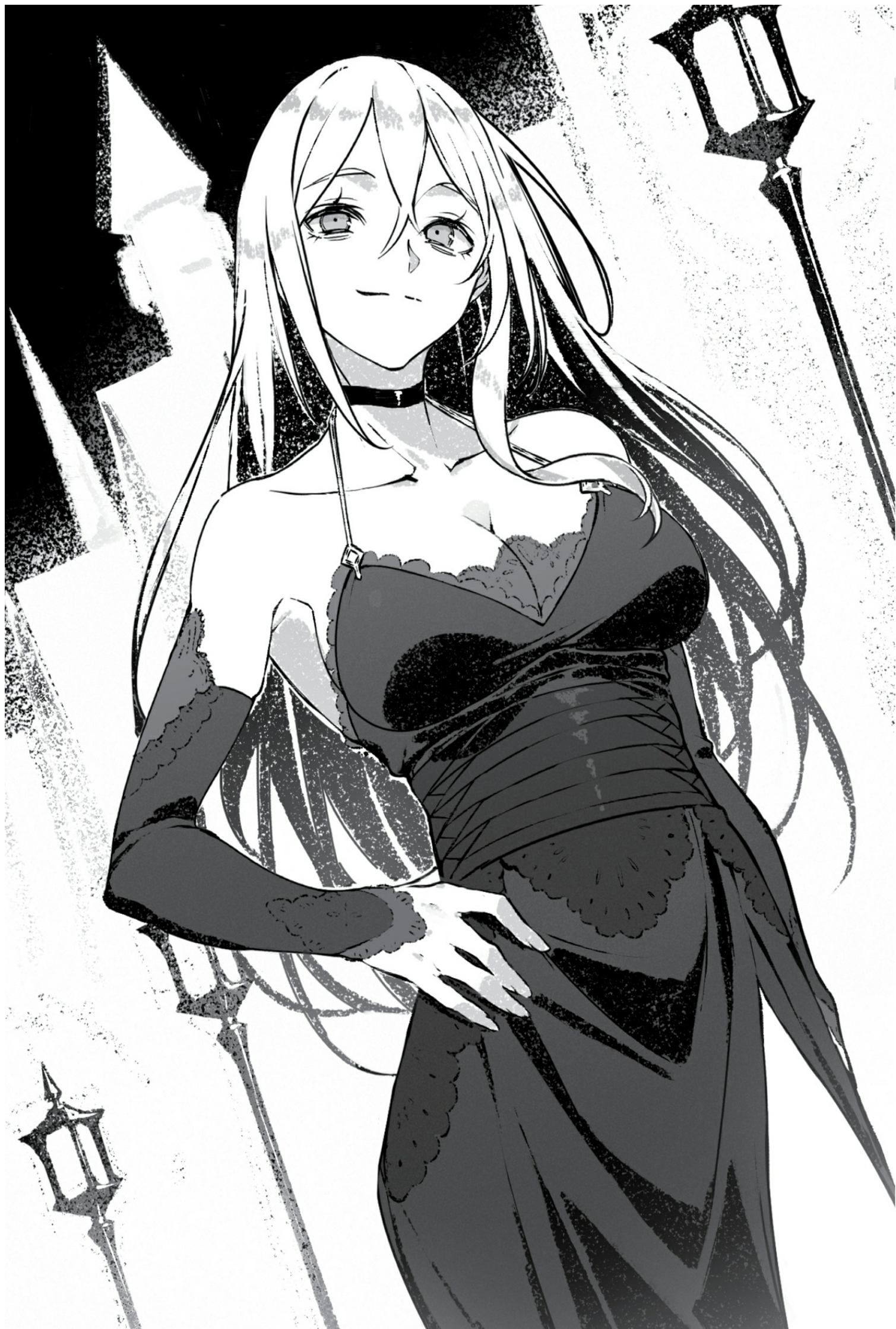
I wouldn’t lose. I’d find some way to win, no matter what I had to sacrifice.

“Noel...?”

The sound of my name caught me by surprise. I heard it as I walked through

the downtown area, thinking about our next steps. When I turned, I found a girl with beautiful blonde hair looking at me. The black dress she wore was quite revealing, with ample space at the top to display her cleavage and a long slit running up its side so that her legs were also on show. The design provided a lavish display of her body.

“Long time no see,” she said. There was both a touch of hesitance in her voice and an ice-cold beauty in her smile.



I couldn't help but return it.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Tanya?"

The girl standing before me was none other than my former teammate.

"Ahhhh! That's the stuff! Nothing like a little liquor at lunchtime!"

Alma placed the now-empty mug of ale on the table. Her grin spanned the full width of her face.

"Can't say I disagree. That little bit of guilt makes it all the tastier," added Lycia, a mug of ale in her own hand.

"Okay, so I know it feels great now, but no passing out drunk like last time, okay?"

The third member at the table, also drinking, was the witch dressed in red: Veronica. Her smile was mildly troubled by her friends' antics even as she brought her own mug to her lips.

The three girls were at The Stuffed Cat. It was a popular lunch spot, so it was packed with people. Amid the smacking lips of diners enjoying their food and drink over friendly conversation, the three Seekers were having their own little drinking party.

Alma and Lycia were already friends, but Veronica was a recent addition to the mix. Lycia's clan, Lightning Bite, had recently merged with King of Dukes and Veronica's clan, Red Lotus, to form a new clan called Mirage Triad. It was this merger that connected Lycia and Veronica.

Veronica was strong-willed, reliable, and smart, as expected of the leader of her own party. She also took good care of those in her circle. She was a godsend for Alma and Lycia, who were both rather careless and free-spirited.

"Can I ask for your honest opinion on something?" Veronica asked Alma in the midst of their chatter. "How big is the gap between the Mirage Triad and Wild Tempest?"

"Do you want the honest truth?"

“Of course.”

“From here to the moon. You could spend your whole life, and you’d never make up the difference.”

Veronica buried her face in her hands, struck by Alma’s answer.

“That was...entirely...too much honesty...” Veronica muttered. Her voice trembled as tears welled in her eyes.

Alma chuckled. “Sorry, I guess it was. But don’t get the wrong idea. In terms of basic combat abilities, our clans aren’t so far apart. I’d say the gap is...from here to about the clouds, maybe.”

“You’re not even *trying* to make me feel better, are you?”

“But you could rise above the clouds, I think. If you all really, really worked for it.”

Alma wasn’t trying to act superior or arrogant. She was stating facts.

“What separates us from you,” she continued, “is Noel. As long as he’s around, you’ll never beat us. I know you’re well connected, so you probably heard already, but Noel made 350 billion fil on the stock market. Who else does that?”

When it came to sheer strength, tough Seekers were a dime a dozen. To beat out the competition, you needed something more—like cunning, shrewd dealing, or political sway. In this regard, Veronica showed promise; she was a quick thinker and knew the importance of gathering intel. Wolf was the master of the Mirage Triad, but it was Veronica, the vice-master, who truly carried the clan. But even she couldn’t hold a candle to Noel.

“Even when you know the truth, it’s still so depressing to hear it said so bluntly...” Veronica said. Her eyes drooped as she ran a finger sadly along the rim of her mug. “I really was pretty set on getting ahead of you guys someday...”

Veronica gazed off somewhere far into the distance as a sympathetic Lucia rubbed her shoulder.

“Now, now,” Lucia soothed, “Let’s stop it with all this serious talk. We should

be thinking about our own plans before we get all carried away competing with Noel.”

“Maybe it’s okay for you to be all casual about it because you’re head over heels for the guy, but for me he’s a rival I’m hell bent on beating someday.”

“E-excuse me?! Wh-wh-who’s head over heels?! How about not making assumptions about people for a change?!” Lycia’s face went bright red as she vehemently denied Veronica’s accusation, but her true feelings were clear as day. Didn’t matter how you looked at it—Lycia really *was* head over heels for Noel. Even Alma was getting sick and tired of Noel being pretty much all that Lycia talked about.

“You’re an elf in heat,” she said. “Go back to the forest.”

“Don’t spring an attack on me! Especially when *you’re* the one who’s all hot and bothered, Alma! You can hardly keep your hands off him!”

“I’m his big sister. It’s only natural that we get along.”

“Big sister?! You’re the only one who sees your relationship that way!”

“Say whatever you feel like if it makes you feel better. I don’t mind.”

“Wait, what?! Why are you acting like *I’m* the weird one?!”

Veronica, caught in the middle of the argument, heaved a great sigh.

“Will you two stop it?” she asked, rubbing her temples as if she were massaging a headache. “I feel like I’m getting dumber just listening.”

Veronica was at the limits of her patience, and as her gaze drifted out the window, something caught her eye.

“Oh? Speak of the devil. Isn’t that Noel over there walking down the street?”

“What?!” Alma and Lycia cried in unison. “Where?”

The two girls leaned over the table in an effort to get a better view. Meanwhile, Veronica shrank backward and pointed to where she’d seen him.

“Look,” she said. “He’s right there!”

“Oh, yeah, it really is him,” Alma said with a bright smile, which in the next instant darkened into a sharp glare. “Wait. Who’s the girl?”

“No way. That’s Tanya,” said Lycia.

“Oh, wow. You’re right. It *is* Tanya.”

Veronica and Lycia looked like they were seeing a ghost. Alma turned to them in confusion.

“Tanya? As in Noel’s old teammate?”

“Yeah. I heard that she betrayed him and ended up as a slave as a result... What are they doing together?”

“Judging by her clothes, it looks like she ended up a slave to someone rich. If she’s just waltzing around town freely like this, she’s probably less of a slave and more like a mistress. They probably bumped into each other by coincidence. Velnant is a big place, sure, but it isn’t crazy to think this could happen.”

“I see, I see...” chimed Alma and Lycia in unison.

Veronica’s deduction had satisfied the two of them. Alma nodded and stood up from her chair.

“I’m heading out,” she said. “We don’t know what that girl’s going to do to Noel, so I’ll kill her quickly before she does anything.”

“Wait a second! You can’t just kill someone on the street! Think of the trouble you’ll get into!” said Lycia, halting Alma in her tracks. “You have to do it where people won’t see you.”

“So you aren’t even trying to stop her...” muttered Veronica, exasperated.

“You know just as well as I do the sort of person Tanya is,” said Lycia.

“Well, yes, but...is murder really the answer?”

“You know it is, so don’t try to stop us. Alma, let’s go!”

“Okay!”

The two girls left for the street, a murderous aura following them out. Veronica stared at their silhouettes, so amazed by their behavior that a part of her was impressed.

“Love really *does* make complete fools out of people...” she muttered with a

chuckle, before realizing something. “Wait. / have to pick up the tab?!”

Tanya Clark was the daughter of an ordinary merchant family, one that was neither particularly rich nor poor. As a young girl she lived a completely ordinary life in a peaceful countryside village, surrounded by her three sisters and her parents.

Tanya was different from other girls in one way: she adored Seekers. Lots of boys her age wanted to be Seekers. In both the city and the countryside, it wasn't uncommon to see them playing in the streets outside, living imaginary adventures of their own. It was mostly treated as a fad, so most boys gave up on these dreams when they grew up. Girls who wanted to be Seekers were comparatively rare. They existed, sure, but boys seemed better-suited to the work. Tanya was not dissuaded even then. Like many of the boys her age, she was enamored with one particular Seeker.

The Seeker in question had been active in times long past and lived on largely in legend. The Healer known as the Heavenly Maiden traveled together with a hero called the Messiah, and together they accomplished many a great feat. According to legend, the two were married, and they founded the Holy Kingdom of Rodania—now the Republic of Rodania.

This was a tale as old as time, one that had passed into legend embellished and exaggerated with each retelling, but Tanya loved it. She read the story so many times, she could recite most of it from memory... Though even as a child, she found the idea of a messianic hero who could use every class quite laughable.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that much of Tanya's personality was shaped by this story. When she found out from the appraiser that her own class was identical to that of the Seeker she looked up to—Healer—she was over the moon. She began playing at Seeker adventures with the boys and dreamed of one day becoming a real Seeker herself. While other girls her age were playing house, toying with dolls, or getting interested in romance and fashion, Tanya had been ensorcelled by her dreams of becoming a Seeker.

Naturally, Tanya's family did not approve of her dreams. They made it so clear

that sometimes she thought her ears would fall off. The other girls also looked down on her, thinking her suspicious for only ever playing with boys. But what hurt Tanya the most was that many of the boys with similar dreams to her own began to look at her with heated eyes. This was likely due to the fact that Tanya was much more beautiful than the average village girl, and her body developed quickly; it was all too much for boys who were beginning to become aware of their desires.

As boys started looking at her more often, some also went as far as trying to touch her inappropriately. On more than a few occasions, she was almost attacked. Though she was able to defend herself, the result of these experiences left Tanya unable to trust people. From that point on, Tanya trained all by herself. On the day she turned fifteen, she left home and headed for the Velnant Empire.

Life in Velnant wasn't easy. The Seeker Training Academy was completely free, but that didn't include daily living expenses, which Tanya had to cover herself. She had no choice but to devote all of her time outside of the academy to working part-time jobs.

But even through the hardships, Tanya felt fulfilled. She couldn't make any friends, and she didn't have time for anything but study and work, but walking the path to become the Seeker she dreamed of more than made up for it. And best of all, entering the training academy had opened Tanya up to her own true potential. Many of her classmates were jealous of her growth, but she was strong enough now that she no longer needed to care about them. She didn't actually have enough time to waste on such things.

As graduation drew near, Tanya found herself standing at a crossroads. Before her were two choices: join an existing group, or form a new one herself. As a talented and capable Healer, Tanya could easily get into one of the bigger clans. However, the most exceptional of Seekers struck out on their own, forming unique teams and clans.

To join a clan was to adopt their colors. But aiming for the top meant trusting your own abilities, so Tanya knew what choice she had to make. The problem now was who to form her new group with. Tanya didn't trust her classmates. There were other ways to find allies, but she was frozen by past trauma; she

simply did not trust anyone but herself.

It was at this point in her life, as she puzzled over what to do next, that Tanya met *him*—an arrogant, eccentric, and unique boy named Noel Stollen. He was also looking for teammates with whom he could reach the very peak of the Seeker world. What surprised Tanya was that he had already successfully recruited Lloyd, who was the star student when it came to frontline tactics. Seeing a future in Noel's group, Tanya approached him in hopes of joining it.

After Tanya was accepted into the group, Noel then recruited the problematic but undeniably capable Walter. He joined them after undergoing something of a rough grace period. The group thus formed, they dubbed themselves Blue Beyond.

Even as rookies, the exceptionally talented Blue Beyond successfully took on and accomplished a vast number of contracts. Because they were constantly aiming higher and higher, they were seen as a voracious group of up-and-comers.

For Tanya, every day was fun. She could feel her dream taking shape. More than anything else, it felt as if light was beginning to shine on the darkness locked up at the bottom of her heart. All of it was thanks to Noel.

Noel was not one for flattery or compassion. Instead, he was prepared to give up his own life in order to reach the very top of the Seeker world. He had a bad attitude, but he was genuine and even pure at heart. Every day, without fail, he put himself through intense training and continued to study whatever he could about Seekers. He was rational and practical to his core, which was comforting to someone like Tanya, who struggled to trust others. She even thought of his approach as beautiful sometimes.

Tanya had always been alone, and Noel was the first teammate she met whom she felt she could trust from the bottom of her heart. He would never betray her expectations. That strong bond reminded her of what it meant to trust in others.

Tanya began to dote on Noel. He was younger than her, and so he felt to her like a little brother. She prepared his meals, took care of things for him, and even made him clothes. The ever-stoic Noel didn't care for her bothersome

behavior very much, but to Tanya, his reaction was cute, like a cat that still wasn't used to affection. She found herself hoping that these days might go on forever, but of course, that hope was dashed.

Oh, I... I love Noel.

Her realization came very suddenly, like an epiphany. It hurt as she reflected on the day, preparing to go to sleep for the night. She awoke to her own true feelings. From trust to fondness, and from fondness to love, it was a natural progression. He was the first teammate she'd ever trusted, and because she felt so strongly about their similar goals, the love that awakened in her had blossomed in an instant.

If Tanya were the type of girl to think that falling in love was the definition of happiness, she probably would have been over the moon. The love she felt for Noel was stronger than any experience she had ever known, eclipsing everything lesser. So it was especially unfortunate that Tanya's feelings for Noel brought back her the trauma of the past. It brought back the fear of suddenly being preyed on by the same boys she had talked to about dreams of becoming a Seeker. All of the trauma seemed to awaken just as vividly as her newfound feelings, lurking in the back of her mind.

For Tanya, the very worst of it was that now she was in a position not unlike the boys that had caused her own trauma. Her feelings were a clear betrayal of Noel's trust. She knew she should give up, and she knew that if she told him her feelings, he would turn them down. It was because of this very attitude that Tanya had grown to trust him.

But the more she knew it was futile, the more her feelings grew, and the more deeply she cherished his presence. Lost under the control of her own twisted feelings, Tanya fell into a deep self-hatred, often to the extent of vomiting. She could run away from the boys who had once tormented her, but it was impossible to run away from herself.

Tanya stopped doting on Noel as her emotional turmoil worsened. But even then, her feelings only grew, and her repressed emotions turned on the other girls who were interested in Noel. She got rid of them from the shadows. Most of them simply listened when she threatened them, but some rebelled, and

Tanya made short work of them. Even healers came with offensive abilities, and few could stand up to a talented healer like Tanya. All it took was a little pain for them to run off crying, realizing their lives were far more important.

Meanwhile, the ignorant men called her a saint because of her unceasing smile and her gentle manner. They were so very, very wrong. She was more like a demon...and nobody knew that better than Tanya herself.

“Tanya, can I have a moment?”

One day, Lloyd confessed his love to Tanya. She’d sensed it beforehand, and she’d felt similar feelings from Walter. With everything she had been through, the confession did not make her happy. She couldn’t believe the leader of the party would do such a thing, especially considering how Walter had held off from confessing so as not to disturb the harmony of the party. Rage and indignation bubbled up from within her.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “You’re the party leader. You should be putting the party first.”

Lloyd chuckled. “Can you really talk about duty and responsibility when you’ve been bashing others in the shadows?” he replied.

Tanya felt the blood drain from her face.

“I know your secret, Tanya. But what would Noel think if he knew? I think you’d be out of the party, for starters.”

“Is that a threat?”

It wasn’t simple rage that boiled within her; it was an urge to kill. Tanya did not care who the source was; she did not intend to yield to any form of intimidation. She had fallen so far in her own estimation that she no longer feared anything.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” said Lloyd, shaking his head. “I’m not threatening you.”

Lloyd let out a sigh before going on.

“You do what you do because you love him, don’t you? Noel, I mean. But you have to know he’ll never return your feelings.”

“Then why are you telling me what I already know?”

“Why do you keep doing it? The person you hurt the most is yourself.”

Tanya couldn't answer. She stood there, gazing at the floor. Her teeth sank into her own lip.

“You're tired,” Lloyd said. “You'll never make good decisions when you're so exhausted. Me... I'm tired too. The more we succeed, the heavier all the pressure feels.”

In response to Lloyd's complaint, Tanya let a faint smile grow upon her lips. She laughed at him.

“If you can't take the heat, leave the kitchen to Noel, perhaps?”

There was a cold menace in her voice. Lloyd's face twisted. It was clear she'd hit a soft spot. His pained expression was nothing like the cool and sophisticated man he usually was.

“He's something special, I'll give him that. But the moment I admit to him being my better is the moment I commit to living in his shadow. I can't allow it.”

“Pride is so cheap...”

“A woman could never understand my feelings.”

Tanya thought his excuse was selfish and weak. Lloyd only ever thought of himself. Still, Tanya felt a small bud of sympathy bloom within her right then.

“You want someone to support you, don't you?” Tanya asked.

“As do you, no? It'll be better for the party as a whole if we both have the support we require. The thing we need most right now is to stand tall and to walk on. If we get too caught up in our own feelings, we're doing a disservice to Noel.”

Lloyd was exactly right. At this rate, all their hard work would come to nothing.

“Let me be clear up front,” said Tanya, “I don't like you all that much.”

“You have to admit, though—I'm better than Walter.”

“You're so mean,” Tanya giggled as Lloyd took her hand.

“I’ve always loved you, Tanya. Ever since I first saw you at the academy. So I don’t care if you pretend at first. Won’t you love me back, Tanya?”

Lloyd was being completely honest. Tanya felt lost and unsure how to respond for the longest time, but eventually she replied with a short nod. Life, she realized, was at times a game of compromise.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll try to love you.”

That was how Lloyd and Tanya became a couple. Although Noel and Walter initially frowned upon the idea, it was still a small price to pay to ensure the party remained together. Sadly, things did not end up the way they hoped.

Even when Tanya and Lloyd became a couple, she refused to give him her body. Romance was meant to bloom over the evening, but Tanya shirked away from even a mere kiss. Intimacy brought Tanya’s trauma rushing back, filling her with hatred for Lloyd. And when Noel’s face fluttered through her mind, she simply could not get in the mood.

From the outside, they were a match made in heaven—both attractive, enviable figures. But appearances aside, they merely tolerated one another. In this way, they were like a crotchety old couple. All that remained in Tanya’s heart for Lloyd was a mixture of sympathy and guilt.

It wasn’t long before Lloyd got hooked on gambling. Tanya tried to stop him, but the guilt in her heart kept her from saying anything too strong. Instead, she went with him to the gambling dens, hoping to stop him before things got out of hand. But her efforts were a complete and utter failure. She’d tried to pull Lloyd back from the temptation of gambling, only to become hooked on it herself. As a result, they gambled away the entirety of the party’s wealth and ended up on the run, chased down by their former teammates.

Lloyd was convinced they’d be able to get away, but Tanya knew it was useless. Noel was merciless. He would not take betrayal lightly. And just as she expected, Lloyd and Tanya were captured before they could even put up any kind of a fight. Noel didn’t just judge them for the crimes they committed; he sold them off as slaves, to boot. Tanya had expected *some* kind of punishment, but in the face of potential slavery, she struggled fiercely. She pleaded for a chance at redemption, but Noel would hear none of it.

“Oh, you silly, silly idiots!” laughed Finocchio as they rode in their carriage. “The two of you already knew who you were dealing with. All you had to do was be good teammates. Backstabbing him, though? That’s crazy! There’s a lesson here about playing with snakes, I’m sure of it.”

Tanya did not reply. Lloyd sobbed next to her. Tanya wished she could do the same, but she’d been so hard on Walter that she’d lost even the energy to do that. She’d been emotional, but there was no denying she’d been horrible to him. Walter had done nothing wrong. It was Tanya who was entirely at fault.

After Tanya became a slave, it did not take long for a buyer to appear. He was a wealthy old man who took great care of her, as though she were his own granddaughter.

“You know, when I was a young man, I wanted to be a Seeker too,” he said inside the luxurious house he bought for her. “Unfortunately, that dream never came true. I ended up with too many responsibilities when I became the head of the family. But I don’t regret it. Still, as time begins to run short, I sometimes like to wonder what kind of life I would have lived if I’d ended up a Seeker.”

The man looked at her with a warm smile that filled his face with wrinkles.

“So I’d like you to tell me all about your adventures, if you please,” he said.

“But I was a Seeker for little more than a year at best. I fear I’ll run out of things to tell you before I even get started.”

“Well, I think I only have a few years left on the old clock, anyway. Besides, my memory and my focus aren’t what they used to be. I think about a year’s worth of stories is just right for me. And to have such a beautiful storyteller like you all to myself, well, nothing would make me happier.”

“Very well. If you’re sure, then, my master...”

In any case, Tanya had no right to refuse. So it was that every now and again, that wealthy old man would visit Tanya’s house looking to hear stories of her time as a Seeker.

The old man was kind to the bottom of his heart. Seeing him enraptured before her with his eyes bright as he listened intently to her stories, Tanya felt a sense of pride. He never once tried to do anything physical with her or use her

body; at the very worst, he sometimes used her thighs as a pillow while she cleaned his ears. Their relationship really was not unlike that of a grandfather and granddaughter.

One day, out of the blue, the old man died of a heart attack. He'd had heart troubles since some years back, and in many ways the death was unavoidable. Tanya was thus freed of her slave contract, and she was left with the house the old man had bought for her and an enormous inheritance. His family did not say very much about it; it seemed the sum Tanya received was only a tiny sliver of the old man's total wealth.

Free of all that once bound her, Tanya was unsure of what to do. She could do whatever she wanted. But what *did* she want? She drank expensive wine, bought expensive jewelry, and dressed in gaudy clothes, but none of it fulfilled her. Just as she was about to fall into complete and utter self-destruction, however, something pulled her back from the edge. It was a newspaper article that detailed the adventures of the clan master of Wild Tempest. It was about Noel.

Noel had achieved huge success in only a short time. He was now a clan master already within reach of a place on the regalia. He walked a path of domination with all new teammates, as if Lloyd, Walter, and herself had never even existed. Tanya was happy, but at the same time, it was unforgivable.

I'm the one who should be by Noel's side, she thought. Tanya was aware that it was she herself who threw it all away. But even knowing that, the fact that she had been so completely erased from his life left her unable to stop the tears. *I brought this on myself, and it was my fault in the end*. Such thoughts could have led Tanya to salvation, were she able to put the events in perspective and move on. But Tanya could not let it go. Inside of Tanya's heart was a whirlwind of dark feelings—hatred, sadness, anger, and the curse that even now would not release her from its grip: love.

Tanya desperately wanted to see Noel again. She knew she could do nothing if she did, that attacking him was entirely futile. But she didn't care. If he killed her, his hands would be sullied by her blood, and he would forever carry the burden of having murdered one of his former teammates. Even an exceptional Seeker like Noel couldn't erase the past. And even if it was only the smallest of

ways, the tiniest of scratches, Tanya could still leave her mark upon him. If she could do nothing else, and if she were worth practically nothing in his eyes, then that tiny scratch would be enough. It was what Tanya longed for.

Her wish was granted without her having to arrange for anything.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Tanya?”

He stood right before her, the man who, even now, she could not stop pining for.

“This is such a surprise. How about a cup of tea?”

Noel looked at his watch. “Sure. How about the café over there?”

He motioned with his eyes to a nearby café, a stylish spot with an open terrace. There weren’t many customers, so there were lots of free tables.

“Works for me,” said Tanya.

The two walked over to the café and took their seats at a table on the terrace. The server came over for their orders immediately, and both asked for tea and tea only. Neither expected to be there long.

“It’s good to see you looking so well,” Tanya said with a smile.

“Congratulations on founding a clan too. You’re clearly keeping busy.”

“Keeping busy?” Noel burst into laughter. “I’m hardly just keeping busy—we’re almost on the regalia. And we’re heading for the top once we get there. Busy, really? I don’t need your half-baked social niceties. They mean nothing to me.”

Noel’s offensive attitude sent the blood rushing to Tanya’s head. Just as it was boiling into utter rage, Noel put a hand up to stop her from speaking. A cold smile drew across his face.

“If you intend to explode into another rage, our conversation is over. I’m going home.”

Tanya was the one who had invited Noel for tea in the first place. She couldn’t stop him from leaving whenever he wanted. At that moment, the server

brought over their cups of tea. There was nothing left but to swallow her anger.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you?” Tanya said.

“I’m as kind as I’ve ever been. I’m just particular about who I’m kind to.”

Noel spoke the line with blunt honesty as he lit up a cigarette.

“You’ve started smoking...”

“Unlike you, I’m a busy person. These come in handy.”

Something about the first part of Noel’s statement clawed at Tanya.

“You know what happened to me after I became a slave, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I heard it all from Finocchio,” Noel said. He blew a puff of smoke into the air and went on. “You really ended up with quite the catch, huh? That just shows how high quality the two of you were as slaves. I knew you were living the good life as soon as you started living it. And you have to admit, that luxurious life is a whole lot better than being arrested for embezzlement or living life as a fugitive.”

“So what? You’re telling me to be grateful?”

“Yes. Exactly that. Tanya, let’s be clear—you *should* be grateful to me,” Noel told her without even a hint of shame. “Because of me, you’ve gotten yourself a good life.”

“I can’t *believe* you...”

Tanya was shaking with rage as Noel chuckled.

“The truth is the truth, however you spin it. You betrayed me, and I made you pay for it. But now we’re both living better lives. So what’s the problem? It’s all in the past. I don’t feel anything for you anymore. Not rage, not hate, nothing.”

“It’s...in the past?”

Tanya could not hide her shock. She knew that Noel had forgotten about her and embarked on a different path. She knew, and yet still she hadn’t expected him to say it right in front of her, so coldly. She hadn’t wanted an apology; she’d wanted him to hate her for her betrayal. She wanted him to show her the feelings that he had for her and her alone. Then she might have been satisfied.

But Noel didn't have any feelings for her. His chilling gaze appraised her like it might a rock on the side of the road.

"You don't want to hear about Lloyd or Walter?" Noel asked, breaking the silence. "Just like with you, I know who bought Lloyd, and I know what kind of life Walter's living back at home. The reason I didn't turn down your invitation for tea was because of our past friendship and because I thought you might want to know what the others are doing."

"I don't care what they're doing," Tanya spat as she stared straight at Noel. "But I want you to tell me something."

"Hm? And what's that?"

"If... If nothing had happened between us, would Blue Beyond be where you and your clan are now?"

Noel's answer came quickly and without hesitation. "Of course. I chose each of you. There would have been a few differences, but we would have achieved the same level of success."

"So why didn't you forgive us, then?!" Tanya screamed, kicking a chair as she stood to her feet. "I know that what we did was inexcusable! I know we ran from you! But why not forgive us instead of chasing us down and making us slaves?! You didn't even need to forgive us! All I wanted was a chance to redeem myself! And if you wouldn't allow even that, I could have been *your* slave! I'm not like Lloyd! You could have had me swear a written Oath of Subordination, and I would have done it if it was for you!"

Tanya didn't flinch for a moment from the eyes of the strangers around her, and her voice continued to wail with sorrow.

"Yes! A written oath! You said you couldn't trust me, but you could trust me if you had a written oath, couldn't you? I would do anything for you, Noel! Even give you my life. So please. Please. Just give me one more chance to be your teammate again. You know I have the ability. And with a talented Healer, surely you—"

Noel cut Tanya's impassioned pleas off with a short, sharp, single word reply.

"No."

“But...why?”

“What I want is to stand at the very top of all Seekers. The teammates I need to get there are wolves. They have to be. I don’t need little doggies begging to be tied up in chains,” said Noel, his eyes narrowing. “So I don’t need you.”

Tanya staggered backward as though Noel’s words were physical blades piercing through her.

“That stupid elf acquaintance of yours told me once that it wasn’t Lloyd you really loved—it was me. Looks like she was telling the truth.” Noel laughed at the stupidity of it. “Someone like you, hoping for someone like me? Not a chance.”

In the next instant, Tanya had flicked up the hem of her dress and pulled a hidden knife from a sheath around her thigh. She held it ready to stab Noel right through the chest, but...

“Why aren’t you striking back?” she asked.

Even though Tanya had readied herself to kill Noel, he hadn’t moved a muscle in response. He simply watched her, expressionless.

“With your skills, you could easily counter me! So why didn’t you?! Answer me!”

Noel remained silent in the face of her demands. Tears welled in Tanya’s eyes. The knife slipped from her hand, clattering to the floor. The watching bystanders breathed a collective sigh of relief. They saw it as an outburst of passion and infatuation, and it was just that.

“Why are you being so quiet? Say something...please...” Tanya begged.

Noel took another puff of his cigarette.

“Forget about me,” he said. “You have your own life to live.”

“But I can’t forget you! It’s because of you that—”

The words caught in Tanya’s throat. She pushed herself against him into a kiss, where she breathed into Noel with a passionate sigh. But even then, Noel remained calm and collected, shoving her away without any further comment. The near-transparent string of saliva that connected their lips stretched apart,

then broke.

“Give it up,” said Noel, crushing his cigarette butt in the table’s ashtray, then rising from his chair. “Be well.”

Noel put money on the table to cover both of their drinks, then turned and left. He did not look back even once. Tanya watched his back as he walked away, clenching her fist so tightly that it drew blood.

“If you won’t be mine, that’s fine!” she screamed. “But don’t forget! I’m never going to forgive you! I’ll never forget you! And I will kill any woman who gets close to you! Every last one of them! I’m dead serious! Because that’s what I’m capable of! And if you don’t like it...if you don’t like it...!”

Tanya sank into her chair and sprawled across the table, unable to stand it any longer.

“If you don’t like it, then never stop being a person I can look up to and adore. Never show anybody your weaknesses. Be the very best there ever was, bar none...”

Tanya’s whispered curse was racked with sobbing, and for a single moment, Noel stopped.

“Nobody will ever control me,” he said. “I am my own king.”

His statement hanging in the air, Noel walked on. Tanya did not watch him go; she knew he wasn’t coming back.

“It’s love... I love you to death...”

He’d caused in her the kind of love that made a person crazy. But she knew full well that snakes had no interest in humans.

“Ooh...”

Alma and Lycia had just witnessed the unbelievable from their vantage point in the shadows. Their pale faces twitched in response.

“We never should have come here. We never should have seen that...” Lycia muttered, stunned.

“I agree...” said Alma.

It was true that they were worried about Noel. It was only natural for Tanya to feel a grudge against him for making her a slave, even if the fault lay with her. They knew Noel could handle himself and wouldn't go down easily, but they couldn't tell if Tanya had something else hidden up her sleeve. They told themselves they'd come to help if he were taken by surprise.

But their main reason for coming was to find out what sort of conversation would pass between Noel and Tanya. They basically wanted to poke their noses into Noel and Tanya's business. What kind of stance would he take? Here was a person who had loved him and fallen into slavery. What words and emotions would she throw at him? Alma and Lycia wanted to watch it all to appease their curiosity. After seeing the conversation unfold, all that remained in them was a feeling of guilt that was difficult to put into words.

They wished they hadn't watched or listened so flippantly. They felt a deep, aching regret within their hearts. If they could have gone back in time to stop themselves, they would have.

“I knew that Tanya loved Noel, but I didn't know she was so serious! I thought she was just possessive like that...”

Even now, the sound of Tanya's sobbing rang in Lycia's ears. She had cursed him like she was spitting blood, but the words were filled with fierce feelings of love. The idea of loving someone to such a deep extent left her shivering.

“I don't like Tanya,” she said. “She said some horrible things to me in the past. But I feel sorry for her. To think her love will forever go unrequited...”

Give it up. Tanya had clung to him, but Noel had mercilessly cut her off.

“I know Noel has his own things to worry about, but can men really get to the point where they'll be that cold to girls in love with them?”

Her question held no anger as she spoke; Lycia honestly couldn't understand it. Tanya wasn't some mere stranger to Noel. She'd betrayed him, but for a year, they'd been teammates who shared highs and lows as they fought side by side. It shocked her to see him deny Tanya even the tiniest shred of sympathy after all they'd been through.

“Not men,” said Alma with a chuckle and a shrug. “*Noel*. No ordinary man would throw away a bombshell like her.”

“You think?”

“I do. Noel is different. He’s wrapped up in his own curse... In that sense, he’s not so different from Tanya.”

Noel’s curse was in his desire to reach the top, a curse that left him cutting away and discarding anything that didn’t help him reach his goal. It was not a healthy lifestyle from any angle.

“The difference between Noel’s curse and Tanya’s is that Noel’s curse makes him stronger.”

“But neither of them ends up happy at the end of the road...”

“Can’t argue with you there.”

Everyone had their own idea of happiness, but however you thought about it, sacrificing everything for a single goal was no way to live.

Alma’s own father—who had died by her hand—had also lost his way due to being so obsessed with a singular goal. Noel had a stronger heart than her father had, but danger still lurked within. Recently, Alma worried that she wasn’t pulling her weight. She wasn’t as powerful in battle as Leon or Hugo, and in the battle against the Noble Blood, it had been Koga who struck the killing blow. She didn’t think of herself as less than any of them, but the results spoke for themselves.

Alma felt worried, agitated, and impatient, but these feelings would not bring results or successes any sooner. To best support Noel—who *was* prone to rash decisions—Alma felt it was important to have a certain amount of patience and calm. She saw evidence to support this idea in Noel and Tanya’s conversation. There was no way for Alma to support Noel if she became like Tanya. Noel wanted Alma for her own unique strengths.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” said Alma. She puffed out her chest with a smile. “Noel has me.”

Lycia laughed. “That’s right. And he has me too.”

“But he doesn’t really need you.”

“What?!”

Alma sighed. “For starters, you’re in a different clan, so don’t try to cozy up to him like you’re buddies. It’s creepy.”

“You don’t have to be so nasty! I know we’re in different clans!”

“And even if you were one of us, you’d be gone in no time.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!”

“A scampering elf in heat, all over Noel? Someone like that would be first on Tanya’s list. She’d murder you.”

“N-n-no, she wouldn’t!”

Lycia denied it vehemently, but she’d already been warned by Tanya once. *Don’t you go near him again.* The memory of the words brought the fear rushing back, and she found herself suddenly drenched in a cold sweat.

“A-and even if she d-did try to attack me, I-I wouldn’t lose!”

Lycia had accumulated enough experience in battle to earn herself an increase in rank. She was a B-Rank Archer: a Hawk Eye. Tanya had been away from the game long enough that Lycia could now handle her with ease.

“Tanya’s rich now. All she has to do is hire a professional hitman and you’re done. Too bad for you...”

“B-but what’s stopping her from hiring a hitman to kill you?!”

“I’ll be fine.”

Lycia tilted her head, confused. “Why?”

“Because I’m Noel’s big sister,” Alma declared.

“What kind of logic is that?!”

Lycia couldn’t hide her shock, but Alma simply clicked her tongue and wiggled her finger.

“The big-sister position is peerless. You don’t have any romantic rivals because you’re not a lover, meaning you don’t get added to any hit lists by

Tanya-types. You have the freedom to touch him all over, as much as you want. In other words, it's a big sister's time to hit the jackpot, and I fully intend to cash in."

"I still...don't understand the logic..."

Lycia gripped her head in her hands, the whole thing confounding her. As long as you weren't after a romantic relationship with Noel, you were probably safe. So even though the big-sister role was, perhaps, the more cowardly option, it was much safer than making yourself a potential target.

Noel didn't flatter anyone, nor did he yield to anyone either. That was why Lycia liked him. Still, the idea that she fell for guys who were difficult made her chuckle.

"By the way," said Lycia, "I don't suppose there are any open positions for another big sister, are there?"

"Nope. It's me and only me."

"Ah."

She'd been shut down almost as soon as she asked the question. Lycia then made a vow to herself, in silence: *If Tanya ever comes after me, you can bet I'm gonna get you wrapped up in the madness, Alma...*

The following day, an article in the newspaper had the whole of Velnant talking.

WILD TEMPEST'S LEADER NOEL STOLLEN'S HOT ROMANCE UNCOVERED?! SPOTTED WITH FORMER TEAMMATE TANYA CLARK!

The news about the ever-popular clan master had spread through the empire before anyone could blink, and people were talking about it morning and night. Not only that, but the article also made use of a new projection technology called "photography." Readers could see for themselves that Noel and Tanya had kissed.

One would have expected the report to end with news of their romance, but there was more to the article than that.

Noel's former teammate Tanya, his passionate lover, was forced into slavery by none other than Noel himself! Our investigation uncovered that her wealthy master died of a heart attack! Tanya's inheritance was a literal fortune! An uncanny relationship... This recent incident... What is the dark truth these two are hiding?!

The newspaper article didn't just make it public knowledge that Noel had been the source of Tanya's enslavement; it also alleged that he'd plotted to kill her master in order to get to his money. Because the newspaper publisher was small, few took much notice of the article outside of its romantic allure. There just weren't that many fools who believed such bombastic news at face value. However, it did provide people who disliked Wild Tempest with ammo to criticize the clan once again. This criticism wouldn't go unheard; Wild Tempest's brand was sure to suffer for it.

Though one might think fast spreading rumors like this would send the image of the clan plummeting, it wasn't the case. After the first article was published, new reports about Noel and Wild Tempest stopped. The other newspapers, and even those caught up in writing articles of their own, went silent. As a result, the fuss about the article settled in about a week. The rumors also lasted little more than a few days. Without new information to add fuel to the fire, they simply dissipated. It was not long before the article about Noel was washed away by a stream of other news. All the people who were criticizing the clan essentially vanished as well.

There was one man who was very vocal about all of this.

"All the empire's journalists are a bunch of cowards!"

Down a little-known street, in a little-known bar, a lone man sat drunk. He had a beard and his clothes were all wrinkled, but he was still young and in his late twenties. His name was Joseph, and he held a whiskey glass in hand as he spewed forth his rage to anyone who might listen. He was the author of the exposé that kicked off the rumors in the first place.

Joseph was a freelance journalist who had worked in another city before moving to Velnant. His forceful interviewing style had earned him his fair share of enemies, to the point that he was forced out of town, but his unyielding

search for the truth had earned him lots of fans.

He didn't regret having to leave his old home base. He'd always intended to end up in the imperial capital anyway. It was the heart of Velnant, a place where the incidents kept flowing, meaning that the articles did as well. He was excited to test his mettle in an all-new environment.

As soon as Joseph arrived at the capital, he set his sights on Noel and Wild Tempest. The clan was on a meteoric rise, having become a clan in only a mere six months. The clan master was just sixteen years old—a brat, basically. The clan was filled with exceptional talent, but Joseph smelled something fishy. His journalistic instincts told him that Noel was someone worth investigating.

His instincts proved right. The more Joseph dug, the more dirt he uncovered. Joseph was delighted, and he immediately went to pitch a feature article at all the largest newspapers in the empire. But not a single one of them wanted the article. Joseph turned his sights on the mid-tier and low-tier publishers and eventually found one willing to lend him an ear. The article was published and released into the world, and the response was even better than anticipated. On top of that, it was little more than an introduction; Joseph had much, much more he could write about Noel.

However...

“Yeah, well, u-unfortunately we w-won't be publishing anymore of your work. Why? Because s-slander runs against our company ethics policy... Y-yes! That's why, so d-don't you ever come back here again!”

Joseph was thrown out by his editor and unable to continue writing his series of articles, even though his editor had initially been the one of the people made happiest by the initial article's response.

“Runs against the company ethics policy? Hmph. Guy probably tells better lies in his sleep...”

Joseph knew that the newspaper had folded under pressure from somebody. It was either Wild Tempest or one of their sponsors. Whoever it was, they'd made sure the publisher would not put out another similar article. Joseph was certain that was why the other newspaper publishers had turned him down, too.

“Who’s going to look for the truth if journalists are too afraid?!”

Rage boiled in Joseph as he waded through old memories, so he slammed his glass on the counter. The bar was empty, but the bartender sent Joseph a cold stare. He felt empty too. His emotions were going round in circles. Every publisher had folded under Noel’s pressure. If nobody would publish his articles, what point was there to even continuing his investigation?

“You need to know when to quit, huh? Is that what they say?”

Joseph let out a deep sigh, his shoulders slumped.

“Why the long face?”

The voice surprised him. Joseph spun to find a young, brown-skinned man in a black coat standing to his side. The man’s mouth was hidden by his collar, but he was clearly quite handsome. It was Zero Lindrake, Lorelai’s vice-master. Joseph had met him before. In fact, he’d been extremely cooperative when Joseph began his investigation of Noel. He’d even given Joseph a piece of cutting-edge technology—a camera—to aid in his work.

It was obvious that Zero wasn’t doing all of this out of the goodness of his own heart. Wild Tempest and Lorelai were rivals. Joseph knew that Zero was using him to throw dirt on Wild Tempest’s reputation, but there was no reason to deny the help when it came in service of his own goals.

“What do you expect? Every newspaper is under Wild Tempest’s thumb,” Joseph said. “Nobody will publish my work.”

Zero shrugged. “I see. That’s a pity,” he said with a laugh. “But we’re not completely out of options yet.”

“Really?”

Joseph looked up as if clinging to a last hope. Zero nodded.

“Of course. You just need to publish your article, correct? In that case, leave the arrangements to us.”

“You’re saying I should ignore the newspapers and publish it myself?”

“Exactly that. We’ll give you all the financial support you require.”

It wasn't a terrible idea, in Joseph's estimation. Unfortunately, there was one big problem: nobody would believe an article published outside of the major newspapers. People didn't idly believe the information they were given; they believed the people who wrote it and the companies that published it. And who would believe someone like Joseph, who had almost zero recognition in these parts? An article nobody could trust was the same as no article at all.

"I need more than financial support. I need your platform. People will trust an article if it's endorsed by you, Lorelai, a clan on the regalia."

Zero shook his head, his face expressionless. "Impossible. If our involvement comes to light, nobody will believe what you publish. You know we're rivals with Wild Tempest, don't you?"

"Dammit. Of course..."

Readers weren't stupid. If Lorelai's name were involved, people would immediately cotton on that they wanted to smear Wild Tempest's name. In trying to gain trust with Lorelai's endorsement, he'd only throw it further away.

"So what else have we got?" asked Joseph.

"It's simple. Ask the snake for an exclusive interview. You know his weaknesses, so they'll become your shield as you do your work. Then you publish your article. The people will believe what you've written if your position and connection to the subject is clear."

Joseph put a hand to his mouth as he mulled over the suggestion.

"You think that's even possible?"

"It won't be easy. But when the going gets tough, the tough get going, no?"

Zero spoke like it wasn't his problem, which brought a frown to Joseph's brow. Still, it *was* worth a try. Joseph knew how dangerous an opponent Noel was. But he would never reach the truth if he was unwilling to face a little danger.

"Okay. I'll give it a shot."

Determination filled Joseph's eyes with a glimmer, like the eyes of a predator staring at its prey.

“The clan master has agreed to an interview.”

When Joseph visited Wild Tempest’s clan house, negotiating an exclusive interview was easy. Though he arranged it through Noel’s secretary, it was plain to see that the deal was made with Noel himself.

Joseph was excited. But his excitement was also mixed with a certain amount of fear. Noel was a dangerous individual. Joseph felt there was a good chance he could be attacked during the interview and then left to sink in a muddy river. This was why he avoided holding the interview immediately and instead specified the location via owl post a few days after negotiations.

The journalist was sure he’d be safe if he did the interview at a regular inn. If he found himself in danger, they’d be in a closed room, just the two of them, so Noel couldn’t make any excuses. Noel also couldn’t kidnap or imprison Joseph without the lodging staff or customers seeing it happen. It was the best place to do the interview and stay safe. This was why he expected Noel to raise some kind of objection, but to his surprise, Noel was entirely fine with the proposed location. He even informed Joseph that he would be coming alone.

It was all going too smoothly; it put Joseph on edge. He’d prepared all sorts of material expecting some sort of negotiation process, but Noel had simply agreed to do what Joseph wanted. It was unthinkable. Unfathomable. He couldn’t help but feel that something was up.

“That son of a... What is he scheming?”

Anxious as Joseph was about what Noel had in mind, he’d never find an answer by overthinking things. He came to a simple conclusion.

Perhaps Noel Stollen really is just a brat in the end...

Maybe Noel hadn’t really thought things through and intended to simply come and threaten Joseph. Noel had probably never run into a person he couldn’t intimidate. Perhaps he wasn’t even capable of imagining it. The thoughts didn’t entirely allay Joseph’s anxieties, but there was a certain logic to them.

Soon, the day of the interview arrived. It took place at the agreed time, at the

specified room. Noel and Joseph faced each other, a table between them.

“So you’re the journalist who wrote the article, huh?” Noel said, raising his chin and looking down at Joseph with arrogance. The judgment was palpable. “The article was third-rate, but you took a good picture, I’ll give you that. I guess when the tools are high quality, it doesn’t matter who’s using them.”

Noel’s gaze dropped to the camera hanging from Joseph’s neck.

“That there isn’t the sort of tool a third-rate journalist can buy very easily. I’m guessing you got it from Lorelai. We’re rivals, but you already knew that. And if there’s anyone looking to smear us right now, they’re top of the list.”

Joseph was shocked that Noel had already figured out the situation, but he was prepared for this. Anybody could have surmised this much.

“Third-rate. Quite the compliment,” Joseph’s mouth twisted into a grimace and he went on, pushing for a reaction. “If you’re going to be that way, fine. I don’t intend to play nice either. Let’s get straight to the point.”

“That’s why I’m here, so get on with it.”

Joseph’s teeth clenched at Noel’s attitude. He was a kid making light of an adult. In his head, Joseph was intent on making Noel pay for his haughty attitude.

“Get on with it? I’m already done. I’ve done all the research I need into your dirty secrets. The whole point of this interview is to gain readers’ trust. They’ll know I went to the source. So you don’t have to say anything. I’ve already got what I want.”

The trust of the readers was all that mattered, and getting the interview was key. It didn’t matter what Noel said, because Joseph already knew what he would write.

“Aha. So you’ve walked me into a trap, essentially.”

Noel looked intrigued. It brought a smile to Joseph’s face.

“Quit acting cool, kid. It’s not a good look when you’ve lost. I know that you’ve got tight connections in the Barzini family and that you were behind the prison-bombing incident. Once my exposé is out in the world, you’re finished.”

Joseph liked the sound of that. His grin grew broad as he continued.

“And let me tell you, it wouldn’t be wise to try anything. Not here. All I have to do is raise my voice, and people will come rushing. You could always add to your list of crimes if you want, but you’ll play nice if you don’t. And don’t even think about killing me; my friends have the article. If they stop hearing from me, they’ve been told to make it public.”

It was a bold statement, but it was also a bluff. Joseph didn’t have any friends. Still, he was banking on the fact he could make Noel hesitate.

“I’ll say it one more time,” Joseph added. “You’re finished.”

Basking in victory, Joseph brought the camera up and snapped a picture of Noel. The shutter sound rang, and the strobe flashed. Although Noel was momentarily blinded by the light, a smile rose to his lips.

“What is it you want? Money? How much?”

The words were so flippant and thoughtless that Joseph flew into a rage, slamming his fist on the table.

“You goddamn brat! Don’t you dare belittle me!” he shouted, pointing at Noel. “Don’t think money will get you out of this one! I’m not a journalist for money or fame! I’m a journalist because *the truth matters*! The people deserve to know, and it’s my duty to bring your crimes to light!”

Part of Joseph really did want the money and the fame, but there was something more important to him than both. He wouldn’t be swayed, no matter how much money he was offered.

“The pen is mightier than the sword,” declared Joseph. “No matter how good a Seeker you are, you can’t escape the truth.”

“Ah, so you’re a man of principle, then,” said Noel, clapping his hands. “Impressive. You’re the first journalist I’ve met who can’t be swayed by money. You’ve earned my respect. I apologize for calling you third-rate.”

But Noel wasn’t done yet, and the smile that spread across his face next put a chill down Joseph’s spine.

“But like you, I’m just as prepared to do battle with the pen,” said Noel, taking

out a pen and a piece of paper and writing something down. "Here."

Noel passed the paper across the table, and Joseph took it in his hand. The moment his eyes skimmed over its contents, he felt some intangible force clutch his heart. Sweat began to pour down his face as fear gripped his body.

"I see it's to your liking," said Noel.

"Y-you..."

On the piece of paper were names. They belonged to all of Joseph's blood relatives and associates. His parents, his aunts and uncles, his brothers and sisters, and their families. Even his former friends and lovers were included in the list.

"Journalists always see themselves as the people who control information. That's why their fragility shows the moment they become the subject of investigation themselves. *The pen is mightier than the sword*. Have you ever *really* thought about what that means?"

Noel slowly rose to his feet, smiling as Joseph sat stunned. Noel continued around the table until he was behind Joseph, whereupon he placed his hands on Joseph's shoulders. Noel may have resembled a petite and beautiful girl, but the moment those hands gripped his shoulders, Joseph knew he could not fight back. There was immense strength in them.

"You said you've done all the research you need," Noel said, whispering into Joseph's ear. "So you know what's going to happen to all the people on that piece of paper. I don't care if they're little girls or the elderly; they'll all meet the same fate."

"S-stop it..."

Joseph's whole body was trembling with panic. Noel let out a carefree laugh completely devoid of mercy. He was obviously enjoying every moment of this.

"Hey, what happened to the tough guy I was talking to earlier? Isn't pursuing the truth your great mission? Isn't it worth sacrificing your friends and family for?"

Noel chuckled derisively as he spoke. Joseph bit his lip. His work was worth

risking *his own* life for. But he could not sacrifice the lives of those who had nothing to do with this.

“P-please. Just stop it... I’m sorry...”

“Huh? What? I can’t hear you.”

Noel put a hand to his ear in an exaggerated mockery. Joseph begged again, shaking all over with fear and frustration.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m begging you, please forgive me.”

Noel’s sudden bark of laughter cracked in his ears.

“Forgive you? Were you acting all high and mighty just now because everything was in your favor? Wouldn’t a first-rate journalist be ashamed of kneeling before a *goddamn brat*, like me? Hm? No?! Answer me!”

The menace in Noel’s voice rang through to the back of Joseph’s teeth.

“You think I’ll forgive you just because you’re acting meek and terrified? Are you trying to belittle me, you piece of trash? Hey, are you listening to me? I asked you a question. Are you?! How about your little sister’s kids, huh? Should I have them brought here right now?! Huh?!”

Joseph shook his head frantically, tears of terror clouding his vision. He’d been through all sorts of hardships for his work, but this was the first time he’d ever been in a position where he felt absolutely certain that, no matter what he did, he could not get away.

He’d planned to set a trap, and everything had gone so perfectly. But he was foolish. So stupid! Noel was known as the snake for a reason. He never showed sympathy or mercy, just set his eyes on his prey and then swallowed them whole. Joseph had never imagined it was possible to face a fear worse than death.

“Pitiful. Utterly pitiful,” muttered Noel, disgusted. Then, he suddenly inserted a knife in the table, standing on its blade, and went on in a gentle, cajoling voice. “Joseph, do you know how the yakuza apologize for their wrongdoings?”

Joseph didn’t know what Noel was talking about. He looked up, still trembling, and into Noel’s eyes. They were like two deep, black wells.

“I’m a generous man,” Noel said. “I’ll forgive you for five of them.”

His bright, joking voice invited Joseph into the darkest sanctum of hell itself.

Zero was in a private room looking over documents when there was a knock at the door.

“A package has arrived for you, sir.”

“Come in.”

The clan member entered the room with a small package. He was much younger than Zero, a friendly looking young man who often ran errands.

“It’s addressed to you, sir. Thing is, we don’t know the sender.”

“Have you checked its contents?”

Lorelai had members in its ranks who could see through objects. Using these skills made it easy to inspect any suspicious packages.

“No, sir. I didn’t want to go doing so without permission, see. Would you like me to run a scan?”

Zero thought for a moment then shook his head.

“No, I’ll take it from here. Thank you.”

“I don’t suppose it’s...?”

The young clan member raised his little finger and grinned as he gestured. He clearly thought the package had come from a girl or a lover. Zero chuckled.

“You’re a sharp one,” he said. “Now get back to work.”

“Yes, sir. Give me all the details later.”

Zero watched as the clan member put the package down and left. Then when he was alone, he began to carefully unwrap the package. As he did, a small card fell to his desk.

“To my dearest friend, with kind regards,” it read.

That the superb penmanship felt written with bad intentions was not just Zero’s imagination; the small white box that accompanied the message was

stained red along the bottom.

“Well, well.”

Zero opened the box. Inside of it was the camera he’d sent to Joseph, along with...five severed fingers. They were Joseph’s—of this Zero was certain.

“That snake,” Zero grumbled, his voice full of a deadly chill. Then he grinned. “Adopting yakuza tactics now, is he?”

The snake used whatever means necessary to achieve his goals. He was cunning, and he was not afraid to get his hands dirty. However, the intent behind his actions was unclear. Was it impulsive, or had he come to this decision after much thought? Or did his actions betray his personality? It was because Zero wanted to know more about the inner workings of Noel that he had been happy to sacrifice Joseph; and now he had his answer.

“Now I know who you are. You’re a perfectionist bound by your own pride.”

From Noel’s position, there were any number of ways he could have dealt with Joseph. He could easily have taken care of the journalist in secret. And just as easily, he could have turned Joseph into a spy to peek in on his rival clan. But instead, Noel had chosen to pass judgment on the man, and display his very brutality to the clan behind him: Lorelai.

He was essentially using fear as a message. The use of fear as a means of controlling others was proof of a proud personality that would not allow for error. It was exactly the sort often seen in the yakuza. It was also apparent in how Noel refused to forgive his former teammates for their betrayal.

Once you knew what made your enemy tick, planning countermeasures was simple. After all, nobody could run from themselves. Intelligence and tactical decision making didn’t matter; a person’s resolution came down to their personality.

Zero stood from his chair and took the clan house elevator down to the fourth-floor basement. The only people with access to the floor were Johann—the clan master—and Zero. Only they held the keys that took the elevator down so low. In fact, the fourth-floor basement was a secret to even the other clan members.

Zero's footsteps echoed through the dimly lit corridor. He stopped at a thick metal door and opened the small sliding panel to peek through to the other side. His nostrils were immediately assailed by a foul, sour scent. In the center of a room was a small, black silhouette crouched into a ball.

The room was a cell, and the prisoner inside wore a collar that stopped him from using his skills. The cell was exceptionally secure, impossible to escape without the aid of particular skills. If a prisoner *did* manage to escape the cell, getting any further without the use of the elevator was impossible.

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

The silhouette slowly raised its head at the sound of Zero's voice. The sunken face was at the limits of exhaustion, drained of life, and filled with despair. The prisoner was fed the barest minimum to ensure survival, and being locked in the cell for so long had taken a cruel toll on their mental fortitude.

"You don't look well," said Zero. "I don't really like the idea of treating you this way, but I hope you understand that we can't go showing sympathy to spies."

It was no lie. Zero really didn't like it. But he also wasn't interested in improving the situation, either. Any small show of sympathy could lead to feelings of pity and compassion. This prisoner was a tool, and a tool had to be treated as such.

"I've finally worked out how to use you," Zero whispered, "Mr. Faceless."

Chapter 4:

Dance of the Winter Flowers

I CONTINUED TRUDGING FORWARD, deep into the forest. I was entirely alone, without even one of Hugo's puppet soldiers to keep me company. If any of the others knew I was doing this in the midst of our clash with Lorelai, they'd be furious. The city of Velnant was one thing, but only an idiot would go walking through the forest, away from prying eyes. Even I knew it was stupid. It wasn't like me at all.

But I was here because of the "gift" that was delivered to our clan house. I'd arrived at the clan house early to find our employees flustered. I pushed through them to find a fox's head placed at the entrance. The blood dripping from its neck and staining the floor told me it had been severed only recently. The other team members still had yet to arrive.

"Did anyone inform the military guard?" I asked the secretary, who looked anxious. He shook his head.

"No, whenever anything problematic comes up, we always contact you before going to the military guard. I was just about to send word."

"Good."

We were Seekers. Battle was how we made a living. It was bad for our reputation to be running to the military guard over every little thing. It was also a very important time for us, so I wanted to handle things internally. Besides, I already had an idea of who had sent the present.

"This is quite the reply," I muttered. "I'm impressed."

I lifted up the fox's head. The clan house employees, whose jobs kept them far from battle, let out screams. I ignored them as I inspected the head in my hands.

"Hm. Is it just a fox?"

When I first saw the head, I thought it belonged to Loki. He had the rare class

of Imitator and could change form at will, and he also had shapeshifter's blood in him—he was a hybrid beast. I'd assumed he was dead. But I was wrong.

“Oh? There's something in the back of its throat.”

I opened the fox's mouth and found a folded piece of paper inside of it. I took the piece of paper out and opened it to find a message written in a code that only Loki and I knew. Once I read it, I tore the piece of paper to shreds.

“Please clean this up,” I said. “I don't want the military guard hearing about this, or any of the other clan members. I want you all to continue work as usual.”

I turned to leave.

“Where are you going, Master?” the secretary asked.

I smiled.

“To a fight.”

I took the nearest horse and sped off toward the forest at the outskirts of the empire. When I could get no further on horseback, I left my steed at the lodging of a nearby village and proceeded on foot.

I wasn't far from the location specified in the coded message, which had said the following:

If you want the information broker back, come to Jade Lake, alone. If you bring anybody, the information broker dies...but I suppose trying to intimidate you with lines like these is a waste. I know they won't faze you. The information broker's life evidently means nothing to you, so let's try something different. If you choose to let the information broker die, the whole of Velnant will get his corpse along with a clear message spread far and wide: the master of Wild Tempest is a coward only too happy to watch his friends die if it means saving his own hide.

As expected, the writer of the letter did not leave a name, but I knew it was somebody in Lorelai. This also confirmed to me that Loki had failed his mission and been captured by them.

Just as the letter had stated, I normally would not hesitate to watch Loki die.

The man was a professional. He knew what it meant to fail in his mission. If he died, that was his responsibility to bear, not mine—but I didn't want the news spreading. The people of Velnant looked to Seekers as symbols of strength. They were heroes in the truest sense of the word, powerful and fearless, able to stand up to any challenge. Whatever they *really* were, the common people saw and believed them to be noble.

With this in mind, our reputation would take a huge hit if it was known that I abandoned a friend and let him die. This was different from what had happened with Lloyd and Tanya. Loki had only failed in his mission. He had not betrayed or backstabbed me. Even though he was not an official clan member, and our relationship was purely for business, we were close enough that one could call us friends. And leaving your friends to die was the most dishonest thing a Seeker could do.

I had intimidated the newspaper companies and ensured they would not leak any information about me, but Lorelai was on the regalia and thus had ways to spread information outside of traditional channels.

I had gotten to where I was through the strategic use of information. That's why I knew that if I did not address the problem before me now, we would be forced into a position we could not get back from. I had no choice but to obey Lorelai if I wanted to maintain the trust and reputation we'd built. I had to save Loki on my own.

"Is that it, though? Really?"

Nobody was around to answer my question. I was alone, with no teammates to rely on, headed into the jaws of death. Thinking about the situation tactically, there was nothing else to call it but foolish. It wasn't like me at all.

"Nobody surpasses me when it comes to information warfare. And there are ways to regain what we lose even if I let Loki die. Yet here I am, acting on instinct instead of thought..."

It was illogical. I didn't want to admit it, but I was controlled by my own emotions. It made me angry that they threatened to call me a coward and that they took Loki as a hostage. I was caught up in pride, lost to my feelings. I was now being controlled by the very emotions I'd belittled others for and blamed

for their weakness.

“But...”

Although I mocked myself for my foolishness, my heart told me it was right. This was the very thing that stories of heroes were made of: walking straight into danger, knowing your enemies lay in wait, all to rescue a captured friend.

I’d use any underhanded method to win, even if it meant sacrificing my friends. That was who I was. Born with the weakest class, the Talker, I had chosen this path to accomplish what I’d promised my grandfather: to be the strongest Seeker ever.

That wasn’t everything, though.

The title of “strongest” that I aimed for was definitive. It was something nobody could deny. But even if I earned it by becoming the bad guy, nobody would praise me for it. While it was possible to continue hiding this from the world at large...I could not fool myself.

Plotting and scheming were valid. Underhanded means were natural ways of fighting in a world so unforgivingly competitive. In order to win, you used everything at your disposal. But no matter how many lies you told or how showy you chose to live, ultimately you had to be someone you yourself could be proud of.

“That’s not me. I’m not the sort of person to hide away from being called a coward, from having my friends kidnapped, just to ensure victory. That’s not how I win.”

If I was going to be the strongest, then I was going to live the life of the strongest. Even if that meant making a foolish decision, I would not live a life where I ran from a fight. Not ever.

“I knew you’d come, snake.”

When I arrived at the jade-colored lake, a brown-skinned man was waiting for me with a smile on his face.

“I came to thank you for your most wonderful present,” I said, replying with a

smile of my own.

The man—Lorelai's vice-master, Zero Lindrake—laughed so hard and so merrily that his shoulders shook. Loki was lying on the floor by his side, tightly bound. He was in the form of a casual thug, a form I knew well. His mouth was gagged, leaving him unable to speak, but his eyes spoke for him. They looked enraged. *Why did you even come?!* they seemed to say.

"I don't know either," I muttered, taking a step forward, then looking at Zero. "I'm here alone, as promised."

"I know. There's no sign of anybody else in the area. But I didn't have to scan the area to know you'd come alone. It's who you are."

"Heh. That's quite the trust you've put in me. Have you done a complete psychological profile, then? Of course someone who resorts to kidnapping and intimidation would do that sort of thing. I can't stand cowards."

Zero chuckled. "I didn't think you'd come if I didn't go to these lengths, that's all. It might surprise you, in return, to know that I also came here alone."

"You what...?"

Zero's words caught me by surprise. It was true that I hadn't spotted any other enemies, and I hadn't felt anybody else's presence. Because I was a Talker, I didn't have skills to detect enemies or a class that could make up for it. I had to rely on my five senses. Still, I could tell he wasn't lying. Even if I couldn't sense any enemies, I could tell if Zero was lying by the movements of his face. I frowned, pressing my lips together. Zero seemed to enjoy my reaction, as his face twisted into a grin.

"Oh? And here I was thinking you'd be happy to hear the news. Or would you have preferred it if I brought the others?"

"You... How much do you know?"

"How much indeed? Thinking is your specialty, isn't it? How about using that head of yours to figure it out?"

Zero was cunning. I didn't know enough about him. I clicked my tongue in annoyance. Was Lee-Gaku his source of information? Had he betrayed me and

told them about the ace up my sleeve? Was that why Zero had called me here alone? But it was also possible that Zero didn't know any of the details. In that case, he hadn't brought his friends *because* he assumed I was hiding an ace up my sleeve. He'd made the right choice. If he'd brought his teammates, it would have been a good chance to kill them all together.

"It's a lot to lose," I muttered to myself.

But things did not always go the way you wanted. I had come alone, as asked, but I had not come unprepared. I had a secret weapon, and in it was the potential to kill every member of Lorelai all on my own. But it was not something I could use multiple times. In order to kill Zero, I would have to use its power. But thinking about the aftermath was a real headache.

"Well, then, shall we get started?" Zero said, using a knife to cut the rope around Loki. "Get out of here. You'll only get in the way."

Loki stood to his feet, shooting me a glance filled with questions.

"Do as he says," I told Loki. "There's nothing else you can do. Run away. Get as far away as you can."

"U-understood."

Loki gave a quick nod, then scampered away like a scared rabbit.

"Just as I thought. You've got some way of fighting back," said Zero. "Killing you won't be easy."

I shrugged. "Don't be silly! I'm a Talker, you realize? I'm a sitting duck without my teammates around to protect me. What chance do I have against a Dark Knight?"

"I can see it in your eyes. You want nothing more than to kill me, right here and right now. But I don't want to die just yet, so I won't hold back!"

Zero had only taken an instant to throw away his cloak in preparation for battle. He let loose a roar like a wild beast, and then his body began to transform. His hair stood on end; his entire body grew larger and larger as his back tore open to reveal wings. Hard scales covered his body. In just a few seconds, Zero had morphed into a huge black dragon. I cackled at the sight of it.

“Ah ha ha ha! Amazing! What a magic trick!”

I looked up at the huge dragon, clapping my hands. I’d never imagined that Zero’s true form would be that of the legendary draghi people. I couldn’t help but want to applaud the sheer majesty of the living legend that stood before me, even if it was an opponent.

“Groarr...”

A rumbling growl escaped from the dragon’s mouth along with jet-black flame. By the looks of it, the monster held on to some of Zero’s human intelligence, but the frenzied beast within was holding the reins.

“You have my gratitude, Zero Lindrake,” I said with a grin. “It’s an honor for a hero to slay a dragon.”

I took a metal syringe from inside my coat and stabbed it into my neck. Then I let the “medicine” within flow through me. The effects were dramatic. Being a Talker allowed me to use skills without using magic, since both buffs and debuffs made use of the target’s magical energy. A Talker’s skills would merely enhance what was already there.

Just because I didn’t need to use magic didn’t mean it wasn’t flowing through my body, though. I could feel magical energy I’d never used swirling and circulating through my body. I felt like I was burning with an intense fire, brimming with unlimited potential.

Just as Zero had morphed into a new creature, my body had also changed. I had not grown any bigger. I was not covered in any new armor. I did not have claws or fangs, nor wings with which to soar through the air. There were no changes in me that were visible to the human eye, but the change within me was so much bigger than Zero’s transformation. And Zero knew it too—the giant dragon took a step backward.

I smelled fear. It was a scent that I was very sensitive to in my current form.

“It’s about time you realized how crazy a person can get...”

As my body and mind overflowed with a bloodthirsty mania, I leaped into the fray.

This was the second time he'd been ordered to run away and done as he was told.

"Shit... Augh, dammit!"

Tears streamed from Loki's eyes as he ran. All this was his fault. If he hadn't failed to infiltrate the ranks of Lorelai, none of this would have happened. Loki was a professional information broker, and not only had he failed his mission, but he'd done the unthinkable: he'd been taken prisoner. It vexed him beyond belief.

What bothered him most was that Noel had come to his rescue. Loki knew Noel's personality, and he'd been certain the boy wouldn't show. But Noel had come. Loki had become exactly what Zero planned: a pawn that got Noel to move as he wanted. The weight of his failure was nearly unbearable.

Loki paused for just a moment. He was an Imitator. It was considered a battle class, but in truth, Loki had no fighting skills. All he could do was change form. There was nothing he could do without some ability to fight. He knew that. He'd stopped anyway because, just for a moment, he was at a loss.

He turned back. As he did, a huge shock wave sent him flying. He was thrown into a tree, and pain coursed through his body.

"Huh?! What the hell was that?"

As the pain began to subside, he looked around at the trees that had been entirely uprooted from the shock wave. It came from where Loki had escaped, meaning it came from Zero and Noel.

As Loki stood there, shocked, a huge amount of water suddenly fell from the sky onto his head. At first, he thought it was rain, but it wasn't. There was a raw, fishy scent to it, and its sudden downpour brought a bunch of dead fish along with it.

"Lake water?"

There was no way to know for sure, but there was no other explanation. No sooner had this strange occurrence happened than the whole forest was

draped in a terrifying silence. Not even the birds chirped. The silence was so complete that Loki's ears hurt.

"Is it all over?"

If it was, then it was certain that Noel had lost. No matter how much training he'd received from Overdeath, he could not defeat Zero. The state of the battle was as clear as day. But that was why Loki began to backtrack. If Noel was indeed dead, he needed to make sure—because then he'd have to inform Noel's teammates. It was this sense of duty that sent him back.

The sight that met Loki's eyes upon returning to Jade Lake was completely different to when he left.

"N-Noel?"

In front of a giant hole once filled with lake water stood Noel, silent. The ground around him had been violently gouged and dug up, and in the holes were large pools of red blood. But the blood was not Noel's. It didn't look like he'd been injured at all.

"So you're back?"

Noel turned toward Loki, a light grin on his face. The moment their eyes met, Loki felt like he might freeze with utter fear. It was the Noel he had always known, but his eyes were different. The red light within them bore an Abyss-like bad omen with unfathomable depths.

Noel glanced at Loki before he took out a needle and injected himself in the neck with it. It seemed to bring Noel's eyes back to normal. Noel then fell to his knees, completely drained.

"Yo! Noel! Are you okay?"

Loki rushed over but was shocked when he saw Noel's body. It was covered in countless bruises, like fractured pottery.

"I...couldn't finish him... I used this power...to kill him, but he got away... This is...bad. I have to...make a plan..."

Noel's breathing was ragged, his voice squeezing out between gasps.

"I-I don't know what's going on, but at least you survived. You need to rest—"

But before he could finish his sentence, Noel collapsed.

“Noel!”

Loki quickly checked Noel’s vitals. He was breathing, but in a rough and erratic manner. His body temperature was unusually low. It was dangerous to leave him in this state. Loki slung Noel onto his back.

“Don’t worry! I’ll get you to a doctor on the double!”

“Haah, haah... Didn’t think I’d end up turning tail and running...”

Zero sat, covered in injuries, against the back of a large tree. He chuckled wryly at his own failure.

“I knew he had a secret weapon, but that power is ridiculous... Isn’t he afraid of death at all?”

Zero had fought Noel and lost. To add insult to injury, the battle was completely one-sided. Noel’s secret weapon had been so powerful that it had stolen Zero’s hope of fighting even in dragon form. It was a miracle that Zero had even been able to escape at all.

“Now I know what his secret weapon is, at least.”

It was a truly fearsome power. Zero had never, in his entire life, seen anyone so prepared to accept death. But because of that, Zero was now sure of something: Noel’s secret weapon was not something that could be used over and over. And once it could be properly identified, taking care of it would be a simple task.

“I guess that’s the silver lining for taking it on myself.”

If he’d brought any of his teammates, they would have suffered terrible losses. Everyone in Lorelai was exceptional, but no matter how many of them there were, they were nothing against Noel when he was like *that*. The only one who could beat him was Johann when he was completely and truly serious.

Even now, after having escaped, Zero shuddered at the thought of the battle from mere moments ago. As he took deep breaths to calm his heart, Johann contacted him via *Link*.

“What’s the situation?” he asked.

“I lost,” said Zero.

Johann’s shock was palpable, even through *Link*.

“What do you mean? Did the snake bring reinforcements?”

“No, he was alone. I lost to him and him alone.”

When Zero explained why he lost, Johann erupted into laughter. “That snake! What an unbelievable individual!”

“This isn’t a joke. I almost died.”

“I’m sorry. So this is the resolve of the snake, huh?” Johann took a pause to correct himself. “No...the determination of Noel Stollen. I’ve misjudged him.”

“He’s certainly a threat, but handling him shouldn’t be an issue.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m talking about something more fundamental,” said Johann. His voice was calm and deliberate as he continued. “I believe Noel Stollen is a fine fit to be my last foe.”

“What do you mean?”

But Johann did not respond. Instead, he cut the *Link*. Zero had no way to resume contact from his end.

“Dammit,” Zero muttered.

Although the inner workings of Johann’s heart were a mystery, Zero was set on obeying whatever commands the man gave him—not simply because Johann was the clan master, but because he was Zero’s only friend.

Zero and Johann were the results of a top-secret Rodanian project designed as a way to ensure military equilibrium with the Velnant Empire, which had the regalia and magic-engineered civilization. They were experiments that attempted to restore the former greats of the past—legendary beings—by using their remains.

The Phoenix, classified as a lord with an abyssal depth of 12, had the power to rebuild itself from mere shreds of flesh so long as it still had magical energy. It could also consume corpses and bring them back to life as monstrous birds. By

creating a bio-instrument with the Phoenix's heart and inducing a parasitic relationship through attachment to a woman's spine, that woman could recreate corpses it consumed through birth in the same manner as the Phoenix. Unlike the Phoenix, however, she would give birth not to underlings, but completely independent living beings.

The strain on the mother was immense, and the chances of giving birth to a successful restoration were incredibly slim. But through countless sacrifices, Rodania found itself with multiple successful experiments. These eleven beings were versions of "the Messiah," Lex Rodanius. He was a mutant that should never have existed, a legendary hero who wielded every known class—and he was the founding father of Rodania.

Johann. Simeon. Andrezj. Diego. Forma. Levy. Seamus. Bart. Thaddeus. Felipa. Judas. These eleven were called the Messiah Numbers. Restorations that weren't based upon Lex were called the Zero Numbers, and those were considered abnormal even within restorations. They were created through experiments specifically for the purpose of gathering data. They were considered waste products right from the start.

Johann was one of the Messiah Numbers. Zero belonged to the Zero Numbers.

One fateful day, the eleven Messiah Numbers—all children at the time—rebelled and planned an escape from their research facility. Because the power of the Messiah ran through their veins, they broke their Oaths of Subordination with ease. The research staff paid dearly for this grave oversight on their part, painting the facility hallways in their blood when the Messiah Numbers ran rampant. As they were making their getaway, Johann arrived at the cage in which Zero was held.

"Come with us!"

Zero was the only one of the Zero Numbers that was able to maintain a human form. His siblings were little more than lumps of flesh without logical thought or intelligence. Zero had spent his time alongside them, waiting for the day that he would finally be discarded. Johann had lived up to his moniker as a Messiah when he offered him that chance at survival and saved his life.

The group of twelve children—the eleven Messiah Numbers and Zero—attacked towns and villages as they ran from their pursuers, eventually earning a fearsome reputation as a group of bandits. The children dubbed themselves Deep Snow, spurred on by the terror they inspired in the ordinary people around them. They would rob others of their comforts like a steely cascade of ice, as formidable and inevitable as a sudden bloom of snow.

Simeon, leader of Deep Snow, was timid and had his shortcomings, but he was loved by all his friends for his caring personality.

Johann was lively and arrogant, a bright spark who loved to be flashy in battle. That was why, even when his back was against the wall, he always found a way to win. He had the makings of a true hero.

Andrezj was excellent at reading the room and seeing things from multiple perspectives, so he often acted as mediator between friends. Deep Snow would have surely collapsed in on itself without his talents.

Diego was wild, had a short temper, and was prone to fights. Every day would bring around another scrap with his friends, but in battle, he was the boldest and the most determined, a hero among the team.

Forma's sharp mind got him appointed as the brains of Deep Snow. His suspicious and untrusting disposition, however, meant that he kept Zero at a distance at all times.

Levy was forever money hungry, and he was the most eager to loot and scavenge. Despite this, he wasn't stingy, and he often bought things for his friends whenever they snuck in among the common people to buy supplies.

Seamus was quiet, meek, and unassuming, but surprisingly enough, he was the most powerful in battle by a wide margin. Even Diego, who picked fights with everyone, steered clear of Seamus.

Bart was an honest type, a young man with a simple love of music and song. He disliked groups, so he tended to keep some distance from the team camp. He was often found playing the guitar on his own.

Thaddeus loved to drink anything and everything. He was always drunk, even when they went to battle. But he was also the most pious, and prayer was very

important to him.

Felipa was the team's only female member. She was warm and kind to all she knew, and even in battle she fought with the aim only to injure, never to kill.

Judas was the team's most conscientious and rational member. He was often strict and stern, and he lived by many rigorous restrictions. Still, he never forced any of his rationale onto his teammates. He simply chose his own way to live.

Zero was the one with the strongest sense of camaraderie. In battle, he enjoyed fighting together with Johann and Diego on the front lines—not because he wanted to stand out, but because he wanted to protect his friends.

Deep Snow was a force to be reckoned with. Its success didn't stem from how each member wielded abilities at an A-Rank or EX-Rank level, but instead from the deep bonds forged between all of them. They fought off every attempt by the military to eliminate them and even the Seekers that came to hunt them. The government hesitated to get more involved for fear of further losses.

But just as the seasons change and melt away the frost, Deep Snow's time in the sun eventually ran out.

"I can't wield my power properly..."

The first to show abnormalities was Seamus, the most powerful among them. He'd been injured in a fight that should have been a cakewalk, and he remained weak even after getting medical treatment back at camp. Then, he died.

Deep Snow was deeply shaken by the sadness of Seamus's death, but now they also felt a persistent fear of the grim reaper. Seamus was no different from a brother or sister. The chains of death that arrested him were also bound to the rest of the group. It was not long before the others began to notice changes in their own conditions.

Though there were minor differences, the symptoms were generally the same. First, their powers began to wane, and their abilities dulled. Even Zero, who was not as exceptional a specimen as the Messiah Numbers, struggled with similar symptoms.

The cause was all too clear. When it came down to it, they weren't much more than frauds. Counterfeits. Now, as a consequence of using too much of

their overwhelming power, they were cutting into their own life spans.

Deep Snow was still a formidable force even without being able to annihilate enemies in its typical quick and decisive fashion. The members' experience in countless battles had hardened them. But now the group was running on borrowed time until it would meet its eventual demise. The death of their leader, Seamus, was one deciding factor; the other was betrayal at the hands of one they trusted.

Judas.

"I'm exhausted... We have to end it."

The endless fighting, the shortened life span of a replica... Judas's conscience weighed heavier upon him than anyone else in the group. For this reason, he could no longer bear the cruel, merciless fate that awaited them.

Deep Snow's members fought with everything they had when their camp was attacked, but their hearts were left distraught by their friend's betrayal. They fell, unable to fight with their former ferocity.

The only survivors left at the end of the battle were Johann and Zero. Thaddeus blew himself up so that they might escape, taking out the traitorous Judas and more than half the enemy forces along with him. The other members of Deep Snow who had fallen in battle were reduced to ashes in the aftermath.

However, though Johann and Zero had survived, their minds and bodies were in terrible shape. Their very will to live was lost. They slipped in among ordinary citizens and quietly waited for their deaths to arrive.

It was then that a Velnant agent appeared before them.

"If the two of you so wish, I can help you defect to the Velnant Empire."

"Why would we wish that?"

"The master I serve desires Seekers to command freely."

"Seekers?" Johann asked.

The agent nodded. "The empire's Seekers are truly exceptional. However, they are now so exceptional that the imperial family can no longer control them. If we were to force them by way of the law, it would not only send

Seekers into an uproar, but the greater public too. It is for this reason that the imperial family desires powerful Seekers of its own.”

“You expect us to just lie down and become your lap dogs?!” Zero barked, glaring at the agent.

The young Zero was created by adults who specifically intended to eventually dispose of him. His experience had left him with strong anti-establishment beliefs.

Johann was different.

“Fine,” he said. “We’ll be your dogs.”

“Johann, what?!”

Zero was incredulous. Johann looked at him with a tired smile.

“At this rate we’re going to die here on the street. Becoming the empire’s dog doesn’t sound so bad compared to that. Still, I won’t promise to be a submissive, obedient lap dog.”

“Then what will you be instead?”

“I want to be...” said Johann, his eyes alight with his unique fighting spirit, “...a hero.”

The true meaning of his words was painfully clear. With what little life he had left, Johann wanted to leave his mark upon the world. He was already born with the makings of a hero. Here now, at the crossroads of a life in which his friends were lost, it was natural he’d want to live as he so desired.

“Zero, what will you do?”

Zero half laughed, half sighed. “You need someone to look after you, so I guess I don’t have a choice. I’m with you.”

Everybody else was dead. The only person Zero could call a friend now was Johann.

The two of them crossed into Velnant, obeying the imperial family’s orders and quickly getting to work. Though there was some uncertainty around how much time they had left, it would be some time before they hit their limits.

Zero wasn't as powerful as the Messiah Numbers, so he wasn't required to do as much. It followed that he would have a longer life ahead of him. Johann, on the other hand, combined his skills to create multiple differing personalities to help limit his power consumption. Each of his personalities was based on a fallen friend. While these personas were cycled and used as necessary, Johann himself maintained a deep sleep to focus on the restoration and maintenance of his powers.

Johann and Zero took over the anti-establishment clan Lorelai from the inside. Once they were on the regalia, they pretended to obey the imperial family's orders while privately working to take control of everything.

"A hero yields to no one. A hero is controlled by nobody."

Johann had muttered this to himself when he arrived at the idea of the train system plans.

"You can win, Johann. I know it."

Zero stared at the slate-gray sky above as he spoke the words. Yes, the snake was a nuisance, but he was just another test on the path to greatness. There was no path to greatness without setbacks. Lorelai would consume the snake and then move ahead.

Everything they did was to leave their mark on the world. Everything was to prove they had lived.

The winter sun fell as rapidly as though it were rolling down a hill. The visitor arrived at the Lorelai clan house in the evening. He entered the drawing room, flanked by bodyguards, a beautiful man with long hair and a chilling gaze. He faced Johann.

"You know why I'm here, don't you?"

Johann gave a joking shrug in reply. "Of course, Your Highness."

Prince Caius—the second-eldest imperial prince—stared at the carefree Johann with a furrowed brow.

"That attitude of yours... It's not Forma, or Simeon, or Andrezj. It's been some

months since I had a chance to talk to you directly, Johann. And I must say that I still don't like you."

Caius knew all about Johann's multiple personalities. Usually, Johann left everything to Forma to handle, but depending on the person in question, he would sometimes swap them for Simeon or Andrezj. All three were good communicators. Forma was sharp, quick at thinking on his feet, and fearless, making him Johann's most trusted personality, but he was also arrogant and thought extremely highly of himself. This weak point made him a bad choice for meetings with people of high standing.

"I'm so happy to see you again, Your Highness," Johann said.

"Shut up."

In contrast to the cool and composed Johann, Prince Caius was ice cold. No, he was furious.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, you son of a bitch? You want to drop out of the train system plans? Now that we've come this far? Do you really think we'll just let that happen?"

Caius tried to hold back his rage as he spewed forth his stream of questions. Johann smiled and nodded.

"I do. It's all written in the confidential letter I sent you. Lorelai is removing itself from the plans entirely."

"I am going to need a reason..."

"I could tell you, but I think you already know, Your Highness." Johann's smile didn't abate. "My mistakes have caused delays, and they've lost us trust from both the royalty sponsoring us and the citizens themselves. I intend to take responsibility for those errors by removing myself."

"If you were telling the truth, then I might have shed a tear for you. And it's not like I can't understand your position; everything was going swimmingly until the snake showed up and pulled the rug out from under you," Caius said, sneering. His anger was showing in his face at last. "However. I refuse to allow *you* to bargain with *me*. You think that by threatening me with your removal, you can get away without taking true responsibility for what you've done? Fool.

You rolled the dice yourself. You don't get to just leave because the results weren't the ones you wanted. You will play your part. If Lorelai insists on removing itself, then it will also be removed from the regalia. We'll revoke your Seeker license as a bonus. *That* is how you take responsibility."

Caius's words were no idle threat, but Johann never lost his cool for a second.

"I cannot deny that the snake did, indeed, pull the rug out from under me. I'm willing to accept that my loss of standing and the inevitable loss of profits are my own fault. I brought all that on myself. But I'm not asking for this just so you'll wipe the slate clean."

"Then what is it that you want?"

"Would you think me a fool for wanting...a fight?"

"There's a time and a place for jokes, you idiot! Not here, not now!" Caius spat. He'd run completely out of patience. "A fight? The utter gall of it! We're not playing some kid's game here! Who do you think pulled you out of the jaws of death?! I did! You would have died if it weren't for me! I saved your life, I had you legally registered as a citizen, I supported you all the way through to Lorelai getting a position on the regalia. The whole reason your railway plan could even be brought to life is because I am here. And now what? You just intend to throw mud over everything I've done?!"

The truth was that from the very beginning, Caius had used Johann as a pawn for his own purposes. He had no right to claim it was all out of compassion. Still, it was true that without him, Johann would have ended up dead long, long ago. Regardless of whether Caius helped him out of personal gain, Johann was still duty-bound to him.

"I am grateful to you, Your Highness, which is why I intend to give you the bioplant for producing demi-beasts, as well as all our research data to date. As long as you have that, you should be just fine without me."

The demi-beasts were produced and developed based on research documents Johann had taken with him back when he escaped from the Messiah lab. They were indispensable to the success of the Velnant railway system. Johann no longer needed them, because he was no longer concerned with the railway at all.

“You think that’s going to be enough?”

Johann let a grin play on his lips before he shook his head. “No. That’s why I’d also like to give you this.”

Johann took a document from the drawer of his desk and passed it across to Caius. Caius’s face went pale when he saw what it contained.

“You... Y-you son of a...!”

“As prince, I’m sure you understand the value of that information. After all, it lists all the agents that the Velnant Empire has dispatched to each country. Those agents would meet a swift end if it were to land in the hands of a foreign country.”

The agents he referred to were engaged in intelligence gathering and secret operations in order to protect the safety and prosperity of their home. They had dangerous jobs that forced them to hide their true identities. Should those identities be discovered, the agents in question would be tortured, interrogated, and inevitably killed. It was no different than if the empire were to discover foreign spies themselves. The same measures would be taken.

Interrogation and murder wouldn’t be necessary if the agent could be swayed by money, but those who became agents were rarely so weak of will; that was why they were selected for these missions in the first place. This made it absolutely imperative that information about a country’s agents could not be allowed to leak, under any circumstances. It was also why the information was so incredibly valuable to other countries.

“Are you trying to intimidate me?” Caius’s eyes, formerly full of rage, burned now with hatred. “This is a clear act of betrayal. Not just against me, but against the empire. Are you truly prepared for what this means?”

“Heh. Do you intend to kill me? You’re welcome to try, since you have me right here. But remember...plenty of your proud patriots are in the same boat as me.”

Johann was strong, but he was no match for the entire military might of the Velnant Empire. The problem was that he wasn’t about to meekly allow Caius to kill him. He’d make sure that the documents were leaked first, and that would

be a crushing blow to Velnant. Caius clenched his teeth hard, realizing he was trapped, and the defeat began to show in his face.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I already told you—I want to fight the snake. All you have to do, Your Highness, is give me your tacit permission to do so. I won’t ask for anything more.”

“You’ll throw it all away? Everything you’ve earned, just to fight that bratty snake?”

Johann nodded, and Caius looked utterly exasperated.

“You’re insane... What happened to wanting to become a hero?”

“That hope of mine persists. I wanted to be a hero so I could carve the proof of my existence upon the world. But a hero isn’t always the people’s champion. I want to be a hero that I can look up to. Someone I can be proud of. That’s all I want.”

The idea of becoming a hero everyone looked up to, of standing at the peak of the Seeker world to face off against the Valiant, was indeed an appealing one. If Johann hadn’t felt the tug of destiny to move from being a Messiah by name to a Messiah by actions, he would have been lying. Even so, Johann was a realist. Rather than battle some unknown enemy that lingered in the distant future—namely, the Valiant—what he wanted now, above all else, was to feel the sparks of fighting an enemy that sent his heart racing. That enemy was right there in Wild Tempest.

“That boy is most intriguing. He’s worthy of me going all-out, even worthy of dying by my hand.”

Johann’s statement was definitive. Caius could do little but sigh.

“I’m done dealing with this lunacy,” the prince said. “Do as you wish.”

Caius turned and headed for the door. But a moment before he got there, he paused.

“You lived as you wanted. Now you must end things the same way, hero.”

With that, Caius left, leaving Johann to bow as he faced the door.

“I am forever grateful for the kind words, Your Highness.”

Not long afterward, the door burst open, and Zero entered the drawing room. When his eyes met Johann’s, his face bloomed with an astonished smile.

“I saw His Highness at the clan house entrance. He was furious! I had a bad feeling about it, but even then, I never imagined you’d really put things into motion. You’re unbelievable.”

Zero had known what was coming. Johann merely shrugged.

“I’m used to people getting angry at me,” he said.

“Then maybe reflect on it a little!”

“I don’t like to look back too often. I’d rather live with my eyes on the horizon.”

Johann laughed easily and put a cigarette in his mouth. He lit it, inhaled deeply, then let out a puff of smoke.

“I’m sorry that I made the decision without talking to you about it. But it’s done now.”

“What about the clan members?”

“They’re all talented and skilled. They’re sure to land on their feet even without the clan. I intend to pay each of them handsomely from the clan’s treasury, anyway.”

“You’re shirking your responsibility. They adore you. Don’t you feel the slightest bit sorry for them?”

“I don’t. I am who I am. I’m not going to change how I live just to show them a little kindness.” Johann smiled. “If they really do adore me, then they’re free to join me in the upcoming battle. It’s going to be a blast. Everyone will finally be able to cut loose.”

“That’s easy enough to say, but who’s going to convince them to join you?”

“My most trusted vice-master, of course.”

Zero’s jaw dropped.

“You’ll do it, won’t you?” asked Johann.

“I have never wanted to kill you more than I do today,” replied Zero. “Fine, I’ll cut all the members from the clan and hire anyone who wants to join us as mercenaries. That way, they won’t bear any of the bigger responsibilities for all of this.”

“Very well. I trust you to handle it,” Johann said, nodding.

A somewhat suspicious look crossed Zero’s face.

“Are you taking up this fight because time is ticking? You don’t have long left, is that it? That’s why you want to give everything to this fight with the snake instead of the Valiant?”

“Well, there’s still life in me yet, although I’ll definitely be weaker by the time the Valiant shows up. If I’m going to give everything I have to battle, then I want to fight a fitting opponent. Not that I’m saying that’s the only reason...”

There were some feelings inside him that Johann couldn’t put into words. He’d made this decision in an attempt to better grasp those feelings.

“And you don’t mind if that opponent is the snake, Noel Stollen?”

Johann gave a confident nod. “I want him,” he said.

Zero’s face lightened and he laughed. “Understood. I’ll be right there with you until the end.”

“You always have.”

“Do you have a particular strategy in mind?”

“Until now, the Snake has never once shied away from showing us his very particular type of hospitality. It’s about time we returned the favor. So we’ll welcome him into our world, and we’ll do it our way.”

When Johann grinned, it was like a beast baring its fangs.

“We’ll do it like old times,” he said. “Like bandits.”

“It’s no good. The treatment doesn’t make a difference; his recovery will be a slow one. Don’t expect him to wake for quite some time.”

The Seeker medic's expression was grave as he explained the situation to Leon in the clan house infirmary.

"I see. Thank you."

Leon nodded. He gazed at Noel, lying in bed, asleep but in obvious pain. It had been five days since he'd been brought to the clan house. He'd been conscious when he arrived, but he quickly fell into a deep sleep. He still hadn't woken from it. The medic, a Healer, had tried a variety of methods. None seemed to have an effect.

"Hugo, you were right..."

Hugo, standing near Leon, inclined his head. "Noel's soul is damaged. I am sure of it."

The soul was the essence of life. It was the soul that permitted so much varied potential to exist within people who shared the same human flesh. It was the reason individuals had their own will, and it was intertwined with the mental and spiritual state. In no uncertain terms, the soul was the true, ineffable essence of life.

When the soul was injured or damaged, even healthy people would grow weak and eventually die. The biggest problem was that there were no known methods to mend broken souls. Some recovered; some died. It all depended on the individual's will to live.

"Either he was attacked by a soul-damaging skill, or he fought in a way that damaged it... If what he told us is true, then it was the latter. Right?"

Hugo looked at Loki for confirmation. He was the one who brought Noel here. He'd told them everything he knew—that Noel had fought Lorelai's vice-master, Zero, but that victory had left him completely unable to move.

"I didn't tell no lies. He beat Zero."

"It's just so hard to believe," Leon muttered. "We're talking about a Talker beating a Dark Knight. Dark Knights *specialize* in fighting human opponents."

Hugo shrugged. "That must be why this happened. I do not know what he used to win, but that power came at a huge cost. I had the syringe Noel was

holding analyzed, but the contents of it were already gone. Even these two don't recognize it, and they have been with Noel longer than us."

Hugo was referring to Alma and Koga.

"He didn't tell me nothin'," said Koga sulkily. "He must've wanted to keep it a secret from us too."

Alma nodded. "I didn't hear anything either," she said, but unlike Koga, she didn't seem upset by it. "Noel doesn't like getting any closer to people than necessary. Never has. If he doesn't have to say anything to us, he won't. Even if we knew what was going on, we couldn't have done anything about it. If he didn't ask us for help when he needed us, then we have to assume he made the right decision...even if it annoys me."

Leon's brow furrowed at Alma's cold take on the situation.

"Alma, aren't you worried about him?" he asked. "He might never wake up, you know?"

"He'll wake up. That's who he is. He's tenacious...like a snake. He could get broken and beaten to the last, tiniest scrap of his life—but he's still not gonna die until he makes it to the top."

"That's little more than blind faith."

"Call it what you want. As long as that faith's enough for me, I don't need to be right. Besides, I don't want to hear that from someone who doesn't even believe in themselves."

"What are you trying to say?"

Alma snorted. "Pfft. I'm saying that instead of being here getting all frustrated, don't you have a job you should be doing? Isn't that why you're the vice-master?"

Leon had no retort. Even though he understood that, his feelings were still at the forefront. Whatever reasons Noel might have had, *he* was the one who went off entirely on his own. It was *Noel* who did not trust his teammates and who hadn't told them what he needed to. So why was it up to Leon to clean up the mess he left behind?

Leon glared at Alma, and then Koga jumped in between them.

“Whoa, whoa,” he said. “This is no time to be gettin’ into fights. We won’t get nowhere if we waste time at each other’s throats.”

“How terribly stupid,” muttered Hugo, his voice frigid. He’d been quietly listening the whole time. “The two of you clearly rely on Noel far too much. It is not just Alma, Leon. You have your own brand of blind faith in Noel. When Noel is away, or out of commission, you have the power and the right to make whatever decisions you deem fit.”

“I...”

Leon was at a loss for words. Just then, the door to the infirmary burst open and a clan house employee stormed in.

“I have a new report! Tron has fallen!”

The employee went on to explain that the city of Tron in the Cormand domain had fallen. The sudden news left everyone in a state of shock.

“Do we have any reports from the scene itself? What’s the situation?” Leon asked.

“Much like the two cities before it, Tron was burned to the ground after the sudden arrival of a mysterious armed militia. The lord of the domain appears to have been taken prisoner. No civilians were killed, but their army was crushed, and the city has taken severe damage. It looks like the Velnant government has decided to dispatch the military, but...”

“But they’re not actually doing anything to stop the militia; they’re just going through the motions of looking like they are.”

Tron was now the third city to have fallen. Amid the panic in the Velnant Empire, the government was reacting in an inexplicably passive fashion; there were no signs it would move to dispatch the regalia. It was almost as if the government had given tacit approval of the militia’s actions.

“There’s no mistaking it now,” said Hugo, his face grave. “That militia is Lorelai. All the lords who have been taken hostage were those who took against Johann by listening to Noel. I don’t know how exactly they did it, but they’ve

gotten permission from the government. Perhaps the imperial family wants to make an example of those lords as well.”

“But there’s no way Lorelai can go this far without having to face up to their actions... Do they intend to just throw away everything they’ve done?” Leon wondered aloud.

“It is not that they *intend* to,” Hugo said curtly. “They already have. They’ve given up their position on the regalia and dropped out of the train system plans. Lorelai is now officially no more than a group of bandits. Having given up everything, they’ve made themselves ‘invincible’ in a sense. They are impervious to any words and laws thrown their way.”

“But why would they do that?!”

“You still don’t see? By stepping off the stage, they are foisting all the responsibility on Wild Tempest. Noel was the one who took a huge portion of the success that Lorelai worked for. They will not allow this to be overlooked. That is what they’re saying with their actions. *‘It’s your turn now. If you’re going to stop us, you’ll have to do so by force.’*”

“That’s it? But that’s...” Leon was practically speechless. Koga then raised his hand.

“Hang on a sec. If Lorelai’s gonna throw it all away to fight us head on, isn’t that a huge chance for us? It is, right? Usually a clan that big wouldn’t bother with newbies like us...but now, they’re just a buncha bandits clamoring for a ruckus. Our stock’ll soar if we win a battle this big, yeah? Then we’re a shoo-in for the regalia.”

“The difference of power between us and Lorelai is depressingly massive. We don’t stand a—”

Leon nearly said *chance*, but he stopped himself. Real Seekers didn’t limit themselves to battles they were sure to win. Koga was right. The situation presented a great opportunity. Losing meant losing everything, but winning meant a potential—no, practically guaranteed—place on the regalia.

Then Leon looked at Noel. Had he known this all along? Had he predicted that Johann Eissfeldt would throw it all away just to crush Wild Tempest? Was it

even possible for him to know?

“As vice-master, I will let you know our next course of action before the day is through. I just need a little time.”

Leon left the infirmary and headed for his personal quarters.

Upon returning to his own room, Leon weighed his options.

“To retreat, or to fight?”

There wasn't much time. If he didn't decide soon, it didn't matter which of the two options he chose. It would be too late to do either.

If they chose to retreat, their path to the regalia would be blocked for good. They would endure the crushing responsibility for these events, and they'd probably find themselves drowning in debt. Nobody in the clan wanted that. However, it would allow them to avoid a battle in which their chances of victory were almost nonexistent. Rank, honor, money—none of that mattered if you were dead.

If they chose to fight, it would mean risking death for all of them. Though it was a Seeker's job to dive headfirst into dangerous battles, their most favorable chances of victory against Lorelai were no higher than one percent. Lorelai was staffed with 7 A-Rankers, 65 B-Rankers, and 18 C-Rankers. According to Wild Tempest's research team, every single member of Lorelai was on board with Johann's rampage. The man had such charisma, it was certain that his clan would greet any battle with high morale.

There was probably no way for Wild Tempest to come out on top. This was not an issue of confidence in the face of danger or ignoring reason by way of sheer violence and brutality. In the end, it was simple: diving into a battle you were sure to lose was the act of fools.

The only person who could overcome such circumstances was Noel. He had the brains to make the impossible possible. Regardless of the fact that Wild Tempest was a new clan, in an incredibly short time he had made them recognized candidates for a spot on the regalia.

Leon was ready to stake his life on a battle against Lorelai. But as long as Noel was comatose, there was no path that would lead them to victory.

“Hugo was right,” he sighed.

He could ponder the issue forever, but he still wouldn’t find a way to succeed without Noel’s support. He really did rely on Noel too much. That “blind faith” jab had a lot of truth to it.

Noel had once told him that the second-in-command earned their position *because* they held different opinions from the person in charge. It promoted variety and diversity in a group and helped them progress without roadblocks... but that was just theoretical talk. How did it work in reality?

Leon and Noel did consider things differently on a fundamental level—that much was true. Leon didn’t like Noel’s underhanded methods, and in his heart, he could never come to terms with the way his own party had been disbanded. Noel’s power, though, was the real deal. His battle abilities were nothing worth discussing, but his smarts and courage were already considered top class when compared across the entire empire. He had the air and the dignity of an experienced clan master. Leon couldn’t compare. He was stronger than Noel, with a much longer career, but he had nothing on Noel when it came to leading an entire organization.

They couldn’t win. And because they couldn’t win, Leon kept trying to think like Noel, tracing his thoughts, even though he was precisely the standard Leon couldn’t meet. This left him facing a wall far too high to climb, rendering him unable to take even a single step forward. It was just like Alma said. He couldn’t even believe in himself.

“It’s exactly the same as back then...”

Back when he hadn’t trusted his teammate Keim, his former clan—the Winged Knights—had been defeated and disbanded. He could never fight alongside those members again. It had all been a result of Leon’s incompetence and his failure to act in those moments. Yet here he was, on the brink of repeating that mistake. Was he about to walk into another embarrassing defeat because he couldn’t trust the people he fought alongside? Would he make a fool of himself all over again?

“No. I have to do what I couldn’t back then.”

Leon needed to lead the clan with a grit that was different from Noel’s. This was Leon’s job, his responsibility. It was why he was the vice-master.

He reached for a letter in the drawer of his desk that was still sealed shut with wax. Keim had sent it. Leon had been unable to read it ever since it arrived. He’d been...afraid. Now, though, he knew he had to change and take a decisive step forward. Leon opened the envelope and began to read the letter inside.

The letter began with a sincere apology full of heartfelt regret. Keim wrote that the disbanding of the Winged Knights had been entirely his fault. He’d ignored Leon’s wishes with his own selfish feelings, labeled him their betrayer, then stabbed him. His mental weakness was no excuse. Keim felt he had done something he could never take back, and for that he was sorry.

“No... I pushed you into it, Keim... You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Leon wiped away his tears, unable to hold his sobbing back. After the apology, Keim wrote about how he was doing. Having hurt those who were closest to him, he was now traveling and thinking about what he wanted to do next. He wasn’t alone—Ophelia was with him. The two were traversing the Velnant Empire in search of what they had been missing. Through meeting and interacting with a wide variety of people, they were getting in touch with what they most lacked. Keim wanted to visit and see foreign countries to expand their horizons even further.

“So you’re with Ophelia now,” Leon muttered, smiling with relief. “I’m so glad... I’m so glad you’re both well...”

Leon felt genuinely happy for them. He followed the rest of the letter with his tear-filled eyes and arrived at a request.

“When my journey comes to an end, I will return to the capital. When I do, I want to apologize. I won’t ask you to forgive me. However, if you do, I hope we can drink together at our old haunt and talk all night as we once used to. Nothing would make me happier than to hear of the adventures you’re getting up to, and with everything in my heart, I pray that you become a hero whose name is carved into the annals of history.”

The tears refused to stop flowing. Leon tried to hold it in, but the feelings continued to bubble up and spill over. He thought he'd lost everything. He'd decided to fight to protect those old memories. As long as people continued to praise him for his work as a Seeker, the Winged Knights would continue to live on in people's memories.

But somewhere in his heart, Leon felt that such efforts were ultimately pointless; he was humbling himself, working for the sake of a wish that nobody else understood. This proved he hadn't made a mistake. There was value in protecting the Winged Knights' name. The party was worth it. Leon had to be true to himself, even if he would never be recognized for his efforts, which meant he had to continue to fight.

It wasn't that he was tied down by the past. He was protecting the bonds he had forged with friends.

"He'd laugh at me if he were here, I bet."

Yes, Keim would chuckle and call Leon honest to a fault, maybe even tell him not to be so hard on himself. Leon was at peace with all of that now. That was the kind of guy that he was, always stumbling onward, believing with a naïve sincerity in what he felt to be right. That was Leon Fredric, and he would have to be proud of that fact. Once he acknowledged who he truly was, a path would open up before him. There would be no more running away.

"All right, Keim," he said with a chuckle. "I'll be strong."

There was a knock on the door.

"Vice-master? Are you there?"

"I am. Come in."

A clan employee entered—and obvious shock registered on their face at the sight of a man as big as Leon sporting a red face and puffy eyes. The employee's surprise was natural, considering what a rare scene it was. Realizing how he must look, Leon rushed to wipe the tears from his face.

"I-I'm fine! There's no problem! Uh... What do you want?"

"There are visitors here for the master," the employee said, voice heavy. "It's

a number of the lords currently being targeted, along with the director of Vulcan Industries.”

Leon stretched his arms. “So, the VIPs have all finally arrived...”

Leon knew their reason for coming. They’d come to order Wild Tempest to take care of Lorelai immediately. They had nowhere else to turn now that the imperial family had turned its back on them. Lorelai was easily strong enough to easily handle their armed forces, so it was no wonder that they were scared. Their status wasn’t all that was at risk now; their very lives were as well.

“Did you tell them about Noel?”

“No. I’ve told them nothing, just as you said. They’re in the drawing room.”

Leon could already see the guests flying into a mass panic the moment they learned of Noel’s comatose condition. They wouldn’t just scream and cry and fly into a rage either, but would also likely take actions to harm the clan. Noel’s condition had to remain a secret for now.

“Good. I’ll handle the rest.”

Leon stood from his chair and gave his own face a curt slap.

“The battle starts here. Time to get my game face on.”

In the drawing room stood four men dressed in tuxedos, each obviously of noble standing. If Leon’s memory served, then the three uptight older men were lords, and the chubby middle-aged gentleman was from Vulcan Industries.

There were no bodyguards in the room. They’d likely been made to wait outside. Still, regardless of whether there were bodyguards in wait, there would likely not be many. These men had visited the clan house in secret. They had lost the courage to stay even in their own domains now that Lorelai had painted targets on their backs. To put it plainly, they’d fled in fear. No doubt they would rather keep that fact hidden.

“I apologize for keeping you all waiting. I am Wild Tempest’s vice-master, Leon Fredric. Thank you all for coming so far to visit.”

Leon bowed politely. The four men’s eyes stayed on him.

“Where’s the snake?”

“Vice-master? We asked for the snake.”

“We have nothing to say to you. Bring us the snake.”

The snake. Noel, in other words, was who the three lords really wanted to talk to. They’d have a tough time forcing any words out of him in his current state.

“The master is currently out.”

“Out? Where did he go?”

“I apologize,” said Leon, “but that information is classified.”

“Classified?! Quit playing games!” The old man’s voice squeaked with hysteria.

Another voice rose to match him. “You’re hiding things from us?! Now?!”

“Whose fault do you think all of this is?!”

“This is all your fault! You were too big for your britches, and now you’ve brought the pain down on all of us!”

“Do you have any idea how the people are suffering because you made Lorelai angry?!”

“If your clan hadn’t been here, none of this would have happened!”

“If the snake isn’t here, then at least bring us someone useful!”

“This is all the snake’s fault! We’re the victims here!”

“That’s right! *We’re* the victims! And we expect the snake to take full responsibility!”

The rain of childish, self-righteous complaints grew thick and fast. Leon quickly grew sick of them. If this was what it meant to be part of the nobility, then the rot ran deep. Yes, it was Noel who had tempted them into voicing objections to Johann’s plans. Yes, Noel’s share of responsibility was a considerable one. Still, however much they were tempted, it was the lords themselves who made the final decision as to whether to act... And now here they were, choosing to play the victims. There was nothing to call it but shameless. They were the ones driven by their own greedy ambitions.

These cowards had thought only of their own hides when fleeing their lands, yet they had the gall to talk as if they were worried for their own people. Ludicrous. These outdated, old-fashioned, and prehistoric geezers believed only in the value of their own nobility, and they needed to learn their place.

“Excuse me!” shouted one of them. “I’m talking to you! Are you even listening?! Or are you as stupid as you look? I said I want to speak to the snake so you’re going to—*aghhhh*!”

The old man ate Leon’s fist before he could finish his sentence. Leon had pulled the punch enough that the man wouldn’t die, but he crumpled and passed out all the same, a thick trail of blood flowing from his nose. The two other old men fell into a moment of stunned silence at the show of violence, but their faces quickly turned red with rage.

“Y-you bastard! Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?!”

“You’re a barbarian! Don’t think you’ll get away with striking a noble, you brute!”

Leon snorted, looking down on the two men.

“Oh, I’ll get away with it,” he said. His words were cold enough to freeze the old men in place, and their shoulders trembled with fear. “As it stands, you don’t even have the right to call yourselves nobility. You’re nothing but frauds, cowards who abandoned their own lands in fear of Lorelai. You’re like pigs stuffing yourselves with taxpayer money, unable to even do your own jobs. Each and every one of you is an embarrassment.”

Leon hit the old men where it hurt most. They glared at him but soon turned their gaze away and shut their mouths. He was right. They’d abandoned their duties, and they had no right to call themselves nobles. Here, now, they were powerless old men and nothing more. They couldn’t hope to stand up to the power of a man like Leon, a Seeker who fought on the front lines.

“All the same,” said Leon, “you can rest easy. We will protect you.”

“R-really?!”

The pitiful old men looked at Leon with hope in their eyes. Leon smiled and nodded.

“Of course. For the right price. It’s 10 billion fil per person.”

“Wha—ten *billion*?! That’s beyond ridiculous!”

“But you have the means to pay it, don’t you? I know you all keep money hidden away.”

In truth, Leon did *not* know. For greedy, evil old men like this, however, it was something of a safe bet. The hesitation painted across the old men’s faces instantly proved that his assumption had been correct.

“And you’ll really protect us if we can pay you 10 billion, yes?” The question came from the Vulcan Industries director, who had remained silent until now. “I did not betray Johann, but his wrath is sure to fall on us eventually. I don’t fear death, but I *am* afraid of our plans coming to a total deadlock. The railway is imperative for the future of the Velnant Empire, and it is certain to bring with it both riches and prosperity. I wish to leave my name in the history of our great empire.”

Leon knew that the man spoke the truth. His eyes sparkled with ambition akin to Noel’s.

“I promise. We will protect you.”

“Then I believe you. I will prepare the money and have it sent first thing tomorrow.”

The director left the room without another word. Leon turned to the old men.

“And how about you?”

“I... I will pay for your protection...”

“Me too...”

“Then make it quick. We want the money upfront. Now, you take that unconscious old man over there, and you get him up to speed. We won’t commit to any action until we have 30 billion from the three of you.”

In contrast to the nobles’ grim faces, Leon smiled.

“Get back to your lands as soon as possible. Be the dignified lords you’re supposed to be. Put on that arrogant swagger you’re always showing.”

“B-but it’d be dangerous to go back, wouldn’t it? Lorelai is coming...”

“That’s what we’re for. What *you* should worry about is what will happen if they beat us. If your inability to do your jobs is made public, your land will be taken from you, and I’m sure you’ll never win it back.”

“That’s true, but...”

“Besides, I have to add a condition to our deal.”

“A condition?”

Leon nodded. His resolution shone clear in his face.

“Once the air clears and this incident is over, you *will not* reclaim the funds you lost by digging into taxpayer money. You will protect your people through the correct mediation of government and taxes. If you refuse, I will make it public that you fled your lands when they needed you most. Understand that if that happens, you will lose everything: your wealth, your honor, and your rank.”

Under Leon’s fierce gaze, the old men could do nothing but agree to his order.

When the old men finally left the drawing room, the rest of Wild Tempest’s main team entered in their place. It seemed they’d been listening to everything from outside.

“Forty billion in total! I wouldn’t expect anything less from the second-in-command to the snake,” said Hugo, clapping his hands in appreciation.

“That took some real guts,” Koga said. His bold grin made it clear that a fire had been lit inside him. “If you’d lost yer nerve, they woulda trampled ya into dust.”

“You did better than I expected, so...good job,” said Alma. She walked over to Leon and smacked him lightly in the chest.

Everybody was aligned in their appreciation of Leon’s work. So aligned, in fact, that they knew exactly what Leon would say next.

“You all heard the conversation, so you know my decision. Wild Tempest is going to meet Lorelai on the battlefield. This battle will be harder than any

we've fought, but we've got every reason to take it. Losing is not an option," Leon said. He spoke quietly but with a strong-willed and unwavering voice. "I'm giving you an order in place of the clan master. Take down anybody who stands in our way!"

The three voices replied as one.

"Yes, sir!"

Though the southwest domain of Bascoud was now part of the empire, it had once been under the control of the Mediola Kingdom. It was one of three countries to be absorbed by the empire after the kingdom was annihilated by the Cocytus.

The lands of Bascoud were warm all year round, and even in winter, temperatures never dropped below ten degrees. However, because of strange weather this particular year, it grew cold enough to snow. Although the snowfall wasn't enough to pile up across the cities and roads, the locally revered Table Mountain was covered in a thick layer of it.

Bascoud was not far from Tron, the subject of Lorelai's attack. It was also another domain that had chosen to betray Johann. There was no doubt that Lorelai would now turn its sights on Bascoud's largest city, Juan Maria.

In order to meet Lorelai before the clan arrived, Leon had set up Wild Tempest's forces on the roads not far from Juan Maria, where the townsfolk had since been evacuated.

"It's freezing..."

Standing next to Leon was a handsome man with a mop of brown hair and two swords strapped to his back: Wolf, the clan master of the Mirage Triad.

"Yes, it is," said Leon. "Not as cold as it gets in the capital, but you're never at an advantage fighting with the cold running through your body. Tell your team to be careful, yeah?"

"Vice-master's already taken care of that."

Wolf gestured with his chin at Veronica, giving orders to the team.

“I’m pretty much clan master in name only. Even my old team members from the Lightning Bite listen more to her than they do to me. I’m telling you, it’s a raw deal...”

Wolf gave an irritated shrug, and Leon chuckled.

“All the same, *you’re* the clan master of the Mirage Triad, Wolf. Your team will obey your decisions. I know I’m repeating myself here, but I appreciate you taking on my contract.”

Leon gave a light nod to convey his gratitude, and Wolf waved him away with a bashful shake of the hand.

“You paid us up front, and you paid us well. We don’t need your thanks.”

“He’s right! We don’t.”

A commanding voice cut in from the side. It was Veronica, a woman with chestnut hair. She was standing between Wolf and Leon before they’d even noticed her arrival.

“You paid us,” she said, “and we intend to carry out your contract to the very best of our abilities. Remember what I said when we drew up that contract, though: We are nothing more than mercenaries. Should you, our employer, become unable to fight or die in battle, we will retreat immediately. The relationship between Wild Tempest and the Mirage Triad is purely one established by our contract and the money that binds it. Please don’t forget.”

Wolf frowned at Veronica’s ice-cold delivery.

“Yo, Veronica, Leon knows that already. You don’t gotta go repeating yourself right here, just before we’re about to go into battle.”

“It’s *because* we’re about to go into battle that I’m repeating myself. I wouldn’t expect an irresponsible mutt like yourself to understand, but those at the top are responsible for keeping their teammates safe. You boys can keep your camaraderie and do as you wish, but I will not let that camaraderie overturn the agreement we already made.”

“Veronica, you—”

Wolf was about to jump into an argument when Leon stopped him with a

hand.

“It’s okay, Veronica. I get it. I won’t ask any more from you than what’s necessary. Only what’s in the contract.”

Leon had signed a contract with the Mirage Triad to hire them as mercenaries against Lorelai. Lorelai was overwhelmingly strong, so to even the odds, Leon needed the help of another clan. He’d chosen Mirage Triad. While Mirage Triad’s time as a clan had been short, the clan was full of capable Seekers. Lightning Bite, Red Lotus, King of Dukes—even before they’d combined to form Mirage Triad, each party had been well known for its members’ capabilities.

Leon’s only direct connection to the clan was Lycia, but he knew that they’d all started at about the same time and had something of a rivalry with Noel. When they held a battle to decide on the clan master of their new clan, Noel served as the official judge of the event.

Leon had leaned on this relationship between the clans when requested Mirage Triad’s aid, and in return, they’d happily accepted. Even Veronica, aside from her sharp warnings regarding the details, was all too excited to take part. The Mirage Triad received 10 billion fil in full upfront. As a bonus, this was a huge opportunity for a new clan looking to carve out a name for itself.

As for the clan’s overall strength, Mirage Triad had Wolf, Veronica, Logan, Lycia, and four other B-Rank Seekers. It also had 20 C-Rank Seekers, though about half of those were easily able to keep up with any B-Ranker. The clan may have lacked A-Rank Seekers, but it was still packed full of talent.

Lorelai had 7 A-Rank Seekers, 65 B-Rank Seekers, and 18 C-Rank Seekers. The difference was stark. Even with Mirage Triad’s support, Wild Tempest was at a disadvantage. Under normal circumstances, it would be a one-sided beating. Though Leon had wanted to hire more mercenaries, there were no other clans they could trust outside of the Mirage Triad, and hiring people you didn’t trust was equal to throwing money into the wind. Leon only wanted to hire the type of people he knew would fight with everything they had.

Given their position, and their inability to strengthen their forces any further, Wild Tempest needed to focus on protecting its most powerful member: Hugo. If Hugo fell, so would the clan. Koga and Alma were to act as his protection.

Leon looked over at them, and they both nodded back, their eyes alight with the fire of battle.

“You’re really sure Lorelai’s coming, right?”

The question came from Logan, whose powerful frame was followed by Lycia and Leon’s former teammate, Vaclav.

“I’m sure. Their real goal is a final confrontation with us anyway. As long as we wait here, they’ll come whether we want them to or not.”

Logan nodded, satisfied. “Good. I’m looking forward to finding out just how strong the regalia is.”

Arrogance dripped from his words, but Logan’s lack of fear toward his opponent actually helped to bolster Leon’s spirit. Logan was captain of the vanguard, meaning he was on the front lines. His actions and attitude there would determine others’ morale.

“Leon, why isn’t the snake here? Where’s Noel?” Vaclav asked.

They had once been teammates, but Vaclav had put a clear distance between them in his tone of voice. Their past had made things somewhat awkward between them, which saddened Leon. Still, it made some things easier—especially given the situation.

“Working on something else. He won’t be here.”

It was a lie. Leon hadn’t told Wolf or any of the others about Noel’s current condition. He’d only told them that Noel would not be coming.

“Understood. I’ll return to my post,” Vaclav said, but not before meeting Leon’s gaze for a short time in silence.

“He’s coming.”

These words, so full of certainty that Noel would eventually arrive, came from Lycia.

“Noel’s always loved making flashy entrances and impressing the crowd since we were rookies. And with a stage like this for us to fight on? There’s no way he has the patience to just sit there behind the scenes.”

Wolf, Veronica, and Logan all nodded.

“Guy really does love the spotlight.”

“We wouldn’t have taken the contract otherwise.”

“He’ll come. I’ll bet my entire savings on it.”

Leon couldn’t believe what they were saying. Noel was *comatose*. No matter how much he crawled, struggled, and fought, he was not coming. But even as he thought that, Leon felt a strange burst of hope—a feeling that maybe, just maybe, Noel really would appear.

“He just might,” Leon conceded with a smile.

“Leon!”

Lycia called out in a half shriek. She had the best perception of everyone here, and Leon knew what her cry meant the moment he heard it. He took a huge leap backward. The next moment, Leon’s throat was sliced open by an invisible blade. His evasive movements had kept his head from being entirely decapitated, but blood sprayed from the wound. He was dying. Aware of the danger, he engaged his skills immediately.

Paladin skill: *Light Veil*. Since ranking up to Paladin, the healing abilities of *Light Veil* had increased, and the gaping wound in Leon’s neck closed. Leon’s ability to use skills while carrying a fatal wound was due to his *Angel Wings*. Leon was born with a smoother flow of magical energy than most ordinary people, and these *Angel Wings*, as they were called, let him use skills in an instant.

Leon still fell to his knees, even after healing his wound. He had no choice. All of his energy seemed to leave his body in an instant.

“Th-this is...”

It was poison. The blade he’d been hit with was poisoned. He wasn’t just stuck and unable to move, he was also unable to breathe. He couldn’t use his skills either. His field of vision drew narrow, and while that was happening, he sensed an invisible enemy moving in to attack.

“*Homing Arrows!*”

“Flame Wing!”

The two young women’s voices came almost simultaneously as Leon struggled with his dilemma. Lycia let loose a countless number of arrows with her B-Rank Archer class, Hawk Eye, while Veronica let loose a stream of flaming birds with her B-Rank Wizard class, Magician. Both attacks flew toward their unseen enemy, equipped with the ability to pursue their foe.

The attacks hit their enemy directly. The resulting shock wave exploded into the ground, sending powerful gusts of wind back toward them. Behind the swirling clouds of dust and dirt was a man in a pitch-black robe with a shortsword in hand.

“Heh heh heh.”

The looming, spindly man was entirely unscathed. He chuckled at Leon and the others, clicking his tongue and shaking a finger at them. In the next instant, Wolf and Logan leaped toward him. Wolf was a B-Rank Swordsman, a Gladiator, while Logan was a B-Rank Fighter with Monk skills. Wolf’s two swords and Logan’s powerful fist collided directly with the man...or so it seemed.

At the very moment that the two attacks were about to hit, the man slid backward and out of the way, as though he were sliding along the earth. Wolf and Logan readied themselves for a quick follow-up attack, but their bodies went tense, and they dropped to their knees. Poison again. They were in the same boat as Leon; the enemy had poisoned them both as he evaded their attacks.

There was little time to recover. Even if the three of them wanted to use an antidote, it was pointless trying until they knew what poison they were dealing with. Just as they were readying themselves for the end, each was struck with a thin needle.

“Leon! You can move!”

Alma had thrown the needles at them, each needle tip coated with a neutralizing antidote. Assassin skill: *Blood Poison* could produce poison and antidotes from one’s blood. Alma had quickly determined the poison based on all of their symptoms, and the effects of her antidote were immediate. Leon, Wolf, and Logan all got to their feet.

“Divine Impact!”

Leon released a ball of light from his sword at the same time as he stood. Thanks to his speedy casting rate, Leon’s long-distance attack skill gave their opponent no space to run, and it hit him directly. The attack didn’t neutralize the man completely, but it was a severely damaging attack that covered him in burns. Wolf and Logan moved in to finish him off, but Leon rushed quickly to stop them.

“Stop! He can still attack!”

Wolf and Logan stopped in their tracks just as thorns thrust up from the ground, brushing the tips of their noses. If Leon had been a moment too late in his warning, they’d have been skewered completely.

“Shadow Arm... So we’re dealing with an Assassin... No, it’s a level up from that. He’s a Death Apostle.”

Death Apostle was an A-Rank Scout specialization. As if in response to Leon’s words, the man grinned. His wounds healed in seconds before their eyes; somebody was healing him. Leon was on guard, searching for a Healer he could not see. Then, the space behind the Death Apostle suddenly split into countless fractures.

A hole opened in space, and a force of powerful warriors emerged from it. Leading them was a man with silver hair sporting a red jacket with a standing collar.

“I’ve been desperate to see you, Wild Tempest.”

The man opened his arms wide, an enraptured smile on his face as though he were welcoming a lover into his arms. He was none other than...

“Johann Eissfeldt.”

Wild Tempest now found itself face-to-face with its rival clan: Lorelai.

Lorelai had arrived via a group teleport skill, a power only available to high-ranking Wizards. At their head, Johann Eissfeldt looked over Leon and his forces with a leisurely calm.

“So many new faces, and I see you’ve hired mercenaries! A wise choice... But what of the snake?”

Leon did not answer. Johann’s shoulders drooped.

“Such a pity. He still hasn’t recovered, then?”

“I told you, didn’t I? You pay the price for using that kind of power.”

The voice came from the brown-skinned young man standing next to Johann: Lorelai’s vice-master, Zero. Though he’d lost his battle against Noel, he seemed no worse for wear.

“Indeed, it would seem you were right. In which case, the snake is the main dish, and what stands before us now are our appetizers.”

Johann’s eyes filled with a sudden ferocity. He was preparing to strike.

“Battle formations, everyone! It’s—”

Leon couldn’t even say *starting* because Johann was already closing in. Leon readied his shield, unleashing two Paladin skills: *Holy Shield* and *Iron Will*. Both would significantly boost his defense.

Johann was an A-Rank Lancer with the Rune Lancer subclass. He had a wealth of mid-range attack skills. Leon had heard that in battle, Johann was able to change the shortsword at his waist into a full-length spear. Leon expected Johann to ready that spear as he closed in in a bid to unleash his mid-range attacks.

“What?!”

Johann didn’t even touch his spear. Instead, he maintained full speed as he slipped into striking range of Leon. Then, instead of a spear, he threw a punch with his right hand, his fist wrapped in a golden chakra.

“*Fort Crusher*.”

Fort Crusher was a skill belonging to the High Monk subclass, available only to A-Rank Fighters. Fighters had the unique ability to transmute their magic into chakra, an energy that vastly boosted their physical abilities. When that chakra was focused into a single point, the user’s fists were literally capable of crushing forts. It overwhelmed defensive skills and was capable of critical hits fifty times

more damaging than regular attacks.

“Gaaaaaaaah!”

Leon’s shield caught the brunt of *Fort Crusher* head-on and shattered into dust. The shield was crafted from the finest mithril, but Johann had broken it as easily as if it were made of hard candy. Not only was the shield broken completely, but the hand Leon had clasped the shield with was also shattered into pulp by the attack.

Impossible! Leon thought. *Johann is a Rune Lancer!* How had he been able to use a High Monk skill all of a sudden? Was this even Johann? After an instant of searing pain and utter shock, Leon refocused his concentration on the battle. Whether this was a fake Johann or the real one didn’t matter; a person with that fighting ability had to be dealt with, and quickly.

Still within striking range, Johann prepared his left hand for a second attack. Leon couldn’t use his sword at this range, so he gave up on it entirely and leaned back before driving back in with a full-force headbutt.

The heavy noise of impact rattled Johann and sent him stumbling backward. When it came to thick skulls, Leon was the victor. He quickly followed up with a slash of his sword, but it sliced through air. Johann had already leaped up to avoid the strike and was using the momentum to unleash a spinning kick.

Though Leon was taken by surprise, the motion of the flying kick was clear enough that Leon was able to avoid it. Knowing that Johann was now stuck in the air, where he could not evade further strikes, Leon once again sliced at him with his blade. Again, nothing but air. This was not an ordinary evasive maneuver; Johann had vanished like smoke before Leon’s very eyes.

The instant Leon realized that Johann disappeared, he let loose a spinning back fist. The *Angel Wings* skill allowed him to quickly heal his broken left arm, which spun around and behind Leon, colliding directly with Johann’s face as he teleported behind him.

Johann spun through the air and collided with the floor. Leon had known immediately that Johann used the Fighter’s teleport skill, *Instant Wavedash*. He’d also felt the slight change in the atmosphere behind him and predicted it to be where Johann would turn up. It was the whole reason for the backfist.

Leon moved in toward the fallen Johann for a follow-up strike, but his legs froze in place as a tremendous pain suddenly struck him in the side. His face contorted in agony. Though Leon had hit Johann with his backfist, Johann's intended kick had also slammed into Leon's side.

"Ugh... *Light Veil!*"

Leon's healing skills repaired his damaged body, but...

"Huh?! I'm not healing?!"

Leon could tell from the pain his bones weren't the only thing that had suffered injury. His internal organs had sustained a serious blow as well. The damage was enough to kill him if he didn't heal it soon. But no matter how many times he tried to use his healing skills, his body would not heal.

"It's the Dragon Fist skill, *Path of Darkness*. The damage is irreparable. Well, so long as the caster doesn't die."

Johann had fallen to the ground, but he sprang back to his feet without even using his hands. After eating Leon's backfist, he didn't have a scratch on his face.

"You're quite something, I'll give you that," said Johann. "It's been twenty years since anyone landed a blow on me. Your problem is that you lack experience against human opposition. That's why you didn't know about *Path of Darkness*. Your skewed battle experience has left you with skewed battle smarts, and now I know exactly what kind of Seeker you are. No matter how honed your battle senses are, you're no match for me."

Johann was relishing this, basking at the peak of arrogance. He tilted his head to the side and laughed.

"So what now?" he asked. "You want to cry and beg for forgiveness? I may just forgive you."

Leon did not answer, but instead held a hand out behind him. As he did, a shield came flying at him with tremendous force. It came from Hugo, who had used Puppeteer skill: *Imitation*. Leon caught the newly forged shield and equipped it.

“Don’t assume we’ll go down that easy. We’re still going to win this.”

Johann chuckled. “Now that’s what I like to hear. Nothing better than a battle with your very life hanging in the balance.”

Leon and Johann each took a deep breath, then barked orders to their teams.

“All Seekers, attack!”

As they watched their leaders in battle, both sides sprang into action.

“A fight it is, then! *Legion!*”

The moment that the battle began, Hugo produced a hundred puppet soldiers with the Grandmaster skill: *Legion*. The horde consisted of 60 close-range soldiers. 20 long-range soldiers, and 20 support soldiers. All fought alongside the rest of the team in the battle against Lorelai. The close-range soldiers swung between offense and defense as was necessary, the long-range sniped from afar, and the support soldiers cast barriers and healing spells on their teammates.

The fight was especially fierce against Lorelai’s A-Rankers. The clan had five besides Johann and Zero, and they were incredibly strong. A single Death Apostle had completely overwhelmed Leon, Wolf, and Logan at the same time—a drastic outcome even for a surprise attack. In order to handle the others, Hugo’s puppet soldiers were indispensable. The Puppeteer was considered the most powerful class precisely because of how Hugo was using his soldiers, and now he was tasked with leading his teammates to victory.

By the same token, the fight would end the moment Hugo was taken out. The enemy was sure to know this too, and they weren’t going to spare any attacks on such a weak point.

“Hugo Coppélia, your scalp belongs to me.”

Standing before Hugo was a young man with brown skin and a black scythe. His voice was quiet, yet a furious roar throbbed through each word with perfect clarity.

“Not while I’m here!”

Koga—tasked with protecting Hugo—leaped at the scythe wielder with his sword slashing ahead of him. Each slice was as fast as lightning, but Zero merely grinned as he evaded each attack. Then, from behind him—from his very shadow—came a little white monster. It was Alma, using *Silent Killing*. Rank A or otherwise, he was as good as dead if she landed a direct hit. Just as her knife was about to land, Zero fired a back kick in her direction.

“Grrhk!”

Alma took the kick right in the guts and was catapulted into the distance. Zero didn’t miss a beat before he turned his scythe on Koga. Koga just barely got out of the way of the blade, but its attack was far from over. Using the momentum of his previous strike, Zero spun into a combination of slicing attacks like a tornado.

Zero’s scythe was a weapon that derived from Dark skill: *Death Scythe*. Formed with a huge amount of magic, the scythe could cut through space just as easily as it could its enemies. In other words, trying to block it was pointless. Anything less than dodging out of its way would prove fatal. Hugo had information about the Dark Knight profession. He’d shared it with the others, so both Koga and Alma knew the danger they faced in the scythe.

Koga deftly ducked and dodged each of the scythe’s attacks, but Zero outclassed him in terms of both skill and stamina. If Koga couldn’t find some way to strike back, he would eventually be sliced into pieces. Hugo’s close-range soldiers were of no use for support here; they couldn’t keep pace with Zero’s scythe, and since those puppets were constantly needed elsewhere on the battlefield, he couldn’t risk trying to use them here. Without Noel, Hugo needed to regulate his magic consumption or risk running out completely. That was the Puppeteer’s primary weakness: they required a large amount of magical energy.

To best support Koga, Hugo would have to use his long-range soldiers...but since Koga and Zero were currently locked in a heated battle of attack and defense, aiming only for Zero was extremely difficult. Even a long-range specialist with the *Bull’s-Eye* skill would hesitate before taking a shot. A prodigy the likes of Hugo made such a shot possible. He read both Zero’s and Koga’s movements, and as soon as Koga dropped from above his line of sight, Hugo

gave an order to a soldier located some distance away.

“Fire.”

The soldier was outfitted with a sniper rifle, and it had been in position before the battle started. In the very next instant, a bullet zoomed straight toward the back of Zero’s head. Hugo had measured the timing perfectly, but Zero darted away with the tiniest shift of his body.

“This abomination!” Hugo cursed, but he hadn’t lost his cool yet.

“Ice Blade!”

The slight pause in Zero’s scythe attacks gave Koga the chance to deploy one of his own skills. The clump of ice appeared and encased Zero within seconds. Behind it, a flash of white closed in faster than even a bullet.

“Accel—Vigintuple!”

“Iai Flash!”

Alma and Koga unleashed their attacks simultaneously. Alma’s blisteringly fast knife attack and Koga’s blade each slammed into Zero, still cocooned in the ice. This time they had him. Their timing was perfect. It didn’t matter if he was Rank A. No human could avoid such an attack.

“What the—?!”

Things were much more serious than Hugo had thought. The Dark Knight subclass specialized in fighting human opponents, but it did stem from the Swordsman class. In exchange for acquiring skills effective against humans, all base stats except agility were lowered, and they could not learn skills to help boost them. They weren’t so weak that they were lower than a B-Ranker, but they were firmly at the lower end of the A-Rank spectrum when compared to other close-quarters specialists.

So his next move should have been impossible.

“You think this ice is gonna stop me?” muttered Zero.

The clump of ice imprisoning Zero had been destroyed from the inside. Zero, now free, brought his scythe around, slicing deep gouges into Alma and Koga in one swing. Their quick reflexes saved them from being cut in half entirely, but

their stomachs were slit wide open, blood and innards already beginning to tumble from the open wounds.

“*Heal!*”

Hugo barked the order at his support soldiers, who healed Alma and Koga with haste. Their wounds sealed closed around their organs, newly returned to their rightful places. The shock of the damage still brought them down to their knees. Zero moved in on the two, who were still immobile. He raised his scythe for an attack, far too fast for them to defend in time. Zero’s attack speed exceeded Hugo’s ability to respond. He had no chance of saving them.

That was why he’d prepared backup.

“Rraaaaagggghh! *Vorpal Sword!*”

Wolf, who was fighting a different A-Ranker, charged Zero at high speed, bathed with purple light. This was the Gladiator skill: *Vorpal Sword*, which amped up the user’s muscles and granted them a massive speed boost that would surpass even the magnetic railroads of the far future.

The basic strategy of group battle meant dividing the enemy and defeating each division. Wolf was the strongest in Mirage Triad, and in order to ensure that he was able to move around the battlefield freely, Hugo had forced Lorelai to focus on his puppet soldiers. In doing so, Wolf and the puppet soldiers were able to work together and take down one of Lorelai’s A-Rank Seekers. Hugo had then sent a message to Wolf through his soldiers to come at once.

Zero took deft evasive maneuvers with supernatural reaction speed and avoided Wolf’s attack, but Alma and Koga were already moving into follow-up attacks.

“*Perfect Throw!*”

“*Crazy Cherry Blossoms!*”

An instant after Zero dodged Wolf’s attack, he was faced with countless steel needles and sword slashes.

“Grr!”

Zero leaped into the air to dodge the strikes. He then brought his scythe

around in a wide arc, destroying all of the needles that had locked on to him. Though he had managed to stop their attacks, he'd had to get airborne to do it, and now his movement was compromised. This was exactly what his opponents had been waiting for.

“Link Burst!”

Hugo sacrificed one of his long-range soldiers to perform a high-powered, long-range attack—and this time, it hit clean. Though Zero was able to defend against some of it with his scythe, it was obvious he'd been hurt. His body was in bad shape; now was their chance. Hugo didn't skip a beat before issuing orders to the others.

“He's no ordinary A-Ranker! The four of us will finish him here!”

Alma, Koga, and Wolf shouted back in affirmation. They would show no mercy. If the opportunity presented itself, they would kill without hesitation. They had to; Zero was an unknown quandary. He had inconceivable physical strength for a Dark Knight. Even if he was receiving buffs from his teammates, his original power levels couldn't be high enough for him to display this kind of strength. There had to be some trick behind it.

Since they didn't know the key to Zero's strength, they had no choice but to bring him down and stop him right here.

The fierce battle between the two A-Rankers, Leon and Johann, grew more intense as they continued their back-and-forth. Leon parried Johann's vicious strikes with his shield and struck back with counters. Having had his shield annihilated by Johann's first strike, Leon was now able to make better use of the Paladin's ironclad defenses by parrying Johann's attacks to the side instead of taking them on directly.

He couldn't emerge from the parries entirely unscathed, however. With each attack, Leon was taking damage to his shield arm, and it was worsening over time. He was constantly using his healing abilities to keep going, but the pain held steady, each fresh pulse threatening to knock him unconscious. Leon also had to grit through the wound in his side, which he could not heal. Any ordinary person would have died of shock already, but Leon was different.

“Graaaaargh!” he roared.

Leon’s fighting spirit never waned, no matter how much damage was inflicted upon his mind and body. Rather, each blow seemed to polish his sword and shield work, pushing them ever higher. He was undergoing an awakening. His latent abilities were being forced out of him by way of a battle that pushed him to his very limits—to the brink of death. He cast his humanity aside, fighting instead with the speed and ferocity of a wild beast, and he began to force Johann backward.

“Oho! This I like! More! Show me more of your power!” Johann cried.

Johann was a wild beast all of his own. Even on the back foot, his attitude of mental superiority didn’t flicker the slightest bit.

“*Golden Demon.*”

Johann’s body was coated in golden chakra. This skill boosted his chakra production to the very limits that his body allowed. While active, his physical abilities rose to the proportion of his chakra amount. Based on his current chakra, Johann had made himself at least sixty times stronger.

“Don’t you go dying on me yet, Leon Fredric!”

Leon was assaulted with strikes that blew those he’d faced earlier out of the water. He somehow managed to parry each blow as it came, but the speed and aggression on display were on another level entirely. Even with defensive skills in effect, the wounds ran deep. Soon, his healing skills wouldn’t be able to keep up with the damage he was taking.

Leon’s skin was breaking, his muscles were tearing, and his bones were fracturing. He was caked in his own blood, but his mind remained cold and sharp. He was entirely focused on only what he needed to do to win. He considered using *X Invincible*, but he knew it would do no good. That skill reflected all attacks, but Johann was probably fast enough now that he’d evade anything reflected back at him. In other words, *X Invincible* would not shift the tide of battle. Since the skill could only be used once every twenty-four hours, it needed to be saved for a truly decisive moment.

So what else could he do? Could he break through this situation with the skills

he had? Leon's thoughts blitzed through his brain as he fought off Johann's attacks, but he found no answers to his questions. But it was *because* he could not find an answer that he realized the solution.

If I do not have the skill, then I will make it.

People sometimes awoke to new skills through severe training. For Leon to defeat Johann, he would need such a skill. Unfortunately, you couldn't just *decide* to acquire a skill intentionally. No one had ever grown wings because they wanted to fly; no one grew gills or fins because they wanted to swim. In the same vein, nobody instantly generated a skill because they wanted a new one. What skills could be acquired depended largely on ability and compatibility, even within a single class. Skill books were devised for this precise reason. They were a source of knowledge—a way for people to learn any skill for a particular class.

There were no skill books on the battlefield. For Leon to learn a new skill now, he only had one option: to awaken to it through his own power and effort. Leon knew that was impossible...and yet, he also knew there was a time in a person's life when they had to push the limits, to defy the odds, and to reach beyond their means.

Leon wanted a skill like *Path of Darkness*. He assumed the skill worked by flowing the user's chakra into their enemy, which restricted their ability to heal. That was why it remained effective until the user died. Could a Paladin do something similar? Just as High Monks channeled their magic into chakra, Paladins channeled their magic into their light aura. They differed in the fact that chakra boosted the user's physical abilities, and light aura created an energy effective against beasts, but the two were similar at a foundational level.

Picture it. Focus, Leon thought. *What do I want once the light aura flows into my opponent? Destruction? No, not that. That's not the duty of a Paladin.* The image didn't fit. Leon could sense it. To awaken a skill, that skill had to complement the person using it. What Leon wanted was...

"You're losing focus!"

Johann's fist decimated Leon's shield and left his sword in pieces for good measure. Johann moved in on Leon, who was now empty-handed. The concept

for what lay in wait in this instant flitted through Leon's mind: death. At the very brink of calamity, Leon felt the door to new possibilities open.

Leon was quicker than Johann. He let loose a right punch of his own and hit Johann square in the chest. What Leon wanted was...a silent and decisive moment.

"Heaven's Law."

The new skill began to take effect.

"Wh-what is this?!"

It was the first sign of hesitation Johann had shown. His arms and legs were shackled by crosses. The shackles glowed with light, trapping Johann in the air.

"It's Heaven's Law. My new skill."

"New skill?! You think some new skill is enough to stop me?!"

Johann put his whole being into breaking the shackles, but they didn't budge. Johann was still trapped.

"Impossible... I can't break this at full power? Even with *Path of Darkness* in effect?!"

"It's because the skill is in effect that you can't break it. The power of those shackles comes from your chakra. *Path of Darkness* boosts your ability to produce chakra, so basically, those shackles are strong because you're strong."

Heaven's Law was a skill that worked by pouring an aura of light into the opponent and creating shackles that brought their chakra or other energy sources under the user's control.

"If you want to break those shackles, you're going to have to let go of all that chakra," Leon said calmly. "But you used the better part of your magic using *Path of Darkness*, so you'll be left unable to fight if you do so. This battle is over. I win."

Listening to Leon's explanation, Johann clenched his teeth as hard as he could. He looked around to see Leon's other teammates gradually gaining the upper hand. Lorelai was the more powerful clan, but Hugo's puppet soldiers were strong. The teamwork between them and Mirage Triad had broken

through Lorelai's ranks. Now Lorelai's only A-Rank Seeker left on the battlefield was Zero.

"Admit defeat, Johann Eissfeldt."

Right then, as Leon offered Johann a chance to surrender, there was a change in the air. A creepy sensation that Leon could not name, but that forced him to jump backward in retreat.

"Oh, you've got good instincts. You've defeated Diego; I can't deny that."

The once-vexed Johann suddenly had a smile on his face. If only *just* the smile had changed, Leon would have recognized it as a mere bluff. Johann would just be feigning comfort through the pain. Leon knew better. An unimaginable transformation had occurred within Johann.

"Who *are* you?" Leon asked.

The battle with Lorelai was reaching its conclusion. Hugo's puppet soldiers—in tandem with Mirage Triad—had left the better part of Lorelai unable to continue. Now it even seemed that Leon had bested Johann. The key player left to bring down now was the Lorelai vice-master, Zero. He was in an unfavorable position, defending against the barrage of attacks from Alma, Koga, and Wolf.

"Concentrate your attacks! Fire!"

Hugo brought together the puppet soldiers spread out in battle and moved them in as support against Zero. The long-range puppet soldiers kept up steady waves of fire, pushing Zero farther back.

"Idiot, follow my lead!"

"Who you callin' an idiot?!"

Koga let loose a complaint as he swooped in to support Alma, who was leaping toward Zero.

"*Secret Swordsmanship Tsubame Gaeshi!*"

The space filled with sword slashes, all set on attacking Zero at once.

"You two take the lead! Give it everything!"

Wolf headed in after Koga to add another layer of support for Alma. He raised his dual blades above his head and let loose a lightning attack.

“Take this! *Flash Hazard!*”

Zero did his best to evade all of it—the sword strikes, the bullets, the lightning—but Alma was waiting at the end of his evasive movements, ready for him and moving at top speed.

“It’s over,” she said. “*Quick Attack!*”

Alma’s knife plunged into Zero. At that very moment...

“Don’t get ahead of yourselves, fools!”

Zero’s face contorted with hatred. In an instant, he was fully transformed.

“A dragon?!”

The enormous black dragon that stood before all of them left Hugo in shock. Alma’s knife was stopped dead by the monster’s sturdy black scales—the blade didn’t even leave a scratch.

“Groooooaaaar!”

Zero let loose a roar that shook the skies as he swiped with arms as thick as giant trees. The resulting reverberations sent Alma, Koga, and Wolf flying off into the distance. With the three of them out of the picture, Zero turned his attention on Hugo and opened his mouth wide.

“Not good!”

What came forth from the mouth, filtering past its vast array of cragged teeth, was a high-intensity beam: *Dragon’s Breath*. This attack could pierce mountains—the support soldiers’ barrier wouldn’t stand a chance against it. Knowing that evasion and defense were both impossible, Hugo instead used a Puppeteer skill.

“*Shift Change!*”

Hugo instantly swapped places with one of his puppet soldiers, allowing him to get clear of the *Dragon’s Breath*. Everything in the area where Hugo once stood was melted to sludge in the aftermath of the attack.

“I see,” said Hugo. “So *that’s* where his true strength comes from.”

Nobody could have believed that Zero’s true form was a black dragon, yet there it was before their eyes. Still, now that Hugo’s dispersed puppet soldiers were ready to gather together in tight focus, even a black dragon could be taken down.

“Come,” said Hugo. “I will be your opponent. I—”

Hugo wasn’t afraid of the black dragon...but then, a sudden chill ran down his spine. Fear stole his words away. He saw a woman in a tunic at the furthest reaches of his sight. She was surrounded by too many monsters to count.

Those are... Those monsters are...

“Looks like it was a mistake to only worry about the A-Rankers.”

The woman showed off an elegant smile before bringing a whistle to her lips. The shrill sound echoed across the battlefield. In response, black lightning gushed forth from the monsters around her.

“Demi-beasts, engage battle mode.”

The woman gave her orders in a quiet voice. She was a B-Rank Talker: a Beast Tamer. In response to her orders, the demi-beasts began to growl.

“Grrrrgggrrrr...”

The demi-beasts, each one as capable in battle as a B-Rank Seeker, surrounded Hugo and the others.

“Who am I? You ask the stupidest questions. Leon Fredric, do you really not know who you’re fighting?”

Johann deftly evaded the question. Leon frowned.

“Then I’ll ask you once more. Who are you? That High Monk just now? That wasn’t the Johann I know. Johann knows the world and the way it works. He isn’t just some battle-obsessed warrior; he’s careful and thoughtful to an almost obsessive degree. And now you feel like a different person entirely. What the hell *are* you?”

Johann chuckled.

“Those guys and me... We’re all the same Johann Eissfeldt.”

“The same? Wait, no way... How is that even possible?”

Leon could do nothing but stand in shock as he began to realize the truth behind Johann’s identity. It went beyond all common sense. Something fell at Leon’s side as he was reeling—he was shocked anew when he realized what it was.

“A-Alma?! Why?!”

He used his healing skills to mend Alma’s wounds at once. Gritting her teeth through the pain, Alma opened her eyes.

“I’m...gonna kill that guy...”

“That guy? You mean Zero?”

Alma nodded and pointed in the direction she’d been thrown from. The arc she indicated led Leon’s eyes to the hulking form of an enormous black dragon. *When did that get here?* The question fluttered through Leon’s mind, but in an instant, the answer was clear.

“That monster...is Zero?”

“Yeah. That’s what he’s been hiding all this time.”

“How are Koga and Hugo?”

“Hugo is outside of its attack range. He’s fine. As for Koga... Don’t know. He and Wolf both went flying, like me.”

Meaning they were somewhere on the battlefield, perhaps unconscious.

“Got it. I need you to find the two of them, then focus everyone on the dragon. It’s big, but if all of us combine our strength, we’ll—” He couldn’t even manage to add *emerge victorious* before he noticed the new additions to the fray. “You have got to be joking...”

Countless monsters came into sight. Those were demi-beasts, if his memory served.

“Hang on! Aren’t demi-beasts only effective when they’re in an Abyss?!” Leon

shouted.

Johann enjoyed watching the confusion play across Leon's face.

"You'd be exactly right, in most cases," he said. "A Beast Tamer's orders are what make them capable of entering battle mode even outside of an Abyss. Puts quite the strain on their bodies, but we're no longer part of the railway plans anyway. It makes no difference to us if we lose the demi-beasts here."

Leon grit his teeth as he listened to Johann explain. The demi-beasts had taken him completely by surprise, and why shouldn't they? He'd never even considered them as a possibility. Hugo's puppet soldiers and Mirage Triad were fighting with them on various fronts, but they were exhausted, only barely managing to hold the monsters back. All it would take was a rampage from the black dragon to turn the tide of battle entirely.

Then, just as Leon had feared, the black dragon flapped its wings and took flight into the sky. Countless black spears appeared around it. They came from Dark skill: *Fatal Strike*, which meant every last spear threatened an instant, one-hit kill. If the dragon launched those spears while everyone had their hands full with the demi-beasts, they'd have no chance to get out of the way. The black dragon was fully intent on finishing things right here.

Without a moment's hesitation, Leon stretched his hands above his head.

"*X Invincible!*"

He unleashed his Paladin skill, successfully reflecting every spear released through Zero's *Fatal Strike*. That success had unfortunately come at a grave cost.

"Gah..."

His concentration was still fully focused on the black dragon when Leon coughed up a mouthful of blood. The sword that ran completely through his guts was, of course, Johann's. Leon collapsed. Alma caught his weight.

"Leon! Be strong! Heal yourself!"

"Ugh... *Li...Light Veil...*"

The healing skill repaired Leon's wound, but he was already far beyond his

limits of exhaustion. His healing skill had been stretched to its limit. The bleeding had stopped, but the wound had failed to heal completely and lay open and raw.

“Y-you...” Leon spat. “How?”

“Hm? Wondering about the shackles you placed on me? I’m not a High Monk anymore, is the thing. Easy to get rid of in my current situation. That skill of yours is powerful indeed, but it only works on classes that rely on transforming magical energy into something else.”

Johann spoke as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, and then he raised a hand in the air.

“Resurrection,” he said.

This was an all-encompassing healing skill usable by Archangels, a subclass of A-Rank Healers. A wind of blinding light sped across the battlefield, resuscitating all the Lorelai members who had been incapacitated. It even restored their strength and vitality.

“Y-you can use every class skill?”

Leon struggled for breath as he asked his question. Johann nodded.

“You’ve got it. That’s the special ability of my class—the Messiah.”

“M-Messiah...?”

“I’m one of only two of us who can use all the skills. Diego, who you fought earlier, can only use High Monk skills. Hey, the fact you could beat him is still truly commendable. To think you almost killed him too.”

A dark bloodlust saturated Johann’s words and emanated from the spear held in his hand. Leon and Alma would both die here, and everyone else would follow right after.

“You can rest easy,” Johann said. “The snake will join you all soon enough.”

Johann readied his spear, a grin spreading across his face. Alma gripped her knife, seemingly to fight back...but perhaps she could sense the sheer gap in their abilities, as her fighting spirit quickly left her. Leon could barely move. He could do nothing now but admit defeat.

Then, they heard the voice.

“I think I’ve seen enough.”

At the edge of Leon’s vision, above the black dragon’s head, a blue shadow moved in to attack. Johann must have picked up on the violent impulse it carried because he quickly turned and shouted.

“Zero! Get out of the way!”

Before Johann’s voice could reach his friend, the black dragon’s wings were sliced away. No longer able to fly, the dragon plummeted to the ground, and the blue shadow made a gentle landing. A gust of wind swept through the battlefield. It seemed to slice through the air like blades. The demi-beasts and the recently healed Lorelai members had no chance to defend themselves, and they were cut down where they stood. As the wind tore through everyone and everything, it raced toward its final target: Johann.

Johann stopped the wind easily with his spear.

“Impressive!” came a clear, casual voice from the wind.



As the air settled, a figure in a long, navy-blue coat was revealed. His longsword was pointed in an artfully directed arc at Johann.

“I’m relieved that at least *you* will give me a fight I can enjoy.”

Johann looked irritated by the new arrival.

“Zeke Feinstein,” he muttered. “The Innocent Blade...”

Facing off against Johann was Zeke Feinstein, the vice-master of Supreme Dragon, the Empire’s most powerful clan.

The night before the battle, Leon visited Supreme Dragon’s clan house on the invitation of a certain someone—Zeke Feinstein, EX-Rank Seeker and one of the strongest men in the empire.

Leon had successfully hired Mirage Triad as mercenaries during his preparations to battle Lorelai. The clan would lend powerful support, but Wild Tempest’s chances of victory were still slim. Leon knew they needed someone even more powerful...but unfortunately, there were no other clans they could trust.

After much deliberation, Leon decided to ask not for the support of a whole clan, but of just one individual: Zeke Feinstein. Forget having the strength of an army—Zeke easily surpassed one. Leon had never met Zeke, but Noel seemed to be on friendly terms with him, since Zeke had granted him the use of his name to hold a symposium. Knowing Noel, it was less a friendship and more of a partnership behind the scenes, no different than his relationship with Finocchio.

Whatever the case, Noel was an important figure as far as Zeke was concerned. If Wild Tempest lost, Noel’s value was lost with it. Zeke wouldn’t want an outcome like that, so he could potentially be relied on to help fight Lorelai. With these thoughts in mind, Leon sent an offer to Zeke in secret. Zeke, in turn, summoned Leon to Supreme Dragon’s clan house in order to give him a reply.

“You can’t be serious? Trying to scramble for help from other clans to solve

your own problems... You should be ashamed of yourself.”

They were in the Supreme Dragon’s gorgeous drawing room. The icy comment came from the clan’s third-in-command, Sharon Valentine, but she was not alone. All the heads of Supreme Dragon were in attendance: Sharon Valentine, Zeke Feinstein, and Victor Krauser—the clan master known as the Beginning One.

With slicked-back golden hair, Victor was a sheer mountain of muscle even at close to 60 years of age. As they weren’t on the battlefield, Victor was dressed in a tuxedo, but even from afar, it was all too easy to single him out as a war hero from his entire aura. From behind his glasses, his two golden eyes were predatory as he stared at Leon.

Leon felt like a dead man surrounded by Supreme Dragon’s top brass, or maybe a lowly herbivore thrown into a room of apex predators. The only ones actually sitting down in the room were Victor and Leon. Zeke and Sharon remained standing, as if ready to slay Leon at a moment’s notice. If he showed even a hint of enmity, he’d be dead before he even knew it.

What the hell was Zeke playing at? Calling Leon to the clan house was one thing, but why bring Sharon and Victor into it? Was Zeke’s intent to kill Leon? If that was the plan, there was no need to invite him to the clan house to do it. Leon stole a glance at him from the corner of his eye, but he was still unable to discern Zeke’s motives. Zeke looked as he always did, his eyes narrow and his features set in a confident, superior expression.

“Leon, was it?” Victor said. He sounded relaxed. “Zeke has told me of your objective. Lorelai is indeed a threat. I also understand that, should they continue on their path of destruction, they will need to be eliminated. However, we are not the authorities, nor are we the police. We are Seekers. We have no reason to act unless ordered to by imperial rule. Besides, you are their target, are you not? Ergo, this is your problem. Solve it yourself.”

“Mr. Krauser, if I may—”

Leon was just about to voice an objection when he found Zeke’s sword pointing directly at his neck. He still had his head on his shoulders, fortunately, but a drop of blood dripped and fell from his neck.

“Who gave you permission to speak?”

Zeke’s words were deadly serious. If Leon did anything outside of what they allowed here, Zeke really would kill him. Leon found himself gulping nervously at the sheer intensity in the room.

“I can imagine what you want to say,” said Victor. “You only want help from Zeke, yes? However, Zeke is our second-in-command. If Zeke acts, then by definition, we have sided with your clan. I know that it is not uncommon for clans to form alliances. In the past, we too have worked in collaboration with other clans. The problem, as it stands, is in your methods.”

There was a quiet anger in Victor’s voice as he went on.

“I do not take issue with you contacting Zeke individually. After all, it *is* his decision to make. However, I take issue with the reward of 30 billion fil, as proposed in your communique. It is no small sum, but we are the first star of the regalia. If it is discovered that we were moved to action by monetary rewards from a new clan such as Wild Tempest, it would impact the honor of our clan... Nay, our organization. You may have been sincere in your offer, but it has not had the effect you intended. There are some partnerships that are best settled without money. With money out of the picture, we can move and fight of our own volition. We will not be motivated by any rewards.”

Victor glanced at Zeke, who lowered his blade from Leon’s neck.

“Leon, my boy,” Victor said. “If you have an explanation, then speak.”

“Thank you, Mr. Krauser,” Leon said, his eyes locked on Victor’s. “There is truth to your words. Money isn’t everything. But if I am allowed to say as much, your words are also arrogant. Whatever you may say to the contrary, the world revolves around money. People cannot live without it, and that is a hard truth, which is why I named a price—to show my sincerity and to prove there was no ulterior motive to my offer. If you wish to refuse the offer, that’s fine, but you can only refuse because you sit at the very top of the mountain. Not motivated by any rewards, you say? How much do you even know of money? Aren’t you just looking to talk big and hide behind your claim to be a Seeker and nothing more?”

Leon took apart Victor’s reasoning smoothly and concisely. He didn’t think

Victor was wrong. It was Leon who had been out of line earlier, and if that had been the only issue, then Leon would gladly bow in humility. It just annoyed him quite a bit to be forced to listen to a lecture at swordpoint.

“Don’t get too cocky just yet.”

Sharon put her gun to Leon’s head as she spoke. He wasn’t afraid. In fact, he was filled with rage at being taken so lightly.

“You all resort to violence whenever someone talks back, then. Is this how the empire’s strongest operate?”

“What did you say?”

“I’m not an idiot. If Victor’s logic is correct, then you don’t even need to resort to violence. I’ll just leave.”

Leon glared at Sharon. He may have found himself in the lion’s den, but he wasn’t about to roll over obediently before them. He had his own pride, his own honor to uphold. He was the second-in-command of Wild Tempest, and if he let them push him around, they would take it as incentive to treat his entire clan the same way. Leon wouldn’t let that happen. It was his duty and responsibility as vice-master to ensure that it did not.

“I am the vice-master of Wild Tempest. You think that if I am pushed around, that if I am made a fool of, that I won’t be angered? Miss Valentine, I’m not cocky. I’m furious.”

His eyes on all three of them, Leon reached for his sword.

“You understand what it means to take such an action?” Sharon asked.

Leon chuckled. “Hmph. You started it.”

Naturally, he had no intention to fight them. Reaching for his weapon was a symbol of his unwillingness to yield to their violence. If they responded by attacking him, he would run away with everything he had. *I can’t just stay here wasting my time*, Leon thought.

That was when it happened.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

Out of nowhere, Zeke burst into laughter.

“I didn’t think you were much more than an opportunist, but you’ve got guts. I can see why Noel chose you as his second.” Zeke wiped the tears from his eyes and turned to Victor. “Master, I plan to help Wild Tempest.”

“What?!” Sharon shouted. Her voice soared in pitch from the sheer shock. “What are you saying?! It doesn’t make any sense! Explain yourself!”

“I’ve intended to help them since the beginning. The two of you have probably noticed already, but Noel and I have a partnership of sorts—a connection. If I want Noel’s aid, Wild Tempest needs a place on the regalia.”

“And what is it he’s helping you to get?”

“I can’t make that news public just yet, but it’s a favor that’s as much for all of us as for me. So, Master, will you grant me this freedom?”

Zeke smiled and tilted his head to the side as he asked his question. Victor heaved a great sigh.

“This was what you were planning all along, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“Yup, you guessed it! Just needed to make sure that we weren’t dealing with the sort of small fry who’d shake in their boots at the mere sight of us. Leon handled himself well, I think. He hit you right where it hurts, didn’t he, Master?”

“Shut it. You’re certain that helping them will be of use to us?”

“I’m not big on lying. I can guarantee it’ll shake things up in a really interesting way.”

“Very well. But do not forget that there is responsibility in the freedom you are given.”

“I understand. I’m grateful for your permission, Master.”

Zeke bowed in reverence. Leon felt like he’d been tricked, but could understand Zeke’s motives for doing so.

“Have I convinced *you*, Teach?”

In response to Zeke’s joking tone, Sharon’s face morphed into an expression that would’ve suited a demon.

“Men! Ugh! Is there any creature more irrational?! Do what you want! See if I care!”

Sharon turned on her heel and stormed out of the drawing room, practically breaking the door behind her on her way out. Leon could sympathize with her somewhat, but Zeke had already turned to him with a bold grin upon his face.

“Leon, I said I’d help you, but I have conditions. I’m a fickle sort, my dude—if the battle bores me, I’m out. Are we clear?”

Leon nodded. “Crystal.”

In other words, Zeke had no interest in loaning his power to make the battle easier and was prepared to prove it. Whether they could borrow the power of the Master Swordsman depended on how they showed themselves in battle. Leon accepted the condition all the same.

“I never imagined that Supreme Dragon’s famed vice-master would make an appearance. Do you really have so much free time that you can just poke your nose into other people’s fights? I’m almost jealous.”

Johann grinned, and Zeke flashed a wild smile of his own.

“C’mon, you must be aware of the position you’ve put yourself in? You’re no longer honored members of the regalia, just a group of mangy bandits. Seekers are praised for this kind of work, you know? Protecting the populace by hunting down the bad guys...”

“Protecting the populace, you say? Interesting that you say that with such a wicked look on your face... But fine. Fighting you will be fun.”

Johann raised a hand above his head and engaged a skill.

“Resurrection.”

Lorelai’s clan members saw their wounds healed once more, but the demi-beasts stayed dead. Healing skills were useless on them, perhaps because of their body composition.

“Clan members, get behind me and stand down!” shouted Johann, raising his voice. “Do not move until I give the signal!”

“Understood, Master!” said Zero, who had returned to human form. He retreated along with the other members.

“A smart move,” said Zeke, still smiling. “None of them would even slow my blade down. Leon, that order also goes for you. I don’t have the dexterity to watch out for wandering ants during battle. If you and the others want to live, get clear and go far away.”

Leon cringed at being compared to an ant, but he nodded.

“All Seekers, fall back!”

Wild Tempest and Mirage Triad all moved in the opposite direction from Lorelai. On the way, they bumped into an injured Wolf, being helped along by Koga.

“Hey, Leon,” said Koga. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I hired Zeke as an extra mercenary. We leave the rest to him.”

At the pained tone of Leon’s voice, Koga looked away. Leon could tell what he wanted to say. *If they were leaving everything to an outsider, what point was there in fighting as hard as they had?* Behind them, Alma walked on silently. Her dissatisfaction was so clear in her face that she didn’t have to say a word. Still, the truth of the matter was that if Zeke had never shown, all of them would be dead.

When the clans had retreated, Zeke and Johann took a step toward each other.

“Looks like you can use a whole bunch of different class skills,” said Zeke.

“You’ve been watching from afar, then. Wouldn’t have figured you for a peeping tom.”

“Yeah, I’m disappointed in myself, to be honest. Would have been way more fun to find that out in the heat of battle. It’s like knowing the twist at the end of a mystery novel before you even start reading it.”

Zeke’s slumped shoulders said everything; he really *was* disappointed.

“Not that it makes any difference now,” he added.

Zeke let out a sigh. The moment he did, he brought his sword up to block Johann's spear. The clash sent out an intense pulse of energy, whipping up fierce gusts of wind in its wake.

"You like playing dirty?" Zeke said.

"I like to win," replied Johann.

Their smiles dripped with arrogance as they kicked off from each other and separated.

"Javelin Rain!"

"Air Slash!"

A countless number of spears appeared in the empty sky behind Johann before they all fired at Zeke as one. Around Zeke billowed a swirling wind, wreathed in a jade-colored *Brave Aura*.

Master Swordsman was the Swordsman's EX-Rank subclass. Swordsmen were capable of turning their magical energy into a form of attack energy known as auras, which they could then imbue with a wind or lightning element. The B-Rank Swordsman Wolf's element was lightning; Zeke's appeared to be wind. He turned the wind into blades that sped straight for Johann's spears.

"Holy Shield!"

"Defense!"

In response to the storm of a shock wave that hurtled toward them from the battle, Leon and Hugo both cast barriers to protect their teammates. Though they poured considerable energy into them, they still strained under the force of the blast.

"That destructive power is incredible," said Hugo, standing next to Leon, his face pale. "Johann Eissfeldt must have made it to Rank EX."

He was never very good at things like flattery or subservience, not since he was a boy.

All he had to do was laugh along, but he never saw the point, and his parents

grew tired of his attitude. His personality left him with no one to call a friend, which made him a target for violence.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. His insistence on paying back what he was given in fights earned him a reputation as the worst kid in the city, feared even by his own parents. Because of the way he lived, he never once believed there was anyone stronger than him.

“If you’ve learned your lesson, you won’t disobey me again.”

That same man had been hanging naked from a tree for a week. No food, no water. The one who put him there was a gorgeous elf. Now she said the following:

“You will join Supreme Dragon, Zeke. If you don’t want to, I’ll leave you here to hang.”

The beautiful elf—Sharon Valentine—was a recruiter for the clan. She knew of Zeke’s potential, and she’d come because she wanted to give him special training as a future clan member. Thinking he’d been sold by his parents, however, Zeke responded with curses and badmouthing, leading Sharon to summarily hang him from a tree. He was still mad, but he had no right to refuse; it was a choice between Supreme Dragon and sure death.

In hindsight, that was the first and the last battle he ever lost. He underwent training, fought in real battles, and began to rank up. He had never lost to anybody except Sharon, his teacher, and he ultimately surpassed her. Even though Sharon was an A-Rank Seeker, if Zeke ever got serious, he could kill her in seconds. The gap between them now was far wider than when their roles were reversed, back when they first met.

It felt good to be strong, but it was also boring. Neither person nor beast could stand up to Zeke’s ferocity. It didn’t matter how strong he became if there was no opponent for him to go all out on. Tortured by this emptiness, Zeke continued to train alone, all the while believing that someday a fitting opponent would arise.

His wish was granted. Enter Leo Edin, clan master of Pandemonium and EX-Rank Seeker. Along with him, the Valiant was coming. He’d felt abandoned all this time, but it seemed that the gods had not abandoned Zeke just yet.

But human beings are strange creatures. When his wish was granted, Zeke found that he could not stand for the *existence* of anyone who could be deemed a worthy opponent.

“In this world, there will be none stronger than I.”

The Master Swordsman, Zeke Feinstein, owed the essence of his person to the selfish boy he’d been as a youth.

The destructive powers of the Rune Lancer’s *Javelin Rain* and the Master Swordsman’s *Air Slash* were even. Zeke could tell that Johann’s battle abilities put him at Rank EX too. He also knew they’d get nowhere fighting as they were. Zeke wanted to draw this fight into close quarters. Right as he channeled energy into his feet to move, his senses rang out in alarm. He retreated immediately—but it was already too late. Johann’s spears surrounded him from all angles.

“You can use different class skills at the same time?!”

Johann had just used the *Royal Road* skill, which negated attack distance. By the time Zeke realized what was up, spears were already pushing their tips against his skin. Escape was impossible. The only option left was to cut the spears down before they impaled him.

“*Air Burst!*”

While wrapped in *Brave Aura*, wind streamed out from Zeke’s body to cut the spears into thin slices. Suddenly, he stumbled. His arms and legs went numb, and his body wouldn’t respond to his commands.

“It’s *Blood Poison*. The tips of those spears were laced with it. Stopping the instantaneous *Royal Road* was truly impressive, but getting out of it entirely unscathed is—”

Johann couldn’t finish his sentence. In assuming he’d already won, Johann left an opening that Zeke closed off in an instant. He moved at an impossible speed, slicing Johann’s left arm clean off, then quickly followed back up to take off his head.

“Grr! *Trick Room*!”

Johann responded by using a skill to trap Zeke inside of invisible barriers. So long as he was inside those barriers, his magic energy would overload, leaving him unable to use skills. Zeke had realized this for himself and threw everything he had into a sword slice.

“Agh!”

The barrier should have been nearly unbreakable from the inside, but after a momentary flash from Zeke’s white blade, the barrier was torn to pieces as though it were paper. The wind generated by the sword attack cut through the air, taking a swipe out of Johann’s cheek.

“Now hang on a second,” said Johann with a chuckle as he wiped the blood from his face. “Sword slashes aren’t supposed to be able to break through *Trick Room*, let alone destroy it. But never mind that—you’re supposed to be poisoned! A Master Swordsman doesn’t have any poison resistance.”

“I cut it.”

“Huh? You what?”

“Like I said: I cut it,” Zeke said, as if talking to a petulant child. “I used the *Brave Aura* within my body to eliminate the poison in my blood.”

“You’re being serious right now? You managed to locate and cut down *only* the poison?”

“Never was a great liar. Anyway, all the proof you need is me standing here.”

The technique Zeke mentioned was no simple affair. Ordinarily, if one used *Brave Aura* inside of themselves, they’d shred their insides to pieces. Zeke wasn’t just able to focus on his blood vessels alone, but he could also wield the skill on a cellular level. It was an incredible feat. He’d only come to gain full control over the *Brave Aura* skill after years of arduous training.

“I learned something in our back-and-forth,” said Zeke. “You use multiple class skills, but that’s only the half of it—you can use them at the same time! That alone makes you a threat, but I’m pretty sure you can’t use all of them at an EX-Rank level. Compared with your Rune Lancer skills, the others are less

accurate. There are class skills that are off the table to you too, huh? If you had the whole range at your disposal, why wouldn't you go wild using Hugo Coppélia's Puppeteer skills? You can't access rare classes that can only be passed on via family bloodlines, can you?"

Johann shook his head. "No, I can't. You're right. Perceptive types like you are a real nuisance. Can't hide anything from you. You aren't the only one with sharp eyes here, though. That's a glaring weak point you have there, Zeke Feinstein."

"Hm? Remind me?"

"No need to rush. I'll show you."

Johann drove his spear into the ground. Then he kicked his left arm off the ground, caught it, and put it back in place.

"Here we go," he said. "*Kaleidoscope*, engage."

Unveiling a refreshed fighting spirit, Johann split his body into four. Death Apostle skill: *Kaleidoscope*. This allowed the user to split themselves into four copies. Each copy had a physical body of its own, could think independently, and was capable of using skills.

The four Johanns readied their spears, then launched at Zeke. Their spears quite literally covered the sky as they attacked Zeke with fierce attacks and ample use of *Javelin Rain*, but Zeke calmly parried all of it. He proceeded to counter them with insulting ease until only one remained. Zeke's sword was like a crazed beast baring its fangs as he cut down the last Johann.

That was when he noticed.

"They were all fakes?!"

Where was the real Johann? He looked around, keeping on guard, as Johann's laughing voice wafted through the sky.

"I used Death Apostle skill: *Vanish* right as I split myself into parts. You didn't notice, did you?"

"Knock off the cheap party tricks! Think you can just disappear and run away?!"

The enraged Zeke deployed *Air Burst*, which launched a torrent of blades all around him. It didn't matter if he couldn't see his opponent when he used an area-of-effect skill such as this. The high-speed air blades screamed as they sliced through the air. Johann took that moment to engage yet another skill.

"X Invincible."

It was the ultimate defensive skill that reflected any and every attack, and it left Zeke with air blades coming at him from every angle—but Zeke already knew it was a trap.

"Air Burst!"

By using the area-of-effect skill once more, Zeke was able to nullify the air blades coming in. He'd also rendered *X Invincible* useless, as it could only be used once every twenty-four hours. No other class had a similar defensive skill. In short, Zeke had walked right into Johann's trap to take away the *X Invincible* skill.

As a bonus, since it required so much magic to cast, Zeke could now pinpoint Johann's location. Seekers with a high level of experience in Abysses could feel the flow of mana through their skin. Though one might be able to hide their physical presence, they could not hide their use of mana.

"Gotcha!"

Zeke's eyes flew wide as his voice grew ecstatic. He looked like the very portrait of a wild beast as he flew toward his prey. He wouldn't stand for any more tricks. This last slice would be final. As he moved toward the space where Johann was hidden, his sword flew through the air.

Then, for a split second, Zeke's thoughts screeched to a halt.

Johann stopped using his skill and allowed himself to appear. Zeke couldn't work out why, and it confused him. Within that tiniest window of hesitation, Johann used a new skill.

"Lands of this forsaken earth, answer my rage. Open the gate to Apocalypse."

"Huh?!"

Zeke's sword was just about to slice into Johann...but whatever unknown

power Johann unleashed stopped Zeke from doing so. Its power was so great that merely standing in Johann's vicinity was nearly impossible. Zeke drove his sword into the ground. As he looked behind himself, he could not believe the sight that met his eyes.

"What the hell...is that?!"

A black sphere floated in the air. The gravity of it drew Zeke, along with everything else around it, into its vicinity. Trees, birds above, and the earth below was pulled in before disappearing into the center of the sphere. Even those watching from a distance had to cast barriers in order to resist its pull.

"*Apocalypse* is the Messiah's dying message," Johann said. He spoke calmly, completely devoid of emotion. He was the only thing unaffected by the black sphere. "By engaging seven different class skills at once, I open the gate to *Apocalypse*. You can't run from it. It sucks everything in, breaks it apart, and sends it to the outer edges of reality. It is the end of everything, like a dying star. And that includes you, Zeke Feinstein."

Fuck you! Zeke tried to scream, but his voice was swallowed by the black sphere and never reached Johann.

"Your one weakness is that you lack experience against truly strong opponents," said Johann, looking down at Zeke as he hung on for dear life. "I can see it in the way you fight. You've gotten stronger by winning all the fights you expected to win, but you lack the imagination and the creativity to turn the tables when you're behind. That's why you were defeated so easily here. With more experience, you'd probably have become even stronger than me. A pity, Zeke Feinstein, but you were no match for me in the end. It really is a pity."

Johann opened his arms wide.

"Leave us, beasts. Oceans, wither. Blood, strangle life. Blasphemers, burn in flames. Darkness, bring pain and suffering. Lord, connect us to the spirits of evil..."

With each utterance, the black sphere grew stronger. And then...

"Heavens, split. The end has come. Close the gate of *Apocalypse*."

Johann brought both hands to his chest, at which point the black sphere—and

Zeke with it—disappeared from the world. The battle was over. Johann, the victor, took a cigarette from his jacket and lit it. He breathed out smoke that seemed to reach for the clouds above.

“I expected more,” Johann said with a dry chuckle.

Before he could finish laughing, his chest was cut open by a diagonal slice.

“Wh-what?!”

Johann put his hands to the gushing blood and stumbled backward. He stood in shock as light streaked across the empty space before him. They were cast from a sword. Zeke emerged from the empty expanse through a gate of sword slashes, his body covered in cuts and bruises.

“Heh...heh heh... Haven’t felt like I was at death’s door since I was a kid...”

Zeke had returned from the outer edges of reality itself. He was completely dyed in blood, his left arm and his right eye both crushed. He seemed to have deep injuries that wouldn’t be identified until far later. Standing took supreme effort, and he looked ready to pass out at any second. Even then, his spirit and determination had grown so much stronger.

“I owe you my thanks, Johann Eissfeldt. I reached new heights because of you. You pushed me to the very limit. I admit, even I never thought I could cut through the very universe.”

Lost in shock for a moment, Johann came to his senses and burst into laughter.

“Never have I met anyone quite as unpredictable as you. You’re a worthy foe, I admit that now. So...it’s time to unleash my full power.”

Johann healed the wound upon his chest and readied his spear. Zeke gripped his sword tight in hand.

“I’ll make you regret not giving it your everything from the start,” said Zeke.

“Regret? Please. I feel nothing but joy.”

They were like two beasts in human skin. They howled together, each craving the other’s demise.

“Let’s finish this!”

The fight was like something of the gods. Each move, each strike heralded calamity and disaster as it was used. From afar, all Leon and the others could do was protect themselves to make sure they didn’t lose their lives to the aftershock. Fortunately, nobody had died yet, but you could never predict what came next when the gods themselves went wild.

“This... This isn’t our battle anymore...”

Alma’s voice was filled with rage and frustration as she spoke. Leon felt the same way. He’d hired Zeke, but he never expected that they’d be so far apart in ability. He thought himself capable of more, perhaps due to his own vanity. Leon and the others were just as Zeke said: they were ants. Wild Tempest, Mirage Triad, they were despondent wrecks. Humans simply could not win against gods.

“Everyone, I’m sorry I got you invol—”

Before Leon could finish his apology, Hugo covered his mouth.

“Stop it. You did nothing to warrant an apology. We are here because we chose to be here. You did the best you could, Leon. Be proud.”

“But—”

“The fight isn’t over yet. You can reflect on it all you want when it is.”

“You’re right...”

Leon nodded, his head drooping. Next to him, Wolf heaved a sigh.

“Way things have turned out, it wouldn’t have made much difference if Noel showed up or not...”

“Nah, I don’t believe that,” said Koga, shaking his head. “Those two out there are monsters, sure. But ya know...I bet if Noel were here, he’d find some way to get one over on both of ’em.”

“Koga...”

Loyalty wasn’t the term for the pride in Koga’s voice—it was unwavering

camaraderie. He believed in Noel with everything he had. Leon remembered what he'd lost and felt a pang in his heart.

"I know how you feel. I get it," said Lycia, with a somewhat embarrassed laugh. She'd been injured in the battle, but her voice still sang with its usual brightness. "I feel like Noel could win even if it was impossible for anyone else. Not that I have any way of proving it, though."

Lycia scratched the back of her head, blushing. Then she whipped her head up to look at the sky.

"No way... Really?"

Leon's head tilted with confusion as he looked at the shocked Lycia.

"What is it?"

But the answer came not from Lycia, but Alma.

"He's here," she said. "Our snake's here."

"That's impossible..."

Leon was completely dumbstruck as someone pointed up at the sky and cried out. "Hey! Isn't that one of the Association's small attack ships?!"

It was a two-man airship, but perhaps the term mechanical horse was more fitting. Piloting the ship was an older gentleman: Wild Tempest's coordinator, Harold Jenkins.

The airship suddenly picked up speed and dropped to about ten meters above ground. A young man with black hair and black clothes leaped out from it, carrying a coffin on his back. He landed in between Zeke and Johann.

"Yo, looks like you two are having a good time. Deal me in."

It was Wild Tempest's clan master, Noel Stollen.

Noel remained fast asleep in the clan house infirmary. Loki began to think that might be for the best. There wasn't anything that Noel could do now, even if he *was* to wake up somehow. Lorelai wasn't the sort of opponent you could beat without careful preparation, and that went double for a buffer. Noel

managed to climb to his position through his smarts and his cunning, which made up for his weakness in battle. This had an unfortunate downside, though. Noel was powerless in battles that went beyond scheming.

In truth, Loki knew that he was also growing weaker. He was prepared to give up his own life should he fail in his mission. He'd ended up a hostage instead, and caused Noel to fall comatose. All of this was his fault. Loki sat in his chair and sighed.

"Huh? You..."

At that moment, the door to the infirmary opened, and an older gentleman in a tuxedo entered. For some reason, he carried a black coffin on his back. Loki stood up before he could think. He thought at first that the man might be an undertaker, but no, he didn't seem the type. Loki even thought he might know who this old man was. Namely, the coordinator of Wild Tempest, Harold Jenkins.

"No need to get so tense," Harold said. "I've heard of you. I assume you've heard of me also?"

Loki nodded hesitantly, and Harold smiled.

"Very good. However, I must admit I'm surprised. From what Noel had told me about your line of work, I'd expected someone colder, someone...rougher around the edges. And yet, you seem to have stayed with him all this time."

"No, I—"

"Please, relax. I have no intention of spreading rumors that may damage your reputation or character, especially since Noel is about to wake up. He will as soon as we use this medicine, anyway."

Harold revealed a metal needle.

"You see, he predicted even this eventuality. He asked me to come here at the appointed date and time to inject him with this should he end up comatose. He could have been more polite about it, but you know how kids are these days with their attitudes..."

Harold shook his head while Loki's eyes widened.

“What do you mean he predicted this?”

“Well, more precisely, he considered every potential development and prepared countermeasures for each outcome. Nothing if not thorough, this one. He even saw the battle of Bascoud as a trial through which his fellow clan members could mature and grow.”

“A-are you for real? Hey, shouldn’t you have used this medicine sooner? There must be some limit to how far he can see ahead.”

“You’re right. The best course of action would be for him to wake up without using the medicine at all. I’m afraid that we have no choice. Not everything goes the way we want.”

Something about what Harold said caught Loki’s attention. As Harold was about to stab Noel with the needle, Loki grabbed a hold of his arm, stopping him.

“Wait. That medicine is just gonna wake him up?”

“Does such a convenient medicine exist? This gives him access to unfathomable powers, but at the cost of his life.”

Loki understood everything now. This medicine was the reason Noel had defeated Zero...and it was also the poison that had put him in this coma.

“Stop! You can’t do this!” Loki shouted, still holding Harold’s arm. “His life?! No! You can’t!”

“Protest all you want, but Noel himself is the one who created this medicine, and he asked me to do this.”

“There’s no need for it! Give it to me!”

Loki reached for the needle, but Harold pushed him away. He took out a gun and pointed it directly at Loki.

“I see. You’re...” Harold trailed off, returning his gun to its holster with a smile. “You’re right. Even if Noel asked for it, I don’t have to give it to him. Still, I want to see his desires come to fruition.”

“Why? What good is it to you?”

“I want to see it,” said Harold, a dark obsession in his voice. “I want to see what comes next. When I grew older, I was ready to give it all up. Everything. But I didn’t. The world is now full of unlimited ambition. Potential. Noel is reaching for the true peak of it all, the place my old friend once gave up on. I do not mind being called a monster if it means helping him get there!”

Harold plunged the needle into Noel’s neck, and the snake’s eyes flew open.

The battle between Zeke and Johann was tipping steadily in the former’s favor. In terms of damage, Zeke was clearly the weaker of the two, but he also yearned to win with a much fiercer determination and resolve. He continued his fearsome sword attacks, gradually pushing Johann to his limit.

“Is this the best you’ve got? Huh, Johann Eissfeldt?!”

“Grrr!”

Johann was thrown by one of Zeke’s strikes and landed on his knees.

“Haah, haah... Amazing. You’re stronger than me, I’ll admit it.”

“Hmph. Admitting defeat, are we? Here? Now? Where’d all that confidence go?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” said Johann. “If I can’t win, I’ll have to wake up *someone* who can.”

Johann got to his feet. A wide grin was spreading across his face. Zeke knew Johann wasn’t lying. He could tell from the bottomless well of bloodlust that was radiating out from his person.

“It’s time. Awaken...”

But just as Johann was waking up that power inside of him, a black figure landed between the two of them.

“Hey! Deal me in, c’mon!”

It was the snake, Noel Stollen. Both Zeke and Johann were at a loss for words, and they weren’t the only ones—so was everyone on the battlefield, who were also swallowed up in the glory of his entrance. Noel stood there as if time had

stopped, a joyous grin on his face, as though interrupting a battle of the gods meant nothing to him at all.

“Heh heh heh. How long are you two going to stand there looking like idiots? This is a battlefield, isn’t it?”

Zeke raised his sword at Noel’s cheeky, fearless comment.

“Hey, Noel, I don’t mind you making a grand entrance...but read the room a little, will you? This is no place for someone like you. Go off with your little friends and let us get back to it.”

“The one who needs to wake up and read the room is you, Zeke. This battle is between Lorelai and Wild Tempest. Don’t act like it’s yours for the taking. You were just the opening act. It’s time to disappear and make room for the main event.”

“The hell?!”

Zeke was enraged, but Noel walked casually toward his pointed sword.

“If you still aren’t satisfied, then fine. I’ll play with you.”

Noel’s threat was straightforward. *You want to fight, I’ll fight.* It was nothing more than that. And yet, Zeke leaped backward.

“Noel, you...”

He’d lost the words to say anything more. He knew Noel was capable, but that was as a strategist, as a schemer and planner. He’d never once considered him a danger on the battlefield. But here, Zeke felt an instinctive fear of the man standing before him. Alarm bells rang ceaselessly in his head, screaming that his very life was in danger.

“Hm... Interesting...”

Zeke didn’t stop fighting because of that fear. The idea of accepting Noel’s challenge held its own appeal. Regardless of reason, Zeke sheathed his sword.

“You really are an intriguing one. But you and I can fight somewhere more fitting than here... And to be honest, I’m tired,” said Zeke. As he turned around and walked away, he added, “Make sure you keep your promise to me.”

With Zeke out of the picture, I stood facing Johann. Our eyes locked.

“Let’s put an end to this,” I said.

“So arrogant for one so late. I’ve no reason to refuse, even so.”

“One-on-one, fair and square.”

“You don’t need your friends to help?”

“No need to bring them into a fight like this. This is between you and me. Hey, Harold!”

At my call, Harold dropped from the airship and landed between the two of us.

“As an official inspector of the Seekers Association, I, Harold Jenkins, shall act as the official observer of this duel between the two of you.”

Harold gave a deep and respectful bow, but Johann was unimpressed. “Hmph. You’re pushing me into this, but fine. However, let me make it clear: official inspector or not, if I see you siding with the snake, then I’ll respond in kind.”

“Understood.”

Now it was settled. I turned to the rest of the clan and raised my voice so they could hear.

“Everyone! Your orders are to wait as you are. This fight is between clan masters, one-on-one, to decide a victor!”

Johann shouted at his own clan in turn.

“Lorelai members, you are no different. Wait until further orders!”

Johann then pointed to the table mountain in the distance.

“I have a condition,” he said. “If we are not involving our clans, then we move the battlefield to Table Mountain. It’ll be easier to fight if you don’t have to worry about them, no?”

“Works for me.”

I nodded, and Johann pointed his hand at the space in front of him. It

fractured, opening a hole large enough for a person to pass through. On the other side of it lay the snow-covered peak of Table Mountain.

“I’ll see you there.”

Johann had used his *Warp Drive* skill to open a portal that reached Table Mountain. Harold and I made to follow him, when a voice called out to us from behind. I turned around to see Leon standing there.

“Noel, are you really going to fight him?”

His face was a portrait of pure exhaustion. I nodded with a grin.

“I know what happened. You did good, Leon. You and the others can rest. I’ll handle things now, as the clan master of Wild Tempest.”

“You really are taking him on, then. All right. If you’re sure of it, then you have my trust. But be careful, Noel. Johann Eissfeldt can use a variety of class skills, and on top of that, he’s got one weird case of multiple personalities.”

“Hm... Is that so?” I said, thinking. That would’ve explained how he used the *Warp Drive* skill and the strange feeling I got from him. “Thanks for the info.”

I turned away from Leon and entered the portal. I was wrapped in an instant of a floating sensation, then found myself standing at the top of the snow-covered mountain. Harold was right behind me.

“So your vice-master told you about me. I could hear him from here, you know.” Johann laughed and snapped his fingers. The moment he did, the portal closed. “This is the first time we’ve met face-to-face. Forma had absolutely nothing good to say about you, so it makes me happy to meet you under these circumstances.”

“If we’re talking spoilers from our seconds, then you’re no different, eh? You didn’t seem particularly fazed by my arrival.”

“It’s true; I heard about you. That’s why I wanted to fight you.”

Johann thrust a hand out, ready to go.

“Use your otherworldly power,” he said.

“Better hope you don’t regret it.”

I took a needle from my coat and thrust it into my neck.



“This is the drug you requested.”

Lee-Gaku opened the cooler box and showed me its contents. Inside of it were six needles, three filled with red liquid, three filled with blue.

“The red are for the Abyss; the blue are for purification.”

“How much time do I have?”

“Five minutes.”

“In other words, once I use the red, I need to take a purification shot within five minutes?”

Lee-Gaku laughed and shook his head. “Not quite. You have five minutes in *total*. So long as the drug is in effect, each minute of use is equivalent to ten years of your life span. But this is at best an estimate; it will differ depending on the state of your body at the time of use. So think of five minutes as a general baseline. Mr. Noel, you are sixteen now, so I think it is likely you can last five minutes.”

Lee-Gaku gave another chuckle before continuing his explanation.

“But the effects of the drug are real incredible, considering the cost. Just as you requested, the drug will give you the same powers as the Noble Blood, which was the key material. You can’t stop time, of course, but you will have the same speed, power, and regenerative abilities. The magic filling your body will mimic the Abyss, allowing for perfect reproduction of the Noble Blood’s potential.”

I nodded and closed the cooler box.

“I see. Thank you, Lee-Gaku. With this, I have everything I need.”

“No, thank you! It was a very enjoyable job. If you survive taking the drug, I would very much like to work for you again! I will take any job, no matter how dangerous!”

“Unfortunately, this is your last job.” I took out the silver flame with a smile and aimed it at Lee-Gaku’s forehead. “We’re done. It’s all over for you.”

Lee-Gaku's eyes widened in shock. He went to cry out, but his voice couldn't outpace my finger on the trigger. There was only the sound of the gunshot, followed by Lee-Gaku slumping to the floor.

"It's nothing personal," I said, leaving the underground laboratory behind me. "I just can't have you create anything like this ever again."

With the Noble Blood's power inside of me, I was filled with a sense of boundless potential. It flooded me with the desire to release all of its destructive powers, but I somehow held on and managed to keep it under control without going berserk. I had the Talker skill: *Mental Fortitude* to thank for that.

The time limit hadn't changed. I'd used about one minute fighting Zero. A little less than a minute getting woken from my coma. This left me with just over three minutes. Any more than that, and my body might not be able to handle it.

"Amazing! You're in full control of the beast's power!"

Johann looked overjoyed as he raised his spear into a fighting stance.

"Now show me everything you can do with that power. *Javelin Rain!*"

A countless number of spears appeared in the empty space behind Johann. I used the giant black case I'd brought with me as a shield, defending against the wave of Johann's attack. The case itself crumbled to pieces in an instant, but the axe inside played its defensive role perfectly.

"Here we go," I said.

I wasn't about to waste any time. With axe in hand, I leaped at Johann. His spears flew toward me, but I knocked them away. I landed in striking range and swung my axe. Johann prepared to use a counterattack skill.

But he was too slow. Far too slow.

"Feast upon his corpse, Onikagura!"

The axe responded to the bloodthirst flowing through me with an ominous glow that cloaked its entire form. It was a replica of the battle-axe my

grandfather had once cherished, a weapon forged with beast materials from a lord with an abyssal depth of 12, the King of Fury. The huge beast was melted down and then, through very special methods, forged into the Onikagura. Although there were many weapons and defensive items that incorporated beast materials into their forms, the Onikagura was the only weapon to be made from a whole beast.

The Onikagura also came with its own unique ability. It was sturdy and capable of regeneration, but most crucially, its weight could be changed at will. It could be light as a feather or heavy as a boulder, whatever the user so desired. You could swing it light and then add weight upon impact, giving it godlike speed and disastrous levels of destructive ability.

I thought of the Onikagura as the strongest weapon for any individual. Now, with the Noble Blood's power running through me, the axe weighed more than ten thousand tons. With the destructive force of a meteor coursing through it, the axe smashed the mountain into pieces.

Harold only managed to avoid getting caught in Noel's attack with some effort. Table Mountain was practically blown open into an underground cave, which was where Harold landed. Clean, pure water flowed from the cave; the continued attacks sent water spurting into the air, creating rainbows as it caught the light.

Noel and Johann continued their fight. In response to Noel's heaviest attack with the Onikagura, Johann used the *Phantom* skill to negate it. Life or death would be decided in a matter of seconds, and Johann was the tiniest bit faster.

Just as Leon had said, Johann could use multiple class skills. He'd used *Warp Drive* and *Phantom* already, and he continued to use skills unavailable to the Rune Lancer class to evade and defend against Noel's vicious attacks.

"He's completely on the defensive..." Harold muttered, fear in the edges of his voice.

Johann's true power was extraordinary. There was no doubting that he was easily Rank EX. It was shocking enough that he had access to so many class skills, but his true power was in his ability to chain them together. One only had

to look at the heavy wounds he'd left on the Master Swordsman to see that.

All the same, Johann was being overwhelmed. Against Noel, there was no chance to launch an offense. The reason was simple: Noel was that much stronger. Thanks to the drug, Noel now had all the physical abilities of the Noble Blood—like its frightening power and speed. He couldn't use the beast's time-stopping ability, however. As his physical abilities were equal to that of the Noble Blood in human form, Noel wasn't actually much stronger than an A-Rank Seeker with a close-quarters specialization. According to Harold's analysis, based on basic fighting power (and not even considering skills) Johann should have had the upper hand.

And yet, Noel was clearly and overwhelmingly stronger.

"Brandon, that's you out there, isn't it?"

Harold clutched at his chest. In Noel's figure, he could see his old friend fighting once more. The wild and yet beautiful movements were unmistakably those of Overdeath. Brandon had given everything he learned to the grandson he loved so much.

Noel was a backline Seeker and didn't need battle tactics. It was far more efficient for him to funnel his efforts into other areas too...but Brandon and Noel were not ones to choose the easy path. It was because of this decision that Noel had such overwhelming strength.

This was an unrivaled fighting art, passed down from grandfather to grandson. This was the true reason that Noel could overwhelm Johann.

"I see... It's this. *This* is the sight I've been waiting to see!" said Harold.

No matter what skill Johann tried to use, it didn't make a difference. The moment he cast or engaged a skill, I easily read his next move and crushed it before it happened. It was one-sided bullying thanks to the fighting art of reading the future.

"Fatal Strike!"

The black spears could kill in an instant, and they were all around me...but I

saw them coming. Before they had a chance to skewer me, I cut them all down by bringing the Onikagura's weight down to its lightest. Even as I defended myself, I also threw one of Alma's iron needles at Johann. It passed through his leg, and he fell. I moved in for a follow-up strike.

"Grr! *Shadow Dive*!"

Right as the Onikagura was about to split his skull in half, Johann slipped into the shadows. He was preparing himself for a new attack. *Shadow Dive* required a lot of magic, but Johann was putting more emphasis on a quick win than preserving his magic. A wise decision. In my current form, I was not one he could deal with lightly. Even an EX-Ranker would need to fight with everything they had...although their efforts would be meaningless even then.

"Too easy," I said.

As Johann slipped into the shadows, I sent a flashbang into the air. The brilliant light removed the shadows and pulled Johann from them. He was completely defenseless as I swung the Onikagura with everything I had.

"Grrraaaaaahhh!"

Johann used his spear to defend himself, but he could not stand the might of the axe and was slammed straight into the rocky walls. A solid hit. He had healed himself many times over the course of battle, but this one strike was able to take that ability away from him.

We'd been at battle for about a minute. I had expected a rougher time, but things were going more smoothly than I expected. I walked over to Johann and readied the Onikagura for a finishing blow.

"Awaken, Seamus!"

Light flashed. By the time I realized it signaled blade slices, the Onikagura was already in pieces.

"What?!"

I was shocked. Johann had disappeared from where he was in front of me. He'd moved behind me at a pace I couldn't follow with my eyes. I tried turning to face him, but I was far too slow.

“So long, brave young warrior.”

Johann’s voice was different from before. It was wrapped in a quiet sorrow.

“D-dammit...”

My body slid to the floor, cut in half.

Leon stared in disbelief as Table Mountain was blown away.

“That was...Noel?” Logan asked, his eyes wide with shock.

The mountain was quite a distance away, but everyone had seen that it was Noel who smashed it.

“Such power... But it’s...”

Veronica whispered as she touched her right eye, the prosthetic one. Her real right eye had been offered to the spirits in return for greater magic power, as per the Magician skill: *Sacrifice*. She saw that Noel’s power was not so different. Based on what she’d seen, she guessed he had given up half his life for the power he now wielded.

So he’s willing to go that far. Or rather, it was just like Noel to go so far. Knowing the strength of Noel’s resolve, Leon could say nothing. Gloom draped itself over all the others who had realized his sacrifice. Koga’s face looked especially pained.

“This is stupid!”

Alma was the first to break the silence.

“I can’t stand it, just sitting here waiting!”

As Alma began to walk out in front of the group, Leon hurriedly stopped her.

“Wait a second, Alma! Back up! We won’t be useful to any—*hrk!*”

Leon crumpled to his knees from a sudden, sharp pain. Alma had kicked him right between the legs, leaving him unable to even take a further step.

“Quit it. Hmph! I have my own fight to win,” she said, then directed her voice toward Lorelai to shout: “Where’s the dragon guy?! Get out here! I am going to

kill you!”

Alma was goading Zero in battle. Leon began to sweat, but it wasn't due to the pain racing between his legs.

“A-are you serious?! Didn't he just wipe you guys out?!”

“That's exactly why I want to settle things with him,” Alma said.

She walked out further ahead of the clan. At the same time, Zero emerged from Lorelai.

“Sounds fun,” Zero said. “I'm in.” His eyes left no doubt that he was serious about the battle.

“Hugo, Koga!” Leon said, rising to his feet. “We have to support Alma!”

But Koga stopped him with a hand. “Let her fight on her own,” he said.

“What?!”

Leon was shocked, but Hugo nodded.

“Yes. She'll likely do better that way.”

“Wh-what the hell do you mean?!” Leon asked.

Koga looked at Alma. “We've fought together, so I know she's stronger solo. That's how she was raised and trained to fight. She can't go all out when she's fighting with a team.”

Leon let out a groan in response to Koga's explanation. Even if he was right, taking Zero on alone was practically suicide. Hugo placed a hand on Leon's shoulder.

“She will win,” Hugo said.

“So I have to trust the course of battle, just like before...”

Leon and the others looked out ahead to where Alma and Zero were facing off. Alma cut her own hand with her knife and coated it with her blood. *Blood Poison*. It was toxic enough it could even kill the A-Rank Zero. In response, Zero transformed into the black dragon. He was going full power right from the start.

This was a battle that would be decided in an instant. The watchers on both

sides could feel it in the air. No underhanded tricks, just a head-on collision to determine and prove their strength.

Black spears had already begun to appear in the sky around Zero. *Fatal Strike*, a Dark skill that spelled certain death. The amount of magic at play was clear in the sheer amount of spears, and all of them were pointed at Alma.

“This is bad... No matter how quick she is, she can’t avoid all of them. Can Alma use *Phantom* again?” Leon asked.

Hugo nodded. “She can. Phantom can only be used once every twenty-four hours, but she hasn’t used it yet. The problem is that even *Phantom* can’t negate the effects of *Fatal Strike*. Those spears will even impale spirits.”

“Dammit. What the hell kind of a skill is that?”

Fatal Strike could kill instantly even with a scratch. Worse yet, Alma was a rank lower than Zero. She was Rank B. There was no way her resistance levels would be high enough to stop the effect of the spears.

“She can’t use *Shadow Dive* to avoid them either. Even if she hides in the shadows, those spears will find her. For Alma to win, she has to evade all of those spears and land her own attack.”

“Is that... Is that even possible?”

“Nope,” said Koga, quietly but confidently. “When it comes to speed, Zero’s gotta be the quicker outta the two. Let’s say Alma does make it past the spears—she’ll get smoked if he counters her even once. Zero’s defense is strong. Strong enough to negate Alma’s attacks, anyway.”

“You’re saying she’s got no way to win?!”

Leon was practically screaming in exasperation, but Koga shook his head.

“No, I’m sayin’ if anyone can find a way to win in these circumstances, it’s Alma. I’m a front-liner, y’know? So I know. Defeatin’ Zero’s possible if you’ve got yer back against the wall. That’s why we’d only get in the way.”

“We’d get in the way?! What the hell do you—”

Before Leon could finish, Hugo’s voice cut through the air.

“It has begun!”

Alma was the first to move.

“*Accel—Vigintuple!*”

She was moving at top speed to close in on Zero, who didn’t move in the slightest. At this speed, he could see and follow her movements. But Zero—and Leon—had misjudged Alma.

Her left leg suddenly exploded. She suffered horrible burns, but gained a massive burst of speed.

In an instant, Leon understood what she’d done. He’d seen that explosion before from a Garmr bullet. The material within them reacted to magical energy by absorbing the target’s magic and causing an explosion. Alma had put one of those bullets in her left boot and then set it off, using her magic as a trigger. The resulting explosion allowed her to increase her top speed.

It was a reckless strategy, one that threw self-preservation to the wind. But Zero refused to falter. He sent all of the floating spears on a direct course straight for Alma. The speed of the magic spears was slightly slower than Alma, but there were so many of them, it was clear that at least one would find its target. Alma didn’t waver either. It was as though she didn’t have the time to be shocked. Just focusing on the sight before her eyes took everything she had; she wasn’t even trying to evade the spears.

Alma focused on the spears aimed for her weak points, knocking them off course with her knife or the *Shadow Arm* skill, accepting that the others might graze her. She didn’t drop her speed for even an instant. She would not die. She had a sliver of time before the effects of *Fatal Strike* took hold.

This was Alma’s true strategy: to boost her speed beyond its absolute limit and defeat Zero *before* his instant-kill effects took her out. It was true that if she could cut off Zero’s magical power before the instant kill got to her, Alma would survive the attack. Even if she couldn’t kill him, rendering him unable to fight would also dispel the effects of the skill. Nevertheless, nobody could have believed she’d actually try to pull off such a reckless strategy.

Koga was absolutely right: For Alma, Leon and the rest of the team just would

have gotten in her way. This wasn't a move she could've pulled while fighting as part of a team.

"Die."

Alma's utterance was like a ghost's whisper, and it reached no one because of the sheer speed at which she was moving. Covered in blood and cuts, Alma moved into attack range, her eyes as cool as ice. Zero prepared to counter, but Alma was faster. Her knife blade aimed for a peculiar reverse scale—the only weak point in the dragon's entire armored hide—and while maintaining top speed, she cut it off completely.

With the power of the Noble Blood's regenerative abilities coursing through me, my body split in half and just as quickly knitted itself back together again. The very instant I knew the attack was unavoidable, I poured the entirety of my focus into the *Regeneration* skill. If I'd cut it any closer than I had, I might not have made it.

While my body put itself back together, I launched a surprise attack. The Onikagura was in pieces, meaning I only had my knife, and Johann easily evaded each strike I made with it.

"I see," he said, his eyes sharp, spear readied for another attack. "So you have its healing abilities too. Then I just have to kill you hard enough that regeneration is impossible."

"I'm right here. Do it."

I gestured for Johann to come closer. His brow furrowed with annoyance before he rushed in for an attack. He was fast, but now that I could see the attacks, he wasn't so fast that I couldn't handle him.

Our blades clashed continuously, sparks flying and impacts rocking the cave in which we fought. My plan was the same: read Johann's skills as he used them and shut them down with my battle techniques. But this new Johann was stronger than I was in this regard.

"Grrr!"

I was being overwhelmed in close quarters, and Johann wasn't leaving any gaps for me to take advantage of. He used skill after skill. His movements were completely different than what they were previously. I couldn't evade his attacks; all I could do was focus on regenerating as each fatal blow landed. Each time I did, I was hit again.

Even retreat was no longer an option. With the Onikagura, I would have been able to fight back, but with only my trusty knife to wield, I couldn't do a thing. I was on the wrong side of a one-way battle.

"Gah... Ugh..."

My knife shattered right as my regenerative abilities hit their limit. I spat blood as I fell to my knees.

"And now it's over."

Johann swung his spear. It was a finishing blow...and the first time he'd shown any sort of opening. I took the silver flame from its holster. There was something like laughter in Johann's eyes. My guns were powerful weapons, but Johann's speed would allow him to easily dodge before the bullet ever reached him. I knew he wouldn't think anything of it.

But that's exactly why I'd done it.

Instead of firing the gun, I threw it. Surprised, Johann moved his head and let it fly by. He couldn't understand why I'd done it, because it wouldn't have done any damage to him anyway. Was it a desperate, self-destructive move at the brink of defeat? I could see the question in the confusion on Johann's face. Rolling with his confusion, I pushed the button on the remote for a small explosive.

"What?!"

An explosion rocked Johann from behind. It was the silver flame. I'd put a remote explosive inside of it in case somebody ever stole it. It wasn't strong enough to harm someone as powerful as Johann, but the sudden jolt was enough to make him stumble.

Immediately, I leaped into the air and spun around. With the force of the spin whipping me around, I launched a kick right at Johann's heart—he was still off-

kilter. Johann read my movements and brought up his spear to counter. I flicked my arm together with my body and cut off his hand, which flew into the air along with his spear. I'd used a super-thin wire built into my watch—one I'd wrapped around him in the heat of battle.

He was powerless to stop my attack. It was the ultimate combat technique, devised by Overdeath for one-on-one combat, and not reliant on skills. It hit Johann square in the chest. The attack was called...

"Rumbling Thunder!"

Much like its name, at the moment the kick hit, a sound like lightning echoed through the air. With the power of the Noble Blood behind it, the kick had most definitely caused Johann's heart to burst.

"Ghhk! Gaaah!"

Now it was Johann's turn to cough blood and fall to his knees. I launched a punch at Johann's head to finish him, but things changed in a flash.

"Too slow!"

Johann's heart was gone, yet he grabbed my right arm and clamped it tight between both of his legs. It was an armbar—a joint-lock—and he was intent on breaking my arm with it. I didn't even have time to escape; Johann focused his strength into his hips and my arm broke like the branch of a tree.

"Arrghh!"

In order to break free, I took a hold of Johann's right ankle with my left hand. Then, with all the power I had, I crushed it. Johann cried out in pain as his bones and sinews were smashed in my grasp. It was only then that I managed to pull my arm free.

"Haah, haah... Haah, haah..."

My breathing was ragged. I'd gotten back to my feet, but I still felt ready to collapse. Johann was no different. He was well past his limit.

"I copied you. I focused on *Regeneration*, right as you were crushing my heart, and somehow managed to survive," said Johann, standing on one leg. He laughed hoarsely. "I never imagined anyone could bring down Seamus. He's

based on an old friend, and he's the most powerful personality I have. That's why he'd disappeared at the moment he was defeated. So I guess it's as I always thought: / am the one who has to settle things with you."

More pointless banter. He was using it to buy time to heal himself. I, on the other hand, didn't have the luxury of time. How much had passed by now? I couldn't work it out; my brain wouldn't function properly. My vision began to blur just as Johann punched me straight in the face. I fought to stay standing and returned a punch of my own. Johann ate it and bent backward, almost in half.

We were at our very limits, but one way or another, we had to finish things. I launched a follow-up attack, and Johann countered. Our fists landed at the same time, both of us shouting in effort.

"Rrrrrrraaaagghhh!"

We roared in harmony to pull ourselves toward higher limits, raising battle cries into the air as we traded blows. We had no technique and no skills left to use; this was our one and only way to decide a victor. Each movement caused blood and sweat to fly from our bodies, and our ability to concentrate waned.

I knew I was taking the harder hits. The quality of our personal limits was different. I knew the battle was cutting away at my life span. Even if I won this battle, would I survive the aftermath of it? Why was I fighting?

But just as I was about to give it all up, I heard a voice. It came from where it all started. It was my *raison d'être*.

I promise, Grandpa... I'll become the strongest Seeker ever.

"Rrrraaaaaaarr!"

I used what life I had left to repair my right hand. At the same time, I put my right thumb into Johann's left eye and crushed it. Johann had assumed my arm was useless, so he couldn't get out of its way in time. While he was lost in the confusion of pain and his lost eye, I hooked my finger into Johann's eye socket and drove the back of his head into the ground with everything I had. It was a throwing technique my grandfather had called...

"Raging Dragon Claw!"

Overpowered by my dragon claw, Johann lay on the ground. The light in his remaining eye had faded. His skull and his brain had been smashed. There was no regenerating from that.

“Haah, haah... I...haah, haah... I won...”

I didn't have time to bask in the glow of victory. I searched my coat for the purification needle. Unfortunately, my hands were shaking so badly, I couldn't grasp it.

“Noel! Stay with me!”

Harold, who'd been watching over the whole thing, came running over. His face was pale. He supported my weight in his arms, took the needle for me, and injected it into my neck.

“You've been fighting for four minutes and thirty seconds! You can still make it!”

I could feel the pseudo-Abyss within me purify, but...

“Ahhhhh! I-It's...no good...”

It wasn't fully purified. Pain racked my entire body as though it would tear me apart. The fractures along my body increased. I'd gone well past critical levels, and my body was breaking down. Harold called my name in desperation, but my consciousness was fading. I felt myself falling into the darkness...

“Resurrection.”

At the very edge of death, my body was wrapped in a gentle wind. The pain subsided, and my consciousness grew clear. The fractures across my body began to vanish.

“Y-you...”

The one who saved me was Johann. He stood to the side, using his healing skill.

“But why?”

“You're the winner of our battle. I will die shortly,” said Johann, heaving a great sigh before chuckling. “I just don't think there's any need for both of us to

go.”

I was stunned. Johann took a seat on the ground and lit a cigarette.

“You’re healed. You won’t live a long life, but you’ll have more than enough time to keep causing trouble.” Johann then pointed skyward, as if telling me where to go. “But I’m sick of looking at you. Do me a favor and let me have my last moments to myself.”

I didn’t know how to respond. He was an opponent I was destined to bring down. I had fought with literally every fiber of my being to beat him, and I had won. And yet, this man had saved me from my self-destructive victory.

“Noel, let me give you a hand. Let’s be off.”

Harold let me lean on his shoulder as I rose to my feet.

“Johann, I...” I paused to look at him. “I *will* be the strongest Seeker.”

Johann’s remaining eye grew wide and he burst into a peal of laughter that seemed full of genuine mirth. It sent cigarette smoke wafting into the air.

“You’d better, hero,” he said.

With Noel and Harold gone, Johann was left on his own in the cave. It was a beautiful place. Clean water flowed through it, and the moss on the walls glowed with a soft, almost fantastical light.

Johann felt at ease. Even on the brink of death, he felt no pain, just the comfortable invite of sleep. If this was what it felt like to die, then he had no complaints. Johann blew out smoke as he looked up at the warm light streaming in from above. For a moment, it was eclipsed by an approaching black shape: a dragon. It flapped its wings and descended to the place where Johann sat.

“Hey, Zero. You lost too?”

The black dragon—Zero—was clearly weakened. A small scar from a blade could be seen around its throat. The dragon nodded and nuzzled its nose into Johann.

“Then we both lost... But it doesn’t feel so bad. We gave it everything we had. I’ve got no regrets. Got to punch the snake in the face as hard as I could too.”

Johann’s shoulders shook with laughter. Zero let his massive body lay on the cave floor.

“Thank you, my friend,” said Johann, gently rubbing Zero’s nose. “For sticking with me and supporting me this whole time.”

Zero’s eyes closed, enjoying the moment, and then he stopped moving entirely.

“Well...” Johann muttered, standing to his feet and staring at something. It was a fly. “Sorry, but I’ve no intention of letting you take our bodies. Apocalypse, open.”

Messiah skill: *Apocalypse*. The black sphere swallowed Johann and Zero, then vanished. Nothing more of them remained. The snow that fluttered down from the hole at the top of the cave danced in the shallow light.

Epilogue

THE MIRROR FLOATED in the empty space of the slum ruins. It reflected the sight of a cave somewhere far, far away, but then turned pitch black at Johann's self-destruction. The bug that had been their eyes must have been taken with it. They would see nothing more.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Wonderful! Truly wonderful!" said Malebolge, who had been watching the scene as it unfolded. She cackled with laughter. "Who would have thought Johann would buckle under the snake! Truly surprising!"

Malebolge's laughter went on and on. A young man stood behind her, draped in a white cloak. He—Empireo—was far less impressed.

"Hmph. What a joke. I'd heard the man was *his* descendant, so I had high hopes, but that's the best he's got? After sacrificing more than half of his life span? Not even worth talking about."

Malebolge's gaze flicked back to Empireo at his angry comment.

"Yes, by our standards, he may be a joke...but a person's worth doesn't lie in their power as an individual—rather, their power in a group. I think it's best not to underestimate a man who was willing to sacrifice his life like that, especially when he leads others. The Wild Tempest that beat Lorelai today is incomparable to what it once was. All its members are stronger now; they are not enemies we can take lightly."

"Nonsense. Being unafraid of death says nothing. So they've survived flirting with death one or two times. That's not enough growth to call them a worthy foe. That the snake beat Johann isn't a sign of their difference in strength, but rather Johann's weakness of heart. He accepted his death and chose to pass on the torch to the next generation instead of seeing his own will through to the end. There is nothing more pathetic. An end unbecoming of a soldier."

The still-simmering Empireo turned and left the room.

"He's a blunt one. I wonder why he can't see the importance of Johann recognizing the snake as the next generation, or just *how* terrifying the snake is. Bern, what do you think?"

Bern, the hybrid beast dressed entirely in black, shook her head slowly.

“Regardless of Johann’s decision, the truth of the matter is that it was the snake’s actions that caused Lorelai’s downfall. Wild Tempest has grown stronger, but it will not pose the same threat Lorelai would have. That’s... exactly what you wanted, isn’t it? It’s almost scary how well this is all unfolding...”

The snake was undeniably strong. Not only could he stand toe-to-toe with Johann in one-on-one combat, but he’d pushed Johann to the brink of defeat. At the very end, it was Johann who still had power remaining. It meant that from the very start, Johann wasn’t fighting at full strength...though perhaps he was. At the very least, it was hard to believe he’d fight like he was expecting to lose. He had chosen to lose because he saw the snake as someone worth losing to. Maybe that was a belief, a principle, that was unique to Johann and therefore too difficult for anybody else to understand.

Perhaps nobody else would ever truly understand it.

“Malebolge, did you really not see this coming?” The hybrid beast asked the question quietly, and Malebolge grinned.

“I told you it was surprising, didn’t I? I’m not an omnipotent god, you know,” said Malebolge walking past her to the exit of the room. “Rather, I’m the creator of gods.”

After that, Malebolge left, leaving only a sweet scent in the air behind her.

“Surprising, you say,” muttered Bern. Each word was spoken as though it bore a tremendous weight. “I will believe you...for now.”

Inside the Vulcan Industries factory, a huge locomotive was being constructed. Equipped with the most cutting-edge engine inside its frame, the train was capable of speeds up to 250 kilometers an hour and could carry up to 700 tons of cargo. The company was already close to having assembled several of these vehicles. Once the lines were built between stations, they would be ready to go at a moment’s notice. Meanwhile, production of demi-beasts was ongoing. They were expected to be at every station by the following month.

It had been one month since the battle with Lorelai. I'd been asleep for half of that time after exhausting myself in the fight. When I woke up, Lorelai had disbanded, and its remaining members had dissipated. Some moved to new clans, and others were hired by the government. Wherever they went, one thing was clear: Lorelai was not reforming. Now that both Johann and Zero were dead, there was nobody else that the former members felt duty-bound to.

Lorelai's assets—including its money, clan house, and affiliated airship—were seized by the government. I'd heard they would be used to help rebuild the cities and towns that had been attacked. Unfortunately, there was no way for me to intervene. It was bad news for us to get caught up in it all because we'd have to take some responsibility. The government was furious, and the only reason we'd managed to get off scot-free was that we had the masses on our side. Things normally wouldn't have gone like this.

The battle was over. Wild Tempest had emerged victorious. Our party accepted victory and was ready to move on to our next step. Alma sustained great injury in her battle with Zero, but she made a full recovery thanks to her exceptional vitality. The battle had also earned her a rank up. Alma was now an A-Rank Scout with a Death Apostle specialization.

And as for me...

"Noel?"

I turned toward the voice and found Harold standing there.

"Your secretary said you'd be here," he said.

Harold walked over and took out a letter.

"It's a message from the imperial family and the Seekers Association. Talker, Noel Stollen—you and your clan are hereby accepted and recognized as a third star of the regalia."

"I knew it was coming, but I have to say, it makes my heart skip a beat to hear it."

I took the letter from Harold with a grin. Defeating Lorelai had all but guaranteed us a spot. And the reason we could get there, even though we'd been the cause of all the trouble? Neither the imperial family nor the Seekers

Association wanted the empire's name sullied.

"As for the official ceremony, you can expect more information in the next few days," said Harold, also grinning. "To think that a clan founded less than six months ago would make it to the regalia! Noel, you are truly something special."

"If by special you mean reckless, then sure."

I put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it. I watched the smoke drift up into the air.

"I underwent a full analysis from a doctor," I said. "She said I have ten years left. Of course, that means ten years if I'm taking it nice and easy. It'll be much shorter if I keep up being a Seeker."

"So...what do you intend to do?"

"Stupid question," I said without hesitation.

Nothing had changed since I first started.

"There's no leaving the path that I'm walking."

"Heh. How'd I know you'd say something like that?" Harold muttered, chuckling as he lit a cigarette of his own. "I'm sure it's a weight off Johann's soul, also."

"It's because he was so stubborn that I had to cut into so much of my own life span. The guy doesn't need a weight off his soul, he needs enough of it to keep him in hell for what he did."

I chuckled at the thought of it, and Harold burst into laughter.

"I'm almost certain that he would have felt the same. He didn't save you out of the goodness of his heart, I don't think. He pushed the weight of his soul on you instead. He knew you were the type who couldn't refuse it."

"I'll take that weight gladly. This is how it goes."

Johann and I were enemies, but with our battle over, we had no reason to hate each other. That's how I felt, at least, and I assumed Johann held similar values. I'd lost a lot in that battle, but I didn't regret it. It was a kind of catharsis.

“By the way, have you seen what the demi-beasts really are?” I asked, changing the subject.

Harold nodded, his face growing grave. “I have. They’re human corpses.”

Similar to the way I acquired the power of monsters for use in battle, Johann had produced demi-beasts from human corpses. Even though the factory itself was under the control of the government now, production of demi-beasts continued. The bodies came from those without families or connections. As long as the bodies were anonymous, and as long as nobody on the inside leaked the information, the secret would likely never be uncovered.

“On an ethical level, demi-beasts simply should not exist. But their existence is a necessity for the expansion of the empire. So the government continues production. I’m sure they already have plans in place for if and when the truth ever comes to light.”

“The church, you mean?” asked Harold.

I blew smoke into the air and nodded. More than half of the empire’s citizens were faithful followers of the church. If the use of human corpses for the demi-beasts was ever looked at in an unfavorable light, all the church had to do was announce its acceptance of the practice. Nobody would be able to stand up to them. To stand up to the church meant denying the salvation of not just yourself, but your family and ancestors too.

“People are little more than objects, when it comes right down to it. You can get mad about the ethics, but that doesn’t mean people come out of it happy. Individual lives are the same. You can live a correct life and follow all the rules, but whether your dreams come true is a different issue. That’s why I don’t regret sacrificing years of my life. I did it for my dream. The truth is, there are some places you just can’t reach without a sacrifice like that.”

I turned to Harold so I could show him the back of my hand. A small seal in the shape of a book floated above it. It was a sign of my rank up.

“Using the power of monsters, surpassing human limits, it opens new doors. Now I can go even further,” I said. I had no regrets. I was reaching out with both arms, ready to take it all in my own hands. “Harold, do you remember what I said back when we first met?”

“Indeed, I do.”

His eyes narrowed as if staring into a bright light, and I repeated the words again.

“I’m going to become the strongest Seeker ever.”



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