
Bye Bye, Earth
EREI·IWON
The Girl of Reason 1
TOW UBUKATA

# Bye Bye, Earth

## 1 The Girl of Reason

TOW UBUKATA

YEN ON
New York

# COPYRIGHT




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TOW UBUKATA

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# Prologue
## Departure—At the Red Hour

*Just who is this man in front of me?*

This unexpected question cut mercilessly into the girl's heart. He was someone she ought to have known, someone she'd lived with until this very moment—the man who'd raised her, taught her. He was irreplaceable to her, yet she'd suddenly started seeing him as a complete stranger. Why was that?

*I'm scared.*

The shadowy figure stood with his back to the sun, his features unreadable.

"This is my final duty as your Enola. Come at me, Belle!"

He raised the sword in his hands and took a small step toward the girl. The tip of the blade shone sharply, drawing her eyes to it. It felt as if something had just twisted itself around her heart. And trying to fight off that pain…

*Ah. So that's what this is*, she thought. *Just like how I'm about to leave him behind, he's planning on leaving me, too.*

The question of "why" had no place there. All she had was a choice—the latest choice at the end of countless other choices. The seeds of choice are always being scattered, so we never have to question when or why.

*That's right…*

*Why…?*

## 1

*Ring.* At the chime of the timekeeping stone, she opened her eyes.

The light balanced with the darkness in her black, unyielding eyes, and her vision was filled with a vast blue sky that seemed endless.

*I feel as if I could dive right in…*

As the sunlight washed over the grassy hill, the girl lying there sat up and stretched pleasantly. Sprawled out beside her was a large, bulky sword covered in a flax-colored cloth. She lovingly stroked its blade, bringing her other hand to her chest to hug it closer.

Her hands, graceful yet still with hints of youth, were covered in small, unobtrusive scars. Around her neck was an amber-work pendant inset with a unique gemstone, and she picked it up with her fingertips.

“Look at how red it is already…,” she whispered intently.

The timekeeping stone—the O’crock—was displaying a crimson color as bright as fire. She watched it for a moment and, seeing that the color made no signs of dulling, let out a sigh. But her expression quickly changed to a smile.

“Well, it is what it is.”

Her voice was cheerful, and she suddenly hopped to her feet. The girl practically floated up, as weightless as a bird gliding on the wind before touching the ground with a soft thud. Her short black hair cut across the spring sunlight before gravity pulled it back down.

“All right, partner. Let’s go. Our clients must be getting impatient.”

The heavy sword lying at her feet seemed to sense her gaze, because she heard a faint noise that almost sounded like an annoyed grumble.

The platform of Lake Chaser was in a state of upheaval.

“Oh, goodness. Looks like everyone got driven out of the lake,” remarked a Cateyes peddler who’d traveled there from afar.

The area was overflowing with all manner of different races: the World-wise Mauti, who hardly ever left their homes deep in the forest; Sheepeyes, who always moved as a clan; Minotaurus youngsters, with their great brute strength; laid-back Froggies; keen-eared Reutelites; even beautiful Mermaids from the marshlands and other Undines had made a rare appearance.

As they all talked grimly among themselves, the large lake drank in the light, reflecting their figures as clearly as the Weather Wheel Tower high above their heads.

“Hmm… I wonder if this could make for some good business,” the peddler murmured to himself as he looked around, his ears pointed and whiskers standing on end.

He spotted a familiar group of Reutelites and, approaching them with an amiable smile, quickly struck up conversation.

“What’s all this commotion about? The mouse folk and even the goat folk who hate leaving their villages are all here, out of the forest. There isn’t a festival going on, and I don’t see any criminals being judged, so what is it?”

Although the question came without the preamble of a greeting or other niceties, one of the Reutelites ignited a pipe, sucked on it, and blew out a puff of smoke.

“Well, ya see, a season or so ago, one of them salty water fellas came down the river and ended up here.”

“Oh, someone from the salt waters? What race were they?”

“Nah, it’s not like that. If only it was someone we could talk to. Sadly, it’s a fish flower, and a real devilish one at that. It’s spreadin’ its poison all over the lake.”

“A fish flower…spreading *poison*?”

“Salt, it’s spreadin’ salt. Not poison strictly speaking, but it’s poison to us. It’s turnin’ the whole lake into salt water.”

“Ah, I suppose a saltwater flower wouldn’t be able to scatter its seeds here otherwise… So you’re all gathered here to slay this fish flower?”

“Well, not quite,” another said, lowering his voice. “See those young bulls over yonder? They went ahead and tried to take care of it, but it already got one of ’em.”

Sure enough, the peddler could see a few young Minotaurus men, all of whom had some degree of injury. One of them had a broken horn—a Minotaurus’s source of pride—and he couldn’t help but feel bad for them given how much they boasted of their strength.

“So some of the mouse folk put their heads together and came to a decision.”

The peddler leaned in, curious to hear more. Any verdict the World-wise Mauti handed down from the Weather Wheel Tower was absolute in the eyes of those who lived in and around the lake. For that reason alone, it was incredibly rare for them to convene in the tower.

“And well, I dunno all the details, but apparently, they put in a request. For a Nomad.”

“Oh-ho, a Nomad, you say?! That ought to settle it, then.”

“We’ll see about that. The Nomad ended up sendin’ the girl livin’ with him instead.”

“A girl…?”

“That’s what the mouse folk said. ’Cept there are weird rumors about that girl.”

A glint appeared in the merchant’s eye at the word *rumors*. He nodded eagerly, urging the Reutelites to go on.

“Well, they say she gave birth to a rock. Y’know, one of those ones that changes color.”

“Oh, you mean an O’crock? If I remember right, they change colors with the passage of time… But a girl *birthing* an O’crock sure is strange.”

“We don’t really know all that much about it, either. Rumor has it she was in Park City but got kicked out after causin’ some sorta trouble. She’s been wanderin’ from place to place and ended up in these parts, but none of us have said a word to her.”

“Hmm,” murmured the peddler. “Very interesting. This should make for a good story.”

The Cateyes man clapped his hands together happily, while behind him, the figure they were expecting gradually approached, bringing silence along with her.

“Huh? Why’s everyone gone all quiet?”

“Looks like…someone’s comin’.”

A hush had suddenly fallen over one section of the platform. The silence gradually spread, and although they couldn’t yet see her, the closer she got, the quieter everyone became.

Without warning, the gathered crowd parted in two. No one had instructed them to do so, but this cleared the shortest, most direct path between the new arrival and the lake.

A whisper cut through the silence.

“Looks like we’ve got a full house.”

The lone girl quietly made her way forward.

She had no features—no tail, no scales, no fur. She didn’t have large eyes or pointed ears, nor whiskers or proud horns. With no features unique to any race, she was characterized by a complete lack of character.

She fearlessly cast her black eyes over her surroundings, and her pursed lips curled into a friendly smile. She carried a large object wrapped in a flaxen cloth upon her back, its outline clearly that of a sword. *That* could very well be called her defining feature; it was wider than her shoulders and longer than she was tall if you counted the hilt, very much contrasting the girl's petite figure.

"…Eerie, ain't it."

As she approached, the silence lifted and the onlookers began to murmur. The girl regarded the crowd with a smile, but this only earned her strange, alienating looks.

**Same as always, huh…?**

Those whispered words went through her mind, yet it wasn't out of jaded resignation. Another voice inside her was trying to spur on the version of her that still couldn't get used to this no matter how many times it happened.

*But someday…*

She believed that surely, one day, the alienating gazes around her would change.

The girl stopped in her tracks.

"Belle Lablac!" she declared, her voice ringing out. "That's my name. I've come to your aid under the orders of my Meister, Sian Lablac."

An old Mauti man stepped out of the crowd. He stood across from Belle, hunched over and leaning on a cane, clearly showing his age. Belle thought he had a kind face.

"Well met, Lady Belle. On behalf of the people of the lake, I humbly ask for your help."

"Who are you?"

"I lead the Mauti and preside as judge in the Weather Wheel Tower. They call me Ja." Ja went on to politely explain that this was the name granted to the oldest member of the clan.

"Nice to meet you, Ja. So where's my opponent?"

"Take a look over there. In the lake is a dull black spot."

"Uh… It's too far away for me to see properly from here, but I think I can see it."

"Lake Chaser has been called the hand mirror left behind by the gods. The one who has besmirched it with darkness lies beneath that spot. Its arms are thicker than tree trunks, and we

do not yet know how many it has. Its bright-red body is hard enough to deflect swords and spears, and it spews black poison from its mouth."

"My Meister said it's almost definitely an eight-armed negroni. Though, I guess I won't know for sure until I see it."

"Oh… You will dispatch it for us, then?"

"Yeah. It doesn't matter what kind of flower it is, flower flesh is my favorite food. Anyway, don't worry. I'll defeat it."

But those words did little to relieve the crowd, who fell back half a step, aghast.

"How beastly…," Belle heard someone whisper.

*Tch. Acting all virtuous just because they eat nothing but grass and fruit.*

Putting aside that minor unpleasantness, Belle got down to work. As she scanned the lake, she took her sword down off her back. It had no scabbard to speak of, so instead she used a sword bag woven from flower skin, fastened around her body at the tip of the blade and at the hilt. Belle carelessly undid it, and the sword dropped to the ground behind her with a loud *thud*, stabbing into the earth under its own weight.

The crowd exclaimed in fear and wonder. The sword looked overwhelmingly large and heavy. It was widest at the base of the hilt, and from there the blade extended all the way to the tip in a wide arc. Through the cloth covering, it had a contour similar to that of a white clover leaf. Its shape didn't give the impression of sharpness, but of a dreadful, blunt mass that could threaten the very earth.

Stepping away from the unwieldy weapon, Belle swiftly started taking off her clothes.

"What are you doing…?" Ja asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Making myself lighter," replied Belle, turning her gaze to the lake.

With a serious expression, as if she didn't care about the eyes of the people around her, Belle slipped off her shoes, leaving her with only the O'crock hanging from her neck and her long, flax-colored pants. She stepped onto the platform and briskly walked toward the surface of the water.

"What the…?!"

"Whoa…!"

The moment they all expected Belle to sink into the water, she *bounced lightly off* it instead. The crowd of onlookers was shocked beyond belief; every mouth was agape, and all eyes were wide with incredulity. Belle kicked off the water's surface lightly with her toes, producing ripples as she jumped high into the air where she floated like a wind fae. Each time she kicked off the water, her half-naked body rose gracefully into the air.

But the crowd's wonder soon turned to revulsion as they realized this grace was a lack of gravity, afforded those rejected by the blessing of the earth.

As Belle hopped across the lake, feeling their gazes on her back, she noticed the water beneath her gradually turning black. Suddenly, she sensed something massive stirring in the depths right beneath her.

Belle kicked off the water, floating straight up into the air, and whispered to the murky darkness.

"Hey… Why'd you come here?"

The ripples spread across the entire surface of the lake and disappeared.

"Don't you have a home to go back to?"

And then, as if responding to her hushed question, it appeared. Belle was a split second faster, kicking hard against the water and jumping high into the air. The water's surface, which had been a calm black mirror, turned bright red and surged toward her—then burst. With a violent spray of water, a giant tentacle-like arm covered in suction cups extended toward the sky in pursuit of Belle. It caught her in midair, coiling and constricting around her ankle before instantly tugging her down into the water with a loud, rumbling splash. The resulting pillar of water rose as high as the Weather Wheel Tower. A moment later, the droplets of water fell back down to the lake like rain in the middle of a bright, sunny day.

It all happened in an instant, during which time the crowd was helpless to do anything but watch. A heavy silence hung over the scene, and all of a sudden, the water by the platform began to tremble.

"Whoa!"

"Eeeek!"

A drenched Belle emerged from the water, startling the people who happened to be standing nearby. She effortlessly hopped up onto the platform.

"*Tch*... I should have taken off my bottoms, too...," she grumbled, raising a leg.

The tentacle's tremendous strength had ripped her pants to shreds where it had grabbed her. But something else had suffered even worse—the tip of the red tentacle, which Belle had somehow torn off with her bare hands. She tossed it to the ground with a wet, slimy splat.

"Shoo, out of the way," Belle told the onlookers.

They didn't need to be told twice. The people all hurried out of her way with a mixture of wonder and fear. Another red tentacle rose out of the water, and then another. They reached toward the platform in a straight line, spurring the spectators to vacate the surroundings.

Belle wove her way through the fleeing crowd and hurried back to where she'd left her sword, putting her top back on in the process.

"The water's still pretty cold...," she nonchalantly told the sword thrust into the earth.

As she was doing that, a few of the creature's tentacles wrapped around the Weather Wheel Tower and pulled its body out of the water with a huge splash. The huge red mass of flesh had yellow eyeballs with oblong pupils that shone black. Its gaze was fixed on Belle, weighing her up as if it was trying to understand the one who'd come to kill it.

"So it really is a negroni... And a big one, at that."

Belle pursed her lips, staring back at the demonic fish flower.

"You're up, partner."

The fabric covering the sword came undone, revealing an aged mass of lily steel fruit that shone with a dull gleam. No metal could be less appropriate for creating a sword.

Along the blade was carved the word:

**EREHWON**

It was some manner of spell written in a mystical, ancient text, yet no one who'd seen it had been able to understand what it meant.

The negroni silently closed in on Belle, then powerfully lifted one of its tree-trunk-like tentacles and brought it down toward her head.

“Sing, Runding!” Belle roared.

She gripped the handle of the sword in both hands and drew it from the ground with a twist of her body. Watching her effortlessly swinging around that blade larger than she was, it seemed that everything she touched took on the same weightlessness Belle herself did.

***YYYYYYAH!***

The two huge masses collided head-on, one from below and one from above. A strange, seemingly off pitch sound reverberated, as if the air itself was warping around them, and the next second the tentacle went flying with incredible momentum, colliding with the Weather Wheel Tower. Yet only the building was damaged—the tentacle didn’t have so much as a cut in it.

More tentacles swung down at Belle, and she deflected them one by one with her sword. The creature’s limbs went flying every which way, gouging out parts of the ground, knocking down trees, and damaging the platform’s surroundings. Before long, a cloud of dust hung over the place.

“Keep it up!”

“Please save us!”

As Belle was pressed by the creature’s attacks, the same crowd that had been whispering how strange and abhorrent she was only moments ago now cheered her on. They had begun to lose hope, seeing that her sword seemed anything but sharp, when—

“Cut!”

Belle’s sword flashed, and one of the tentacles she’d deflected suddenly went flying away from the creature’s body.

A momentary silence hung in the air—followed immediately by excited cheering.

The severed tentacle landed behind Belle with a thud, and the next one that swung down was likewise suddenly cut off. Incredibly, the sword’s very appearance seemed to have changed. With every swing, the blade looked sharper, and the old steel fruit took on the smooth white luster of a lily. It seemed to have

regained the bright, unsoiled splendor of youth, while also retaining the strength of aged steel.

Realizing that whaling on Belle blindly would achieve nothing, the negroni stopped moving, its tentacles freezing in the air.

Belle didn't overlook this moment of hesitation. She bolted ahead, the tip of her sword aimed at the creature as she quickly closed in on it. Not giving the negroni any chance to dive back underwater, she fiercely lifted her shining sword—now a graceful shade of lily-white—above her head.

***EEEEERRRRREEEE…!***

The sword suddenly emitted a strange sound, like a voice crying out in joy, that overlapped with a roar of destruction—and in the blink of an eye, the negroni's bright-red body was torn to pieces.

Belle felt as if she could almost hear the creature's silent screams. Something that looked like dark-black blood seemed to pour from its body.

*It smells like salt water…*

With its gigantic viscera exposed in all their vivid colors, the negroni thrashed what was left of its appendages. The impacts produced cracks that ran through the platform, and the Weather Wheel Tower shook in its grip.

Even writhing in agony with its body destroyed, the negroni coiled its tentacles around Belle in one final act of resistance, constricting her youthful form. Still holding her sword in her hand, Belle gazed straight into the negroni's eyes.

"…Hey. Why'd you come all the way to a place like this?"

Her sword let out a faint howl.

*"I want to go back…to the sea…"*

The negroni's growls transmitted to Belle through her sword.

"Then why…?"

*"I can no longer…go back…"*

With a start, Belle tightened her grip on her sword.

*"I will die…here."*

The negroni's head suddenly swelled up. Belle could see its trembling heart through its wounds. The inside of its body was a vivid red, and it almost looked as if something was opening up there. Blooming like a flower.

*"Scattering…my seeds."*

Hearing the creature's final howl, Belle once again lifted her sword overhead.

"I'm sorry."

The negroni's body suddenly contracted, preparing to shoot out its seeds—but in that moment, Belle swung her sword and sliced through both the tendrils constricting her and its heart, cutting it to pieces.

She thought she heard a scream. A rueful scream.

Having been damaged twice in the same spot, the platform gradually lost its ability to support the negroni's weight and collapsed. The tower entangled in the creature's huge tentacles snapped at the base, and as Belle swiftly got out of the way, she watched it plunge into the lake, along with the negroni's corpse and the remains of the platform.

The loud rumble of destruction was followed by silence. Belle turned to look at the stunned crowd, but no one said a word. Everyone looked completely dumbfounded as they swarmed around the wreckage and the negroni's remains.

Belle reached out and took a seed from a broken-off section of the negroni's body, then walked over to her discarded clothes. Her sword had already returned to its original form as a lump of old metal without a shred of beauty to it.

"Th…thank you," Ja said timidly as Belle put her clothes back on. "We will bring…your reward…to your home."

His smile was kind, but it was probably quite strained right now. They'd asked Belle to vanquish the creature but never mentioned she was allowed to wreck the tower in the process.

Belle seemed at a loss as to how to respond to that. She strapped her sword to her back, then sheepishly asked, "Do you mind if I take this seed…and what's left of it with me?"

"Wh-what do you intend to do with it, exactly…?"

"It's like I told you earlier. Flower flesh is my favorite food."

An awkward silence followed. Belle picked up one of the severed tentacles and put it over her shoulder, then bowed her head politely to Ja. She walked away from the platform, driven by a distinct urge not to overstay her welcome. And thanks to that, she didn't have to hear them say "How beastly…" again.

On her way back, Belle threw the negroni seed into a passing creek. It soon vanished from sight, drifting off somewhere in the

pale water. She doubted it would actually sprout, but in doing this, Belle felt she'd been able to properly mourn the negroni.

*…Those people would have destroyed every last seed.*

And they would have been right to do so. However, Belle had thought it might be nice to fight alongside a creature like that negroni one day, and if that day ever came, it would feel like she'd done the right thing here.

It was then that she noticed the O'crock's hue had changed from red to heliotrope violet. Dusk was approaching, so Belle hurried home.

## 2

"I'm back, Meister."

Stepping into the hut, Belle saw a man facing the hearth, apparently struggling to light it.

"Good work," he replied briefly without turning around.

Belle dumped the negroni tentacle on the table then placed her sword on its stand. The moment she let go of her weapon, she felt a familiar sensation as her feet left the floorboards. The force tying her to the ground was extremely weak, and without a weight to threaten the earth, she wasn't able to stay down.

This was something she'd been taught by that same man who was now sitting with his back to her. The only person in the whole world who told her that she hadn't done anything wrong…

"Sian."

Belle whispered his name, calling out to him, but he was too focused on lighting the hearth. He'd probably put out the embers by mistake, that blockhead. If he just used his power, he could light the damn thing effortlessly, yet her Meister was a man who often purposely chose to do things the hard way.

*That's true of what happened today, too. He didn't have to send me. Sian would have dealt with it much better than I did.*

She saw Sian's pointed ears stand up. It seemed he'd finally managed to light the fire. He breathed out a long sigh, as if he'd really been working hard, then turned to look at her, his pure-white fur and beard black with soot. Belle offered him a handkerchief, and as he took it, Sian's eyes opened wide in surprise.

“What’s that?”

His eyes had the long, vertical pupils characteristic of Cateyes. When it was bright, they would narrow to look like two black lines stretched across his blue eyes.

“Spoils of war. It was a flower, just like you said.”

“Hmm… Good sword work. Nice, clean cut.”

“Eh-heh-heh.”

“But it looks like you’re still not using all your strength in your slashes.”

“I wanted to see what it’d do.”

“Put all your power into every swing. So what’re you going to do with this?”

“Eat it. It’s a fish flower.”

“Hmm.” Sian shrugged. “That would be the proper thing to do. Eating the dead is the best way of honoring them.”

He didn’t help her cook, though by now Belle knew better than to expect him to. Although Sian never complained about what she made, he did have a bad habit of playing around by putting all sorts of different seasonings and condiments on his food.

“It’s good,” he said, trying the negroni.

But hearing that after Sian had overloaded it with all sorts of other toppings that no doubt made it taste weird wasn’t much of a compliment. He called it being “particular” about the flavor, but Belle would simply respond, “Then why don’t you cook your own food every day?” which shut him up quickly. In the end, though, Belle cooked for fun, so she felt bad teasing him about it too much.

Once Sian was done eating, she took the chance to change the topic.

“Say, Meister. Why do you think that negroni left the sea?”

“Who knows? Maybe it got tired of living there.”

“It wanted to go back to the sea.”

Sian nodded, as if to say he’d expected as much.

“It was trying to fulfill its duty as a flower. To scatter its seeds. And that’s not something unique to flowers; everything in this world interacts with everything else. ‘The world’ is simply what we call all these things that intermingle.”

With that, Sian rose from his seat and headed back to the hearth. He sat on his rocking chair, turned on his glowstone lamp,

put on his glasses, put his pipe in his mouth, and picked up a book. This was his after-meal routine, practically a daily ritual. This was a typical day in the life of the one man Belle felt comfortable living beside.

It looked like he was blowing smoke out of the pipe, but that was merely an illusion produced by Sian's magic. He mostly did it out of habit. Apparently, he hadn't smoked a real pipe in years, saying that he'd given it up because the last pipe he'd smoked had had such an incredible flavor that he never wanted to forget it. There had to be another reason hidden behind his eccentric facade, though. A real reason, something from his distant past that he refused to ever talk about. Belle thought something like that would surely be *more* painful than talking about it would be.

But oddly enough, that side of him put Belle at ease.

She sat down next to Sian and started tanning the skin of the negroni. It was perfect for a sword bag—or might work well for a pair of shoes. But just as that thought crossed her mind, Belle found herself speaking up.

"Everyone was scared of me."

Sian said nothing. He simply nodded, his eyes still fixed on his book.

"It would've gone better if you did it instead," Belle added.

"And what would I have to teach a fish flower?" he asked.

"You're so unreasonable, only ever using your powers to teach."

"Such is an Enola's lot in life. What's wrong with that?"

"No, it *is* wrong. I mean…I know it's my fault for not doing a good job, but now it'll become harder for us to live here, too."

"Then let's get our reward money and move somewhere else. Where should we go next…? East or west? There are still lots of places in this country you haven't visited yet."

"If we go there—" Belle began, before stopping abruptly.

Sian snapped his book shut and looked up at Belle, meeting her eyes.

"If we go there, will I find people who are the same race as me?" she asked, peering into his face.

"No," Sian said with a brusque shake of his head. "When I visited those places before, I never found anyone like you."

Belle hung her head and frowned. A strange feeling that had been lying dormant inside her until now stabbed painfully at her heart. She hated the fact that she couldn't simply accept that pain as a frequent part of her life.

"…If this keeps happening, sooner or later the Dearth March are going to take me away."

"People who don't know about the Dearth March shouldn't say things like that."

"I still remember what you told me about them. They're people who can't enjoy the world, right?"

"Hmm… You're not wrong."

"Well, if a group like that catches me, I'll be done for. Where can I go to find people like me? I want to interact with the world, too. It hurts…the way things are now."

Sian turned his gaze to the hearth. His blue eyes stared into the fire, taking in the glow of the flames.

"That unrelenting feeling inside you is something I'd call homesickness."

"Home…sickness? What's that?"

"Well…it's thinking of your homeland. Yearning for an idealized place. Or heartache that you're not able to love who you are and where you are now."

"Then teach me a way to deal with this homesickness. It's not like I have a homeland to go back to."

The fire crackled quietly.

"In that case, why not leave and go on a journey?"

Sian made the suggestion all too lightly. It was something so important, yet his tone made it sound like a remark made over dinner. And he made it clear he was perfectly serious about it, too. Belle looked at him with a miserable expression.

"Listen, Belle. I don't think you'll find anyone like you in all of Schwertland. However, if you leave the country and travel the world, you may find the place where you belong. Your true world."

"But…Meister, you always say that's the last thing you'll teach me. And that until that happened…we'd stay together…"

Sian nodded, and a wave of sadness suddenly washed over Belle at his response.

“Go to Park City and take the trials to become a Nomad. I’m sure you’ll be able to. I trained you personally, after all. Otherwise, you’ll have to wander this country for the rest of your life.”

“…That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“A journey is something you throw your whole being into. No one can help you with that. I may be your Enola, and I may have spent all this time with you, but I can’t *be* you. Just like how you can’t be me.”

“I know that…,” Belle muttered discontentedly.

In truth, though, this was something she’d had on her mind for a long time now. Their life together was bound to end at some point, and that’s when everything would truly begin.

“But why do you always have to do these things so suddenly, Meister? I need time to prepare myself for something like this.”

Sian chuckled. “That’s all there is to it. All that’s left is for you to make your choice. There’s no rush.”

Having said his piece, Sian left for his room.

That night, Belle crawled into bed dressed in a long shirt and hugging her sword as she always did. A blanket alone wouldn’t be enough to keep her body anchored to the bed.

“*My* world…”

Belle whispered those words over and over. Every time they passed her lips, a strange emotion welled up inside her, but she was unable to grasp what it was. She suddenly found herself thinking about the negroni. She admired its courage to leave the sea, even if its journey had led to a gruesome end.

The O’crock changed colors, from deep violet to midnight blue. The hues would shift as the night stretched on, and just like today, Belle would greet the new morning in the red hour.

She decided to sleep. To let her dreams claim these emotions she was feeling. Closing her eyes, Belle could hear the faint howl of her sword. *You already prepared yourself for this long ago*, it told her.

All that remained was to put that thought into words…

## 3

Late in the afternoon the following day, the people from the lake came to bring them a bag of denari coins. Watching from the dining table as Sian cheerfully greeted them at the door to the hut and accepted the payment, Belle noticed the visitors throwing glances her way. Ja was among them. Their stares prickled at her skin. They looked at her with curiosity, fear, awe… The way people look at anyone who's different. They didn't dare enter the hut of their own accord.

*That's fine*, thought Belle. *I can keep myself from blaming my loneliness on others…*

That was, perhaps, the greatest lesson her Meister had taught her.

"Looks like we won't have any trouble putting food on the table for a while," Sian said with a self-satisfied smile once the lake folk had left. He could be quite crass when it came to things like this.

"Sian, I need to tell you something…"

Without meaning to, Belle had called him by name. Sian smiled kindly at her and tilted his head questioningly.

"What's wrong? Why're you acting so stiff?"

"I'm going to take the trials so I can set out on my journey," Belle declared firmly.

She'd finally said it.

Sian's eyes widened in surprise, and he took a long, hard look at Belle. A grin flickered across his face, but it disappeared immediately, replaced by an almost unnaturally serene expression.

"Hmm… You're not lying. You made your choice faster than I expected."

Belle remained silent, knowing that if she said something now, her resolve would waver.

"Bring both of our swords."

She did as she was bid, and the two of them left the hut.

With the sun high in the sky, Sian positioned himself with his back to the intense light, then turned to face Belle.

"Now, then. This will be my final lesson to you," he said.

All of a sudden, Sian seemed like a complete stranger. Feeling the weight of the sword on her back, Belle fixed her gaze on him.

"To become a Nomad, you must take on a curse. This curse can take on a multitude of forms and differs according to the person's

life. It is the first trial one must undergo to become a Nomad, and it will hang over you as you journey forth. My curse, by the way, is that I am forbidden from using my powers for any reason but to teach others."

Sian's lips curled into a mischievous smile, but right now, Belle lacked the composure to meet him in kind.

"Curses are passed down by Nomad blood. Are you ready?"

With that, Sian drew his sword and ran it over the thumb of his free hand. The cut trickled with drops of bright-red blood. Belle did the same, nicking her thumb then holding it out toward Sian's raised hand. Their wounds touched, and for a moment Belle felt as if they were sharing each other's pain. Just then, something invisible seemed to flow into her body through the cut. She shuddered, a fleeting sense of dread and an intense elation running through her, but she was bolstered by the vivid sensation that something inside Sian was flowing into her.

"Speak your journey's goal, child. Speak it loud and clear!"

"I…I want to find my roots! I want to meet others of my kind! I…I want to interact with the world!"

Belle's voice, chanted through blood, was like a tearful cry.

Whatever was flowing into her from Sian rushed in all at once, then vanished in a snap. Their fingers separated, their wounds gone as if they'd never been. Only the dry blood on their thumbs remained as a testament to what had just happened.

Belle was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of loneliness—but the next moment, she realized something was wrong about the man standing across from her.

"Accept this curse, believing that one day it will become a blessing."

Sian drew back slightly and lifted his sword, standing there as if he was blocking her forward path.

"Something's…strange," Belle groaned. "Sian…your face, it's almost like…"

"Like you've never met me before? Mmm, that is proof my final lesson is being realized."

Sian made it seem like he was completely unconcerned by what was happening. However, as much as he tried not to show it, he was dead serious.

Belle was on the verge of tears. She hugged her shoulders, as if trying to hold something in.

“Aaah… No, Sian. You’re fading away…!”

“Those who outgrow their teachers do not need to remember them. All that matters is that their teachings live on. That way, they’re spared from learning their teachers’ true intentions.”

“Their ‘true intentions’…?”

“I’m entrusting this to you, so you can reach places I never could.”

The shadowy figure stood with his back to the sun, his features unreadable.

“Aaah… I knew it. I knew you’d pull something like this… That’s why I didn’t want to bring up the journey. Damn it, you mess with people’s hearts like this and call yourself an Enola? Damn it all… I’m lonely, Sian. It hurts…”

“Forgive me, Belle. Once you cut me down, you’ll be free of this agony.”

“You always do this! You always try to make it so people won’t need you!”

“Such is the fate of an Enola.”

Belle swallowed the lump in her throat, just barely managing to hold back her tears.

“…I…want strength like yours!”

“That is not the kind of strength you need.”

Sian’s voice was filled with kindness, and he finally raised his sword. It was a brilliant lapis lazuli color, made from polished lotus steel. And on the surface of the blade, glowing a piercing blue somewhere between light and shadow, was etched the spell **ENOLA**—*instructor* in the ancient text.

Belle raised her own sword, her trembling hands clinging to it for dear life. As it came face-to-face with Sian’s, a low growl rose from the blade.

“Someday, you will come to learn the meaning of the spell **EREHWON** etched upon your sword—the *true* meaning of a word long lost to us: *utopia*.”

As Sian spoke, the tension in the air grew thicker. Even if neither of them desired it, their blades sought each other out and would move the hands gripping them. As the growl of her sword grew louder, the words left Belle’s lips almost unconsciously.

“I love you, Sian.”

“You’ll find a better man than me, my daughter.”

And that was the end.

“This is my final duty as your Enola. Come at me, Belle!”

Belle raised her sword, its howl almost a roar by now. She moved, spurred into motion. *By what?* she wondered, but the moment that question crossed her mind, the formless answer appeared. *Oh. Right. That’s it.*

She sprinted forward.

*Ring*. A crisp, clear sound echoed out.

The O’crock turned crimson red, like fire.

That color wouldn’t dull for quite some time.

# I.
# Origin—Under the Earthshine

## 1

*The stones around these parts sure do have an appetite*, Belle thought as she set foot in the crater. There was no one visible as far as the eye could see, only strangely shaped pillars of stone casting long shadows like men standing in silent meditation. The only proof that these stones had, until just recently, been lush trees teeming with greenery was the carpet of leaves on the ground that hadn't yet wilted. And even they made a faint scraping sound and emitted a hard glow.

*I haven't been to the Quartz Forest in a while… Though, it's not like it feels nostalgic at all.*

Belle cast an objective eye around this place, where tree and rock devoured each other, vying for dominance. The rocks consumed the trees, transforming them into the same material, only for greenery to sprout from the stone in turn. Flowers bloomed by piercing through the stone, while the roots reverted the rock to soil.

The landscape changed at a dizzying rate. Sunlight poured down on the forest and was drunk in by the stones or absorbed by the trees, crystallizing the area and eventually producing mysterious stones that changed their hues with the passage of time.

This was the Quartz Forest, where timekeeping stones—O'crocks—were produced.

It was also the place where Belle had first appeared in this world.

*I came out of one of these stones as a baby…*

It was a recollection from before her birth, unable even to be called a memory. Needless to say, Belle felt no nostalgia for this place. And even if she did remember it, the forest was constantly

changing, meaning there was no chance that anything would look familiar to her.

Yet as if to make up for that, this was also the place where all the forgotten people across the world turned to crystals of light and began counting the passage of time. Petrified memories, marking the hours with a *ring*, *ring* that stood as a testament to the frozen, eternal nature of time.

“I wonder if any of these trees or stones are my mother or siblings…”

The moment those whispered words left Belle’s lips, she was overcome with disappointment at the realization that they didn’t feel the slightest bit real.

“Nah, there’s no chance of that.”

Belle gave a derisive smile at her own expense and walked toward the center of the basin. It was there where the object that had brought her into this world had once stood.

“The stone egg… There’s not even a trace of it left anymore.”

She picked up a strange fragment from the ground. It seemed to be made of something between metal and ceramic, but its texture felt like neither. As for what its original shape had been… she couldn’t even hazard a guess, having spent so long caught in the middle of the struggle between stone and tree.

In all likelihood, it had just so happened to have an elliptical shape when the people of Park City found Belle here, making it look like she’d hatched from a stone egg when she emerged from inside it.

At least, that was what Belle assumed. The terrain here was strange to begin with. The basin had been turned into a crater, gouged out of the earth as if something huge had crashed here. Was that maybe because the stone egg had dropped from the sky?

“So my homeland is in the heavens…? What a bad joke.”

All of a sudden, Belle got the feeling that these thoughts right now were very unlike her. They weren’t ideas she’d come up with on her own, but ones someone else had taught her. But all her memories of whoever could have taught her were gone now. All she had left was the vague knowledge that she had met, been raised, and parted ways with someone like that. Not even the loneliness that came from that separation lingered in her heart anymore.

As the sky slowly darkened, Belle threw away the shard she'd picked up. It made a clear, resonant tone as it clattered across the ground.

"Now, then," she said cheerfully. "If this is where everything started, then what do I do next?"

The answer to that question came to mind right away: go to Park City. That was probably something else she'd been told, but Belle had no way of knowing. What she knew for sure was that she was just about fed up with negroni meat, and Park City would no doubt have other good food she could sink her teeth into. That alone was as good a reason as any to make her way there.

The O'crock hanging from her neck was a red-violet hue, while the stones on the ground changed their colors constantly. Once night fell, Belle set up camp. First, she selected a piece of chalk from among what little personal belongings she'd taken from the hut, and used it to draw a defensive circle around the spot she'd chosen to sleep on. It was very simple grammar magic that repeated the same rudimentary spell several times. There weren't any dangerous beast flowers living in this area, but she couldn't risk getting turned to stone by the Quartz Forest while she slept.

Belle tried using words that were particularly effective at stopping the rock from spreading…but the energy with which she'd written the grammar magic kept building.

"I feel like I got it wrong…," she mumbled to herself.

Belle watched as, one after the other, the modifiers stuck out of the line of the circle, creating a terribly warped shape. She was only trying to produce a basic effect, but the spell wouldn't complete no matter how long she waited. In the end, it kept expanding, forcing her to erase one part and add to another, again and again. This went on for so long that Belle had no idea where to cut the spell off or why she'd cast it in the first place.

In the end, Belle was left with no other option but to give up on her writing abilities and put a period on the spell. That was when she noticed the spell looked completely different than the one she'd drawn.

In fact, it wasn't grammar magic at all.

"This is mathematics magic…"

Even Belle, ignorant as she was of math techniques, could tell it was impressively concise. It combined very few numbers to give the greatest effect, avoiding bits that might be hard to understand to overwrite Belle's simple, nonsensical spell.

"Aw, man… I should've just used this. Damn. I wish I'd noticed sooner."

Once again, Belle felt it was unlike her to think that way. It felt weird, like normally she wouldn't care about something like this, but she decided not to dwell on it. It didn't make any difference anyway. She didn't know who'd cast this mathematics magic, but considering there was no one around her, Belle figured they'd probably already left.

*I should erase the spell before I leave… I wouldn't want my shoddy work compared with that.*

Having come to that decision, she spread out her blanket inside the lopsided spell and went to lie down on it. Belle hugged her sword, still wrapped in its cloth, and took a deep breath. Lying on her back, she looked at the sky that seemed to stretch on forever. The O'crock took on a heather-violet hue. *Ring*, *ring*, the stones around her chimed, ushering in an incomparably lonely night.

It didn't give Belle a sense of melancholy, however. Despite the fact that she was alone, this forest didn't provide any sense of solitude. After all, it was only when there was something they couldn't forget that a person could feel lonely.

Before long, the final rays of sunlight sank beneath the edge of the basin, and darkness crept in like ripples in water. As the stars began to twinkle, the nightscape took on a cold, pale hue.

Without warning, a mysterious light appeared before Belle's eyes. Its faint glow washed over her as she lay sprawled out beneath the silent atmosphere. It was a star large enough to fill the night sky, yet it looked like a glittering sapphire as it rose up into the heavens.

The Holy Star—Earth.

That was what everyone called the giant mother star. The greatest celestial body in the sky.

During the day, it was hidden by sunlight. However, come nighttime, it shone even brighter than the sun, its gentle indigo light illuminating the darkness.

Myths and legends claimed it was the home of the gods, but Belle didn't know why it was also called the mother star. The only ones who might know the answer to that question were the O'crock and the stones around her.

Yet one thing Belle did know was that she found the light comforting. It filled her with an incredible peace. Being enveloped in the faint glow of Earth made her feel as if the barren loneliness inside her had been wetted just slightly, which in turn gave her a sense of hopelessness.

Without realizing it, Belle stroked her chest with her hand. It was only after the action that she came back to her senses, having gotten the impression that her clothes were wet. But they were dry. It had only been an illusion shown to her by the pale light of Earth.

Sinking into this illusory water, Belle could hear the whisper in her heart.

*I want to find it… A world where I'm allowed to interact with others. I want to go there soon…*

It wasn't a desire to discover this place for the *first time*, but rather the urge to go back home. An impossible return to a homeland she'd never seen.

Overcome with this emotion called homesickness, Belle slowly but surely succumbed to sleep.

## 2

*I found it… I finally found it…*

On the other side of the darkness, in the interstice of dream and reality, Belle heard a faint voice call out. *What did you find?* her dream self asked, but there was no reply.

Instead, all she heard was…

*It's taken so long. So very long…*

The voice, barely able to contain its intense emotion, echoed slightly. Just like when it first started, the voice suddenly melted away into the rustling of stones and trees.

*The Girl of Reason…*

And with those final words, the voice faded away, its call failing to pull Belle back into the waking world.

Eventually, morning dawned.

The air was crisp, and the chirping of the bird flowers filled the air.

The moment Belle opened her eyes, she was already wide awake, as always. Still lying down, she glanced at the stone hanging from her neck. It was fountain blue, the color just after dawn. She still had quite a bit of time before the sun rose to its zenith.

Belle got up, deciding to have a light breakfast while she still had time—but just then, something entered her field of view. A white figure sat there in the middle of the foliage and rock, completely shocking Belle. It was only when she felt it tugging on her cloak that she'd noticed it. But even before she could register her surprise that she hadn't seen it until just then, Belle let out a scream.

"Eeeek!"

She tugged the cloak out of the figure's grasp, stumbling and wrapping it around herself as she scrambled back. Her hand reflexively went to her sword. Covering her body with the cloak, she held up the weapon. She could hear her pulse racing in her ears.

Belle was so flustered it wouldn't have been a surprise if she'd slashed out with her sword. What stopped her from doing so was the beauty of the figure.

Yes. It was beautiful.

*A—a rabbit…?*

It was a child. Its eyes glittered like red jewels, and pure milky-white fur covered its body. Its long ears stood up on either side of its head, and its cute harelip was crimson, contrasting its white fur. It was wearing a red waistcoat and black pants, and Belle caught a glimpse of a golden chain connected to a pocket watch inside the waistcoat pocket. Machina clocks were incredibly rare in Schwertland.

However, even more unusual still was the child's race. It was Rabbitia, a race that made its home far away from Schwertland, the Land of Swords, all the way on the other side of the continent in Denariland, the Land of Coins, a place famous for producing many Nomads. It was said that the people of Denariland knew

more about magic than anywhere else in the world and also used techniques from the ancient Age of the Gods.

Running into a traveling Rabbitia, however, was highly unusual, and for this reason many believed that meeting one was a sign of good fortune to come. Belle had a hard time believing this Rabbitia child would yield her any good luck, but it was clear that they were a Nomad—and quite possibly the caster of the magic Belle had unintentionally ruined last night.

"Ah… Sorry. You just surprised me, is all…"

Belle hurriedly apologized and lowered her sword, but the child's gaze remained fixed on her. In fact, it was so unchanging that Belle wondered if it really was even looking at her.

*What's their problem?*

She couldn't tell whether the young Rabbitia was a boy or a girl, and all it did was stare at her with eyes that didn't give off any semblance of intellect. Yet despite that, it had an incredibly elegant appearance.

*It's pretty, like a doll…*

The moment that thought crossed Belle's mind, the Rabbitia inexplicably reached out and grabbed the hem of Belle's cloak. It put the fabric in its mouth, then started *chewing* on it. It all happened so suddenly, Belle couldn't even react in time to stop it.

"Hey, quit it!"

She tugged away her cloak, but by that point, it had already eaten about a palm-size piece of the fabric. The Rabbitia child made a quiet noise as it swallowed, then cocked its head at Belle, who stared at it with her mouth hanging open.

That completely disqualified any possibility that this little one had cast the mathematics magic last night.

"Why're you looking at me like I'm the dumb one here?!"

It was pretty, all right, but that just made this whole thing feel even sillier.

*I doubt I'll be able to interact with it…*

Belle resigned herself to this conclusion and started packing up her things. She honestly believed that whatever story this little one had, she was better off walking away. That was the smart thing to do.

Belle carried very little with her, so packing up consisted of placing her sword on her back, throwing her rucksack over her

shoulder, and donning her cloak. After she'd done all that, she turned her back to the child.

*Tick, tock…*

But just then, she heard a loud noise that seemed to echo around her all at once. It rumbled under the ground beneath their feet and reverberated through the stone pillars to fill the crater.

"What's that…?"

Belle's skin prickled. Something was approaching. She looked around, but all she saw was stone. There was nothing else. Only rocks…

Her vision almost seemed to turn white as Belle reflexively leaped into action. She picked up the Rabbitia child, put it under her arm, and bolted away.

*Oh crap…!*

It was only afterward that she fully registered the meaning of her actions. The ticking sound exploded, kicking up the earth, and jagged Azurite fangs sprouted out of the ground, closing around the spot the Rabbitia child had been standing just moments ago. The deafening rumble it produced overlapped with Belle's scream.

"An O'crockodile! Damn it, why's a gnome attacking people?!"

Grumbling, she started racing up one of the basin's sloping hills. Neither the heft of her sword, her luggage, nor the child seemed to weigh her down. She sprinted over another small hill, only for the soil right in front of her to suddenly surge upward. Belle gripped her sword tightly, lifted the child onto her shoulders, and kept running. Her entire field of vision turned dark as a pair of huge jaws covered the sky and the O'crockodile revealed itself in all its glory, its body made of what looked like burning rubies that gave off an angry glint.

"Runding!" Belle roared, calling out the name like a battle cry. She swung her sword, never slowing as she ran. She moved with incredible grace, wielding her weapon in only her right hand.

**EEEERRRREEEEHHHH…!**

The sword let out a howl. Its blade flashed, glittering lily-white as it smashed into the powerful stone fangs of the creature, crushing them.

Belle kept running, the sky becoming visible where she'd slashed through the creature. As the O'crockodile's body crumbled behind her, she hopped up into the sky with the child on her back. Through her sword, Belle felt like she could hear the faint growl of the rubies that made up its eyes, or perhaps its heart.

*"Do not bring your curse here…"*

And just like that, its voice faded away.

Landing at the edge of the basin, Belle looked back to the Quartz Forest. She frowned, ruminating on the guardian gnome's final words.

*Do not bring your curse here.* She was sure that's what it had said. Belle had no idea what it meant, but somewhere deep down, she got the vague sense that it was referring to the first trial taken in order to become a Nomad—a trial that hung over a person even after they set out on their journey.

She furrowed her brow again—this time not in a frown but in a smile at her own expense.

"Heh… I'm used to being driven out of places…," Belle whispered to herself.

The child had finally hopped back down to the ground, and it stared up into her face with curiosity.

Once she reached an ordinary grove of trees on the outskirts of the Quartz Forest, Belle checked her bearings. She placed the O'crock on the ground, and a dim halo of light floated up from it. This was the gradation ring, formed of the fundamental colors—indigo, blue, green, yellow, red, and violet. Each one always pointed to a cardinal direction, wherever the ring was.

Belle headed in the direction indicated by the color blue—east. After walking for a short while, she found the Yellow Brick Road. As its name implied, it was a wide road paved with yellow bricks that symbolized the sun. It linked together the key points of Schwertland, with all roads leading to Park City. All Belle had to do now was continue down this road and she'd reach her destination.

"Now that we've made it here, there's no need to worry."

So Belle sat down at a roofed bus station on the side of the road and decided to have lunch there. She rummaged through her

rucksack, took out a cup, and dumped a few small crystals into it. These were made using a special Mermaid technique that solidified fresh or hot water and were an indispensable part of everyday life.

The crystals Belle was currently using were local products of Lake Chaser, which, despite being cheap, could be kept for a long time and were unaffected by outside heat. And most importantly of all, the water they turned into was tasty. In that regard, as well, Belle felt a bit sad leaving the lake behind.

She used a spoon to crush the crystals, which instantly reverted into hot water that melted away whatever fragments remained of the stone, then mixed a red crystal into it in the same way to turn the hot water into tea.

“Here, you want a drink?”

She offered the young Rabbitia the cup, but it didn’t take it. The child had followed Belle all the way here, never once saying a word, so she’d assumed it must be hungry. But apparently not. It didn’t give any sort of response, not a smile nor a cry. Belle placed the cup in front of the child sitting on the ground, then without giving it another look, set about satisfying her own empty stomach.

She made another cup of tea and sipped on it. After she’d drunk about half, Belle put a generous amount of swelling fruit powder into the cup. To this, she added molasses to make oatmeal, which she ate with dried negroni meat. It was plain but good.

Lost in the smells of tea and sugar, Belle suddenly noticed the child was nibbling on something.

“Wha…?”

Even Belle had to stare in disbelief. At some point, the Rabbitia child had gathered a variety of fruits of different colors, honey pots full of insect flowers, and bundles of herbs. There was so much that Belle wouldn’t have been able to hold it all in both hands.

As Belle looked on in surprise, a bird flower landed on the child’s shoulder, a branch laden with fruit in its beak. It dropped the fruit at the child’s side, then flew off with a short chirp…only for another bird to land and drop something else.

The child suddenly turned to face Belle, startling her. It extended its hands and gestured toward the fruit that had just landed in front of her, as if telling her to eat it.

"Uh… Thank you."

Although she still felt a little uneasy, Belle took a bite, which turned out to have an incredible flavor. The child watched her, its gaze vacant.

"Thanks…but I've had enough. You should eat, too."

The Rabbitia said nothing. After a short while, it looked away from her again and started gnawing on the fruit with a blank expression. That beauty, accompanied by its eerie attitude, made the child seem increasingly more mysterious.

Having finished her meal, Belle hurried to wash her utensils. She crushed a crystal containing fresh water and used it to rinse her cup, before reaching for the one she'd given the child. However, as she did, the child picked it up, stopping Belle from taking the cup. She pulled her hand away in surprise, but the child just sipped on the now-lukewarm tea, showing a complete lack of interest in her actions.

"You can keep that one," Belle said. "I've got more cups than I need anyway."

The child said nothing in response, which only added to Belle's eerie impression of it. She packed up her things and made to rise from the bus station bench—but her legs suddenly froze.

A huge number of bird flowers had silently gathered around them. They were red and blue, big and small. It was as if every bird in the forest had gathered there, the tree branches bowing under their weight as they all stared at Belle and the child.

The sword on Belle's back let out a soft howl, but the birds showed no hostility. In fact, the very reason for Runding's moan was because it *wasn't* hostility being directed toward them…but a desire for them to leave, just like the O'crockodile had shown.

Belle came to a sudden realization. There were all sorts of different ways to try to expel someone, like baring your fangs or placating them with food. So what if it wasn't her the birds were rejecting? After all, when the O'crockodile first attacked, it hadn't lunged at her, and she wasn't the one the bird flowers had been showering with food.

It was the Rabbitia child.

Belle turned to look at the bench. The colorful fruit glittered in the sunlight…yet the child was nowhere to be seen. Belle heard a rustling sound like rain—the sound of countless bird flowers flapping their wings and flying away as one.

The cup she'd left with the young Rabbitia had also disappeared.

## 3

*What was that…?*

She felt like she'd just come out from under some kind of spell. The unusual child was gone without a trace, but Belle still had the strange feeling she'd find it there if she turned around, staring at her with that blank expression.

She walked along the Yellow Brick Road, looking around at her surroundings, and before long, the forest cleared. Belle found herself atop a tall hill, and the sheer grandeur of what she saw there blew all thoughts of the child out of her mind.

The road stretched out into the plains, and past that was a single large, beautiful building. It was the castle of Schwertland, with walls made almost entirely out of O'crock stone. Even from a distance, Belle could tell the walls were shining the mist-green color of late morning, just as her own O'crock was.

A quiet whisper went through her mind.

*Park City…*

As Belle walked over the hills, she kept her eyes fixed on the city. The central block surrounding the castle was a hexagon, and six triangular towns bordered its walls. The three towns on the eastern side had castle walls protecting them, but the three on the west had no such bulwark, giving it an uneven shape.

Belle followed the Yellow Brick Road toward Park City, arriving at Lower West Town. The fundamental color of the entire city was yellow, and this was where most paths of the Yellow Brick Road led. It was a very cluttered, chaotic place, with lots of people coming and going through its open gates.

The noise and tumult enveloped Belle as soon as she entered the town. People of all different races roamed the streets, making it hard to walk in a straight line without bumping into someone. Some people sneaked glances at Belle, owing to her unusual

appearance, but no one spoke up. As she wove left and right through the crowd, Belle happened to spot an inn called the Amaretto Arbor, which she promptly entered.

The first floor doubled as both a bar and a dining hall, so Belle decided to get something to eat first, then if she ended up liking the place, she'd rent a room. There were people seated at some of the tables seeking shelter from the noonday sun. They glanced at Belle as she came in but soon looked away. There was no one by the counter, so Belle set her sword and bag down and took the corner seat.

"This is the *outside*, missy," said the innkeeper—a man with impressive, curled horns—from the other side of the counter.

Belle gave a nod to say that she knew, and the Sheepeyes man's golden eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Looks sure can be deceiving, huh? I thought a Mermaid from the castle had wandered in… You an *underdog*?"

Belle hadn't expected to be mistaken for a Mermaid, who were famed for their beauty. Slightly taken aback, she shook her head.

"No… All this inside-outside business has nothing to do with me."

The innkeeper furrowed his brow for a second before his expression turned to one of realization, and he gave a shrug.

"Well, if you're from the boonies, first you'll need to learn about the rules here in Park City."

Belle paid the innkeeper's words no mind and handed him one of the denari coins she'd received for slaying the negroni.

"Get me something to eat…and a cold flower tea."

"Oh wow. For this much, you could stay here for two or three nights."

"Depending how things go, I might."

The innkeeper deposited the denari in his apron pocket, then put a flagon filled with ice and flower tea in front of Belle, along with a surprisingly stylish glass.

"Now listen here, missy. I dunno what corner of the countryside you came from, but here in Park, the Thema is law. Fail to abide by it, and you could end up dead."

Belle nodded indifferently. She'd heard about the laws governing Park City but didn't really care much for what it all meant. Seeing this, the innkeeper kindly gave her his advice.

“The Thema dictates that people are either just or evil. This applies to everyone in the world, and it’s decided at birth. At least, that’s how it works here in Schwertland. Uh, you *do* know this country’s called Schwertland, don’t you?”

He hadn’t said a word about the way Belle looked, or that she was different from everyone else. Thanks to that, Belle felt unusually comfortable with the man and found herself arguing back.

“I get the feeling you think I’m ignorant or something.”

The innkeeper smiled quietly as he prepared her meal on the other side of the counter.

“Also, stop calling me missy. I’ve got a name, you know.”

“Do you, now? Care to share it with me?”

“Belle Lablac.”

“You got it, Lablac,” the innkeeper replied amiably. “I’m Haggis, the owner of this here Amaretto Arbor. How much do you know about Schwertland?”

“I think I know enough. Everyone in Park City is born as either a ‘top dog’ on the side of justice or an ‘underdog’ on the side of evil. So everyone inside the castle walls are top dogs, and everyone outside the walls are underdogs, right?”

“Exactly. The insiders and the outsiders. The Thema was established on the distinction between these two groups. And upsetting the Thema isn’t allowed under any circumstances.”

“Have you considered going inside the walls, Haggis? I hear there’s no injury or illness in there.”

“Well, just because there’s no injury or illness doesn’t mean everyone there’s happy. Besides, I’ve already been determined to be an underdog, so I’m not gonna say I want to go there. The important thing is that my side was decided. And you’d do well to discover what side you’re on, too, as soon as you can.”

“There’s no need. I won’t be here long.”

“What? You mean…?”

“I’m going to become a Nomad. That’s why I came to Park City.”

Haggis went quiet. He didn’t say a word until he placed the bird flower dish he’d prepared for Belle on the bar.

“Give it up. God won’t allow it,” he murmured quietly the moment Belle started to eat.

“Huh?” She looked up at him, dumbfounded.

“Come on, Lablac. Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of the god living in the castle.”

Belle shook her head, chewing on a mouthful of meat.

“See, this is why I don’t like dealing with people from the boonies… Listen, Lablac, the one who truly controls this country isn’t the top dogs or the king. It’s God. *God* rules here… Wh-what? Why do you look so confused? Is it really that much of a shock?”

“No.” Belle rubbed the bridge of her eyes and sighed. “I just remembered something. ‘Deus Ex Machina.’”

“Deu… What?”

“I don’t really know, either. Someone cold and heartless told me about it once, a long time ago… But it’s like there’s another person inside me who knows completely different things… Uh, never mind. Forget I said that… Anyway, this bird’s delicious.”

Haggis nodded, a puzzled look on his face.

“Yeah? This flower bird was caught fresh this morning, so it should be good… Are you sure you’re all right?”

Belle smiled. She was fine. This was a way of making sure of that. So long as the memories were only there as information in her mind, so long as she didn’t remember her Meister…

*I cut him. But who? Why?*

…then she wouldn’t be hurt. It was all to ensure that.

Just then a large group entered the Amaretto Arbor.

“What’s going on…?” Haggis asked, looking over. Belle turned around to do the same.

Standing in the entrance was the Rabbitia child, as expressionless as ever. Beady red eyes, milky-white fur, and in its hand, a familiar cup.

Belle was stunned. It was the same Rabbitia she’d met in the Quartz Forest. And surrounding it was a group of young Sheepeyes, the same race as Haggis, who were all looking in their direction.

“…What are you planning to do with that child?” Haggis asked in a low voice. His tone was commanding and heavy as lead.

“What d’you *think* we’re gonna do, old man Haggis?!” one of the young men snarled at him.

When Belle saw the thing hanging from his belt, she finally realized who he was.

*An evil Solist…*

And it wasn't just him; all the young men surrounding the child were carrying swords of varying shapes and sizes.

"It's a Rabbitia! A *Rabbitia*! How often does a chance like that land in your lap?!"

The young men were all excited. Belle had no idea what they were going on about, but Haggis's eyes flared with anger.

"You *know* how we get mocked by other Solists for being Sheepeyes! If we just sit on our hands, we'll never get a chance to take the spotlight!"

"That doesn't justify sacrificing a child for it!"

"Rabbitia are all monsters anyway, and that's true of this brat, too. It would suddenly vanish and start gnawing on our swords. Bringing it all the way here was hard work!"

The young man kicked the young Rabbitia, making it drop the cup. The child remained as expressionless as ever.

Belle reached for her sword almost unconsciously. The situation was starting to make sense. The child's face was bleeding in places, and its clothes were muddied. Plus, on top of all that, they were calling it a monster. Belle didn't know exactly why, but she was suddenly furious. Once again, she thought back to the fact that she had no memories of her Meister. That was simply…

*I cut him.*

…how it had to be. The young Sheepeyes drew his shabby sword. The tip of the blade had bite marks, probably from the child's gnawing on it, and his eyes were filled with a dangerous glint.

The thought crossed Belle's mind that this young Sheepeyes man was exactly the same as the O'crockodile that had attacked the Rabbitia or the bird flowers that had brought it food. Sheepeyes were typically docile, but this one had drawn his sword on the child. And then she suddenly noticed something roll out of the cup the child had brought with it. It looked to be made of some sort of strange material—

*A stone egg…*

It was neither metal nor ceramic, but a fragment from a mysterious substance unable to be described in the words of this world. Why did the young Rabbitia have this? A wide array of thoughts flickered across Belle's mind in the span of a single

second, lumping together and spurring her to move. She couldn't stop herself.

"If we cut this thing down, we'll be able to make a name for ourselves! Feeding our swords Rabbitia blood will make them stronger! Nothing would've happened if we'd handed it over to someone else, so we brought it here instead!"

"Idiots!" Haggis shouted.

And at the same time, a chair came flying toward the young man. Caught off guard, he reflexively swung out with his sword. There was a loud bang and a crash. Struck in the chest, the young man lay face up on the floor, unmoving. And most importantly, his drawn sword was split in half by the blow.

The sound of the chair—Belle's chair—tumbling to the floor filled the silence.

"Lablac, what'd you…?"

Belle was standing, her hand on the hilt of her sword. Even she didn't expect the words that rushed from her mouth.

"Underdog Solists really aren't what they used to be. If you can't understand the difference between *being* evil and *doing* evil, then you have no right to wield a sword!"

No—they weren't Belle's words, but *someone else*'s. But that only made it harder for Belle to back down. She felt compelled to swing her sword. That, however, was something that came from her, and no one else.

"H-hey, Lablac…do you have a dog tag?"

"No, and I don't care."

"This isn't your fight, so don't get involved. Hurry up and get out of here… Besides, look at the size of that sword. There's no way you can handle something that big. Just having a sword in your hands doesn't make you a Solist."

A sarcastic smile crossed Belle's lips.

"I couldn't agree more."

She turned to face the other young men, who'd all drawn their swords, but this only served to annoy them even more. They all moved as one, their nature as Sheepeyes, that were used to moving as a flock, allowing them to act in perfect coordination. Three charged at Belle from the front, while the rest spread out around her to see how she'd react. They'd already backed her

into a corner by that point. Their coordination was impressive, and it took the room's layout into account.

*They get mocked? When they're this skilled?*

Yet it was true that, taken individually, each of them was as weak as a Solist. That was just a Sheepeyes' lot in life, born as they were without any inherent fighting ability. And their attempts to overcome that and grow stronger only earned them scorn.

*How stupid…*

Belle pulled the cloth away from her sword, exposing the dull glint of its aged steel blade. She lifted the tip of the sword away from the floor, which creaked noisily around her feet, then swung it sideways with incredible momentum. The surface of the blade glowed white as it became sharp, and then—

*What?!*

Something took control of Belle's body. Her sword wouldn't stop, and an impact like a whirlwind hit the first three young men. Steel clashed hard against steel and shattered. The three of them were flung back as one, hitting their comrades behind them and sending them all tumbling to the floor. Two of the three lay limply, while the one closest to Belle had his arm bent in an unnatural direction from the impact that had broken his sword.

"Who *is* this girl?!"

"Be careful! Get in behind her!"

As the young men regained their footing, Belle's mind raced as she tried to understand what had happened to her in that moment. But she didn't have much time to think, as the next group immediately charged at her, with one of them climbing on top of the counter to get at her back. The massive sword swung in Belle's slender arms, smashing into the man behind her and sending the counter flying along with him. Haggis let out a scream. Struck from below by Belle's sword, the young man slammed into the ceiling and landed in the kitchen, his sword shattered from trying to stop the blow.

*There it is again…*

Every time she swung her sword, Belle felt as if something was binding her, but her body seemed to be moving normally. If anything, it seemed to be *her heart* that was bound…

She swung her sword, still held aloft, in a sweeping horizontal arc at the Solists charging toward her. For a second, Belle expected to see her surroundings dyed the color of blood—but instead, her blade seemed to dull, and her sword changed course aiming not at the Solists' bodies, but at their swords.

The young men's weapons were instantly shattered, the impact of the blow dislocating their arms from their shoulders. They were still alive, though.

*What is this, damn it…? My sword's just a lump of steel now!*

Belle realized that just when her blade had been about to tear into the men's bodies, *she* had been the one to stop it herself. But why? Surely, she wasn't making a distinction between flower monsters and other species—they were all equally alive, and she could cut them all just the same.

*The curse…?*

But then, everything clicked into place. She was stunned.

*Don't tell me I can't cut anything anymore…*

That thought was undeniably hers, as well as the fear and anxiety.

By now, only one of the young men remained unharmed. The rest were lying on the floor, groaning in pain. Most of the noise wasn't out of concern for their own injuries, but over the fact that their swords were shattered.

For Solists, having their swords break was a much bigger shock than taking a blow to their own bodies. Even if they were to lose an arm, a healer could put it back the way it was—but this wasn't true of swords.

Solists raised their weapons from sword buds, borne from steel fruit. Once the steel was given its second life in the shape of a sword, it would grow into that form. However, if it lost its shape, the steel almost never recovered. It would stop growing and end up wilting away.

The whole reason the young men had drawn their swords in the first place was to strengthen their blades by watering them with the blood of the child. However, their weapons had ended up shattered instead, most likely leaving the Solists with an incredible resentment.

*Krnch, krunch, krk…*

Just then, an unusual crunching sound filled the room, and everyone turned in the direction of the source of the noise.

The Rabbitia child was picking up the shards of the broken swords and gnawing on them like they were candy. It chewed on them expressionlessly, as if eating metal was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Raaah!”

The last remaining Solist suddenly charged with the tip of his sword fixed on the child. Belle moved into action, catching up to the young man in a single jump and reflexively swinging her sword—and it was in that moment that she understood what her curse was. The image of the young man cleaved in half drifted across the back of her mind, and it made her heart shudder.

But Haggis intervened. He pushed the man out of the way and stood in front of Belle. Her blade stopped so close to Haggis’s shoulder that it was impossible to tell whether it was actually touching him or not.

“I can tell you’re incredibly skilled,” he told Belle. “Almost absurdly so—and how beastly you are.”

“I…”

“These boys all respect me. No matter what sort of foolishness they may have planned, I would’ve been able to stop them.”

Belle didn’t think so. What had happened here wasn’t as simple as Haggis seemed to think. But she said nothing, just nodded silently and packed up her things. Looking at the wrecked counter, Belle made to take out some denari to pay for the damage, but Haggis stopped her.

“Don’t. Just go, quickly. It won’t be long before the top dogs come here to investigate this racket. If they find out you used a sword without a dog tag, you’ll be in trouble.”

Belle put a few coins on the table and left the inn without another word. It was only then that she recalled the child and looked around for it, but the young Rabbitia seemed to have disappeared at some point. For a moment, it felt as if her vision went dark.

Leaving the inn, Belle saw a crowd had formed outside, and the people were recoiling upon seeing her. She ignored them and walked down the street and, after just a few moments, spotted

something gigantic approaching her from the opposite side of the street.

It was a turtle. Cateyes men walked on either side, all of them Solists. The turtle's shell stood taller than their heads and was shaped like a birdcage.

*A goblet flower…*

The cage looked incredibly solid, as if no force imaginable could break it. Belle stopped in her tracks and waited for the turtle to approach. The Cateyes men reached for their swords and surrounded Belle before the turtle caught up with them.

"Are you the one who was involved in that sword fight?"

It felt like a silly question to ask. Belle nodded tiredly.

"Where's your dog tag?"

"I don't have one."

"You're going to have to come with us, then."

"Does that mean"—Belle pointed toward the castle walls—"I'll be going in there?"

"Correct. Your questioning will be conducted in the prison tower."

"Fine by me. I think I overstayed my welcome here anyway," Belle said, stepping into the goblet flower without being ordered to. "Let's get going."

The top-dog Solists exchanged dubious expressions before shutting and locking the cage door.

With Belle locked in the cage on its back, the turtle walked sluggishly toward the inner part of the city, where the top dogs lived. From among the crowd that formed, a lone Rabbitia child stared fixedly at Belle, as expressionless as ever, before following the goblet flower.

## 4

Locked inside the cage, Belle thought that this was far easier than walking there on foot, yet she hated feeling like she'd lost. That said, she could break this cage at any time if she so wished, so she really didn't have any reason to be worried or disappointed in herself.

As they approached the walls, the sunlight became obscured by the ramparts. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Belle had the

hazy memory of them being that high. Soon after, they arrived at the castle gates, which parted on either side with a loud rumbling noise. It was a magnificent gate, the entire surface of which was inlaid with O'crocks that currently shone sand yellow.

Belle heard the gate close behind her with a heavy thud. She got a good look at the O'crocks, a number of which had been carved with the names of craftsmen of particular renown. She knew that somewhere among those stones must be a name she recognized—the name of the person who'd first sheltered her long ago. But though she looked, Belle couldn't find that name.

She felt her sword howl softly. It was currently sitting on Belle's lap, and she felt the metal tremble slightly through her hand resting on the hilt. It wasn't a howl that showed a desire to aggravate the situation. Unfortunately.

"I guess this should bring back memories…," Belle whispered to her sword, having given up searching the O'crocks. "But I don't remember this place at all."

Once she was inside the walls, Belle gazed out at the town where the top dogs lived. The roads were well paved, lined with trees planted in an orderly manner. It was much cleaner, had more things to see, and was far more cramped than outside the walls.

People of all races emerged from the houses, whispering when they saw Belle sitting locked atop the turtle's back like some kind of exhibit.

Belle did away with her sullen expression and looked straight ahead at the turtle's forward path.

"No, not quite…" Her eyes narrowed as she gazed off into the distance. "I have just one memory of this place. Meeting you… Runding."

Years ago, the first people to shelter and raise Belle had been a top-dog couple who lived inside the walls. They were both Cateyes, the main species of Park City. The husband was a skilled stonecutter who made a living working with O'crocks. It was he who'd found Belle, born from a stone egg in the Quartz Forest, where the O'crocks were produced naturally.

Ever since he found her, the man and his wife lovingly raised Belle as if she were their own child. Belle didn't know why they

decided to take in a strange girl like her. She could only assume they'd done it because they didn't have any children of their own.

That wasn't a problem unique to Belle's foster parents, however; top dogs in Park City hardly ever had children. Maybe in the eyes of her parents, they didn't mind who their child was so long as they could pass down their name. Or maybe anyone, even a monster, satisfied their desire to protect someone. But they truly adored Belle. That much was for certain.

As Belle grew up, strange problems started happening around her. Her unusual strength and agility were treated like some kind of strange illness, and her lack of any features characteristic of a particular race led to her being called an abnormal child.

*Abnormal.* No one was at fault for that.

Her foster parents always seemed concerned that she might hurt someone, yet Belle had no idea why. They were equally as anxious that someone might try to hurt her, which confused Belle just as much. Even to this day, she didn't really get why they'd been so worried. It was probably because she was abnormal, in which case, maybe it was best she didn't understand.

"I was by myself all day today," Belle would always tell them. She would go out, return to the village, and come back home to announce that. When she did, her parents always seemed relieved somehow—even if it was hard to pick up from their expressions. She couldn't remember whether her foster parents had ever told her she shouldn't always be alone or that she should try to make friends. She had a feeling they had, but not in the most pleasant of voices.

Back then, Belle hadn't questioned the world around her. When she was born from the stone egg, she'd spoken the language of some unknown country, but she'd eventually forgotten that once she learned the language of her foster parents. Thinking back on it now, maybe the fact that she'd known a language from birth was an answer to something. But if it was, she'd long forgotten the question.

Seeing her foster father cut stone had fascinated her, so she'd imitated him, and it made her happy to hear him praise her and say she had talent for it. Belle liked rocks. They had a strange will to them. The first time she'd managed to cut an O'crock into the proper shape, her father had set it in amber, and Belle had

carried that pendant on her neck ever since. Stonecutting was laborious work, but she found it incredibly interesting.

Her foster mother didn't approve, though. She had wanted Belle to study a musical instrument instead of working with rocks. Instruments were used to help crops grow. It could even be said that they were what kept Park City alive. Melodies played by different instruments could plow the land, bring rain, and cause specific crops to grow and everything else to wither.

Belle didn't hate musical instruments, but she wasn't good at playing them. What's more, each farm dedicated their lives to performing a set song and nothing else. If there was a bad harvest, a song would occasionally be revised, but fundamentally speaking, they didn't change. When she thought about it like that, the prospect of playing music seemed boring to Belle. Her foster mother told her that putting up with boredom was simply a part of life, but that didn't change the fact that Belle was bad with instruments. She just couldn't make them do what she wanted them to. Different races were skilled at different instruments, yet Belle didn't sound good with any of them.

However, although she struggled with them, she could still play them. There were ways to play instruments other than to bring people joy, so she went to school to learn, reminding herself that putting up with things like that was simply a part of life. And though she did think she made some friends there, she was always alone.

As the days went by, she encountered a certain instrument. It wasn't a musical instrument per se, but it was still an instrument of sorts that produced a sound. It had happened when she was practicing by herself, like she always did. She suddenly heard a mysterious howl, so sudden, vague, and strange that she wasn't sure at first if she'd really heard it. And for some reason, it felt like it was calling out to her. That was something she still didn't understand to this day.

Either way, before she knew it, she'd found herself following that noise. She searched for its source, feeling as if the sound was tugging her closer, and it ended up leading her down into a truly unexpected place.

She eventually found it in the castle's underground vault. On her way there, Belle had passed through several doors and

broken an equal number of locks. The instrument she'd been carrying with her had disappeared somewhere, but thinking back on it now, she couldn't even remember what instrument it had been.

The room was dusty and looked like no one had set foot in it for the longest time. It was littered with treasures, but none of them seemed to have any use. And in the midst of them, there it stood, bound by chains. It looked so unbelievably heavy that the chains seemed to be holding it up to prevent it from sinking into the floor.

As Belle approached, it howled, and in its voice, Belle could feel that unique will inherent only to minerals. It longed for someone to pick it up and claim it.

Yet what inspired her to touch it was the spell carved into its blade. There was something oddly nostalgic about the word.

**EREHWON.**

It was written in the ancient text. She hadn't known what it meant back then, and she still didn't to this day. But she didn't find it unpleasant or eerie.

Even now, Belle still remembered the feeling of laying her hands on it for the first time. The aged metal, left to wither away here in the dark where no one would ever see it, let out a small howl of delight. Belle, as well, was overcome with a strange joy as she let out a whisper.

"I found one. A friend."

She would only later come to learn that its name was Runding, the Howling Sword. It was made from undeveloped lily steel, taken before it bore fruit, and the entirety of it had become the sword. In taking it, Belle allowed the metal to retain its will, to grant it a pure, powerful form regardless of how old it may have looked.

However, to do so, she would need to handle its incredible weight and size. No one was able to lift it or use it as a sword, which was why it had been locked away. Whoever the swordsmith was that had made this weapon, they must have been extremely eccentric. They were undoubtedly unmatched in their skill, yet they'd forged a sword that was impossible to wield with an incomprehensible spell, which not even the most skilled

Solist could use. And in the end, the swordsmith had been swallowed up by the Dearth March…

Yet that swordsmith's final work, Runding, the Howling Sword, had finally found a wielder to rescue it from the dark vault that served as its prison. Which Belle did—causing a huge uproar.

When the castle Solists realized someone had broken into the castle, shattered all the locks in their way, and reached the vault, they rushed straight over there, crying bloody murder at whatever bandit had had the audacity to do this. With all their weapons drawn, the Solists saw the bandit fleeing like the wind, swinging around her new sword to batter away anyone who came near.

No one saw the bandit as a little girl. Between her smooth, featureless appearance, her inexplicable brute strength, and the agility with which she leaped about the castle walls, she looked like some kind of monster.

A monster that defied description had appeared in the castle.

*A friend. I made a friend.*

They all had swords in hand. An indescribable monster had made its way into the castle. Under no circumstances could they allow it to escape.

"What did the monster do?"

"Are you blind? Can't you see it running amok right now?"

"Chase it. After it. We can't let it get away. We have to capture it."

"It's too dangerous. Everyone, surround it."

"Is it just me, or is that monster…?"

"Come on, keep going. It won't get away. We won't let it."

"But that monster…"

"Everyone, draw your swords. We'll strike the monster down together."

"…Isn't it crying?"

It was completely dark out. The only thing lighting up the darkness was the blue glow in the sky—the Earthshine, given off by the mother star, greatest of all the stars.

The girl raced through the castle illuminated by the faint blue light. She swung the large hunk of metal in her hands, tears

running down her cheeks. She didn't know why she was crying, nor did she have any idea what all the commotion was even about. Yet for some reason, she surged with a sense of pride.

Suddenly, a young Centaurus man stood in her way. His strong, crimson, equine body was turned toward her, and he held an impressive sword engraved with a spell in his hand.

Runding roared, crying out with a voice of its own.

*Durchbohren—drill through the world!*

*Howl out in your own pitch, where you belong. That is your desire, the place you long to go. Regain the rhythm, the reason for your being there.*

This proud sword's will filled the girl's heart, guiding her young hands to swing with all their might. The young Centaurus man swung his sword down, only for it to crumple against hers like it was made of paper and bend his arm out of shape. A cry of pain and fury erupted from his lips as his equine body collapsed sideways.

The girl leaped over him and continued her flight.

*Ah, the gate is straight ahead. I can get out through there. I'll go somewhere else, though I don't really know where to go.*

Her eyes were already fixed on the gate, but just then, something crossed her field of vision. Before she knew what was happening, Belle was hit from the side and sent flying. By the time she processed what had happened, it was too late. The sharp tip of a sword had been thrust before her eyes.

Lying on the ground, Belle stared at the sword. She wasn't scared but was instead filled with a strange feeling. She wasn't sure why everyone was so up in arms, but the knowledge that she'd done something to warrant such panic filled her with pride. Pure, unclouded pride. This was the only way an abnormal child could get back at everyone else.

But just as she thought the sword would run her through, the young man holding it spoke.

"Tell me. Why did you do this?"

Belle's eyes were reflected to him through his blade. He was a young, strong Cateyes man with golden fur. His image suddenly became blurred as tears started streaming down Belle's face, unbidden and unrelenting.

She whispered a single word: "Friend."

The Cateyes man frowned and kept listening to hear what else she had to say, but Belle couldn't manage anything else. Instead, she conveyed the meaning by gripping her sword.

"You wanted that sword?" the Cateyes man said in realization.

"Gaff! What are you doing?!" the young Centaurus from earlier croaked in pain.

Solists emerged from the castle, surrounding the girl. Everyone, Belle included, just watched to see what the golden Cateyes man would do.

He pulled his sword away from Belle and casually sheathed it.

"Gaff!" the Centaurus repeated, outraged, but the Cateyes only shook his head.

"It was just a childish prank, Kir."

And so that was how everyone agreed to address the situation. The girl was locked up in a cell, but no matter how long she waited, her parents didn't come to collect her. Deep down, she knew they wouldn't. For some reason, she was certain of that.

She never let go of her sword, and no one tried to take it away from her. So long as she showed no signs of resisting, no one tried to corner her anymore—if only because they were afraid of another rampage. But no one came to get her out of the cell.

When morning dawned, and Belle started reeling from hunger, two people came to visit her. One was the young man from earlier, Gaff. He was accompanied by another person, who spoke to her.

"Your parents won't be coming for you. The reason for that is because I'll be your parent from now on."

The girl didn't understand what he meant. All she knew was that she was overcome with sorrow.

"Come with me," he told her. "I will teach you how to use that sword."

Thinking back on it now, that man must have been her Meister. But Belle no longer had any recollection of him—only a vague, dried-out memory that clung to some corner of her heart.

## 5

The sound of a voice calling out to her pulled Belle out of reverie.

"What?" she asked as she came to.

“Hurry up and get out of there. That’s not your prison cell anymore,” one of the Solists growled.

Belle climbed down from the goblet flower, and a gloomy-looking Reutelite jailer approached and led her to a familiar place. It was a tall prison tower. The higher up you went, the lighter the prisoner’s punishment was, while those charged with more severe crimes were incarcerated underground.

Belle was taken to a cell about halfway up the tower that looked almost like the room of an inn. *Almost*, that is—except for the barred window, the heavy steel door, and the huge candle set by the entrance. A flame spell had been carved into the candle.

“What’s that?” Belle asked.

“It measures how long you will stay here,” the gloomy jailer replied. “Candles with different lengths are set for different crimes. Its fire cannot be put out or made larger.”

Belle tried to blow out the candle as she entered the cell, but all it did was make the flames waver a little. Just like the jailer had told her, she couldn’t make the fire any bigger or smaller.

“So I have to stay here until the candle goes out?”

“Such would be the case, normally. However, should you cause any needless trouble, you may end up prolonging your stay here.”

“I haven’t been questioned yet, though,” she told the Solists standing off to the side, but it was the jailer who replied.

“Your questioning will be held once the candle goes out. You are to wait here until then.”

“Without being questioned first?”

The jailer nodded and shut the door. She could hear the lock click into place.

“The questioning comes later. First comes your judgment. After you’re judged, the goodness in your heart will be weighed. Your interrogation will be after that.”

“But that’s strange. Why not do things in the reverse order?”

“Reversing the order would mean that many would go unjudged. Especially among those on the side of justice.”

With that, the jailer hurried away. She could hear the Solists walking away, too.

“Hey, isn’t that…? No way. The one from back then…?”

“Aye, it’s back. That thing’s returned to the castle…”

Belle could hear voices gossiping about her. The memories of the girl who'd caused chaos in the castle were still fresh, it seemed.

*It was a room just like this where I first met Runding…*

Belle dropped her bag and sat down on the bed, hugging her legs as she stared at the door. Her sword rested against her shoulder, as if she was waiting for something.

*Who am I supposed to wait for, exactly…?*

No one came to mind. She had no connections or anything of the sort.

"My outlook is pretty bleak…," she whispered to herself.

That thought seemed to make her body feel heavier, and Belle gazed at the door in silence. She remained like that for some time until, eventually, the idle thought crossed her mind that she should get some sleep. So she did, still seated in the same position.

She couldn't tell how long she spent like that. It was an empty stretch of time spent thinking nothing, feeling nothing, which was oddly pleasant. Time passed slowly, eventually grinding to a halt, only to, unfortunately, start moving again.

She suddenly heard something—a crunching sound, like something hard being chewed on.

*What…?*

Looking up, she saw the barred window…except now the metal bars were almost entirely gnawed away, and someone had sneaked into her cell through the gap.

Belle stared at the intruder in amazement, taking in their presence. It was the Rabbitia child again. She couldn't forget it even if she wanted to at this point. Still gnawing on a metal bar, it approached the bed and sat down next to Belle. It turned its red eyes to meet her stunned gaze, then stared at the door. The child hugged its knees, as if trying to make itself as small as possible. It stopped chewing on the piece of steel in his mouth, swallowed loudly, then turned as still as a little statue.

"H…hey!"

The child remained completely still, its eyes fixed on the door like it was the one being held prisoner.

"Wh-what are you doing here? Why did you come here? To rescue me?"

Belle got to her feet and looked at the window, her cheeks twitching nervously.

“How did you climb all the way up here anyway? This is a high floor; even I can’t get down from here. Come on, can’t you say something? Just sitting there and staring isn’t going to help. Why did you come all this way? What, to thank me? You don’t have to. I did that of my own accord… Come on, say something! Why’re you just looking at the…?”

It suddenly dawned on her.

“You can’t talk, can you?”

The child continued staring wordlessly at the door. Belle heaved a deep sigh and turned her eyes to the door, too.

“Honestly… Staring at the door won’t open the damn thing!” she cried out. “I came all the way to this annoying city to become a Nomad. Not to sit in a place I only have bad memories of… Seriously, what did I even do wrong? What’s their reason for locking me up in a cell?”

She realized that, at some point, the child had started looking in her direction. Seeing her own visage reflected clearly in its beady eyes, Belle was filled with a strange sense of gratitude toward the child. She picked up her sword, feeling the weight of the large hunk of metal anchor her down to keep her feet firmly on the ground.

“What’s your name…?” Belle asked.

The child remained silent. Its hands rested on its lap, holding on to a familiar cup. The same shard of stone egg as earlier rolled around inside it.

Belle smiled. “I guess you’re not going to answer no matter what I ask.”

She faced the door with a smile. Through its peephole, she could see the candle’s flames flickering.

“Runding!” Belle shouted, swinging her sword at the door with all the force she could muster.

The hinges exploded as if they’d been blasted open, the lock smashed, and the door itself went flying into the corridor, grossly bent out of shape. Belle leisurely stepped out into the hall and, seeing the jailer hurry over in a panic, gave him a smile.

“The candle’s out,” she said in a loud voice.

The jailer stood rooted in place, dumbfounded and helpless to do anything else.

“Oh, and I just remembered… There should be a Solist called Gaff in the castle. Could you call him here for me? Yeah, I should have remembered that sooner. We studied under the same Meister, me and him. I can’t remember my Meister anymore, though, so I ended up forgetting.”

Belle punctuated her long-winded explanation with a wide grin.

“You got that?”

The unfortunate jailer went very pale and nodded repeatedly, then ran off.

# II.
# Parting—Those Who Play for the Land

## 1

It happened just as the hour was turning to violet.

Haggis, the owner of the Amaretto Arbor, had closed off the first floor for repairs and sent the one young man who hadn't been hurt to call for a repairman. The inn's rooms were occupied by the injured Sheepeyes, who now looked more like soldiers returned from the battlefield. Needless to say, it was bad for business. No one wanted to stay at an inn filled with their pained, resentful groans.

As he was having a drink with the regular customers who'd stayed even after all that, Haggis looked up in surprise as a young man approached him. It wasn't the Sheepeyes youth he'd sent out to get the repairman.

"What're you doing outside…?" Haggis began, but he fell quiet. So did everyone else around him.

"It's been a while, old man Haggis," the young man said, his lips curled into a smile. "I heard your sword was broken."

"…Nah, not mine. My sword wilted away a long time ago."

Haggis looked at the young Cateyes man closely. He had shiny white fur and cold blue eyes. At first glance, his pale features made him seem frail, but he had an oddly sharp air about him. He wore a red bandanna around his forehead, which hid his brows and the tips of his ears, making his expression hard to read while letting him carefully gauge his opponent. That was the sort of man he was.

"Whose sword got broken, then?"

"Some of our lads. They're in a bad state, so I've got them resting up here."

"Could I talk to them?"

"Uh, you probably shouldn't…"

“No, then?”

“Mmm… No, you know what? Go ask them for the details.”

The young man nodded and turned to climb the stairs, his eyes full of thought.

“Adonis,” Haggis called out, causing the Cateyes man to stop. “Have you seen your family yet?”

“No. Nor do I intend to,” he replied flatly, not even bothering to turn around.

The man disappeared up the steps to the second floor. It was only once he’d gone that the others sitting by Haggis finally spoke up.

“That guy… I wonder what he came back for.”

“Who knows… He was originally from the outside, though, so it’s not all that strange…”

“But he lives inside now,” Haggis said with a sigh. “It’s just one difficult customer after the next today…”

Just then, he heard a scream coming from the entrance to the town.

“What is it this time?!”

Haggis got to his feet grumpily, and as he did, he heard another person scream.

“It’s…the Dearth March!”

Those few words were enough to send the whole town into a panic, and Haggis and his customers found themselves caught up in it, too.

The sky burned red with dusk, the time of day when people’s shadows stretched the longest…and a horde of dark silhouettes appeared in the streets.

They danced about, covered in a mantle of gloom, giving off a faint scent of cinnamon. Deformed shadows slid through the city like trails of smoke—madmen whose race was no longer distinguishable. With incomprehensible spells scribbled all over their bodies, they played rusted instruments, swung chipped and broken swords about, and used fire pokers to steal the townsfolk’s shadows out from under their feet.

The townsfolk fled for their lives. Those taken by the Dearth March became the shadows and dregs of this world, left to wander in agony for all eternity. That terror lived in all their hearts.

“What’s going on?! Why are they here in the middle of town…?!” Haggis exclaimed in shock, but their haunted wailings drowned him out.

***NNNNNOOOOOWWWWWHHHHH…!***

Their screams were shrill, but above all else, hollow. Their instruments had a phantasmal dissonance to them, and the shadows played loudly as they passed through the streets. It was only then that everyone realized the Dearth March was headed for the castle—either the castle itself or simply inside the walls. But the gates were soon shut, and the shadows slid one by one along the walls to gather at the spot farthest from the sun, where they stopped.

“…They sniffed out one of their own,” Haggis said after a while. His voice had all the gravity of a judge handing down a terrible verdict. “Someone here in Park is about to join the Dearth March… Someone who’s lost all joy in their life.”

He found himself turning back to the inn, wondering what the young man had been wanting to ask the injured Solists about. But that troublesome customer was already gone by the time the Dearth March stopped in their tracks.

None of the Sheepeyes would reveal what he’d spoken to them about.

## 2

“I just thought I’d give it a go and try to call you,” Belle said, her surprise showing through her voice.

Seated at a dinner table, Belle devoured a slice of flower meat before continuing.

“But I never thought you’d get me a full acquittal.”

Sitting across from her was a golden-furred Cateyes man. His name was Gaff Shandy, a top-ranking member of Schwertland’s top-dog Solist corps. He had a handsome mane and a powerful, robust physique. His wise eyes were fixed on Belle, his posture straight and unstirring. He was still young, just barely into the prime of his life, but the dignity of his presence was imposing. When he’d shown up at the tower, the people there had treated him with so much reverence that Belle would’ve thought he was royalty if she didn’t know better.

“You weren’t guilty of anything to begin with,” Gaff said.

He placed a metal plate roughly the size of his palm on the table. It was made of unwilting steel—an incredibly precious material that was also used to mint denari coins. A single piece this size could be sold for enough money for Belle to live off for a year.

“What’s that?” Belle asked.

“A dog tag. All you have to do is carve your personal spell into this spot here.”

Belle put down her eating utensils and cocked an eyebrow at Gaff.

“The postal service delivered a bird flower the other day,” he said.

That alone went a long way toward explaining the situation, but Belle remained silent.

“Its leaves carried a message from our Meister, asking me to look after you. So I’ll make sure you can live as a Solist… What? You don’t want the tag?”

“No, it’s just…I can’t help but wonder. All it took was a letter for him to get a man like you to act for me. Was my Meister really someone that impressive?”

“I can’t even begin to compare to him.”

“Huh.”

“Honestly, I envy you. You got to experience his final trial.”

Belle nodded vaguely but didn’t reach out for the tag yet.

“…Do you resent him?” Gaff asked.

“How can I when he made me forget all about him? I’m sorry, I know you went out on a limb to get this for me, but I don’t think I can accept it.”

Gaff’s fingers tapped on the metal plate on the table. He nodded a few times, contemplating Belle’s words, before sliding it across to her. Gaff gazed straight into Belle’s black eyes.

“You have been my guest since the moment you called me to the prison tower. And I believe a Solist should choose their own guests and do everything they can to help them.”

Belle’s eyes fell to the dog tag.

“Besides, personally, I have high expectations for your work as a Solist.”

"…Except I have no intention of spending the rest of my life as a Solist here in Schwertland. I'm going to be a Nomad. Besides…I think needing permission to use a sword is absurd."

"I know. That's what Meister wanted for you, and it's what you want for your own sake. I realize something that's a lifelong goal for us is just a single step of the process for you. But either way, if you're to set out on a journey, you'll need to complete a mission based on a contract with the king. For a person to be given the right to travel, their journey must be deemed lawful and for the benefit to the country as a whole. That means you'll have to contribute to Schwertland as a Solist for a while." Gaff's voice didn't sound as if he was trying to convince or pressure her.

*"I know." Do you now…?*

He'd said that so unabashedly.

*He's sharp.*

"I…"

Belle stopped almost as soon as she started. However, her hand was already resting on the dog tag.

"I'm cursed. It's a curse required to become a Nomad. I think it placed a *distinction* on my sword."

"A distinction…?"

"I used to be able to cut everything equally. Flowers, stones, trees—and any person of any race."

Gaff's eyes widened with surprise. "You say some pretty incredible things."

"Huh…?"

"You say you can cut through anyone just like you would a flower?"

"I mean…"

"Thinking about cutting down any other person as if cutting through a flower sounds like the real curse to me."

"…Are you calling me beastly?"

Gaff simply frowned, neither shaking nor nodding his head.

"To me, nothing could be scarier than having a distinction on my sword," Belle explained. "This sword, when I touch something with it… Yeah, it's like using a glove. I can't afford for it to be picky."

"But when you touch someone with it, haven't you already cut them?" Gaff said.

“I didn’t mean it like that…”

“Hmm…? From what I can see, it doesn’t seem like you have a curse on you at all. Or at the very least…it doesn’t seem like someone’s cursed you.”

“What do you mean?”

Gaff shook his head slowly. “It seems you’ll have to find out the meaning of the curse for yourself if you want to understand it. So why don’t you accept this tag as a means to do that?”

A smile played across Belle’s lips.

“Fine, you talked me into it…” She picked up the tag, her grip tight around it. “…My own personal spell, eh? I know. How about I carve *Beastly* into it?”

“Belle,” Gaff chided her, exasperated.

But just as Belle was about to laugh and say something else, an awfully loud noise right beside her interrupted their exchange.

It was the Rabbitia child. It had picked at the food laid out on the table, then started eating the tableware. Belle looked at Gaff with a troubled expression.

“A Solist always treats their guests with respect,” Gaff said firmly. “It is a great honor, having a traveling Rabbitia as a cherished guest.”

“A guest, huh…?”

Belle tilted her head, watching the child chew on a plate.

Gaff took Belle to Central East Town and guided her to the room he’d lived in during his days as an apprentice, which still seemed to see some use from time to time. It was on the top floor of a three-story hexagonal building in Upper East.

The moment Belle stepped inside the room, the floor let out a concerning screech—as did the residents of the floor below. Apparently, the floor couldn’t withstand the weight of her sword. Left with no other choice, Gaff spoke to the building’s manager and was able to secure Belle a room on the first floor, which happened to be vacant. He looked genuinely disappointed. As his guest, he’d really wanted Belle to use his old room.

*He’s sincere to a fault.*

It wasn’t that she found that unpleasant about him, but Belle hadn’t seemed to be able to relax since Gaff was doing so much

for her. Some part of her felt that she'd have been better off getting a room in the Amaretto Arbor, after all.

The room was one thing, but she gratefully accepted the furniture Gaff left her with. He gave her a well-loved bed and chest of drawers, as well a table and desk, which were all brought to Belle's new room on the first floor.

Once the final piece, a pair of curtains, was finally put up, Belle couldn't help but express how impressed she was.

"Talk about luxury."

"You should have come to me to begin with," Gaff said, looking a bit offended.

"I'd rather not rely on others for help. Even when they're friends," Belle said as she sat on the bed and looked up at Gaff. "But at this point, I suppose I may as well rely on you in whatever way I can. Just don't regret it."

A strained smile crossed Gaff's face.

"I'll come again later."

And with that, he left the room.

"I haven't bathed in a tub this classy in a while."

Once she'd caught the Rabbitia child and dragged it away from the furniture it had started nibbling on, Belle decided to take a bath. It had a perfectly clear, high-quality water crystal that didn't let the heat escape, and when she crushed it, the bathroom immediately filled with a huge cloud of steam. Seeing the hot water fill the tub, she popped in a few cold water crystals to adjust the temperature.

*This is really nice.*

Belle eagerly disrobed. The Rabbitia child tried to escape the bathroom, but she caught it, which made it thrash in her grasp in an unusual show of resistance. Apparently, it didn't like hot water. But she couldn't have that.

"Gaff's gonna complain if you stay all dirty," she said as she took off its clothes.

Rather than a *guest*, Belle felt as if she was looking after an overgrown baby.

"Huh. So you're a boy?" she said indifferently as she dunked the thrashing child into the tub. His eyes widened, seemingly surprised by the heat. Belle, by contrast, found it incredibly

pleasant. The child's red eyes moistened, and Belle let go of him, thinking he must not like it, but the boy simply sat in the tub with a vacant expression. He never showed any expression to speak of, but maybe this was how he displayed sadness.

"Where were you trying to go?" Belle asked him.

The child said nothing, his long ears drooping. Belle split a bubble fruit in half and poured its contents into the water, which instantly turned white and foamy and enveloped the two in a citrusy scent. She washed him with a sponge, and the child's face seemed to become even sadder…but maybe she was just imagining it.

Still, his graceful, doll-like face did look terribly upset. Belle hugged the child in her arms and realized that maybe she was just seeing her own loneliness in his expression.

"Being treated kindly hurts…," she murmured.

As she was enveloped by the faint fragrance of the bath, the O'crock turned a dark red. She honestly wished the time had gone quicker, but the sun had already set slowly.

Gaff visited again not long after that. Wherever he'd been, he returned with a nervous expression, and when Belle welcomed him into her room almost completely naked, his expression turned sour.

"You'll need to get used to life here in Park."

"I'm fine being beastly, thank you very much," she replied automatically, all the while internally scolding herself. Why couldn't she handle things like this better? "But I'd rather not cause you problems."

She obediently took out some clothes and got dressed. The child gazed absent-mindedly at Belle's face, having already put his own clothes back on—for once of his own accord.

"So what are you here for?"

"Your audience with the king was approved," Gaff said casually. "Tomorrow, at the yellow hour."

He delivered this shocking bit of news in an incredibly nonchalant tone, and Belle got the distinct feeling she'd run into a situation like this somewhere before. She knew someone else whose attitude seemed to get progressively more easygoing the

more serious the matter at hand was. But that wasn't important at the moment.

"Already? Tomorrow?"

"I talked things over with the king ahead of time."

Belle was stunned. Finally, she managed to express her surprise.

"You're something else… You know that?"

Gaff's expression soured further, and he looked at the table in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"So it did wilt," he said.

Sitting on the table was a bird flower in a pot of water, sprouting new buds that were starting to bloom.

"If I'd been a bit quicker, the words on its leaves might still be blooming…"

"It's fine; I don't mind. It was addressed to you anyway."

"It's our Meister's final message. I wanted us both to receive it together."

Gaff had said it clearly—his *final* message.

They both fell silent. Eventually, Belle opened her mouth to speak, having worked up the courage to ask. She hoped talking about it would give her some sense of closure.

"Hey, Gaff… Did Meister say anything about my final trial?"

"Like what?"

"You know… Like that he was cut down by an unworthy student?"

As soon as she said that, Belle's heart seemed to scream in her chest. Her gaze intensified. Her lips trembled, and she looked up at Gaff as if imploring him to answer. However, Gaff's expression didn't waver one bit.

"No, he didn't say anything like that. But even if something did happen, I'm sure he'd willingly accept it. I doubt anyone was as beloved by their Meister as you were."

The confidence in his voice was encouraging, and Belle breathed out a chuckle.

"Thanks."

Gaff nodded softly. In the distance, Belle could hear notes riding the wind. Those who played for the land were performing their finale for the day. It was a melody that Belle had practiced a

lot as a child. It called to the land—so it only rang hollow to Belle, who was detached from the earth.

"Won't you go see your parents?" Gaff suddenly asked.

"If I get the chance."

"Well, if you do decide to go, it's best to do it right at the beginning of the violet hour. That's when the Symphonists invite guests."

"It's fine… I don't intend to go and be a guest of my old foster parents."

"I see," Gaff said. He seemed to struggle to get the words out, which didn't suit his appearance. "But you should probably at least stop by. You should let them know you're back, even if you do it in a roundabout way."

It almost felt unnatural, as if Gaff was implying that if Belle didn't go to see them now, she'd never get to see them again. But Belle couldn't grasp what he was getting at, and more than anything, she felt an inexplicable reluctance to seeing her foster parents. She wasn't keen on figuring out why that was, and even if she was, her only way to find out would be to go and see them. Not that she didn't *want* to see them. But still…

"I can't see them. Not yet," she said, glancing away from Gaff.

Her tone was calm, but it was clearly a rejection of this topic of conversation. Gaff went quiet and nodded. He looked like he had more to say, but instead he walked out of the room. Belle watched him go, thinking that he must be busy, and bowed in thanks. Even if it was out of deference to their Meister's words, Gaff was still leading her by the hand and looking after her—a debt that Belle lacked the means to repay. It weighed on her so much she wanted to run off right then and there.

*You only need to stand firm.*

She got the feeling that those words had come from the flower sitting on the table. Yet following that advice was no easy task.

## 3

Belle left her room shortly before the O'crock turned violet. With her sword on her back, she stopped along the way to buy a new set of clothes in a store that was beginning to close for the day

and changed into them. Clad in jasper green, the color of Lower East Town, she made her way to her old home.

While she was out, Belle had left the child in her room. Rather, he simply hadn't shown any intention of following her. When she'd left, he'd stayed rooted to the spot, his silent, blank face turned away from her. He'd been sitting like that for some time, looking out the window as he gripped the cup Belle had given, the shard of the stone egg still rattling around inside it.

The sun set, and the room went dark. It was nighttime. The large blue star floated silently in the dark sky, its pale indigo glow pouring in through the window above the child's head.

The young Rabbitia picked up the shard in his cup. It was neither metal nor ceramic—light when you expected it to be heavy, and heavy when you expected it to be light. The shard of a strange, mysterious stone egg. Without warning, the child started to eat it. He licked, chewed, and crunched, the sound growing more painful the longer he went about it.

At some point, the sound suddenly stopped—and a change came about. The child's eyes widened as it looked up, as if it was entranced by the Earthshine.

*Ahhh…*

Something close to a groan left the boy's throat. His body shivered, and the next moment his eyes filled with a light of intelligence that soon spread over his entire body.

The trembling child got to his feet. Something deep inside him vanished, replaced by another presence, and his long ears curved as he stretched his back. He extended his arms to either side, drew his jaw back, and furrowed his brow as if dissatisfied. It looked like he was mulling over something, but the next moment, his expression brightened into a smile.

"Aha. So *this* is the Stein der Weisen. What an unusual flavor. Quite repulsive."

At this point, it was hard to describe his appearance as that of a child. The Rabbitia looked upon the world with a cynical smile, his head constantly churning with thoughts. He looked oddly mature and somehow full of life.

Suddenly, his expression darkened, and he started patting his body with stiff movements.

“Tch… A *vulnerability*. I was done in badly. Still, even if it meant making an enemy of this world, it was worth it.”

With a satisfied smile, he looked up at Earth, shining so far away. He searched his chest with his hands, turning the pockets of his waistcoat inside out. Finally realizing that the object he was looking for was missing, he glared at the window with indignation.

“Fool. Handing it over, along with the threads of fate!”

The scornful words came from the depths of his soul, directed at his *own reflection* in the glass. He opened the window, seemingly pushing away his own visage, and energetically hopped atop the railing.

“There’s no need for recalculation! All of my formulas, may you spread free and fast!”

The wind whirled at the sound of his fierce encouragement. The trees rustled like subjects kneeling before their king, and a whistling sound filled the air.

“There it is.”

The Rabbitia’s lips curled into a smile as he gazed across the city, the look on his face completely devoid of any charm.

“Guide the way!”

He jumped. A strong wind whirled about his body, and the next second, he disappeared like an illusion. His shadow alone lingered for a moment, glowing in the Earthshine, before that, too, soon faded.

At the Amaretto Arbor, the wounded Sheepeyes men chatted as they drank their miseries away.

“You really think we can trust him?”

“He’s originally an outsider, same as us.”

“But he’s an insider now. He’s not one of us no more.”

“He did come see us, though.”

“But what for?”

“To revive our swords, right?”

“But *why*?”

Everyone fell silent. They grimaced and touched their shattered swords. Some of them had already given up on any chance of restoring their weapons and mourned them, going so far as to decide to bury and raise their swords all over again.

“Sacred ash…,” one of them whispered solemnly, gazing at the bottle sitting on the table. This was what the man in the red bandanna from the inside had given them. There was no illness or injury inside the walls, the reason for that being this mysterious dust, sacred ash, which healed and protected the people there. To the outsiders, who had to spend a small fortune to call for a healer, sacred ash seemed like something out of a dream.

Sacred ash was so foreign and unattainable beyond the walls that many outsiders believed it to be a deadly poison, while others speculated it was the reason the insiders had so much trouble producing children.

This was why they didn’t tell Haggis about the ash. They knew he wouldn’t think twice about telling them to throw it away. Except…

“He said this sacred ash can heal our swords. And he could be lying, but why would he do that?”

“That’s the strange part. He said it’s to test how evil we are…”

“Who cares about that? So long as I can use my sword again… So long as it lets me give that annoying rabbit and featureless brat what’s coming to them, I’ll take it even if it really is poison…”

“Just think about it. None of this makes any sense. Don’t just carelessly walk into trouble.”

“You think I’m gonna take that from you, just because your sword’s the only one not broken?”

“Yeah. Let’s break his sword, too. Once we do that, he’ll be able to think the same way as us.”

“Just wait a second,” one of them said in disgust. “He was lucky enough to get out of this unharmed, and now you want to hurt one of your buddies?”

He was starting to suspect the young man had given them the sacred ash to get them all to fight over it.

“Damn you, Adonis…”

The man’s red bandanna came to mind. There was no telling what his angle was, and he honestly couldn’t be trusted.

“Anyway, I’ve got this thing I took from the rabbit,” he said, holding up a pocket watch and glancing around at the others. “Those guys are famous for really treasuring things like this, so it

won't be hard to lure him out. Question is, when we find him, will we have our swords with us, or—"

But that was where the man cut off, his jaw dropping in disbelief.

"What's wrong…?"

He pointed to the corner of the room in silent shock, and everyone naturally looked in the direction indicated. Standing there was the Rabbitia they were discussing, but he looked completely different. His blank eyes now had a sharp glint to them, and his vacant, unreadable expression had been replaced with a tense look that made it impossible to imagine the sorts of terrible things he was thinking. He leaned against the wall, smirking as he watched the dumbfounded young men.

"You lot don't learn, do you? Which one of you was it who said he'd *give me what's coming to me*?" Not even trying to hide the scorn in his voice, the Rabbitia calmly walked over to them.

The young men grew agitated and grabbed their newly ordered, untuned sapling swords that hadn't even had spells carved onto them yet. They had no idea what was happening, but they knew they had to do something and charged the child in desperation.

The next second, a fire erupted in the room.

There was no reason for a fire to have started here. Several of the men were instantly enveloped in flames and collapsed on the floor, and a thick, burning stench filled the room. The rest of the men fell into a state of panic.

"Mental arithmetic is enough to handle the likes of you," the boy said with a cackle.

One of the men looked down and spotted a formula carved into the floor. It was a concise, flawless mathematics spell—but before he could warn his friends about it, a blade of ice pierced through him, freezing the blood that spurted from his body. The cries of rage from the other men turned into screams of terror.

The boy dodged the swipes from their swords with an unconcerned expression, picked up his pocket watch, and attached its chain to his breast pocket in a single graceful motion. He wound the watch and looked on with delight as the needle ticked in time with the movements of its small gears. And all the while, the young men were being picked off one by one—torn

apart, blown away, frozen to the bone, or turned into living torches.

It didn't take long before the room was filled with agonized moans and groans. Yet there was no ice, or fire, nor blades of air dancing about chopping off limbs. The young men were all whole and unharmed, lying on top of each other, thrashing on the floor with their eyes shut tight.

"Sweet nightmares," the Rabbitia said impishly, flashing them an innocent smile.

He tucked the watch into his pocket, then reached for the bottle sitting on the table.

"Hmm. Schwertland's finest." He scrutinized the contents of the bottle, before tucking it away in another pocket. "Worthless residue."

He patted the pocket containing said worthless residue, the look on his face indicating he couldn't wait to drink it. It was then that he heard someone calling out to the young men from downstairs, likely the innkeeper.

The boy looked out the window he'd entered from. He could hear phantasmal groans coming from the dark outside—the choir of those doomed to wander the world after losing the place they had belonged.

"Heh-heh. What delightful singing voices." He leaned out the window, the reflection of his smile in the glass suddenly vanishing. "I'll leave them be. My beloved won't be consumed by dreams of purgatory that easily."

The boy's visage vanished in the darkness illuminated by the Earthshine. Only the faint sound of his voice lingered in the air.

"Will you, Girl of Reason…?"

And with that, the Rabbitia was gone without a trace.

The door opened and Haggis walked in. He walked around the young men, sleeping huddled together and groaning in their nightmares, and laid blankets over them with exasperated murmurs.

"Look at them, getting all desperate… That said, I was like that, too, back when my first sword broke."

As he talked to himself, Haggis shut the one window that still hung open.

“In the end, though, having your sword break only makes a Solist grow stronger.”

Belle found herself in Lower East Town. All the sights were familiar, but she still felt incredibly confused. The Mimosa family home was right in front of her. She could see the light shining from their window. Her foster mother had probably put away the instruments she used to tend the farm hours ago and had started working on dinner. Belle remembered how her younger self used to pester her foster father until he finally stopped working—only to realize with a bashful smile just how hungry he was. She would drag him to the dinner table by the hand, where he’d watch her help her foster mother. Her mother would scold Belle for being clumsy, but she always served her the best part of the meal first…

Belle couldn’t move. Her sword felt heavier than usual. It was only at times like this that the ground tugged at her feet and wouldn’t let go. She couldn’t take another step.

She whispered in her heart that she wasn’t alone today. She hadn’t been alone since she took up this sword. Belle was sure that would make Mr. and Mrs. Mimosa anxious. She knew they’d welcome her with open arms and be happy that she’d come, but she just felt too heavy to take that final step.

She could hear cries of grief in the distance, voices that devoured and disrupted all the sounds that nourished people. Being exposed to them greatly damaged the crops and hurt the harvest.

***NNNOOOWWWHHHEEERRREEE…!***

The Dearth March chanted this ancient word from the Age of the Gods: “Nowhere.” There’s nowhere you can go. Nowhere you belong.

You have nothing, no home—*nowhere*.

It was a word that directly violated the single greatest, most absolute Thema of this world—the commandment to enjoy life. Something about the very sound of that word captivated Belle. It was different from the way her sword’s howling drew her closer. In fact, it pulled her in the exact opposite direction.

The sword on her back let out a faint howl.

“Don’t worry.”

Belle gently touched the hilt of the sword.

*Everything's okay.*

She turned around and started back the way she'd come, her steps slightly faster than before.

When she returned to her room, the child was nowhere to be seen, though that didn't concern Belle. She sat down on the bed and stared at the dog tag, pondering what to do. She needed to carve some kind of spell onto it before she met the king.

It didn't take her long to decide. She carved the word *Lablac* into the tag and attached it to the guard of her sword. She felt like that spell best represented who she was in this country.

## 4

"Tell her that Lablac, the Unusual, is here to see her."

The voice called out to a group of writhing, shadowy figures in a dark, damp spot untouched by the sun's rays. The area was crowded with tents, all of them visibly tattered, yet the man could tell they weren't simply old and frayed. He didn't approach the entrance to any of the tents, knowing that if he were to wander inside, all he'd find would be an endless labyrinth. The strange spells and mathematics covering the insides of the tents indicated as such.

The Eye of the group walked in front of the man, leading him to his destination. His face was covered in bandages, over which a large spell of an eye had been drawn. Ears surrounded him, and if he were to show any signs of aggression, the group's Fangs would act to threaten him.

The man was led to a tent that stood larger and more magnificent than the rest. It wasn't beautiful or luxurious, however, but magnificent in how tattered it was. A hand extended from the entrance to the tent ushering the man in, and he continued without a word. The shades all let out their haunted moans, as if telling him to come to them.

**NOWHERE…!**

The man entered the tent. Its inside was paved with a blue tourmaline floor that seemed to stretch without end. Despite the fact that he'd entered through a tent flap, the man heard the

sound of a door shutting heavily behind him. Yet he saw no sign of a door nor a flap.

“Hmph. You swallowed me up, did you?” he whispered to himself.

This living tent had eaten him. This was consuming magic—Rest au Rant. He was in its stomach now, separated from normal space, and it was doubtful he would be able to find a way out on his own.

The man walked idly into the tent, undisturbed by this development. The sound of his cold footsteps against the tourmaline floor trailed long after him.

“Welcome to my abode, Lablac,” he heard someone say.

It was the beguiling voice of a woman. The man turned around, finding a table had appeared behind him. Seeing the refreshments set out there for him, the man smiled boldly and sat across from the woman.

“It’s been a long time, Dranvi.”

The woman nodded. She was a beautiful Undine, and she combed her indigo hair back with her fingers, then poured the man a cup of ice wine. Her voluptuous crimson lips parted, releasing an enchanting, seductive voice.

“I’m surprised you came here… Your chick finally flew the nest, did she?”

“Yeah.”

“But you wouldn’t come visit me just because of something like that, would you?”

The man placed a sword on the table. He removed its sheath, exposing the brightly shining blade—but now the spell written on it, **ENOLA**, was split in two.

“She blew my arm off. Almost killed me. I managed to fix up my body, but I can’t do anything to fix my sword.”

“You never change. Everything you do is so reckless…,” the woman said. Her tone was dry and detached, but underneath that was genuine concern. “Give me one good reason to mend it.”

“You’re the swordsmith who made this blade—Dranvi, the Worthy. You’re the only one who could mend it.”

“Indeed…” The woman’s lips curled in a mysterious smile. She sheathed the sword and took it carefully. “You’re still smoking illusions?”

She smiled silently, seeing the man smoking his pipe. Her attitude had changed, taking on a joking, casual mood.

The man blew out a puff of illusory purple smoke and nodded.

“You’ve been doing that ever since we decided to go in opposite directions, haven’t you?” she continued.

“Aye…”

“How’s the boy, Shandy, doing?”

“Gaff’s too old to be called a boy anymore. He’ll likely become the next Fortuné.”

“Ah.” The woman breathed out the word in sorrow. “Poor thing.”

“Not necessarily. He made the choice to stay in Schwertland of his own accord. The three of us are simply expecting different things from one another.”

“Does Shandy know how sacred ash is made…?”

“Probably not. But the one who will expose it is headed for the castle as we speak.”

“The Girl of Reason…”

The man nodded gravely, solemnly, like a man confessing his sins.

“She was the enigma given to me in Denariland. I solved that puzzle and raised her, though I did leave her in the care of some people in Park with connections to the castle until she reached a certain age.”

“Did you make her take on the curse?”

“Of course. However…it probably didn’t work. Nobody, not a single person, is able to curse her. No one but *herself*, that is.”

“And as you always do, in the deepest cloisters of your heart, you betray others.”

The man fell quiet. The silence dragged on for a long moment until the woman narrowed her eyes, smiled, and parted her lips.

“We need someone who doubts the Reason.”

“Any ideas?”

“The Dearth March’s Nose is keen…”

“Hmph. So *that’s* what you’re after?”

The woman didn’t reply. The two of them silently locked gazes, as if reaching out a hand to each other, though they were far apart.

“She’s a talented child,” the man said, and the woman listened in silence. “She wields the sword you made and inherited all my teachings. The Guidance I left within her will eventually lead her to places and heights you and I could never reach.”

He spoke casually, nonchalantly, but his next words were serious.

“She’s *our* talented child.”

“I know. And I know that’s what you really came here to tell me.”

The woman looked away from him, staring at the endless tourmaline space as if she was looking off into the distance.

“This country will also eventually be called to question by Reason. As will Deus Ex Machina… You would do well to sever ties with me from here on out.”

“Hmm. If you’d prefer, I could call you by your real name, Dranvi. Your *other* name, not the one you use as a swordsmith.”

“When you do, you shall become a part of the Dearth March, just like me.”

The man flashed a confident smile, and the air between the two of them froze with tension. The woman’s gaze seemed to take on a pained look, but perhaps that was just the man’s mind playing tricks on him.

“Our time is up,” the woman said suddenly, her expression immediately going blank. “I will have the sword delivered to you once I finish with it. I hope…we meet again…”

And with those final words, the woman’s heart was swallowed up by something bigger. The man knew she was now a part of the great collective called the Dearth March. The surrounding scenery began to warp, and spectral shadows began to stretch across the tourmaline floor.

The man rose from his seat. Turning around, he saw a door had appeared behind him, but he remained standing in place a moment longer, as if contemplating surrendering himself to the shadows.

But the next moment, the man left the tent the same way he’d come.

## 5

“Lablac. The Unusual, eh?” Gaff examined Belle’s dog tag and gave a nod. “It’s good. Nice and clear.”

They were in the castle for Belle’s audience with the king. The Rabbitia boy wasn’t with her—she hadn’t seen him since last night, but Belle wasn’t worried.

“You’re the second person to carve that name on a tag,” Gaff murmured, picking his words carefully.

“There was someone else?” Belle asked. “Heh, whoever it was, they *really* must have been unusual.”

“It was your Meister,” he said softly.

Gaff seemed overcome with emotion. It was almost like he’d told her something trite like “Your Meister really is by your side.”

Belle let her discomfort show on her face. “I don’t like things like that. It feels pushy.”

“Sorry.”

Belle meekly apologized as well.

Despite appearing calm, the two of them were actually quite nervous. This audience with the king was Belle’s first trial in Park City before she could set out on her journey, yet she didn’t have the first clue as to what to expect. Gaff, meanwhile, seemed to know quite a bit but said nothing, his golden rule being to remain fair and impartial. He was more faithful to his personal sense of impartiality than he was to the king he served. He’d drawn a clear line in the sand, knowing that it wouldn’t be right to help Belle here, even if they had studied under the same Meister.

*You’re so straitlaced*, Belle thought, criticizing him in her mind.

She was uncharacteristically nervous, which only made her worry more. After all, Belle believed she had a talent for having things not turn out the way they should, and not even she knew what she might do if she got annoyed. But at least today, she wanted to keep herself in check. This had to go well.

Despite that, internally she was already shouting at this king she hadn’t yet met. Where did he get off? Why should people need his permission to leave the country? He was just getting in her way—but she’d show him. Belle would find her way out of this infuriating city no matter what. And if it meant beating the king himself down, so be it.

The thoughts crossing her mind were dangerous ones, indeed.

But as they walked through the castle, her enthusiasm suddenly died down. This wasn't to say she'd calmed down, but it felt like someone else inside her head had started to speak.

**The Rite of Contract involves you, as a performer, entertaining God.**

Thoughts completely separate from Belle's own occupied her mind, growing stronger the closer she got to the castle center.

**In the presence of the king, you must introduce your instruments and attend to your business.**

*Damn it. Whenever* you *come out, I just get more worried.*

**The king is God, and the door to your journey can only be opened in his presence.**

*Shut up!*

They went down a long corridor passing by a number of extravagant doors inset with O'crocks. After climbing more stairs than Belle had the patience to count, they arrived at the heart of the castle. In truth, the distance to their destination wasn't very great, but to Belle it had felt excruciatingly long and complex.

"Past here is the Public of Justice," Gaff told her, his expression stern.

The corridor curved away to the left and right, with a large, imposing door in the center. Belle nodded to Gaff, and the door opened.

The hall was massive. It had a spacious performance stage with a multitude of spectator seats set out in a fan around it. It was the seat of God and the king, the heart of the country, as well as its largest theater. Many of the spectator seats were already occupied by audience members, and countless sets of eyes settled on Belle and Gaff, who had emerged facing the stage.

**The Public of Justice, also called the Hall of Swords and Scales, is three rooms modeled on Schwertland's coat of arms,** the other voice in her heart whispered as Belle walked toward the stage. **The coat of arms has God standing in the center with three stages forming a triangle around it. In modeling this chamber after the coat of arms, it becomes a divine symbol, parts of God Himself, and a sacred place to the nation. The Throne Room, where you are now, is one of its room, and it is here where your journey will—**

The Guidance droned interminably in her thoughts, drowning out the sensation of her feet against the ground as she walked. Before she knew it, Belle was standing alongside Gaff right in front of the stage. At the top of the stairs leading up to it sat a solitary, cold throne. Belle thought it looked like a grave marker.

**It is, indeed, exactly that: a grave. The grave of a king who offered up his body to God…**

A number of silhouettes appeared atop the stage—a group of priests clad in blue mantles to represent the morning rising in the east. They wore blue shoes, blue gloves, and each of them had a different mask, which were also blue. None of them said a word, and their movements felt oddly stiff and doll-like. Almost as if…

**Royalty who offered up their hearts to God…**

They had no souls—just like the shadows of the Dearth March. Contrasting the O'crocks decorating the stage, the monochromatic priests slowly raised the great curtain hanging behind the throne, revealing a strange glow.

**This is the throne of the god living in this country…**

Belle let the voice in her heart keep going. Frankly, she was too astonished by the sight before her eyes.

It was a gigantic tree. Belle realized the reason the stage was circular was because it was, in fact, a pot to contain this tree. The stage was open to the three halls, with each of them serving as a viewing theater surrounding the great tree.

Three halls, and the hexagonal layout of Park City. This tree grew at the heart of it all. It was the incarnation of the god that governed Schwertland's Thema—borne from a single sword.

**Yggdrasil—the Sword Tree God. A cancerous sword that has continued to grow since the dawn of this country's history…**

The eternal symbol of Schwertland, the never-wilting sword tree that served as the home of a god. It had once been carved with the spell **EMOCLEW**, the name of the country in the ancient script, but another spell that repeated near perpetual growth had caused the words to become illegible. It seemed to pulsate with a mystical glow as countless spells ran across its surface.

**Gods deliberately choose to occupy diseased sword seeds. The disease is fatal; it eats the host from the inside out, perpetually killing it. The host is constantly dying but can**

**never truly die. As such, death itself dies, and it is this fatal disease that grants the sword seed immortality…**

Belle resisted the voice in her head, but then a strange thought crossed her mind. If this tree itself was God, did Yggdrasil know she was there? The tree had no eyes to speak of, but there was no doubt it was still thinking on some level, acknowledging the presence of everyone there. Except…

"This tree isn't looking at me," Belle whispered quietly enough so that even Gaff beside her couldn't hear.

It made her shudder. Wherever that thought had come from, it overturned the entire premise of her coming here. This was meant to be an audience with the king, but this tree, and perhaps even the very country, were ignoring her existence. In which case…

Just then, the spells running across the tree's surface began to flicker faster. Yggdrasil filled with light, the glow building up to form a layer that covered the tree. Past that layer of light appeared a figure she hadn't seen before, which slowly entered the stage.

**The consecrated king lives with God, his body lost to the tree…**

Something emerged—perhaps an arm or a leg—like a new branch sprouting from the tree. The rest of the body followed, but Belle couldn't tell which part was which. It was strange, malformed. She could only stare, overwhelmed, at the form before her.

"I welcome you, who have appeared here before us in the presence of God," the king said, his voice deep and resonant.

The words came from his upper mouth. He had two faces, one above and one below. The top face was handsome, a contrast to the overall strangeness of his form. The lower face, however, was constantly changing—warping and contorting, blooming and wilting into a different shape every second. The very picture of chaos.

**Two faces: the top dog and the underdog. The world reflects the king's form, exposing these two faces…**

Sure enough, the king's body featured characteristics from every possible race, which is what made him so huge. He had wings and scales, fins and long claws, every type of fur and limb,

different bone structures and internal organs—all added to what seemed to have originally been a Cateyes body.

The sheer intensity of the sight blew away all the doubts and concerns from Belle's mind. Instead, she simply stood rooted in place, dumbfounded.

"If my form offends you, I could return to God's bosom," said the king's top face. That low, sonorous voice came across as sincere, harsh yet kind, almost teasing. And then…

"I see. So you are featureless, one who does not fit in with any of the races. Perhaps that is why you show no sign of decorum," the lower mouth said, cynical and laced with venom.

"Belle," Gaff whispered, telling her to kneel. He was already on one knee, his head hung low.

To do that, she would need to put down her weapon. Belle undid the sword bag on her back, and the huge mass dropped quickly downward. A split second before its tip could stab into the floor, she caught the hilt. The proper thing to do would be to lay it down on the ground, but instead Belle decided to try something.

*This king is looking at me. But the god…*

She raised the sword in one hand and swung it down straight in front of her. The blade came down in a wide arc between Belle and the king. As she swung the sword, time seemed to flow incredibly slowly in the hall, and for the brief second the sword's tip was aimed at the king, everything seemed to freeze. Belle's gaze appealed to the king and something behind him, attesting to her presence and existence.

And then she rested the sword on the floor right before her and kneeled. Silence hung over the hall. Needless to say, this display of disrespect rendered everyone present, Gaff included, speechless. Belle, now kneeling, looked at the king's two faces without averting her gaze. Except…

*I was right. The tree isn't looking at me…*

Feeling oddly confident of that, Belle looked upon the king with somewhat defiant gaze.

The king's top face regarded Belle with what looked like calm serenity. In the same way that Belle seemed to scrutinize the tree behind him, the king appraised that which Belle carried on her back. The second face bitterly grimaced and complained to the

top one. But whatever conflict the two faces had, it ended with the bottom one giving up with a snort, before flashing a cynical smile at Belle.

"King Rawhide." Gaff raised his head, trying to diffuse the situation, and spoke in a loud voice that echoed through the chamber. "By my name, I invited this one, who wishes to open the door to her journey, here to the Public of Justice. On my name, Gaff Shandy, I request that you allow her to take the Rite of Contract!"

Gaff was implicitly saying that he would take responsibility for Belle's conduct. Hearing that left Belle amazed—she hadn't known this would turn into someone else's problem as well. She was flooded with guilt. Still, even if she'd said this was her problem and hers alone, nothing would have changed. She knew that all too well.

"Very well. We will now conduct the Rite of Contract."

King Rawhide, however, seemed to accept Gaff's words at face value. Apparently, he had decided to overlook Belle's earlier behavior. Gaff quietly hung his head again, taking that to be obvious, which left Belle feeling indebted to both Gaff and the king.

*I really can't argue here, can I…?*

But while this was a relief, she felt a bit annoyed at the king. He looked much more monstrous than she did, yet he was also far more tolerant, trusted, and admired than she was. Accepting this strange sense of envy, Belle looked up at the king again.

"Who is it that requests the Rite of Contract? Speak, Gaff," said both of the king's faces in unison.

"One who studied under the tutelage of the renowned Enola Sian Lablac. She spectacularly cleared his final trial and has come to Park City. Her name is Belle Lablac, my sister apprentice."

The audience stirred. Sian Lablac's name apparently carried much renown, but they were equally surprised that his final student had been this smooth-skinned, featureless girl.

"For what purpose do you wish to undergo the Rite of Contract?" This time, the king directed his question at Belle.

"I want to become a Nomad!" Belle replied enthusiastically, getting to her feet without thinking.

"For what purpose do you wish that?"

“To discover my roots!”

Belle knew that everyone in the hall had their eyes fixed on her. This was, after all, a theater. Still, she carried on, as if she’d been pressed for an answer.

“Who am I? Where did I come from? Where should I go? I want to know the answers to all those questions. I want to find others of my kind. Because if I don’t, I’ll…I’ll always…be alone.”

The audience once again settled into silence, unable to accept what Belle had just said. It was too simple, the logic too self-evident for them to grasp. But that didn’t matter to Belle. None of them, not a one, knew how she really felt. They had no idea how difficult it was being surrounded by people who didn’t look like them. To be constantly drifting away from the land. To have everything they touched turn just as weightless—and how hard that made it to cling onto things. It was impossible for them to understand.

But perhaps the king did. Or Gaff. At the very least, they probably understood that was what she truly wished for. Belle wished for that with all her heart. And suddenly, she grew extremely anxious.

*Please understand. Because if you don’t, I’ll…*

“Very well. We shall grant you a trial to form the contract,” said the king’s two faces.

It didn’t take long for him to come to that decision, but to Belle, it felt like a long, tense few moments. That, in turn, enhanced the relief that came from it.

“Speak the name of the instrument you wield, Little One.”

Belle couldn’t contain her desire and got to her feet. She held up her sword and spoke in her best, loudest attempt at imitating Gaff.

“’Tis the creation of the renowned swordsmith Dranvi, the Worthy—the Howling Sword, Runding!”

It was at that moment, being able to stand on that stage, that Belle felt truly whole. The voice of the Guidance went silent, and her consciousness felt as if it once again belonged entirely to herself.

“Damn it, you really worried me there…,” Gaff grumbled uncharacteristically.

He was, of course, referring to Belle directing her sword at the king.

“Sorry. I got carried away. I’ll be careful next time,” Belle said vaguely, not touching on the real reason she’d done it.

The two of them were being led by the blue-cloaked priests down a special passage from the Public of Justice’s Throne Room to the Hall of Blades—a room in Lower West that presided over the yellow hour. The audience also gathered here, following through a different passage. Along the way more priests followed, this time clad in ivory mantles. They were also masked, but there was a fluidity to their movements that the blue priests lacked. They were still silent, though.

“Your power as a Schwertmusikerin will be tested here,” Gaff said.

This was the first thing he’d told Belle about what the Rite of Contract would entail. In other words, it seemed he couldn’t help in any way.

“A Solist has been chosen to face you in combat. Depending on how things go, it could become a battle to the death.”

“I’m used to that,” Belle said indifferently. “Who am I up against?”

“One of the four Arch-Solists, who are considered the top of the hierarchy… His name is Kir. You share a bond with the man.”

“A bond?”

“You once shattered his sword.”

“I did?! When?”

“When you ran amok in the castle in pursuit of this sword.”

Belle pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to remember, but she couldn’t. Instead she asked something else.

“You said he’s an Arch-Solist, but he’s just one of four. Are you one of them, too, Gaff?”

“I am,” he replied curtly.

“Is he as strong as you?”

“He’s very skilled.”

He wouldn’t give her any details. She couldn’t guess at her opponent’s race or the nature of his sword.

“Oh well.” Belle grinned and shrugged vigorously. “Whoever he is, I’m not going to lose.”

The space before her suddenly lit up. They had arrived at the Hall of Blades. Its structure was identical to the Throne Room, with the only difference being that there were two stages, connected by a narrow pathway. One of the stages presented the God Tree, while the other was a combat arena. The entire space was surrounded by ivory walls lined with spectator seats.

"This really is a spectacle, isn't it?" Belle whispered.

Gaff patted her on the shoulder. "Good luck."

With just those few words of encouragement, he walked away, escorted by the priests. Other priests guided Belle in the opposite direction, up to the arena. She picked up her sword, took a casual stance, and rubbed her cheek gently against the blade. Feeling its faint howl, Belle kissed the sword. No matter what hardships may come, Runding would overcome them. She believed that.

But just then, Belle was suddenly overcome with anxiety over the curse placed on her. Would she be able to cut her opponent? If not, maybe she wouldn't lose, but she certainly wouldn't be able to win.

Out of nowhere, a voice interrupted her thoughts.

**"No one can lay a curse on you."**

It was similar to the Guidance's voice but also different somehow. Belle turned around, looking for the source of the noise, but all she saw were the ivory priests and a few blue ones. Had it come from one of the priests, then?

However, before Belle could think on it any longer, the spectator seats filled up with people. The king emerged from the God Tree and looked at Belle from atop the stage. At the same time, another man approached from the passage opposite Belle's. It was a Centaurus, his hooves clicking loudly as he climbed the steps onto the stage. Both the hair on his head and that covering his four-legged lower half were colored a fiery red.

"I have come to conduct the Rite of Contract. Kir Rowal, of the four Arch-Solists!" the man announced in a voice that echoed from his diaphragm. "I must admit I did not expect to cross paths with you here."

He spoke in a grateful tone, which baffled Belle. She couldn't recall who he was, but she got the feeling that if she said that to the man, it would only infuriate him. So in the brief time she had, she tried her hardest to remember.

The man called Kir smoothly drew his sword. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship with an oxblood scarlet glow. It had a long blade that matched Belle's in terms of sheer length. He must have raised it with diligence and stern devotion. Kir deliberately showed Belle the spell etched upon its blade:

**LIVED**

Those who once lived, and those who live on now.

That was the meaning of the spell.

"I used the sword you once broke as a sapling to grow this new sword. You only made me stronger by shattering my blade. In that regard, you have my gratitude."

With those words of thanks, the atmosphere around Kir shifted, as if conveying to Belle that he was hell-bent on cleaving her in two. Looking into his ash-colored eyes, Belle finally recalled who he was.

The day she met Runding, he had been the last man whose sword she'd shattered in her attempt to flee the castle.

*It's a good thing I remembered. That was really bugging me.*

As he was now, Kir looked very little like the young man she'd seen that night. All his naïveté had been carved away, leaving behind a sharp, fierce man.

*A Solist's sword breaking helps them grow…?*

It was a trite phrase Belle had heard many times before, yet Kir was the first person she'd met who actually seemed to prove that. She had always thought they were just hollow words meant to encourage the defeated. Belle herself had no intention of letting her sword break, and Solists saw their weapons as extensions of themselves, raising them and training them as much as they did their own physiques.

*If I lost Runding…the despair would probably kill me.*

As that thought crossed some corner of Belle's mind, Kir called out to her.

"This is a duel. You understand what that means, don't you?" he said with a menacing glare.

A duel meant that they would be testing each other to see who remained. It was a battle that pitted one's existence against another's, a contest in which they put their entire souls as Solists on the line to test which of them was worthy of wielding their weapon.

*He's taking this really seriously…*

Looking at the man's red body, Belle was suddenly reminded of the negroni she'd hunted some time ago. Thinking back on it now, she hadn't cut it down because the villagers had asked her to, but because it had been a duel. In fact, every time Belle took up her sword in battle, it wasn't to show off her abilities for fun, but because she'd been dueling with someone.

Belle grinned. It was a brilliant smile, like a flower blooming, that seemed to leave Kir surprised for a moment.

"I do."

For a second, an illusion filled Belle's mind. She was a single flower standing opposite another flower.

*Durchbohren—drill through the world!*

That was what Runding, as well as Belle, wished for, and the true meaning of Durchbohren. Any flower blooming there was one that had been born on the remains of countless others that could have blossomed in its stead.

Belle considered her curse, the dog tag she'd accepted to try to understand herself.

*I feel like I might be able to cut him like this…*

Kir's expression changed. His glare was still lethal, but he looked calmer, as if his grudge toward her had slipped away.

The two stood there, a wall for the other to surmount. They leveled their swords at each other with gratitude.

The Schwertmusik was about to begin.

"It's awfully noisy," Gaff heard someone call out to him once he was over on the audience's side. It was a young Cateyes like Gaff, with a pale face that made his red bandanna stand out all the more.

"Adonis…," Gaff said, surprised. "I didn't expect to see you here. I thought you hated Schwertmusik."

The young Cateyes smiled faintly, jerking his chin at the two Solists standing onstage. "I'm curious this time." His posture and behavior made it clear he didn't try to put on airs around Gaff. "That's her, right? Your rumored sister apprentice."

Gaff nodded.

"That is one amazing sword she's got there. Think you could take a blow from that?"

The young man's question filled Gaff with a strange sensation. Still unsure of what it meant, he gave a fair answer.

"I can't tell unless I face her myself."

"That right? Me… Not a chance. If I tried to block that thing, it'd send me flying," the young man responded casually. He stared right at Belle, then whispered, "Belle. 'Little One,' huh…?"

It was at that point that Gaff understood what felt off about this young man. The way he spoke implied he'd seen Belle's sword before. But before he could ask Adonis about it, the other man said something.

"It's beginning."

The spectators had started singing to the rhythm of the countless instruments playing. Stomps, swords, and clanging steel all raised the tempo, playing loudly and merrily around the stage —a pure symphonia in the holy theater of the greatest god in the land.

Schwertmusik cultivated the earth even more so than agricultural music dedicated to the gods of the land, supported the castle's foundation more than any architectural music, brought about the rain and wind that made the land fertile and eternal, and its music symbolized the land's Thema, the pleasure principal of theater.

Schwertland was the land where swords and flowers bloomed. Schwertmusik was a performance where Solists clashed swords to drill into the world and question it about their existence. In being provided with proof of their existence, they drilled their presence into the shadow of the world. It was only by doing that, that they truly bloomed, which entertained the god of the nation above all else.

They learned from God, placated God, calmed God, and gained power in the process. They entertained God, entertained themselves in the realization they were entertaining God, and entertained all who heard them, their music linking with all of creation to form a single melody.

That was why Schwertmusik existed. In the moment of that symphonia, the world was united as one, and the line between order and chaos became muddled. Anyone and everyone grew intoxicated by this song.

Yet in the midst of this passionate symphonia, Belle alone remained calm. While surrounded and swallowed up by the song around her, she remained isolated and detached. From the moment she'd taken up her sword, Belle had never been involved in Schwertmusik, nor did she have any intention to do so. It felt like someone was right in front of her continuously filling up glasses of liquor that she had no desire to drink. She was fed up with it, angered by it—she felt she was being teased for her earnestness.

As if to kick away the proverbial liquor served to her, Belle charged at Kir.

## 6

She didn't use any tricks or feints. Belle just charged straight at Kir and slashed. It was a predictable blow, one that should by all accounts have been easily avoidable, but there was a power in its simplicity. Kir swiftly dodged, but the air pressure from the swing knocked him back a bit. The stage's floor was blown to bits, sending tremors throughout the hall.

The audience gasped. It was a truly destructive blow, far too strong for one to believe it was delivered by Belle's petite form. But as she stood there, her stance still recovering from the swing, Kir thrust his sword toward her without so much as a hint of a pause.

Belle floated up, her body soaring like a bird. However, something else, something that wasn't Kir's blade, whirred through the air in pursuit. A mass of heat. Belle could smell the tips of her hair become singed. She held up her blade, deflecting the heat wave as she hopped from one end of the stage to another.

*It's hot…!*

Seeing that, Kir's sword type and the effect of the spell etched into it became clear: It could unleash scorching fire at its wielder's will. What's more, the heat didn't seem to threaten Kir, proof of how meticulously he had raised his sword by his own hand. Belle was honestly amazed.

After that first exchange, it was obvious to both of them that they wouldn't be able to clash head on. If Kir was to block Belle's

strike, his sword would end up shattering. Conversely, if Belle was on the defensive, Kir's sword would turn her into a living torch. However, the two didn't back down, rushing at each other and patiently waiting for an opportunity. They passed each other by, a cavalier on horseback and a fluttering bird crossing swords.

"You're skilled…!"

Kir couldn't help but raise his voice in amazement. Belle wasn't simply waving her sword around like a blunt weapon; there was obvious technique and philosophy to her swordplay, a clear understanding of the angle and speed of her swings, careful fighting spirit, and an unpredictable yet certain flow to her thrusts and sweeps. All of it indicated extraordinary skill, giving Kir a clear picture of why she had taken up the sword. His words were in recognition of that.

The sound of their blades clashing loudly against one another produced beautiful Schwertmusik, but which of their instruments played it better—Belle's sword or Kir's? They both reveled in the music. They would continue to swing their swords and influence each other until one of them fell silent. Such was the true nature of a duel—and the reason she had picked up her weapon. Belle's sword had that awareness, that philosophy.

"…Ha-ha!"

Belle laughed, her eyes glinting as she became absorbed in her craft, performing spectacular Schwertmusik regardless of her intentions. The more she swung her blade, the sharper it became. Its surface was now glowing lily-white. With each flourish, her sword howled anew, its form becoming more beautiful, its reach extending, and its strikes growing heavier, sharper, and faster.

After clashing so many times that Belle lost count, the two once again crossed paths and swung at each other, and in that moment, Belle twisted her body slightly faster than her opponent and swept at Kir's flank. This was a risky gamble, one that could easily end with her being attacked, but he'd driven her to the point where this was the only opening she could make.

*I did it…!*

It was a blow that inspired confidence, so precise and powerful that Belle was sure of her victory—but Kir's equine body was blown back as if she'd hit it with a blunt object. His left arm and some of his ribs were crushed, and he flew through the air limply

before hitting the stage with a painful thud. There wasn't so much as a cut on his body.

*The curse…*

Those words bound Belle in place like a literal binding curse. She couldn't move. For a second, her mind was disturbed, and Kir didn't let that opportunity pass. He gritted his teeth to overcome the pain, got to his feet, and leaped toward her.

"Raaah!"

With a mighty roar, he swung his right arm up. He moved so swiftly it was hard to believe half his body had been smashed just moments ago.

Belle was helpless to do anything but take the blow head-on. An intense impact struck her, followed by heat. She screamed—the pain was intense, like all the skin on her hands had been torn off at once. Something cold ran down her back, and her mind and field of vision all went white. Yet she still managed to keep her grip on her sword. Still in pain, she hopped behind Kir's back, getting out of his way.

Belle realized in terror that Runding's blade had gone completely dull. She gripped its handle tight, but it made acute pain run through her hands, which were covered with the most intense burns she'd ever seen. Even at this point, she wasn't intent on losing, but she didn't see how she could possibly eke out a win like this. How could she beat Kir if she couldn't cut him? Belle desperately tried to come up with a solution.

There was only one answer.

*It's the only choice…*

She could hardly clench her hand, but Belle withstood the pain as their swords clashed one final time. She deflected the flurry of flames, but the downward swing burned her upper arm this time. The pain would have made her consciousness fade, had she not lost all sensation in her hands by now. However, Kir was confident that once the flames hit her, she wouldn't be able to get any closer to him—and that was what she took advantage of. Moving her numb hand by relying on nothing but her sword's howling, Belle used all her might to swing Runding.

*Thwack.*

A dull sound echoed around them, and Kir staggered back. His right arm was shattered, his elbow sticking out in an unnatural

direction, yet even then, he managed to maintain his grip on the sword for a few more seconds. He couldn't lift it, though, and the sword fell, tip first, and stabbed into the stage.

As the audience cried out in fervor around them, the two faced each other, Kir's sword between them. He gritted his teeth. Both of his arms were limp and immobile, and his voice came out in a rasp.

"Cut me down…"

There was no need to kill him, but if Belle did nothing, the crowd wouldn't be satisfied and the Rite of Contract wouldn't be complete.

"I guess I have no other choice."

Gripping the sword with her burnt hands, her fingers bleeding and covered in boils, Belle lifted her sword overhead. A stunned look crossed Kir's face.

"No, don't—!"

Before both of their eyes, the spell **LIVED** split cleanly in two and shattered. Kir let out a scream so loud and pained that Belle wished she could plug her ears.

Belle managed to stay on her feet, leaning on her sword. Both of her arms were wrapped around the blade, but she lacked the strength to hold it in her hand anymore. Her body was awash with cold sweat, and her throat was dry.

Kir was in front of Belle, his shattered arms hanging limp by his sides and his eyes shut tight. Keeping his eyelids closed, he raised his head to the sky, every line of his face filled with pain. He hadn't said anything since his earlier scream; he simply endured in silence.

The chorus of the audience tapered off. In its place, the people raised their voices in angry criticism. Refusing to cut down an opponent and instead cutting their sword was against the rules. Moreover, a sword that couldn't cut wasn't worthy of the name. Could someone like that really be called a Solist?

The choir soon began chanting a curse at Belle.

"Pashhur! Pashhur!"

*Pashhur*—may terror swoop down on you from all sides. It was the threat used against those who broke the rules of Schwertmusik, and the first punishment meted out to them.

Anyone branded by that word would become an enemy of the top-dog Solists, and even if they were attacked by a group or beaten to death, no one would come to their aid.

Belle looked around at the audience, her eyes wide. She unconsciously clenched her hands, making a burning pain run through her, but her heart welcomed the agony. She raised her hung head and glared at the audience.

“This is how I do things! If anyone’s got a problem with it, come down here and fight me!”

She spoke loudly enough to drown out the audience.

Clearly, Belle was in no condition to keep fighting. As the audience scorned her, Belle slowly raised Runding overhead. The sword let out a loud howl that made everyone surrounding the stage shudder. No one walked down to face her. After all, no one would be lawless enough to descend to the stage without the king’s approval.

Loud laughter filled the hall, disparaging the audience’s curses. It took Belle a moment to realize the laughter was hers. She herself was confused, unsure of why she was laughing. Nothing about this was funny. Yet she couldn’t help but laugh.

It was only then that she noticed Kir staring straight at her. His expression was still thick with pain, but seeing the firm will in his eyes, she quickly suppressed her laughter.

Kir looked up at the king.

“Give the victor her glory!” he shouted.

The king’s two faces looked down upon the stage, and he eventually made his declaration.

“You have completed the trial for the Rite of Contract. You have earned our praise, Little One.”

“I lost,” Kir said plainly, looking at Belle. “You’re strong.”

Somehow managing to pick up his broken sword with his injured arms, Kir turned his back to Belle. He stepped down off the stage, moving unsteadily, as if even just standing upright was painful. Belle leaned on her sword as she watched him leave.

“I’m really not…,” she whispered with a frustrated sigh.

“How tragic,” murmured the young man—Adonis—as he stared at the stage.

Adonis turned to look at Gaff, cutting off the other man who seemed to be about to say something.

“Everyone has a tragic side to them to some extent. *Everyone*. That said, she’s very familiar with hers, which is why it’s intriguing. I personally don’t find her pitiful at all. Just interesting.”

Gaff knew that it was only to him that this young man would share his inner thoughts. As he knew that this wasn’t indicative of any trust between them.

“She’s interesting,” Adonis said again, looking at the stage.

Those words indicated his actions and motivation in their entirety. He followed the world’s Thema of enjoyment, while silently mocking it from the sidelines. That was how this man did things.

Gaff turned his back to him.

“Where are you going?” Adonis asked.

“To Belle. I’m worried about her wounds. Plus, as her brother apprentice, I need to give her a word of praise or two.”

“Heh-heh. Her wounds, you say…? No matter how much praise you heap on her, I don’t think you’ll make her happy.”

“What…?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

Adonis looked away, a hint of derision in his words. Gaff stared at his turned back for a moment, but Adonis was soon hidden by members of the audience getting up to leave. Gaff narrowed his eyes. The area was becoming crowded by the murmuring spectators. He turned around and hurried off to go to Belle’s side.

By that point, the young man was completely out of sight.

When Gaff got to the waiting room to see Belle, he found the ivory priests tending to her burns. They were using sacred ash to heal her. The semitransparent gray powder was simply rubbed on the skin, and the pain faded like it was never there to begin with. Belle was shocked by how fast it went away and reflexively pulled her arms back, refusing further treatment.

“What’s wrong?” Gaff peered into her face, standing next to her.

“Nothing… This is enough; I’ll do the rest myself.”

She snatched bandages from one of the priests' hands and wrapped them around her injuries by herself. The pain in her hands was awful, and the burns and cuts given to her by the heat blade were seeping with blood and unpleasant to look at.

"It'll leave a scar," Gaff said, rubbing the sacred ash onto Belle's hands himself. She couldn't find it in her to reject him.

*It feels like even the pain is fake here in Park.*

She just barely stopped herself from saying that aloud and watched silently as Gaff skillfully bandaged her up.

"You should be fine if you leave your hands like this for a while. Just make sure you don't swing your sword until you're healed."

"Thanks," Belle said curtly and got to her feet, sword in hand.

She considered washing her arms when she got back to her room but felt bad about going against Gaff's advice.

"You fought well against Kir. I'm proud of you."

It didn't feel bad hearing him say that again, but right now, Belle wasn't in any state to accept the compliment. She nodded roughly, feeling annoyed for some reason.

"Don't worry about what happened after the match," Gaff said.

"I'm not."

That was only half a lie. The audience chanting that curse at her didn't bother Belle on its own; no one would raise their sword against Belle because of it, and even if they did, it wouldn't be anyone too menacing. Belle's sword was that fearsome, and moreover, the top-dog Solists, who stood on the side of justice, weren't that lawless.

However…

*I'll have to keep breaking people's swords from now on…*

That emotion weighed on her much more than the audience's silly chanting ever could. That, right there, was her true curse. It was clear that Belle—be it her sword or she herself—was subjected to some kind of distinction. She didn't know what she was able and unable to cut until the very moment her blade was upon it.

Belle had no idea of the meaning behind her curse. Why couldn't she cut things anymore? So far, she had been able to cut through anyone or anything without distinction. She didn't know,

and it was evident that so long as she didn't, she would only attract more malicious chanting.

*It's outright heresy.*

It made her feel like she'd been subjected to this kind of malice ever since the day she was born. She'd set out on this journey to escape all the fear and hatred people directed at her, but the curse she'd taken on for that purpose had only ended up drawing more terror and revulsion.

*It's just the same thing, over and over and over…*

And at some point, it became inescapable. That thought made her lips curl into a sudden smile. There it was again. It was strange—nothing about this was funny or weird, and all she should have felt was anger and indignation with nowhere to go, but instead she was smiling. It made no sense.

Belle left as soon as her treatment was done. She returned to the Throne Room with Gaff, where the king was waiting for them with the blue-mantled priests.

"We welcome you as a Solist, Little One," the two faces of the king said in unison.

Gaff nodded, filled with emotion, but Belle looked away from the king.

"I didn't come to Park City to perform Schwertmusik," she said curtly.

Oddly enough, no one, not even Gaff, seemed to find her remark offensive.

"Ye who knocks upon the door of journey, await your missions," the king's top face said, while the lower mouth frowned at her attitude. "Your missions number three. Three, as the Schwertland coat of arms, three tasks with which to entertain God. But that alone is not enough. Set forth and encounter coincidence, Little One."

"Coincidence…?" Belle echoed back, staring blankly at the king's two faces.

"Yes. Coincidence refers to that which you already possess but have yet to see or hear."

"So you're saying I need to rely on luck now?"

The king shook his head. Or at least, that's how it seemed to Belle, given she couldn't say for sure where his neck started and ended.

“You must know the curse imposed upon you. Know the meaning behind it. In so doing, your curse shall become a blessing.”

Belle could tell from the king’s words, or perhaps from his tone, that this wasn’t a falsehood meant to keep Belle in the country. And that was good enough for her. The king’s voice was oddly soothing, which was why she felt confident in saying that.

“I might end up bringing my curse here. In fact, maybe I already—”

“If you already have, then that will be my burden to carry, Little One,” the king said with a calm nod.

All of a sudden, Belle felt like crying, which surprised her. She had been feeling emotional for a little while now, but she suppressed the sensation rising from the pit of her stomach, feeling incredibly safe with the king around. It was as if she knew him from somewhere.

*Who…?*

On the other side of the king’s voice, Belle caught a glimpse of a man standing with his back to the sun. He stood there like a shadow, the visage of a person departing. And in his hand, he held a sharp, glinting blade…

*Why…?*

“It is my burden to carry,” the king repeated.

The God Tree still wasn’t looking at Belle.

## 7

“Are you sacrificing that girl for your own selfish goals?” the king asked, his voice reverberating with merciless severity.

The noise echoed sonorously through the Throne Room. Of the three rooms of the Public of Justice, this was the eastern hall that governed over the blue hour.

At the edge of the stage, opposite the king, stood a single priest clad in a blue mantle. There was no one else in the hall but the priest and the king.

“Is this revenge against God? The god that binds you with this curse?”

The priest said nothing, his expression indiscernible under the blue mask.

“It is foolish,” said the upper face. “I stand as the pillar of this land. What good will come of questioning Reason?”

“It is futile,” said the lower face. “You have completed your journey already. Where will you go?”

“Born as royalty.”

“Born as clergy.”

The king’s voice spoke, chanting in tandem.

“In becoming Enola, the instructor, you have escaped God.”

“In becoming Nomad, the traveler, you have escaped this country.”

“Why did you raise your apprentice?”

“What did you gain at the end of your journey?”

But the priest remained speechless. The smooth mask gazed upon the king’s two faces in silence. It was as if an insurmountable, impregnable wall stood between them, causing them to be unable to sway each other’s hearts.

“I see,” the top face murmured. “You returned here to bid your farewells.”

“I see,” the bottom face murmured. “You returned here to destroy us.”

They looked up to the sky and spoke as one.

“That one will go far. The Girl of Reason… She shall go to places even I cannot imagine.”

The king then looked down on the priest and made a solemn proclamation.

“I now free you in the truest sense. Live as a dead man. No one pursues the dead, not even God… You should have done this when you first became Nomad…”

A loud crack filled the room—the sound of the man’s mask splitting in two. The bright-blue mask fell away from his face and shattered against the stage.

This man was no longer part of the performance. For all the performance was concerned, this man was dead.

“So it is that my deserted self…must come to ruin. Just as the gods of legend left Earth behind and disappeared into eternity… Is it not so, Sian?”

The man remained silent, his lips pursed tightly as if he was holding something back. He looked upon the king’s two faces, then turned his back to leave, stepping down from the stage

without a single word. Watching him go, the king's two faces bade their farewell as one.

"Fare thee well, younger brother of mine."

The man didn't turn around.

*Ring*, chimed the O'crock, changing from yellow to red. It chimed like this whenever its color changed, marking the passage of time.

The red hour—the hour that fills the heart with pain.

*Why do I feel like this…?*

When Belle finally returned from the castle and got back to her room, she was overwhelmed with fatigue. She gave up on taking a bath, settling for simply wiping herself down. Lying on the bed, she rubbed her arms absentmindedly. She scratched them over the bandages and felt a dull pain.

The Rabbitia boy was sitting at her feet. Wherever he'd gone off to earlier, he had been waiting in Belle's room when she'd returned as if it was only natural for him to be there. Belle didn't question it, instead focusing on her own thoughts.

*I just feel like running amok…*

Her body was incredibly tired, but looking back on the day's events had filled her with intense emotion that demanded release. Gaff, too, seemed to notice she was beside herself. Her brother apprentice was a smart yet brusque man, and at times like these all he'd tell her was, "Sleep."

"I need to look after my sword. Please, just for a bit?" Belle asked.

"Not until your hands heal. If you're not careful, you'll never be able to touch a sword again."

He pretty much forced her into bed with that threat. *Damn him*, Belle thought, but though she complained internally, she couldn't say it out loud to the face of the man who spoke out of genuine concern for her. So she made do with cursing him mentally. And yet…

*Why do I have to feel like this…?*

It wouldn't matter at all if she could just be at peace. Why was she feeling so on edge?

*I wish they'd give me a mission already. Because then…*

Then this agonizing emotion would go away. Or would she have to go through this again? Her fingers, scratching at her wounds, clenched up without her intending it. Blood seeped into the bandages, but Belle kept scratching. The pain throbbed sweetly.

A thought suddenly crossed her mind.

*Maybe becoming a monster isn't too bad.*

For a second, that felt like the best way of escaping the torturous pain filling her heart. Her lips curled into a smile, and she felt like she was on the verge of laughter.

*A monster...*

But then, out of nowhere, a loud *bang* pulled her out of her thoughts. Belle sat up in alarm and looked around. The boy was the source of the noise, apparently having bumped his head against the wall.

Belle watched him do it in silent amazement. But then the boy turned toward her with a smile—a chilling grin devoid of any mirth. It looked as if his face had simply contorted into the shape of a smile like a doll that had had its spring wound.

Then he smacked his head against the wall again, smiling as he hurt himself.

The bloodcurdling sight made Belle instinctively cling to her sword, but just then…

**"…A hollow smile is the seedbed of vengeance."**

The voice filled her mind again. The voice of her other self, the Guidance.

"Stop that," Belle said in a trembling voice.

**"…You must not let anger ferment idly."**

The child kept bashing his head against the wall, blood running from his forehead down his jaw. Yet despite that, he kept smiling —an expression that seemed all the crueler in light of his usual lack of emotion.

"Hey, I said stop that."

She couldn't stand it anymore. Belle grabbed the boy's shoulders to keep him from doing it anymore. A red line of blood seeped through his milky fur, and a jolt of pain ran through Belle's hands.

**"…The wine of anger will comfort but then drive you to madness."**

The boy stopped moving, his red eyes fixing silently on Belle.

*I know that…! No, I knew that already!* Belle shouted internally.

But the scream went unvoiced, instead emerging as a sobbing, pained breath.

“It’s all…just too much,” Belle eventually managed to say, though she wasn’t sure who exactly she was directing those words at.

She gently let go of the child and wiped the blood off him with the bandage wrapped around her palm. She put her lips to his forehead and gently licked the wound. It tasted like iron. She did it without thinking, but the child remained expressionless as ever, and she couldn’t tell what was going through his mind. Was he even looking at her? All Belle could see in its beady red eyes was her own reflection.

She suddenly extracted herself from the child, flustered, and pulled the blankets over her head. When she peeked her head out of the covers not long after, the child was already gone. She heard a faint creak, followed by the sound of the door closing. Belle looked toward the closed door, and the flower on the table naturally came into view.

It was the bud of the postal bird her Meister had sent, having bloomed fragrant blue petals.

“Maybe…he’s not as mad as he seems.”

The flower said nothing anymore. The carcass of those words began to wilt with a crumbling sound.

The taste of the child’s blood lingered in her mouth.

## 8

The chance Belle was hoping for came soon enough.

On the afternoon two days after her duel with Kir, Gaff came to Belle’s room, and she took off her bandages to show him her hands.

“All better, right?”

“Hmm… Indeed. It looks like you’re fine to hold a sword now.”

He said those ominous words with complete composure, then dropped another surprising announcement just as calmly.

“It’s a good thing you healed in time. The underdog Solists could attack Lower East Town any day now.”

Belle stared at Gaff with amazement.

“What…?”

“The area your parents live in will probably be attacked.”

Belle was stunned. She thought this was some kind of joke, but Gaff’s expression was serious—which instantly made her ask why he hadn’t told her about this until now.

“If I’d told you, you would have preemptively attacked the underdog Solists.”

“Of course I would’ve!”

“But that goes against the Thema.”

“Huh…?”

“The plan for the attack was already known by God…by the king. However, you mustn’t perform Schwertmusik with them until the attack actually takes place. You can’t just blindly send the country into disorder.”

“But it’ll be too late *after* they attack, you idiot!” Belle snapped before she could stop herself.

Gaff remained silent, his expression unchanging. Just then, Belle heard a bell ringing outside. Solists settlements had one to signal a call to the castle; it was practically a funeral bell.

“The king will convey the divine proclamation at the Public of Justice and nominate the Solist band to take care of this matter. Will you come with me?”

Belle felt like they were making a fool out of her. While they were busy with those formalities, the situation would just escalate. She didn’t care about violating the Thema—she wanted to hurry over to her foster parents’ village.

*Why…?*

A doubt sprouted in her heart. Did she really need to go so far to save her foster parents, who’d given up on raising her? But now wasn’t the time to think about that. The reason didn’t matter; she had to protect them, to use her power to keep her foster parents safe.

Belle got to her feet, sword in hand.

“You’re not waiting for the selection?” Gaff said.

There was a certain relaxed tone to his voice, and that was when Belle realized it: He’d known this was coming. This was why he’d pressed her to go and visit her foster parents. And the reason he hadn’t told her ahead of time wasn’t because of the

Thema, but because it would go against his own sense of impartiality.

Belle looked at Gaff, trying to guess what that sense of impartiality was telling him to do now.

Eventually, he said, “If you go and fight without waiting for the selection, one of two things will happen. If you are chosen, there will be ne repercussions. However, if you are not, you will have to pay your sword’s weight in denari.”

Belle glanced at Runding.

“So I’ll be completely broke if that happens.”

Gaff smiled, seeing her reaction. That convinced her—Gaff was pretending to stop her, but in truth, he was spurring her on, desperately stopping himself from shouting at her to get going already.

“Thank you,” Belle said, before running off.

Belle raced along the jasper-green flagstones, heading for the farm as fast as she could. As expected, the attack on their village was already over. The people who had managed to escape were running in the opposite direction from Belle, toward the castle. The closer she got, the more destroyed buildings came into sight. It looked like they’d been decimated by some sort of magic, but she couldn’t tell what type it was from just a glance, and she didn’t have the time to stop and investigate.

Some of the people were cowering on the ground after being slashed. For a second, Belle thought she saw her foster father among them, and a shiver ran through her. She picked up the pace and kept running.

Belle arrived on the doorstep of the Mimosas. The door was busted open, but the house itself seemed undamaged. She looked around the area and spotted a Cateyes man who’d hidden himself from the attackers, so she grabbed him to get answers.

“What happened to the people who live here? The people from the village?”

“The outsiders… Th-they took them…”

“Which way?!”

The attack must have been horrific, because this grown man was so shaken he didn’t have the presence of mind to be

bewildered by Belle's appearance. Belle threw him back to the ground and sprinted in the direction he pointed.

She soon crossed the gates out of Park City, which were still intact. The guards, however, were moaning on the ground, having been cut down. Belle paid them no mind and raced through the farms outside the gate, and then she saw them—a row of goblet flowers walking down the road, their cages packed with villagers, surrounded by burly underdog Solists.

A thought went through Belle's mind as she gave chase.

*They're stealing Farm Symphonists…*

They were being taken away, along with their instruments and crops. There were very few Farm Symphonists outside the walls, so they stole some from inside to survive—or otherwise, stole back the ones taken from them. It was the endless struggle between justice and evil, with the castle standing between them. The seeds of this endless conflict were constantly being sown and harvested.

*But what for…?*

For a moment, Belle felt as if she saw an intentionality behind it all. Now wasn't the time to contemplate it, though, and she didn't seriously believe that to begin with. Right now, her thoughts were on nothing but kindling the fire of her anger. A natural anger, not the one she used to comfort herself as someone abnormal.

But all other thoughts left Belle's mind when she saw the instrument one of the Solists was carrying. It was her foster mother's instrument or someone else's that looked just like it. It didn't matter to Belle anymore. She howled like an animal and took a firm grip on Runding.

When the Solists spotted Belle, they seemed amused—a smooth, featureless girl was charging at them with a gigantic sword the likes of which they'd never seen before. They could only stare in amazement.

**EEERRREEEHHH…!**

Her sword let out its high-pitched howl, and without a second thought, Belle swung it down on the man at the back of the column. The Solist tried to draw his sword, but Runding's full weight slammed into his side. He never had a chance. The man's body flew into the air with all the weight and dignity of a rag doll.

His half-drawn sword was shattered along with its hilt. In a single blow, he'd been turned into a crumpled mess laid out on the ground.

In the meantime, Belle had already unleashed a second and a third slash. The Solists were in a state of panic—it was too soon for the top dogs to have retaliated, so they had no idea who they were up against. On top of that, whoever was attacking them was ridiculously strong. Facing her head-on did nothing but shatter their swords. Yet when they tried to attack her with ranged weapons, she closed the distance to the shooter in a single bound and struck them down.

Reinforcements arrived from the front of the column, but none of them managed to surround her. Any time it seemed they'd encircled her, she leaped over them and out of their formation.

Standing in Belle's way was a trio of Minotaurus men, larger than any of the other Solists. They wielded large war axes, with unique spells carved on their blades. That alone made it clear they were several times stronger than the rest of the Solists.

"Have at her!" one of them shouted, and the three attacked together.

They hardly had time to say anything else, though. Belle swung her sword about with the ferocious bloodlust of a beast flower, not allowing them so much as a chance to speak.

Much to the shock of the Minotaurus men, Belle's sword deflected all three of their axes at once. An expression akin to admiration played over their faces. Had this been a duel, they might have given her a word of praise or two. But before they could even contemplate anything of the sort, Belle's sword slammed into one of them, knocking him away. She attacked again, moving with a dizzying speed they couldn't match.

The other two men swung their axes at her from both sides, staggering their attacks to hit her at different times. Regardless of whether Belle decided to block or parry, one of her opponents could use that opening to strike her from behind. This wasn't the sort of tactic a Minotaurus warrior would normally resort to. A Sheepeyes might, since they were weak individually, but with the strength the Minotaurus boasted, there was no need for this, and it also came across as cowardly.

But at this point, the men no longer cared about appearances. To them, Belle was nothing but a fearsome beast flower, and no one cared about dignity or cowardice when fighting a creature.

Belle blocked one of the axes, giving them an opening, just as they'd hoped—but their mistake was trying to use their axes against a sword that had already shown itself capable of blocking a trio of weapons at once. The ax shattered to bits, and its wielder's arms bent in unnatural directions, knocking him out of commission. The other ax swung down…

And then something shocking happened. Belle turned on her heel and effortlessly caught the ax bearing down on her by the handle. The man holding it stared at her in disbelief. He hurriedly tried to let go of the ax, but some fearsome force prevented him from doing so. The moment his surprise gave way to fear, something struck him from the side—Belle, wielding Runding with her other hand. The man finally let go of his sword and went flying, his body folding in midair. He crashed into the ground, unstirring.

After Belle easily dispatched the three Minotaurus, an old Reutelite man attacked next. He didn't use a weapon, though, but directed a group of Froggies to surround her. Belle's jumping ability surpassed theirs, but they outnumbered her, and they impressively managed to form a ring around her.

For the first time, Belle stopped in her tracks. The skillful way he'd directed the others made it clear that the old Reutelite was their leader.

"You sure are one crazy kid, ain'tcha?" the old man muttered.

He had the dangerous air of an experienced veteran about him. He took the pipe from his lips and used it to draw a spell in midair. This was a form of grammar magic unique to his race. Belle tried to decipher what he was trying to cast, but the Froggies kept getting in her way.

"I did hear a wild child showed up in Park, but I never thought she'd come after us… Talk 'bout bad luck. Take this."

The old man flicked the pipe with his finger and its flames formed a line of light that settled at Belle's feet. The Froggies all hopped—this time not toward Belle but away from her. Belle tried to leap backward when she realized, but the pipe's flames expanded with incredible energy and burst. Belle decided to hold

her ground a split second before the heat surrounded her on all sides.

“Hah!”

She brought her sword down fiercely on the core of the spell, and it gouged into the soil with a thunderous roar. The sword shone lily-white, cleaving the mass of heat, and the spell broke into cinders, then evaporated like fog.

“She dispelled the flames with her damn sword…?!” the old man exclaimed in amazement.

At that point, Belle had already jumped high in the air. She crossed blades with the Froggies in midair, and each time Runding howled, one of them was slammed into the ground.

Belle landed and looked for the old Reutelite, knowing the group would fall apart if their leader was defeated. But the old man was already gone. She looked around and spotted a group of Froggies carrying him away as they fled as fast as their legs would carry them. They really did take off in the blink of an eye. It was impressive how fast they could run, even if it only made sense with those long legs.

Belle heard battle cries—but not from the underdog Solists. The top-dog Solists had finally arrived on the scene, and fighting instantly erupted. However, at this point, Belle had already struck down most of the underdogs, and the battle was all but decided.

Belle gave up on the fighting and hurried over to the goblet flowers. She hopped on the back of one of the gigantic, sluggish turtles and struck the living cage with her sword.

She’d meant to smash it with the sword, but the blow felt strange in her hands—or rather, it felt like it *should* have. With a satisfying sound, the sword slashed cleanly through the cage door.

*The sword cut it…?!*

The Farm Symphonists hurried out of the cage, excited at their newfound freedom. Belle hurried to the other goblet turtles before checking to see if her foster parents had been there. Since they had been in one of the cages, her foster parents had no doubt seen Belle fighting, and they were sure to recognize the girl they’d once raised. For that reason, Belle wasn’t going to look for her parents but instead would have them come to her. And if they

didn’t, she would simply check to make sure they were safe, then quietly return to her room.

She had just cut open the door to the last cage when, all of a sudden, a Cateyes woman hurried over to Belle and wordlessly caught her in an embrace. In that moment, Belle was overcome with a joy that bordered on bliss. She was proud that she’d been able to use the power that had once made people reject her to save her family.

“Belle. Belle…!” Her stepmother called out Belle’s name, her voice overwhelmed with emotion.

Her hand lovingly caressed Belle’s cheek. She had always been a strict mother, but now she looked at Belle’s face with her eyes full of tears. At her side stood Belle’s foster father, who patted her on the head happily. They were the same kind, rugged hands that had taught her how to cut O’crocks.

*He’s gotten older…*

That was the first impression Belle had of her foster father after seeing him for the first time in years.

“You’re back, Belle,” he said, his voice filled with emotion.

The words got caught in Belle’s throat, but then—

“Mom! Dad!”

A child voice’s reached Belle’s ears, slamming into her thoughts like a hammer. A young Cateyes girl, too young to have grown her tail yet, was hurrying over to Mr. and Mrs. Mimosa and wrapping her arms around them in a hug. Seeing the two of them return the hug, Belle was stunned by the possibility of what this meant—but not by the fact that they had a child.

*…I already knew.*

When Belle had been locked in that cell with Runding all those years ago, she’d known her foster parents wouldn’t come for her—because by then, her foster mother had already been pregnant. Belle had known it at the time, but she’d forgotten about it until now, keeping that realization hidden away from herself in some corner of her heart.

Now she knew why she hadn’t been able to bring herself to see her foster parents. She was stunned, her entire body going limp. Top dogs had great trouble conceiving, so children were considered the greatest treasure imaginable. Belle couldn’t hope to compare to a child who was their own flesh and blood.

Her foster parents were trying to tell her something, but she couldn't bear to listen. She felt like she wouldn't be able to take it and run away right there and then. The couple seemed to notice this, because they fell silent and looked at Belle with concern.

The girl turned around and said with a cherubic smile, "Thank you, Miss Solist!"

Belle had nowhere to run. The girl looked at her and Runding with admiration, and even Belle couldn't deny the girl looked adorable and intelligent. The fact that she had immediately checked on her parents to make sure they were safe once the castle Solists arrived also showed she was brave. And above all else, she must be able to play an instrument well, performing for the land without doubts or reservations.

She could do what Belle couldn't.

Biting back a bitter frustration, Belle patted the girl on the head. Her cheeks flushed bashfully.

"What's your name, little lady?" Belle asked as calmly as she could, bending over to meet her at eye level.

"Bellemot!" the girl said cheerfully, taking pride in her name and in her parents who'd given it to her.

Belle was stunned. For a long moment, she wasn't sure how to interpret what this meant.

Bellemot—"Belle's sister." That was the little girl's name. Belle instantly turned to look at her foster mother, who nodded in confirmation.

Her thoughts went blank, and something surged up within her. Belle tried to keep it contained, lest she burst into tears like a small child.

Belle stood up straight, facing her foster parents. They were trying to tell her something. Belle could guess at what it was, she could see it in their eyes: *Let's live together*. But that would mean casting aside her sword and giving up on her journey right then and there, which she couldn't do.

This was enough for Belle. Enough for this beastly, errant child to leave them without any more regrets.

"I'm glad I could repay you for raising me."

Belle's foster parents looked at her with sorrow, shaking their heads. They realized they'd never be able to live together again.

Both Belle and they tried to say something, but came up blank. Words held no meaning anymore.

“I’m going to become a Nomad.”

Those were her parting words.

It was only when she got back to Central East Town that Belle realized her O’crock was missing.

She reflexively turned on the spot and made to run back but stopped in her tracks. The chain had likely broken while she was fighting, or it had fallen off when she’d been chasing the raiders.

Earth was already visible in the sky, and the stars were starting to glimmer. Trying to look for it all over the farm village with so little light was nearly impossible.

Belle looked at the sky, gritting her teeth. She got the feeling she’d never find her O’crock again. But then again, maybe this was an appropriate way to mark her farewell with her foster parents.

And yet—was she simply to swallow her anger, accept that she’d always be an outcast, endure the pain of that poison, and live in solitude? Thinking that and standing all alone under the Earthshine made her incredibly frustrated. Why did Belle feel so greedy just by virtue of being there?

“Oh well,” she whispered, her lips beginning to curl into an indomitable smile. “Sooner or later, I’ll cut everyone down to size.”

# III.
# Performance—The Sword and the Scales, the Just and the Evil

## 1

With the appearance of the “wild child”—namely, Belle—the underdogs’ raid turned into a rout. As they retreated, the old Reutelite man—the Conductor of the raiders—kept saying, “She sure was one wild child,” and from there the name stuck.

“Damn Haggis,” the old man grumbled. “I took his story with a grain of salt, but damn it all if she wasn’t twice as scary as he said.” Yet there was a hint of praise in his voice.

His tiny form was being carried by three Froggies as they continued down their predetermined escape route. The rest of the raiders were carrying their injured comrades or what little crops and instruments they had been able to steal before retreating to their towns.

Halfway there, the old man called out to one of the Froggies running alongside him.

“Hey, Mist. Whatcha got there?”

His tone was relatively relaxed, knowing that having come this far there was no risk of pursuers catching up to them.

The Froggie, Mist, grinned and held up something that glinted in the light.

“It’s the wild child’s.”

Mist was a girl a few years older than the wild child herself. She answered his question while jogging, her breathing calm and undisturbed by the exercise, showing off the leg strength Froggies took pride in.

“Nicked it off her, did ya? Impressive. I’d be too scared to do somethin’ like that,” the old man said with a raspy laugh.

“I mean, I had to get back at her somehow. We couldn’t beat her at all, so I figured this would make for a good enough

payback. Besides, this thing… It's real pretty."

Mist eyed the O'crock, her expression suddenly becoming much more demure. In that moment, she looked like quite a young, sweet girl.

"Knowing you, Mist, you'll need to catch someone on your own…"

Hearing that casual voice pulled Mist out of her reverie.

"The hell do you mean by that, Cloud?"

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking you'll need to find a good man soon…"

The group all laughed. The one who'd made the comment was a young Froggie man running at Mist's side. Mist grumpily flung a fist at him, only for him to nimbly dodge it.

"Why're you mad?" Cloud asked, confused.

His face was just like Mist's, but he gave off a different air. Mist was regarded by all as clever and full of life, while Cloud came across as laid-back and hard to read.

Seeing their exchange, the old man laughed again.

"Ya two were born from the same egg. Can't ya get along better?"

"We do get along well, me and her," Cloud said like it was a given. "Right?"

"Of course."

As soon as she'd agreed to that, Mist crouched low and swept Cloud's feet out from under him. This time he couldn't dodge, and he tumbled forward propelled by the speed of his jog. It looked like he would slam into the ground, but he folded his knees in mid-fall and performed a spectacular somersault before landing cleanly on his feet. He seemed every bit as agile as Belle.

"What was that for?" Cloud casually complained, but by then, the group was already a fair distance away.

"Damn, you're stubborn," Mist said. She clicked her tongue, watching Cloud recede into the distance behind them.

But then it happened. The wind whirled around them, and the trees surrounding them stirred. Something hopped over their heads, landing in the darkness right in front of them.

"Halt," the old man commanded, his voice tense.

Everyone stopped in their tracks. They were close to town, with the illuminated houses in sight. However, something stood in the

darkness that separated them from the lights of the town.

They heard a sound as the old man struck a match, and a fire sparked to life. He placed a mint pipe between his lips and lit it. Pipes like these were the equivalent of food to Reutelites, but they also doubled as their unique weapons. The old man used the pipe's fire to draw a spell in the air and flicked the pipe in front of him. A phosphorescent light expanded to illuminate the area—a visual defense barrier. It allowed them to see the person standing there but kept them out of sight through a layer of light.

The old man pointed wordlessly, and the Froggie Solists swiftly took position around the illuminated circle. But then…

"What spectacular skill. Color me impressed."

A voice reached them through the barrier, and the speaker revealed himself.

"I have no intention of fighting you. I would, however, like to ask you something, good underdogs."

He was handsome, with long ears and crimson eyes. His shapely harelip was curled into an innocent smile, and he stopped a short distance away from them, his hands spread out in a peaceful gesture.

"A Rabbitia…," the old man muttered, surprised. "What do you want with us?"

"Before we talk, could you do something about this light? It's quite bright," the Rabbitia replied charmingly.

His voice sounded like that of a child, but his tone sounded oddly mature. His appearance, meanwhile, was less that of a child and more a young man, making it even more difficult for the others to discern his actual age.

"No, the light stays. State your business."

"Goodness, how overly cautious. I understand your people picked up an O'crock?"

Mist looked at the old man in alarm.

"No idea what you're going on about," the old man said.

"Really now?" the Rabbitia asked, cocking his head. The sweet smile on his lips bordered on eerie.

"What do you even want an O'crock for?" the old man asked. "You Rabbitia have those mechanical watches of yours…"

The Rabbitia shrugged in exasperation. "A young girl misplaced it, and she's very saddened by its loss. More than you could

imagine."

"Well, we're plenty sad, too. She thrashed plenty of our blokes, after all."

"Yet none of them died," the Rabbitia said plainly, to which the old man shrugged.

"I suppose that's true," he whispered.

"Sir Ginbuck!" Mist chided him sharply.

"But…"

"Oh? I was wondering what you guys were doing here," said a slow, lackadaisical voice interrupting their exchange.

Turning around, they saw Cloud standing there, having finally caught up with them. He walked over to the old man's side.

"Huh? Sir Ginbuck, he can see us," Cloud said casually.

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean… Can't he?"

"Probably. Looking at him, I get the impression he can see just fine despite the light."

"Are you serious…?"

The old man stared fixedly at the Rabbitia, then raised his voice, seemingly having come to a decision.

"Hey, tell me how you're gonna reward us for it. We'll decide based on that."

"I'll trade it for this," the Rabbitia said, taking out a golden pocket watch and holding it out for the group to see.

"Told ya he can see us."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Pipe down, you two!"

The old man opened the lid of the pocket watch and inspected the small, delicate gears moving inside. It was a skeleton clock made with incredible skill.

"Hang on, I thought Rabbitia don't let go of things like this without a really good reason."

"He's just an idiot. Let's take it and run."

"No, we shouldn't."

"Agreed. He'd probably kill a few of us if we did. All of us if we're not lucky."

The old man closed the pocket watch and handed it to Mist.

"It's your call," he told her.

Mist looked back at him, stunned.

“Well, if you say something like that, Sir Ginbuck, who am I to argue?”

She spun around and tossed the O’crock over. It glinted in midair, and the Rabbitia caught it in his white hand.

“This is ours in return, though! And just so you know, if you try to steal it back, I’ll smash this pocket watch to pieces!”

The Rabbitia smiled at her.

“Everything is as fate wills it… Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The Rabbitia bowed in an exaggerated fashion and vanished into the dark. The wind seemed to pick up for a moment, and then all that remained was the quiet sound of the watch’s hands ticking away.

“Oh! You finally got a gift from a man, didn’t you?” Cloud said cheerfully, only for Mist to smack him for real this time.

## 2

*Ring.*

Hearing a chime, Belle turned around in surprise. Even after sundown, there was a certain energy to Central East Town. With plenty of lamps to go around, many shops were still open. It was still too early for the streets to be empty, but although they weren’t exactly bustling, they were filled with all sorts of different noises. Yet Belle doubted she’d mistake that chiming for anything else.

O’crocks were delicate stones. Their tone changed subtly depending on where they were formed, when they were dug out, and how they were cut, so Belle knew without a doubt that what she’d just heard was the sound of the stone she’d carved with her own hands.

*What am I doing…?* She stopped looking around in a hurry. *It’s not like I’ll get it back…*

She finally realized—or rather, convinced herself—that she was simply imagining things, but then her eyes settled on a strange figure. He was dressed in a red waistcoat and black silk pants. She thought the clothes looked familiar, then realized she recognized his race, too. His red eyes fixed on Belle, the Rabbitia approached her with his long ears standing upright.

“Good evening, miss. Are you looking for something?”

His tone was polite, and it was immediately obvious he was a Nomad. Those two facts drew Belle's interest.

"Hmm, well, yes…" His observant gaze made the words catch in her throat. "But I doubt I'll find it…"

"I think giving up would be premature," he said flatly. "Won't you walk with me for a bit? I'm sure you'll find what you're looking for."

And with that, he walked off, urging Belle to follow.

Belle's honest impression was that she'd drawn the attention of a weirdo. His words didn't fill her with any expectations, but for some reason she followed him anyway. Maybe something about the confidence in his words pulled her along, or maybe she was just that reluctant to give up on her O'crock.

She suddenly realized that he was as tall as she was—or short, considering. Looking at him from behind, he looked like a child, but his conduct felt oddly mature. These two traits combined to give the impression he wasn't a kid but instead a very short young man.

*This rabbit gets weirder the more I look at him…*

She wasn't sure what she was expecting to find by following him. As that thought crossed her mind, he suddenly turned to look at her.

"Pardon me for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Kitty the All."

"Erm. I'm…"

"I know who you are, Belle Lablac."

Belle stopped in her tracks. "How do you know my name?" she asked, her voice naturally cautious.

"There is one living under your care. His name is Kitty the Nothing." The man also stopped in his tracks and turned to face Belle. His tone was soft and calm. "You have helped him significantly, and I merely wish to extend my gratitude toward you. You will find us Rabbitia are as duty bound as the Solists of Schwertland."

"So you're…that kid's brother or something?"

"All Rabbitia in Denariland are family to one another."

That seemed to answer some questions and raise others.

"But if you're like a brother to him, why is he all alone?"

“He’s as alone as I am,” Kitty the All said, and kept walking, as if saying that should explain everything. “The thing you’re looking for right now is very important. Yes… So important that, for instance, it may very well hold the key to the coincidence you must stumble across if you are to depart on your journey.”

*Who is this guy…?*

Still half in doubt, Belle resumed following the man.

*That said, those are some strange names…*

The All—the Wise, and the Nothing—the Fool.

In the central ward of Park City, all life was allowed to live as it was. There, where top dogs and underdogs came together, overlooking the castle, was an inn.

Belle had been allowed to go straight in, surprising even her by how easy it had been. Maybe it was Kitty’s handiwork, or maybe the store itself had accepted her.

Normally, whenever Belle entered a store, someone always scrutinized her sword. They would demand Belle show her dog tag, so it always took some time for her to be let inside. The reason behind the demand was never clear, other than the simple fact that someone like Belle wasn’t welcome there.

Even here, she was asked to leave her sword with the shopkeeper, but…

“She needs it on her.”

With just that remark, they had been allowed inside. Belle was more confused than anything.

“This is the inn On the Rocks. There’s one like it in every country,” Kitty said.

“I’ve never heard of it before.”

The Rabbitia led Belle to the eatery and bar on the first floor. The bedrooms for the inn were on the second floor. You could easily call for a healer here, and apparently the place could get in touch with any technician. But it was something else that made this inn truly special.

“It might be more accurate to say that’s the name for places like this. At some point, Nomads began to travel the world, and as their numbers grew, locations where they could gather and meet were established across the different countries. This inn is one such place. A Nomad opened it with permission from the king.”

“A Nomad did…?”

“He passed away, leaving this place to an acquaintance. And he never gave it a name. That sort of thing is not uncommon among Nomads. But even after he died, On the Rocks remains, so long as those who come here have need of it.”

And if no one had need of it anymore, the inn was always ready to disappear. That was just how Nomads were. Belle felt as if Kitty—and perhaps the entirety of the place—was telling her this.

“That sounds kind of lonely,” Belle muttered.

Kitty didn’t answer. He produced a denari coin and gave it to one of the inn’s staff, telling them something. Their table was already overcrowded with plates of food, and although Belle wasn’t sure what else he’d ordered, she let him do as he please. It wasn’t coming out of her pocket, after all. This was all Kitty’s treat.

*What am I doing here?* Belle asked herself. *Why am I not just leaving straight away?*

She thought it was the inn keeping her from leaving. Sitting on the table was ice, flower wine, and cups, and those three things represented this place in its entirety. People, products, and the inn. It didn’t add anything, nor take anything away, but accepted everyone as they were, throwing them all together as if to say there are all sorts of people in the world. Things that would be seen as foreign or out of place in any other establishment weren’t considered strange at all here.

It made her feel right at home, and Belle had never felt so immediately at peace in a place like this before. All of this went to say that it was Belle who wanted to stay in this unusual, rare spot.

Seeing Belle relax in her seat, Kitty grinned at her.

“I just ordered a song for us.”

“A song?” Belle didn’t quite understand what he meant.

“See that Swallowtail woman over there?”

Belle had never met anyone of her race before. The woman’s lithe form was unlike anything else she’d seen, resembling a bird. Something grew from the woman’s back all the way down her arms—folded wings. She lifted a cup to her vivid-yellow lips, sipping on something to wet her throat. In her hands was a golden string instrument the likes of which Belle had never

encountered before. She couldn't recognize it from the shape or the number of strings.

"She's a traveling Troubadour who makes her living singing."

Belle never heard of such a profession before.

"She's a singer…? But it's not like this is a farm, and the building is in good condition. There's no need for any farming or construction music."

"Yes, you're right. It probably *isn't* necessary."

"Huh…?"

The staff member stood next to the Swallowtail woman and pointed to Belle and Kitty. The woman turned to face Belle, and their gazes met. Her eyes were so translucent they drew Belle in. Her yellow beak curled into a silent smile, and her fingers settled on the instrument. She plucked it.

*Lone…*, the string seemed to say as it quivered.

The inn went quiet as everyone turned to look at her. There was a certain anticipation in their eyes. The woman began singing in Schwertland's native tongue.

Ah, let us awaken
We need not magic anymore

Within the dream
Forgotten when we wake
The arcana, riddles, histories of the world

A transitory paradise
Gaze into the looking glass, build a land that exists nowhere
Let us pass through transparent passages and labyrinths
Like an illusory Alice, with no name or place to belong

Play the key, even as the broken mirror tears into you
For you know that which you seek
Is the way home
In the face of newborn brilliance
Narrow your eyes
And at that moment, even the little one
Will find a place of true peace

Ah, let us awaken
We need not magic anymore

The final note lingered in the air as the string trembled, followed by a quiet applause. Just like Kitty said, the song produced nothing. So what were they applauding?

It truly had been a fine performance. The Swallowtail woman's voice was brilliant and pure. Belle found herself clapping in a daze, tears in her eyes. She wanted to get to her feet and praise the singer, even though her song produced nothing. She couldn't understand why.

The woman got to her feet, glass in hand, and approached Belle's table with silent movements. She stood before Belle, her glass raised, and it took Belle a long moment before she finally found the words.

"Thank you."

That was all she could manage, and it came across as a silly response. Belle herself was taken aback by it. But it was enough, it seemed. The woman lifted her glass, seemingly in Belle's honor, and downed its contents. Then she left, leaving behind a silent smile.

She hadn't said a word the entire time, almost as if she couldn't speak. But Belle had heard her singing just moments ago.

"'May the curse of a departing Nomad eventually become a blessing'…is what she meant to say," Kitty explained. Then as if he'd read Belle's thoughts, he added, "She's incapable of speaking except for when she sings. The rumors say she can't hear, either."

Was that her curse as a Nomad?

"Does her song really produce nothing? Her voice is so pretty…"

"Well… I'm sure it must seem like a waste of rare talent to some. She doesn't pray to any god, either. But can you really say her song doesn't produce anything?"

"I don't know. I won't forget it, though. I'm sure her song will stay in my memory."

Kitty smiled at her.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked.

Belle looked back, baffled.

“The song is quite famous in Schwertland, sung for one departing on their journey. I imagine your parents may have heard it at some point.”

Suddenly, she realized something. The lyrics had mentioned a “little one”—the literal meaning of Belle’s name.

“Or maybe they didn’t know it was a song and only knew the word. Either way, they put those same feelings into that name.”

Belle thought he was right. Her foster parents had known she would leave them one day. They’d likely known ever since they decided to raise Belle as their own. Yet despite that, they had raised her with all their love.

But their parting had been so sudden Belle hadn’t had a chance to say good-bye, so she’d had no way of knowing how they really felt about her. She had resented her foster family for the longest time.

She wasn’t wrong for thinking along those lines. Perhaps Belle shouldn’t have questioned if it was right and simply believed. Her heart hadn’t been hard enough to simply write it off as a fantasy.

“You shouldn’t think of forgetting something and losing it as the same thing,” Kitty told her firmly.

Belle’s eyes filled with tears, and she hurriedly covered her face. She felt her cheeks flush. This whole time, the man had been making her feel all sorts of emotions. But she wouldn’t cry anymore.

Feeling embarrassed, Belle averted her eyes from Kitty, and just then, she saw a familiar man. Her eyes widened in surprise. There was no mistaking that dignified appearance and oversize body.

It was Gaff, and he instantly spotted Belle. He smiled in relief and approached her.

“I’ve been looking for you. Someone said they spotted you nearby, but I never would’ve expected to find you *here*…”

“I didn’t know about this place.”

“I was going to tell you about it in due time, but it was too soon.”

“If anything, it was too late.”

Gaff laughed. “Well, if you found this place on your own and feel that way, I guess that’s all that matters.”

“But I didn’t find it on my…”

Belle trailed off in confusion. Kitty, who'd been sitting across from her just a moment ago, was gone.

*I swear, these rabbits keep doing that…*

Belle gave a strained smile, and Gaff gave her a perplexed look.

"Was someone there? I see two cups."

"A rabbit, until just now."

That brief explanation seemed enough to satisfy Gaff. Naturally, he must have assumed she was referring to Kitty the Nothing, rather than Kitty the All, which Belle found funny. But when she made to rise from her seat, Gaff suddenly said:

"You forgot something."

He pointed at a special gemstone sitting abandoned on the table. For a second, Belle couldn't believe it, but she finally managed to come to terms with it.

"…Oh. You're right."

She'd been very close to really leaving it behind. Belle reached out and grasped it firmly in her palm.

"This is mine." Looking around the store, she softly whispered, "I found what I was looking for."

*Ring*, the stone chimed within her hand.

## 3

Belle walked through the castle alongside Gaff, making her way to the Public of Justice to receive payment for the recent battle. In other words, Belle had been selected for the task, after all—a fact that Gaff seemed to have known. It had effectively been Belle's first mission.

"Did you see your parents?" Gaff asked casually.

"Yeah… But I doubt I'll meet them again."

Gaff eyed Belle's expression as she spoke, looking impressed.

"You seem satisfied."

"You think? Well, everything that happened helped dispel some of my worries."

"That's good."

"Yeah." She gently touched the O'crock hanging from her neck.

They entered the hall. This time, the stage and spectator seats were empty. As Gaff climbed onto the stage after Belle, the blue-robed priests appeared, and the king emerged from the God Tree.

“You have our praise, Little One,” said the king’s two faces.

*Why…?*

Whenever the king acknowledged her presence, Belle got the feeling the God Tree wasn’t looking at her.

“Place your sword upon the scales. We shall grant you unwilting steel in exchange for the exploits your sword will tell.”

Unwilting steel meant denari coins. As the king spoke, the God Tree produced a grinding sound like the creaking of cogs. Something pierced the king’s chest and grew from there—a steel fruit from the God Tree. The fruit split in two over Belle’s head, bending into metal branches that hung down.

*So these are the scales…*

Each of the scales had a seal meticulously etched into it:

The right scale had the spell **GOD**, representing the God Tree.

The left scale had the spell **DOG**, representing the people.

The right side already had a number of denari coins piled onto it, while the left was where soldiers were meant to place their swords.

At Gaff’s urging, Belle handed her sword with the priests. As soon as she let it go, a sense of weightlessness overcome her.

“Give it back soon. I get restless without it.”

Belle’s words were met with silence. A few of the priests worked together to place Runding onto the scale.

**EEE…**

Her sword howled softly, like it was communicating with the tree. As the two metals conversed, the scales began to tilt. The priests climbed a set of stairs that had been placed on the stage and began adding denari to the scales. The scales wobbled as the sides were balanced, before eventually coming to a stop, level. Her sword was then removed from the scales, and Belle took it back before regarding the sack of coins she was offered. Once Belle had also taken the denari, the king’s dual faces began to speak solemnly.

“This unwilting steel shall grant you substance and bless many others with the substance they need.”

This was the custom in Schwertland. Solists who earned money through battle went about Park City spreading their revenue and returning it to the castle in the form of taxes. In this way, the battle between good and evil enriched and supported the land.

Unwilting steel was a mysterious metal. It couldn't be manufactured in Schwertland, so it was very rare for anyone to attempt to counterfeit it. Gaff said the coins were produced in Denariland, which begged the question how they reached the people here. Belle had no idea.

This god was strange, incomprehensible, and inescapable in Belle's eyes.

*Yet he won't even look my way…*

Belle glimpsed the invisible god's profile through the king's dual faces.

"I've got two missions left. I'm ready whenever you are."

Oddly enough, just as before, no one took offense at Belle's casual tone.

"Await our divine decree, Little One. Take your time and rest tonight."

That was what she'd planned to do anyway.

"This is incredible," Gaff said in amazement as soon as they'd left the hall. "Even Solists at the top of the hierarchy don't earn this much at once."

"Hee-hee-hee, I guess I got lucky. I won't have to worry about putting food on the table for a while now," Belle said, before giving Gaff a quizzical look. "The ones at the top of the hierarchy are those four Arch-Solists, yeah?"

"Mmm," Gaff grunted, raising a brow as if to ask, *What of it?*

"And you and Kir are two of them, right? What are the other two like?"

"You want to know?"

"I'm curious. It seems interesting," Belle replied casually.

Gaff stared at her. It wasn't often Belle showed interest in others—and she showed even less interest when it came to people she'd never met or had nothing to do with. She was much too occupied with her own situation.

"Displaying interest in others is a good thing," Gaff said, prefacing his answer.

That was what he was always like, picking his words incredibly carefully.

"One of them is called Tiziano, an Undine. However, their whereabouts are unknown at present."

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. One day they just went missing. We don’t even know if they’re a man or a woman right now.”

The Undine races—particularly Mermaids—were said to change from man to woman and vice versa according to their needs. Since they changed their appearance and gestures to match their gender, it effectively allowed them to hide as long as they didn’t speak their name.

Belle asked the most important question of all.

“Are they strong?”

“Yeah,” Gaff answered succinctly. He didn’t know anything about Tiziano’s fighting style or sword type.

“And I’m guessing the last one is here in Park,” Belle said.

“Yeah… But he has issues of his own.” Gaff furrowed his brow uncomfortably. “He’s known among Solists as the Sword Thief.”

Belle’s eyes glistened with interest, and she urged him to go on.

“He collects the swords of those who’ve died in battle and buys them from those who’ve laid down their weapons. Because of that, he frequently gets into fights.”

In other words, he was hard to manage.

“And he’s strong, too, right?”

Gaff nodded.

“Sounds like a weird guy, though,” Belle said. “Why do something annoying like that?”

“He must have his reasons. Something he can’t tell other people.”

Gaff didn’t like needlessly prying into other people’s business.

“What’s his name?” Belle asked.

“Adonis.”

## 4

He never put up any sort of resistance.

He let people punch him just because they wanted to and mock him to their heart’s content. He smiled as if pitying himself for being beaten, only to be punched again.

He allowed them to hit him and laugh at him, and he’d never do anything in return.

His fur was a silverish-white, his eyes blue. With his conspicuous red bandanna tied across his forehead hiding his brows and ears, he never let people catch a glimpse of his intentions, but just stared at them, weighing them up. That was the kind of man he was.

The first time Belle saw him was in the Solists' village in Central East Town. The sight had made her hand reflexively go to the hilt of her sword. A young Cateyes man surrounded by four or five other men who were violently arguing with him—though, for an "argument" there were very few words being exchanged. They had formed a circle around him, cutting off his avenues of escape, and were beating him with their sheathed swords.

The young man wasn't carrying a sword. Every time they knocked him down, he slowly got back up and tried to leave the circle, only to get pushed back into the center with a flurry of punches and curses. He didn't so much as let out a groan, just silently took their abuse.

Belle was incensed seeing this, but Gaff firmly told her off.

"Stay out of it."

He likely thought her getting involved would only cause more of a commotion. A few words from Gaff, an Arch-Solist at the top of hierarchy, should have instantly resolved the situation—but it wasn't that easy. Even with Gaff facing them, none of the men moved away from the young Cateyes. Some of them even seemed intent on drawing their swords on Gaff for standing up for him.

Duels were a daily occurrence in the Solists' village. They were used for all sorts of reasons such as resolving gambling disputes or arguments and weren't regarded as a lawless act. Even dueling over a simple grudge was common enough.

So even if a fight broke out over a trivial matter, it didn't mean much. Such altercations happened sporadically and ended just as quickly. One person drew their sword, and so did the other. No one really tricked the other into drawing first because there was no need to. After all, fighting was legal with a dog tag.

But the fact that they'd ganged up on him as a group was strange, as was the fact that he wasn't carrying a sword. What's more, they were beating him with sheathed swords, so they must be furious with him, but what could he have done to make them so angry?

None of this made any sense, and it couldn't be called Schwertmusik. So what was it?

As Belle watched on, her eyes met the young man's. She was focused solely on him, being in the epicenter of this strange situation. He had a thin smile on his lips. It wasn't directed at anything in particular, though—he was just smiling. However, the moment he met Belle's gaze, his smile vanished, and like dry earth soaking up water, the expression below his red bandanna turned as blank as a mask.

He quickly looked away from her, and Belle was suddenly reminded of the priests from the castle. She noticed the young man was wearing hard leather gloves, hiding his hands the same way a mask might hide one's face. It felt like a strange connection to make, but it felt oddly fitting.

"I'll never regard a wretch like him as a Solist!" one man in the group said, closing in on Gaff.

"You understand you're voicing an objection against the king's selection, then?" Gaff asked calmly. "Which would, of course, mean objecting to God's will."

This made the group draw back at once. Such a claim could easily get their dog tags revoked, and no one was invested enough in this argument to go that far. They simply directed one last, scathing glance at the young man before walking off bitterly. It was clear they would go after him again the first chance they got, but Gaff did nothing.

"…I caused you some trouble."

The young man got to his feet with a wince. Even talking probably hurt after that scuffle. Yet even so, with a cynical smile, he watched the group walk off.

"Looks like they at least listen to you."

His face was covered in bruises. Some of them bled lightly or were swollen, but the fact that his features were normally quite handsome made the injuries look all the worse. Yet despite that, he had a fearless smile on his lips—not out of scorn for his attackers, but out of pity.

Gaff said nothing. He simply watched the young man. It would have been appropriate to give him some candid advice, but he knew the man wouldn't listen.

The young Cateyes glanced at Belle, then staggered away.

“…He didn’t have a sword,” she said.

“No.”

“Then what happened to cause this?”

“Swords,” Gaff said simply, sighing and crossing his burly arms. “He picked up the swords of Solists who died in the last battle. The bereaved families want them back, but he always says the swords of the dead belong to no one. That dispute led to this scuffle.”

The young man’s claims were true—the dead didn’t wield swords. However, Belle could also understand the feelings of the families of the dead Solists, wanting the swords their loved ones had wielded in life. What Belle couldn’t wrap her head around was why that young man had wanted the swords of the dead badly enough to ignore the feelings of the bereaved families.

“You could’ve said something to him.”

“He wouldn’t have listened.”

“Why not? You’re at the top of the hierarchy…”

“He’s the same rank as me.”

Belle’s eyes widened in shock. “You mean that was…?”

“Adonis, yes,” Gaff answered bitterly.

“Why doesn’t he raise his own sword…?” Belle asked despite herself, looking in the direction Adonis had walked off.

Gaff shook his head, as if to say he didn’t have a clue.

“Maybe he can’t,” Belle said suddenly.

“What…?”

“I mean, maybe he can’t raise a sword of his own,” she murmured, recalling the thick leather gloves covering his hands.

“You think…he can’t raise his own sword?” Gaff looked like this was the first time he’d considered that. “That would be fatal.”

Being a Solist and raising a sword were two things that went hand in hand. Just what kind of circumstances could spawn a Solist who couldn’t raise a sword? If that was true, Adonis would no doubt have his dog tag taken away.

“We shouldn’t jump to any conclusions or make hasty statements when we don’t know anything yet,” Gaff warned her.

That wasn’t the sort of person Belle was. And yet, the young man’s thick gloves lingered in her thoughts.

Belle's days of boredom stretched on. Her selection for a mission wouldn't come. She headed for the palace every time the bell summoned the Solists, but her name was never called. She had free time whenever she didn't have a task to perform, meaning she spent all this time doing nothing before setting out on her journey.

She could duel to while away the time, then pay her sword's weight in gold as a fine after, but she didn't intend to swing her sword just for fun. When a person wielded their sword for a living, using it in combat for amusement looked unworthy, and it would be a bother if she got hurt for no good reason.

Kitty hadn't shown up since their last meeting, either. Belle hadn't seen so much as his shadow. Maybe he'd left on his journey already. The only one still here was the Kitty who couldn't talk—and even that Kitty went out somewhere every night.

So naturally Belle ended up often leaving her room and wandering about town looking for something to do. Sometimes she left Park and hunted beast flowers to cut down on food expenses. She decided that if she had nothing better to do, so be it; she'd spend her free time leisurely.

One day, she discovered three baby pops in a corner of her lodging home's lawn. A pop was a catlike creature the size of her palm and fluffy like cotton. Someone's pet pop must have died and been buried here, its remains becoming a seedbed that produced new flowers. She looked around and, as expected, found a pop tree roughly as tall as her growing in an inconspicuous part of the lawn.

The three pops sat nestled together looking up at the vast, imposing world with round, beady eyes.

*It's like they're shocked at having been born here…*

Seeing them like that, Belle instantly developed a liking for the creatures. She poured her remaining fruit milk onto a saucer and carried it over to them. The three pops let out a gentle *Meee…*, but they cautiously kept their distance. Belle put down the saucer and left, and when she came back the next day, it was empty.

After this cycle went on for a few days, the pops soon grew attached to her and eventually followed her to her room, much to Belle's surprise. She hadn't planned on keeping them as pets.

Belle knew their lives were short and only intended to look after them for a short while, so she didn't name him.

However, the pops spent more and more time with her. Sometimes Kitty the Nothing would sit with them, looking just as idle and absentminded as Belle and the pops.

But then, one day, the bell beckoning the Solists to the castle tolled. Belle had heard it when she'd been on her way to feed the pops, food bag in hand, and she stopped in her tracks wondering what had happened.

She wasn't expecting anything to come from the bell. She probably wouldn't be selected, like all those times before. And even if she was, it wouldn't matter much if she was a little late.

So rather than head for the castle, Belle made her way to the lodging home's back lawn. Kitty wasn't there. Instead, she heard loud, scathing voices. A group of people were arguing over something. Belle approached, reflexively reaching for her sword, and spotted a familiar young man.

"Adonis…"

She said his name, despite having never spoken to him before. The boy with the red bandanna turned his head to face her, although he didn't move much since he was lying on the ground. Once again, his face was bruised, but this time he was badly beaten all over. Seeing Belle approach, he tried to get up, but it seemed even that was too much for him.

A group of unfamiliar men was standing next to him, all of them looking at Belle. Seeing one of them holding a sheathed sword over his shoulder, Belle understood what was going on here: another "argument."

"Don't you think you're overdoing it a bit?" Belle asked, exasperated. "There's only one of him against all of you. What did he even do to you?"

The men exchanged looks, taken aback. Apparently, they all knew who Belle was, which wasn't much of a surprise. After her duel with Kir and the raid, her extraordinary skill with the blade and proclivity for breaking swords meant there wasn't a top-dog Solist who didn't know her name.

Belle was unaware of that, though, and to be perfectly honest, she didn't really care much if people *were* fighting each other. She had only asked because she'd happened upon the situation.

But in the end, Belle ended up erupting in anger.

The men's story went like so:

They were all Solists. They had been debating over what exactly it was that makes a Solist's sword sharp and agreed that a truly strong sword can cut through both soft and hard things.

Belle listened to them with some interest up to that point…but what happened next pushed her over the edge.

Once they had come to that conclusion, all that remained was to test whose sword was the sharpest, so they started with something soft. One of them said he'd seen some pops around the area recently. When you cut them, they gave no resistance and went flying in the air like cotton spores. Pops were the essence of softness, so the Solists had decided they'd make the perfect test.

"You *cut* them…?" Belle asked, her voice dangerously low.

"Well," said one of the Solists, "only two of the three. We couldn't catch the last one. The first two were stupid; they weren't even wary of us…"

The sack fell from Belle's hands. It wasn't that heavy, but the sound of it hitting the ground was painfully audible to everyone present. A bit of food spilled out of the bag, and it was clear to all who the food was for.

Silence settled over the Solists, but they couldn't maintain it for long.

"C-come on, there's plenty of pops all over the place. What difference does one or two make…?"

"It's not like they were your pets, right? I mean, they wilt too fast…"

They made the mistake of trying to downplay what had happened, running their mouths and making it clear they felt no guilt over what they'd done.

"Feeding beast flowers is a bad idea to begin with. Only people no one cares about do that, like this guy. He got mad and attacked us over stupid pops, if you can believe that. Oh, it's been a while since the bell rang. We should hurry…," one of them said in a lazy tone of voice.

The group of Solists made to walk off, but Belle stood wordlessly in their way.

"What's your problem?"

They lowered their voices intimidatingly. In their eyes, they hadn't done anything wrong, but they'd also underestimated Belle based on her appearance.

Belle slowly drew Runding and pointed it at the men. Their eyes widened in disbelief. They knew her sword was big, but seeing it up close was different. It hadn't been nearly this intimidating during her duel with Kir…

"If your swords are really that sharp, then show me," Belle said, her voice trembling with rage.

She looked like she was holding back tears. The Solists, meanwhile, couldn't back down after a taunt like that. One man with his sword sheathed at his shoulder swiftly drew it and leaped toward Belle—but the moment he did, he took the full brunt of her blade to the side. His body bent in a strange direction, and he disappeared on the other side of a hedge fence. A moment later, the shattered remains of his sword fell to the ground.

"Come at me, all of you!" Belle shouted at them, anger emanating from her every movement.

The men attacked her more out of desperation than anger. They charged at Belle with a shout, their swords held high, only for their voices to be drowned out by the howling of her massive sword. It was over in a heartbeat. Belle didn't just break their swords—she crushed every bone in their bodies. It was surprising none of them died on the spot.

Placing the sword on her back, Belle grabbed the men and threw them over the hedge fence. If she had to look at them any longer, she really would kill them.

"What crazy strength…"

Turning around, Belle saw Adonis leaning against the wall of the lodging house. Somehow, he'd managed to prop up the top half of his body.

"Why cut them…? That's so awful…" Belle knew he wasn't one of them, but she couldn't help but ask.

Adonis looked at Belle, his face covered in bruises, and muttered, "I'll escort you."

"Huh…?"

"It's been a long while since the summoning bell rang."

“It’s fine; it’s not like I’ll be selected…” Belle offered Adonis a hand. “Come on.”

He stared expressionlessly at her outstretched palm.

“This is the second time you’ve seen me like this,” Adonis said. He quickly looked away and took her hand. Belle felt the hard leather of his glove against her fingers.

“Where’s your room?” Belle asked, lending Adonis her shoulder.

But it seemed Adonis couldn’t walk yet, because he remained silent.

“If it’d make you feel better, I can always just dump you here,” Belle said, to which Adonis finally responded.

“Lower West building, third floor, end of the hall.”

Feeling Adonis’s weight on her shoulder, Belle thought he seemed oddly cautious, just like the pops had been at first. It was then that she noticed the surviving pop staring at her from within the leaves of a tree. The way it looked at Belle made it seem like it resented her for the affection she’d fostered in them, which had ultimately led to the loss of its siblings.

“I’m sorry,” Belle called out to the pop in the tree.

Adonis also looked up into the branches. The pop remained there for a few seconds before turning around and vanishing deeper into the foliage. Belle didn’t see it again after that.

“…A long time ago, they used to use those flowers to train,” Adonis said almost as if he was talking to himself. With every step he took, he let out a wince. “Nowadays, they have more useful flowers. That tree was planted to breed pops so they could use them in training. A sharp sword should be capable of cutting through the soft and the hard, after all.”

Adonis’s disinterested, indifferent tone made Belle’s anger resurface.

“Don’t you think that’s cruel?”

“Solists won’t grow strong without something to cut.”

“So that makes it fine to cut up helpless creatures? If all you’re good for is cutting weaklings, you’re no Solist!”

Adonis gave a chuckle. “I completely agree.”

His smile was so pure Belle was surprised he was capable of such an expression. Coupled with how bruised he was, it made her feel a strange pang of sympathy for him.

“If that’s how you feel, you should have said so sooner. I thought you were like them,” Belle said, her cheeks burning for some reason.

“Well, maybe I’m not so different from them. For all you know, I might be worse.”

“I wouldn’t be lending you my shoulder if you were.”

Adonis smiled faintly.

“How do you know my name…?”

“Gaff told me.”

“Is my name all he told you?”

Belle paused to think for a moment, then shook her head. “He said you’re called the Sword Thief. That’s all. He didn’t badmouth you or anything.”

“That sounds like Gaff,” he said, and smiled softly again. He seemed to have lost some of his earlier reservations toward Belle. “Gaff told me about you, too. Your name is…Belle Lablac, right?”

“That’s right. Did he tell you anything else?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d he say?”

Adonis’s expression suddenly went blank.

“He called you the Girl of Reason.”

## 5

Adonis’s room certainly made a strong first impression. It was completely empty and dark. At best, it got a few rays of sunlight filtering in when the sun was setting.

“This place really is something,” Belle said frankly as she lay Adonis down on his worn-out bed.

The bed didn’t have a pillow. Sitting on the table was a set of tableware resting face down with a layer of dust over it. There were no chairs to be seen, and the only bit of decoration in the room was a faded carpet. The curtains, discolored from exposure to the sun, fluttered listlessly in the wind blowing in through the window.

“Raven flowers…”

As the curtains flapped back into place, Belle spotted black flowers sitting atop the desk. Raven flowers—a species of bird flower that delivered news of a person’s death—bloomed silently

surrounded by wilted mail flowers. Looking around the room, she realized the wind must have swept through, because ink-black petals were visible everywhere. The dull colors of the individual petals gave Belle a terrible sense of the passage of time. Several people had died, their deaths being relayed one after the other, until over time the room had grown dimmer, dustier, and emptier. That was her impression.

"…Want me to clean up this place?" Belle asked. She hadn't known what to say and that had been the first thing to come out of her mouth. "Or would you rather go to Gogue? You probably can't move in the state you're in."

The Gogue was a chapel directly connected to the Throne Room where sacred ash was administered. It was where the sick and injured went to pray and receive treatment using sacred ash.

However, Adonis glanced at Belle and changed the subject.

"You're gonna be late."

"I'm already late. What're you gonna do?"

"I'll go."

"When you're all battered and bruised?"

Adonis looked straight at Belle like he was weighing up something. Sensing his eyes on her, Belle went quiet.

"I'll take you there. I'm sure Bamboo will like you," Adonis eventually muttered.

Belle had no idea what he was talking about, but before she could say anything, Adonis raised his voice and cut her off.

"Bamboo!"

He called out to someone—and Belle suddenly sensed a presence. A puff of dust rose into the air. It was on the table. Much to Belle's surprise, a beast flower the likes of which she'd never seen before silently appeared. It had fluffy amber fur that swayed in the wind and two large eyes, each of which looked in a different direction. A muzzle lined with fangs protruded from its face, and it had an incredibly long tongue like a second tail that dangled from its lips.

That was the entirety of the beast flower's body—a head, tail, and four legs. The other parts of its body that should have been there were missing.

**A familiar…**

Belle—or rather, the Guidance that governed the knowledge within her—whispered.

**It's a species of wolvus, a canine beast flower. It's bound to the life of its contractor and will not wilt until they die…**

Adonis snapped a finger, and his familiar hopped onto the bed.

"He's my shell. He's always eating himself, so he doesn't exist anywhere."

It was another sentence that made absolutely no sense at all to Belle.

**It's Rest au Rant. Consuming magic.**

The other voice inside Belle's mind whispered an explanation, and Belle finally understood—though, that was only because she'd seen that every one of Bamboo's fangs was meticulously etched with a tattoo-like spell.

"…It's my first time letting someone else inside," Adonis murmured as if he'd just remembered the fact.

Bamboo opened his large mouth, and in that moment, he really did seem like a creature made up entirely of its jaw. Deep within its maw, looming behind the door made up of its many fangs, was a boundless, infinite expanse of darkness.

In the blink of an eye, Belle was swallowed up.

It really did feel like she'd just been devoured. But after a moment of darkness, the scenery around her changed.

"W-wow…" Belle breathed out a sigh, rendered speechless.

She found herself in an incredibly fancy room. This was much more like where she'd expected an Arch-Solist at the top of the hierarchy to live. The place was fully furnished, and everything looked to be the highest quality. The floor was covered with a beautifully patterned woven rug, and walking on it felt as soft as a cloud.

It was hard to believe the same person who occupied the room she'd seen earlier also lived here. But that thought prompted Belle to take a look around. This lavish, spotless room was missing its owner.

That wasn't all, either. There weren't any doors or windows, nor an entrance or exit in sight. Looking at the ceiling, Belle saw that the room was brightly illuminated by a fancy glasswork

chandelier of glowstone lamps, but of course, there was no sign of an exit up there, either.

*Am I trapped here…?*

But just as that thought crossed her mind, Belle heard the creaking of hinges behind her. Turning around, she saw an open door had appeared at the wall—along with a half-naked Adonis. His toplessness startled Belle even more than the door appearing out of nowhere. He was handsome. Pretty, even. His toned muscles flexed tightly beneath his coat of silver fur.

"Sorry for not being a better host, but feel free to sit down and make yourself at home. My body's still aching…"

Adonis looked to be in pain as he sat down on the bed. In his hand was a small bottle full of translucent powder—sacred ash. He took off his gloves, mixed some water into the sacred ash, and smeared it over his wounds. His fingers were surprisingly white and sleek. Maybe it was because he always hid them under his gloves, but they were incredibly captivating.

He used the tips of his fingers to smoothly take off his bandanna with movements that seemed almost unconscious, and his long silvery locks—which proved surprisingly lengthy without the fabric holding them in place—spilled across his forehead.

Seeing him now, he was very good-looking. It wasn't just that his facial features were attractive—he lacked the shallow superficiality often displayed by those with nothing more a pretty face. There was a charm and a grace to him reminiscent of young, well-polished steel fruit. And the way he seemed to wince from the pain of his bruises came across as carnal, somehow.

As Belle stared at him in a daze, Adonis looked at her in confusion.

"What's wrong? Sit down."

Adonis's brusque command made Belle scratch her cheek in bewilderment.

"O-okay…"

She was oddly aware of her own voice and felt awkward for reasons she couldn't explain. But it wasn't unpleasant. It was the first time she'd ever felt this way. Belle clumsily tried to sit down when she noticed a sword stand had appeared beside her and the door in the wall from earlier had vanished again.

She placed Runding on the sturdy sword stand and sat on a sofa, surprised at how easily she sank into its cushions. Then with a *clink*, a tea set appeared on the table.

Belle was gradually getting used to it here. Making herself at home, she picked up a teacup, narrowing her eyes as the fragrance of the tea tickled her nostrils. Next, a plate of tea cakes appeared on the table.

"Looks like Bamboo's taken a liking to you, too," remarked Adonis.

Belle giggled, feeling a little embarrassed. It was like the room had some invisible spirit butler, who was kindly showering Belle with hospitality. Adonis seemed to have finished tending to his wounds in the meantime, as he put on his coat and picked up his teacup.

"No matter how much they beat me up, just one vial of this stuff is enough to heal it all. Serves them right. No matter how hard they hit me, the reality is it doesn't even hurt anymore. It's all an illusion, in the end."

Hearing Adonis say this made Belle realize something.

"The spirit ash… Why do you have so much of it?"

Spirit ash was strictly managed by the priests, and a person typically wasn't given any ahead of time to treat future injuries. They healed anything, after all—injury and illness.

"I bribed them. You should try it next time."

It was hard to tell from his voice if he was being serious. By now, he'd already put his thick leather gloves back on.

"Hey… Can you tell me something?" Belle asked.

"Sure, if it's something I know the answer to."

"What does 'Girl of Reason' mean?"

That question had been on her mind since she'd heard it earlier. All expression drained from Adonis's face, and he looked at the ceiling with a rigid gaze. His reaction made Belle anxious over whether she'd asked something inappropriate, but apparently it was just how Adonis looked when he was thinking. His expression soon softened, and he said firmly:

"No idea."

"Are you serious?" Belle's shoulders drooped in disappointment.

“I don’t think Gaff really knows what it means, either. He said his Meister…who’s also your Meister, called you that. That’s all I know. Apparently, it’s what he calls someone who has a special fate in store for them.”

“I’m not that special. I just…want to find my way home.”

“Home?”

“A place where I’ll find other people who are the same race as me.”

“I see…”

She didn’t expect Adonis to understand, but he nodded almost instantly.

“Any other questions?” he asked.

Belle nearly said no, but then another thought crossed her mind.

“Why do you take other people’s swords? I mean, they call you the Sword Thief.”

Adonis seemed to have expected her to ask that question. He shrugged and pursed his lips pensively.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine…,” Belle said, giving him an out. She was strangely confident she already knew the answer.

*He can’t raise a sword on his own…*

Belle’s instincts were unusually sharp. She was so good at being able to tell what other people were thinking that at times it felt like she could read their mind. Being treated as a heretic since she was a young girl had helped her develop a keen grasp on the subtle emotional fluctuations of those around her, and that had become her ability to read others.

What Belle could read from Adonis felt both major and oppressive. Whatever the circumstances behind it were, it was unacceptable for a Solist to be unable to raise a sword. Belle was certain she’d stumbled across a huge scandal for an Arch-Solist at the top of the hierarchy, so she was torn between curiosity and discomfort.

However, Adonis didn’t brush off her question.

“I’m just asking Park City.”

“You’re ‘asking’…?”

Adonis nodded.

Just then, Belle heard a clang, and a sword had appeared on the wall. Metallic sounds filled the room, and one by one, weapons appeared on the walls all around them. They were all different in terms of sword type, the age of the metal, size, and shape. Belle couldn't tell how many there were—it looked like dozens. Hundreds.

"This isn't all of them, either. I have more hidden in another room in Bamboo."

"Why…?"

She hadn't expected him to have so many. If the only problem was that he couldn't raise a sword himself, then there was no reason for a collection like this. Or was it his inability to raise a sword that made him so obsessed with collecting swords? Belle looked at Adonis, taken aback.

Adonis took a sword off the wall.

"This is my spell."

He held up the sword, showing Belle a symbol she'd never seen before. She had no idea how to read it.

**?**

That strange mark had been etched beneath the sword's original spell.

"This is the mark used in the ancient text to denote a question. It allows me to adjust any kind of sword for my own use. My dog tag has this mark, too, and it's my other name."

"…Why? What does it mean?"

"He who questions—the Skeptic… Why were this sword and its wielder forced to fight? What are Solists, in the first place? What is Schwertland? Who is the king, and God?"

Adonis asked such shocking questions with indifference.

*I wonder, does he realize…?*

His eyes were just like the pops', wondering why he was born and what he was doing here. Completely ignorant and overwhelmingly anxious, both afraid and surprised by his own existence. Why must he live on, why must he keep on hurting—doubt, upon doubt, upon doubt. Would he ever get answers to those questions?

"Did you explain that to the bereaved families?"

"Even if I had, the result would've been the same."

“But nobody will ever understand if they just blame you and you don’t say anything.”

Adonis remained silent but nodded.

Belle felt they were the same. He was just like Belle when she’d been asked why she wanted to become a Nomad, knowing that even if she gave an answer, it was likely nobody would understand. But once she’d gotten them to understand what she wanted…

“I’m not expecting you to understand,” Adonis continued, “but you should know this is the only way I can do things. Besides, once I’ve branded a sword with my Question mark, it’ll only respond to me. It completely changes the intention of the sword’s spell.”

Adonis’s explanation only solidified Belle’s assumption. He couldn’t raise a sword on his own. And the cause for his resentment was something Belle couldn’t understand. It was something surrounded by a deep, terrifying darkness. Just like Bamboo, who devoured himself with his own fangs, it was in a place where nobody could reach—not even Belle, the first person he’d invited into Bamboo.

It made her incredibly frustrated thinking about that. It was the first time Belle had felt this way, and her intuition subtly told her that maybe this was how Gaff and Kitty felt about her. Either way, she seemed to have developed this emotion despite not having known Adonis for long.

“Looks like we made it in time,” Adonis said suddenly, pointing at a window that had appeared out of nowhere. “What Bamboo is seeing should be visible through here.”

Belle could see the Throne Room on the other side of the window. Bamboo must have been clinging to the ceiling to watch the proceedings, because his field of vision even overlooked the spectator seats. The lengthy prayer was long since over, and the king was making his divine proclamation, explaining the upcoming battle. Belle was baffled by how much time it was taking him to explain it. Did it really need to be this long?

“Tiziano, huh…?” Adonis whispered as he listened to the king’s abstruse explanation.

Belle thought the name sounded familiar, then remembered it belonged to one of the Arch-Solists. She asked Adonis why he’d

said it.

“They finally fell to the side of evil,” he answered casually.

Belle stared in surprise. That said, it wasn’t impossible for something like this to happen. On the contrary, falling from the side of good to evil was much easier than climbing up the other way. But what could have driven an Arch-Solist of the highest hierarchy to turn?

“Their sword was shattered, the result of their justice being put to the test… The opposite of what happened to me.”

Adonis spoke like he was muttering to himself, but he soon explained himself without Belle needing to ask him.

“Tiziano had a habit of finding lovers, both men and women, and forcing them to fight each other. Mermaids can become either gender, so they can be fickle like that, and Tiziano acted as if they were a god. Gaff wasn’t able to let that pass and eventually challenged Tiziano to a fight, shattering his sword. But that was bound to happen. Tiziano never expected someone as straitlaced as Gaff to challenge him. Ever since then, Tiziano has been missing, and it seems they finally fell to the other side. Driven by evil, they declared to take revenge on the side of the good.”

“What did you mean when you said they had their justice put to the test…?”

“There’s a way—only one way—of reclaiming a sword that’s been shattered.”

Belle’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“That’s something only Arch-Solists know about, so I can’t give you any more details. But the one thing I can say is that when it happens, the sword tests whoever holds it.”

“The sword *tests* them…?”

Adonis shrugged, as if to say he didn’t fully understand it, either.

“Then…what did you mean when you said it’s the opposite of what happened to you?”

Adonis peered at Belle’s face and slowly nodded.

“I’m originally from the outside.”

His expression made it clear he wasn’t going to say anything else on the matter, and he turned his eyes toward the window again.

Belle looked at his face for a moment, but then she heard her name being called and turned toward the window in surprise. Next, Adonis's name was called. He, however, remained perfectly still as the names of more Solists were called. Belle realized something was wrong—the number of Solists being selected was absurdly high.

The king went on and on, and he even began saying the names of people who weren't Solists. It was the first time Belle had seen the selection process take this long.

"The festive role-playing is about to begin…," Adonis said, his voice terribly grave. "You better brace yourself. This is the worst mission we could've been selected for."

He glared at the God Tree on the other side of the window with hostile, defiant eyes. It was a lot like the way Belle had looked at the tree when she'd demanded it acknowledge her existence.

## 6

*What is this?!* Belle couldn't help but ask herself in shock. She was in the middle of a rehearsal for the upcoming battle, learning how to fight as a part of a group.

"We fight by forming a Schwertmusik band," Adonis explained.

He was part of the same band as her, but right now she couldn't see him. All she could see were the Choreographer and the top-dog Solists forming the ranks alongside her. Belle felt incredibly ill at ease. She had no idea what to do in a situation like this.

"You there! Stop moving for no reason! Are you trying to cause trouble for everyone else?!" a voice scolded her.

Belle eyed the Choreographer with annoyance. He was a Cateyes man who raised his voice at every little imperfection, and he seemed particularly focused on Belle. This drew everyone else's attention—as well as probably some envy—but she had no idea what he wanted. Belle had thought she was keeping up with everyone else's movements and was even able to predict what the formation would do next, allowing her to move a step or two ahead. But that only seemed to annoy the Choreographer.

The other Solists seemed to take after his attitude and gave her cold glares. In their eyes, she had shown up out of nowhere and

arrived at Park, only to be treated like some kind of prodigy and as the strongest powerhouse in this band. To them, there was nothing funny about it. Most of them complained she'd only gotten in because she was in Gaff's good graces.

What's more, given her duel with Kir, they had reason to doubt whether she was, in fact, qualified to be a Solist. She had crushed his sword like a savage, and some argued that maybe Kir wasn't as strong as people claimed—despite the fact that it was people like them who'd chanted *Pashhur* at her while never having the courage to actually meet her in battle. It was well-known by now that her sword was incredibly powerful, but that had just become another source of slander against her.

None of this was Belle's concern, but she couldn't say she was unrelated to all of it, either. This was her second mission, after all, and if possible, she wanted to complete it without getting into any unnecessary fights.

*Has he even held a sword before?* Belle thought as she watched the Choreographer venomously castigate everyone around him. Every time he yelled, they all seemed to find it laughable—that was how fed up they were with him. It was only natural being ridiculed would result in rage.

"What's with that silly way you hold your blade, eh? Didn't anyone teach you how to hold a sword properly?"

Indeed, Belle's grip was unique and differed from the traditional technique. But the grip she used was specifically for holding Runding, a sword of absurd size, and the one who'd taught her this was the unknown yet irreplaceable man now lost from her memories.

"Am I to interpret what you just said as an insult directed at my Meister?" Belle said, cutting off the Choreographer.

Her rebuttal had all the weight of an iron bludgeon. Her tone had also naturally turned formal, the kind of vernacular Gaff considered "Park City speech." That, in its own way, showed just how angry Belle had become.

The color drained from the Choreographer's face. He realized that Belle's hand gripping her sword was directed squarely on him, as if to say that she'd test her "silly grip" on him if he wanted to criticize it. And she wasn't joking.

"N-no, not at all…"

The man seemed to have recalled that Belle's Meister was the renowned Enola, Sian Lablac. He stammered several apologies, and Belle's anger dissipated. Instead, she was left feeling like all of this was completely absurd.

"Let's take a break. Gather in your designated positions at the Yellow Hour. Dismissed!"

The Choreographer's words came out more as a scream than anything else, and all the other Solists quickly dispersed, looking relieved.

His red eyes reflected everything with perfect transparency, without any interpretation or sympathy. Neither magnifying nor reducing anything, those eyes offered whoever peered into them a perfect glimpse of themselves.

Sitting atop a small hill, Kitty the Nothing overlooked the rehearsal. His eyes were fixed on Belle, yet it didn't seem as if he was looking at anyone in particular. In fact, seeing him like that, it was doubtful he was paying any attention to the rehearsal at all. Maybe he was simply staring blankly at nothing, and his eyes just happened to be turned in that direction. He had all the expression of a stuffed doll.

Suddenly, his face moved, and he turned around to see a man standing there. Yet it felt less like he'd turned to face the man, and more like the man had appeared there when he'd happened to turn around.

"The scales will shift," said the man.

Kitty's red eyes said nothing, simply reflecting the man's face. He was a Cateyes, his eyes narrowed under the glow of the afternoon sun. Although he was no longer as young as he once was, his entire body still seemed bursting with spirit, and even in its scabbard, it was clear the sword sheathed at his waist was a well-nurtured piece of art.

"It is the harmony determined by Deus Ex Machina. The top dogs' orchestra has no chance of winning. The underdogs will once again throw themselves into needless battle. And the *Reason* that will call it all into question is still much too inexperienced."

The pipe in his mouth released a ring of smoke—but it soon vanished, for it was an illusion.

“Wandering prince of Denariland. Tonight, I wish to send a message.”

The man peered into Kitty’s red, mirrorlike eyes and passed him by, like he was greeting a familiar face he’d seen on the street. A few steps later, he turned around, having recalled something, but by then Kitty was nowhere to be seen.

The man smiled in satisfaction.

Left all alone, Belle stood on the spot, a bad taste in her mouth. All around her were the other members of the band whispering as they looked at Belle, as if they’d all conspired to isolate Belle on the training ground.

**You mustn’t comfort yourself by letting anger ferment.**

“I know that,” she told the Guidance in annoyance.

But then she felt someone tap her on the back.

“Hey there, featureless. I see you’re working hard.”

Turning around, she found Adonis smiling at her. Belle felt pathetic at how relieved she was to see him.

“Well, as you can see, I’ve got bad things happening to me already.”

Adonis smiled, amused.

“It looked like you gave it back twice as bad.”

“You were watching?”

He gave her a wry grin. “That guy was really trembling. You almost scared the eyes and ears off him. Almost made *him* featureless, too.”

“Tch, can you knock it off with the ‘featureless’ thing?”

Belle said that, but honestly being called featureless by Adonis didn’t feel bad. If anything, it made her happy. It felt like he was more casual about it than someone who pitied her for how she looked.

“Got it, Lablac.”

“Just call me Belle.”

“Little One. I shan’t call you featureless again,” Adonis said, imitating the king’s tone.

Somehow, he was able to make his voice sound like he was speaking with two mouths. Seeing his funny expression, Belle let out a carefree laugh.

As they talked, they crossed the training ground together and entered a tent. To an onlooker, it would appear like a pair of black sheep licking each other's wounds, but in truth, the two of them were the strongest members of the band.

"This place is such a huge contradiction…," Belle muttered as she sat on a bench.

"It's all complicated, too messy. It's clear there's nobody watching over it," said Adonis.

"What do you mean?" Belle asked.

"The God Tree. It holds us all in its grip and won't let go. What is God? Why do we obey that tree—no…God's word?"

Even Belle couldn't help but find Adonis's words blasphemous. If any priests had heard him say that, they'd have stripped him of his qualifications as a Solist. And in fact, there were priests from the Hall of Blades going about the rehearsal in their ivory garb serving as Pianists who accompanied the battle.

But Belle was mostly in agreement with him, except the suspicion she had was slightly different. In a country ruled over by the God Tree, becoming a Nomad meant slipping away from His control. Would God allow that? She recalled what Haggis had once told her. If God doesn't forgive, then who was this God, really? Did the one behind the king really acknowledge her? It was a question without an answer.

A hush settled over the pair for no particular reason. It wasn't an unpleasant silence, though, but one that allowed either of them to break it for whatever trivial reason or keep quiet if they so wished.

The distant hum of activity was pleasant to the ear. Belle felt like she could very well rest her head on Adonis's shoulder and doze off, and it wouldn't have felt uncomfortable. Given more time, had someone not called out for them, she might have done just that.

A hulking figure cast a shadow over the two of them. It was someone with a large, imposing body.

"Hmm… No need to introduce you two, I see."

Gaff brought a chair and sat across from them.

"You're always one step behind," Belle remarked.

It had been like this at On the Rocks, too. Maybe he was doing it on purpose, but whenever Belle seemed about to touch on a

sensitive subject, Gaff would show up out of nowhere.

“If you met him on your own, that’s for the best,” Gaff said, almost as if he was affirming her thoughts.

“Say, Gaff, are you really the one who arranged this band?” Adonis asked. It sounded like a complaint.

Gaff nodded, apparently understanding what he was getting at.

“Couldn’t you have done something about it?” Adonis asked.

“The Solists selected this time were too poorly balanced. And I don’t mean you two. I mean overall. I tried to assemble the best formations I could with what I had.”

Adonis shrugged.

“So you’re telling me to take my complaints to God or the king?”

“Exactly,” Gaff said flatly. Then he added, “There’s no reason for you to do anything reckless. The first band you’re both in will be followed by Kir’s second band, and I’ll be holding the final band in reserve. There’s no need for you two to go out of your way to beat Tiziano yourselves.”

This was unusually pessimistic for Gaff. It almost came across as him telling them to hold back. But his expression was serious.

“Don’t do anything reckless,” he repeated persistently.

“If that’s how you want to put it, I’ll just say this entire battle is reckless,” Adonis retorted teasingly. He wore his usual cold expression that seemed as if he was trying to read into the hearts of others.

“What are you going on about? …Gaff? Adonis?”

“Listen, Belle,” said Adonis. “This battle is going to take place in the Catacombs. They’re on the western side of Park—in other words, the perfect place for evil. That already puts our side at a major disadvantage. Just securing the entrance will take some savage fighting. What’s more, we only know of one entrance to the caves, while the underdogs know countless, and they also have a good grasp on the caves’ internal structure. If we just waltz in there unprepared, they’ll cut off our escape route and wipe us out in no time.”

Belle had previously heard Adonis’s explanation from the Choreographer. It was the reason they had multiple bands working together. Even now, while they were here rehearsing for

the battle to come, the vanguard band was fighting furiously to secure the entrance.

But Adonis wasn't finished.

"The Catacombs are seen as hallowed ground for the outsiders—the underdogs. Just like the castle is for top dogs. There's several underground lakes there, which serve as precious water reservoirs. That water is essential for healers, just like sacred ash is for us. The underdogs will put their lives on the line to defend those lakes. Do the top dogs understand that?"

Belle suddenly remembered that Adonis had told her he was an outsider. Halfway through his explanation, he looked at Gaff sternly, as if he'd already decided that this battle would end in a loss and Gaff was responsible for that.

"That's why I included you in the first band," Gaff replied calmly. "I need you to compensate for any friction among the top dogs. You should be able to…"

Adonis waved his hand, dismissing Gaff's words. "You think they're going to trust what I say?"

"They'll have to or else they'll lose, just like you claim. And your life's on the line here, just as theirs are."

Adonis kicked the ground bitterly. That much went without saying, but what was Gaff expecting him to do? The frustration was visible in his eyes. Belle hadn't known him for long, but this was the first time she'd seen Adonis display so much emotion, which made Belle realize how tough the coming battle would be.

Soon after, it was time to begin rehearsing again. Belle and Adonis got to their feet and left the tent as Gaff watched on.

"The scales will tilt in a major way…," he murmured, looking up at the castle. The seat of God. That perfect miniature garden.

The sun silently began to sink beneath the horizon. As darkness settled over the training ground, the Solists started going home. Everyone's expressions were grave—they were two days away from the decisive battle.

As the training ground stood empty, a single white shadow appeared there.

"My word. 'Wandering prince,' he called me," Kitty the All whispered cynically as he stretched. He rummaged for his golden

pocket watch with a stern expression, only to recall he no longer had it and scratch his head sheepishly.

“I’ll just have to be patient until the threads of fate bring it back to me. It’s just far too different in style from an O’crock.”

His expression became very childish, and he tugged on his long ears. It was then that another shadow approached Kitty from behind. It made no attempt to muffle its footsteps, which implied it wasn’t trying to sneak up on him. Or perhaps even those footsteps were an illusion.

Kitty had sensed the presence without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

“Your message was much appreciated.”

It was only then that Kitty finally turned around. There stood the Cateyes man who’d appeared before the Nothing earlier that day, standing a good distance away from Kitty.

“Oh-ho, I’d expect nothing less…,” Kitty said in admiration.

The man didn’t come any closer, standing right in front of his barrier. The formula Kitty had set hadn’t even shown its calculation yet. He was dealing with a sharp, observant fellow—and to show that he hadn’t just stopped there by coincidence, the man traced the outline of the barrier with his foot.

“I bear you no ill will, wandering prince. I come to you as the one who raised the Reason, to ask you, the one who will lead the Reason away, your intentions,” the man said, his voice casual but revealing no weaknesses. He was detestably skilled.

“What do you mean by ‘intentions,’ Schwertland’s own wandering prince?” Kitty asked back.

The man smiled indomitably. “I have nowhere left to wander anymore. Sadly.” He looked up to the castle and blew out a puff of illusory smoke.

“Are you saying this country should come to an end?” Kitty said. “I wouldn’t expect that from one who has wandered as far as my land in pursuit of this world’s enigmas with naught but tenacity. In fact, I’d daresay that was where you truly started to wander.”

“Heh-heh. As always, you are good at speaking of hope. Perhaps that’s why you’re the only one who honored the agreement and came here to lead the Reason away, good prince.”

“I am, at least for the time being. However, what will happen once she does leave this country, even I cannot say.”

“But before that happens, she still must leave. Which means questioning this country’s Reason.”

“So Deus Ex Machina really is…”

The man nodded.

“My purpose in coming here was to observe and gauge Reason… Taking her away only comes after that,” Kitty said, his voice low.

“*Gauge* her?”

“If she is an evil beyond our power to control, I am to kill her and all who know of her,” Kitty answered flatly, his voice mechanical and emotionless.

“Hmm… Perhaps that conclusion would be preferable to you, the All.”

“Not necessarily,” Kitty said with a smile, all coldness from a moment ago gone. He placed his hands on his waist and looked up at the castle. “A divine symphony of steel and blood… Am I correct in thinking this is the resistance of the gods?”

“Indeed. And God will go to all manner of measures to try to push Reason away.”

“Measures? Such as?”

“Who’s to say…? It may be the God of my homeland, but only my brother the king knows his thoughts… Or perhaps not even my brother does. All I know is that the coming battle will be terribly dangerous. Dangerous enough to nip Reason in the bud.”

“I won’t let that happen. That’s what you came here to ask of me, yes?”

The man returned his eyes to Kitty for the first time and nodded.

“Let me ask you one thing, then,” Kitty said, his eyes on the man. “Why don’t you go yourself?”

His eyes glowed in a way they didn’t when he was the Nothing, as if reading the thoughts of the one they reflected and even peering into their very soul. The man remained perfectly still, letting those red eyes settle on him.

“Your curse, is it…?” Kitty whispered in understanding. “Very well. Let me ask one more question, so that I may gauge you also. What is that girl to you?”

The man’s eyes narrowed, staring into the distance.

“She is, to me, a raven flower blooming from my cadaver when I died upon the stage. One that will carry the dead husk of my words to heights I could never reach.”

He turned his back to Kitty, let out a small puff of illusory smoke, and said in a whisper:

“She’s my hope.”

## 7

The first band set off for the battlefield escorted by a grand fanfare. As they marched, other Solists, Farm Symphonists, and top-dog residents surrounded them to see them off in celebration, throwing ribbons, confetti, and colorful flags, and playing songs calling for their good fortune in battle. It was so boisterous that other Solists had to be dispatched to ensure no one got in the band’s way.

A giant object used for transport was carried proudly at the head of the band, drawing the attention of all who looked upon it with its size and majesty. This was a stemgrass—a species of turtle flower that had been selectively bred to be used as large, living shrines. Its shell had been lavishly decorated, and it served to demonstrate the band’s might as they slowly carried it toward the battlefield.

Belle had been allowed to ride on the shell, and she looked down upon the crowd around her. Like everyone else, she sat with her back straight and smiled wordlessly at the people cheering them on, something Belle considered herself an expert at. Yet this time, she’d been ordered to act this way.

And yet, in truth, she was ill at ease here. She felt out of place and, quite honestly, was filled with doubt. Her excitement just barely won over those emotions, though, because Adonis was sitting next to her. Had it not been for him, she wouldn’t have been able to keep herself from fleeing.

She was dressed in a uniform made by a Designer especially for the battle. Each band had a different-colored uniform, and the first band that included Belle wore the color of camellias. At a glance, their bright-crimson uniforms looked like they offered no defense, however, the vital areas were made of fabric woven

from threads of water steel, which was both light and sturdy. This made it safer than wearing bulky armor. It was a functional outfit with exceptional design that made its wearer vividly stand out, and it perfectly fit her body to make it easy to move around in.

But that was exactly what she didn't like about it. Belle felt like it accentuated her developing bosom, which made her very embarrassed and self-conscious. It also highlighted her waist and legs, and she couldn't help but feel that everyone was staring at them.

In truth, the Mermaid who'd designed the uniform had put all their techniques and taste into the design with the intention of drawing out the charm of whoever wore it, be they man or woman, young or old. After all, this was the job of a Designer.

"So you're wearing the uniform, too," Adonis had said just before they left.

He was clad in the same crimson outfit and looked stunned as he made that comment to Belle. Naturally, it had annoyed her, but then…

"All I wanted to say was that it suits you…"

…he'd instantly corrected himself in a surprising display of tactfulness.

*He's really bad at giving out compliments, isn't he?*

But that just went to show how good Belle looked in the outfit. It was like the Designer had made it specifically for her, and her lack of racial traits meant there was nothing to get in the way, allowing the outfit to come together undisturbed.

Adonis, meanwhile, looked quite handsome in it. He was by no means burly, but he had a lean, muscular, supple form that gave off an impression of strength all the same. His muscles looked like they could bend no matter how much you pushed them, never breaking, and then bounce back once you took your hand away. His red bandanna also accentuated his silver fur and the camellia color of his uniform.

"What a crowd, though," Belle had whispered to Adonis as he stood beside her. They weren't allowed to talk privately during the march.

"You won't be able to say that for long," Adonis muttered, looking at the crowd with unenthusiastic eyes.

Glancing at him, Belle suddenly recalled how she'd taken off her clothes in front of all the onlookers when she'd fought the negroni, and the memory left her oddly embarrassed.

*I can't go around doing that again anymore.*

She somehow felt like that was a pity.

Belle had gotten used to the uniform in no time at all. When she first heard about it, she'd hated the idea of everyone being the same color, but the designer had fit the uniform for every individual member while still making sure they all looked united. It was that level of attention to detail that had made Belle want to try it on.

*A uniform, an outfit… Such a little thing can make quite a difference…*

Suddenly, Belle heard a voice calling out to her from the crowd. Looking down, she saw the Farm Symphonists waving up to her. Belle was shocked, but thinking back, she had made quite the impression when she'd charged in to save them from the underdog attack with Runding in hand. Things like that didn't happen often. What's more, they knew she'd lived with them when she was little, so it made sense they would go out of their way to cheer for her.

Belle bashfully waved back.

*Maybe Schwertmusik isn't so bad…*, she thought.

At times, Schwertmusik gave Belle a sense of fulfillment. *At times.*

Halfway through the march, she especially became aware of how different her peers were even among themselves. Including Belle, there were eight Solists sitting atop the stemgrass: the band Conductor, a Director, a Libretto, a Pianist, and four Solists. With the exception of Adonis, all these other core members of the band enraged and frustrated Belle and made her pity them for their stupidity.

And one Solist was absolutely more infuriating than the rest. A large, burly Minotaurus man by the name of Gordon.

"That's one impressive sword," Gordon had said as he approached Belle.

On the surface his words sounded like praise, but there was clear scorn behind them. With her inherent sensitivity, Belle

could pick up on that keenly. It made her want to raise her brows and display her dislike of him more openly, but she held the urge back. She didn't want to spoil the mood on their march, and since he was part of her band, she remained patient.

But Gordon let out a huff through his nostrils.

"Guess the reason you're here is because of that sword," he said suddenly, then nodded as if to praise the accuracy of his own appraisal.

The fact that he was riding the stemgrass gave an indication of how experienced he was and how many hardships he'd made it through to get to where he was. It was only natural he'd look at Belle like that; she was a relative novice. But of course, that sort of logic didn't fly with her. Belle was immediately filled with rage, and she tamped it down.

"Lemme see it."

Taking the man's haughty attitude in stride, she took off Runding's sword bag and showed him the blade. Gordon instantly grimaced, making it clear he thought it was a filthy sword. And indeed, in its normal state, Runding's surface looked aged and rough. But that was only its outside appearance. Once the power it contained was released, it could easily cleave through the shell of a goblet flower, harder than any steel.

"Lemme hold it."

It wasn't a request, but an order. Without waiting for Belle's response, Gordon reached for the sword's grip. Belle felt an explosion of anger in her stomach, but she kept her outrage contained.

The instant change in Gordon's expression immediately extinguished Belle's anger.

His eyes widened in shock at the sheer weight of the sword as he stubbornly kept trying to lift it with his right hand. Minotaurus took pride in their strength, and his ego wouldn't allow him to lose in that field. Everyone riding the shell watched Gordon try to pick up the sword, gritting his teeth as his face went red with effort. He let out a groan, finally holding up the sword, but that was all he could manage. The next second he dropped it, basically throwing it away, and it hit the shell with a dull thud.

It was a terrible way to treat a sword, one that didn't befit a Solist. Belle hurriedly retrieved Runding, silently apologizing to it.

*Damn it. I'm sorry; having a guy like that touch you must have felt nasty.*

She looked away from Gordon, who still stood there breathing heavily, and put the sword back on her back. But then a woman's voice spoke up, helping Gordon save face.

"Oh, you're so impressive, Gordon. Picking up the sword that heavy even when you don't know how to handle it."

She implied that lifting Runding required some kind of special technique and that otherwise doing so was nigh impossible. This was an obvious attempt to both clear Gordon's name and insult Belle.

"It just goes to show how talented your Enola was."

It was the Director, a woman named Benedictine. She was a beautiful mermaid with spectacular fin ears and shiny lilac hair and eyes. The silver scale bones extending from her elbows shone in the sun. At first glance, she looked like a silent, cold beauty, but she clearly displayed her race's propensity for discrimination and prejudice, eying Belle with hostility.

Gordon wrapped an arm around Benedictine's curvy waist. Apparently, they were in a relationship. They were an unpleasant couple.

"You got that right. Why don't I tell you about what sort of training I did to pass the time?"

Benedictine instantly agreed, calling it a wonderful idea.

"Are you serious…?"

Belle was shocked. The more famous an Enola was, the more guarded the secrets of their training were. That had been part of the reason Belle had been stripped of her memories of her Meister. If the student didn't remember how the lessons were taught, there was no risk of the secrets being leaked. That was how closely kept an Enola's training was, and for the student, it made memories of their tutelage precious.

Yet this man had told them he'd share that information just to pass the time. Belle was too baffled to be angry.

"Oh, what a dull child. Do you really think your famous Enola is someone you can hog all to yourself?"

They kept making fun of her. They praised her sword and her Meister, all the while constantly insulting Belle. Calling it pretentious would be an understatement.

*I'm starting to run out of patience…*

But just then, as if they'd heard Belle's thoughts, someone clapped their hands and spoke up.

"Everyone, we are approaching the caves. Cease your chatter and focus."

It was the band's Conductor, a middle-aged Mauti called Campari. He had originally been a Choreographer, but he'd turned to commanding instead, and Belle knew nothing about his sword. He was instead relied upon for his tactical skill from his past role as Choreographer.

He looked around the group and said, "Don't cause any trouble, Lablac."

Belle was taken aback by this sudden chiding and let out an absent-minded "Uh."

"You don't know how to work as part of a band, so let me warn you: Reckless actions are strictly forbidden. Breaking formation could result in you instantly being expelled from the band."

It looked like he was singling her out, but there was a reason for it. Campari had been the Conductor for the first band that had gone to fight during the underdog raid, where Belle had charged ahead without permission and defeated many of the enemy Solists herself. That had embarrassed Campari publicly. Belle hadn't been thinking about the band at all when she'd done that, but in his eyes, her actions had seemed terribly conceited. So now he only saw her as a young, feckless fool who rushed off into danger.

"Um… I'll be careful."

Campari glared at her for her vague answer but then returned to explaining their formation. Halfway through his overlong lecture, someone whispered to her.

"Don't let them get to you. Honestly, it must be hard, all those horrible things they say about you."

The voice belonged to a young Cateyes man named Perrier, one of the Solists. He carried a large sword, contrasting his weak-looking appearance. Belle could tell he took pride in his weapon, as it was visibly impressive even sitting in its sheath.

“It doesn’t bother me,” Belle said as she eyed his broadsword.

“Hmm, if you say so. Still, they’re pretty awful. They’re always like that. Once they find someone pitiful, they keep teasing them. Cowards, if you ask me.”

*“Pitiful”…?*

That was enough to show Belle how this man saw her.

“Those guys are just trying to make themselves feel better by bullying other people. But you’re doing your best here, too, you know? You put in so much work to finally get up to the same level as everyone else, yet no one understands you.”

Belle stared at him, stunned, but Perrier just continued his careless tirade.

*If anyone here doesn’t understand me, it’s you!* Belle very nearly exclaimed out loud. *Talking about me like I’m some kind of crippled charity case…*

And even if she was, the way he was talking about her wouldn’t be acceptable. All he was doing was pitying other people to make himself feel better. It was way worse than Gordon and Benedictine because Perrier believed he was talking out of the kindness of his heart. So as well as outrage, it also made Belle feel miserable.

Perrier kept droning on and on, claiming he was the only one in the band treating Belle like she was normal. *Normal?* What did he mean by *normal*? Belle was starting to seethe.

*Yeah, that’s right, asshole. I’m a malformed savage who can’t be normal like the rest of you*, she cursed in her thoughts.

Perrier finally noticed Belle was sullenly refusing to meet his gaze and looked at her in amazement.

“You must have gone through a lot of pain,” he said, acting as if everything made sense to him now.

Belle felt her skin crawl. She wanted to kick him off the shell. It was hard to tell, but she got the subtle hint that Perrier felt a certain attachment to her and was trying to cozy up. She couldn’t believe how deluded he was.

Belle was seconds away from telling him to go kiss himself in the mirror, when—

“What are you saying?! You think I’ll just agree to that?!” Gordon howled.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have time to ask for your wishes… Uh, then, how…?”

The person Gordon had yelled at was a young Sheepeyes man whose shoulders drooped feebly. His name was Guinness, the Libretto of the band. He had spiral horns peeking out from his golden curls, and he looked both very young and incredibly tired.

“Are you stupid? That goes without saying. How can you put me in the back? I’ll just end up cutting the Solists in front of me if you do that. Put me in the front. You think so, too, right, Perrier?”

Apparently, they were arguing over the battle formation. Gordon turned toward a confused Perrier, who simply nodded in blind agreement.

“Okay, well, I’ll just adjust the formation… Um, I’m moving you to the front…”

Guinness frowned as he ran his pen across the paper, bothered at having to revise the plan right before they entered the caves. He diffidently looked around everyone else.

“No complaints here…,” Belle said casually, and Guinness’s expression turned to one of relief.

Some of the Solists offered their own changes to the plan, combining to form such an awkward script that made it hard to tell who’d written it in the first place. The fact that Guinness was able to finish it in such a short time with no inconsistencies just went to show how skilled he was; however, the exhausted way he stared out into space and tried to keep everyone satisfied made him look miserable, passive, and defeated.

“He’s pitiful, too,” Perrier said, glancing at Guinness.

Fed up, Belle asked, “You’re sure you don’t want to change something else? It’s not too late to put in your order.”

She was talking about revising the script, but Belle’s words dripped with mockery. Perrier had stationed himself at the front line, just behind Gordon. That meant Gordon would likely get most of the glory, at the expense of Belle on the left flank, Adonis on the right flank, and even the Conductor, who’d been pushed to the back row. All these corrections greatly underestimated the enemy, and the idea of taking part in that had left Belle feeling dejected.

“Don’t worry. Unlike him, I’ve got this.”

Perrier held up his sword, which was far too big for him and gave the impression he was barely able to swing the thing. And no wonder…

“It’s my father’s sword.”

Belle understood everything upon hearing that. A sword with many accomplishments to its name weighed heavily on the scales, so as long as someone had the sword, even if they didn’t do much work, they’d be able to get a good sum of denari coins as their pay.

From what Belle had heard, this idea wasn’t unique to Perrier; many of the Solists who hadn’t gotten to ride the stemgrass and members of their band’s Chorus were going to battle wielding long-lived, family-heirloom swords.

And in their eyes, it made perfect sense. Why raise your own sword when you already had a perfectly good one that’s well raised? But more surprising still…

“Honestly, I never wanted to become a Solist,” Perrier said indifferently.

Apparently, he’d only done it because it was family tradition. Still, so long as he followed the path laid out before him, he had a steady income of denari and a higher social standing than most Solists. He’d be well regarded no matter what he did—and no matter how *badly* he did.

With this, it became very clear to Belle why people called Adonis the Sword Thief. To some, losing their sword was the same as losing the source of money. But listening to him was getting on Belle’s nerves, and she couldn’t stand it much longer.

The cave’s entrance was coming into view, and Belle prayed for them to get there already. She was sick and tired of being on the shell, and her mood would probably improve once the fighting started. Or at least, she hoped it would.

But then a voice spoke up, dashing her hopes.

“How thoughtless. What were you doing all this time?”

For a second, Belle couldn’t tell who was speaking—and the fact that everyone immediately went quiet made it even harder to determine.

“And you hope to gain glory like this? Impossible. At least focus on carrying out your duties, so I won’t need to waste my time reporting you.”

The word *report* clarified who the speaker was—their Pianist, a priest wearing an ivory mask. Belle hadn't expected him to speak. Apparently, his name was Cassis, and his role was to relay the outcome of the band's battle to the king in detail.

To that end, he would have to stay at the very back of the battle, even behind the Conductor, who simply watched the fighting unfold and never took part in it. It was a bad job to do, but even so, Belle thought he shouldn't have to be extra unpleasant with his attitude. Sadly, Cassis didn't know where to stop with his scathing advice.

"Now, you listen to me. Adapting to the situation is something you can only do when you're well organized and prepared. If you try to overuse it, you'll end up losing battles you could have won. Not thinking things through is a grave sin."

And so he droned on and on. His advice wasn't bad on its own, but what was he expecting them do? All he'd done was drag down the band's morale.

*It's not like it'll be him fighting out there… What, is he in love with the sound of his own voice or something?*

The other members of the band felt the same way, apparently. They were intent on having one person as a scapegoat who would agree with him so the others would be spared. And in this case, that turned out to be Guinness the Libretto. Left to take the brunt of Cassis's sermons, he nodded blindly, looking all the more tired.

*What was that…?*

Belle sighed. She looked at Adonis, who was staring out into the distance with a complicated expression. Come to think of it, he'd been very quiet the entire time. No matter how much that annoying couple, Gordon and Benedictine, had tried to provoke him, he hadn't fallen for it and stuck to ignoring them, lost in thought.

"Adonis?" Belle called out to him, and he finally let out a breath. His lips formed a cynical smile.

"I give up."

Belle instantly understood he was talking about his hang-ups. No one here understood what this battle would be like better than Adonis. He wasn't trying to act like the priest Cassis, either, looking on from afar as he criticized everyone around him.

Instead, it seemed like he'd come up with a number of concrete plans to address his concerns.

However, he couldn't share them with the others. And it was clear that even if he did, no one would listen to him in this situation. With so much envy and deceit bubbling under the surface, carelessly speaking now could make it all boil over into a conflict that would tear their band apart.

"It's a problem," Belle said with a bitter smile.

In truth, Belle would have preferred to let things boil over. It would probably be better than charging into battle with their relations so shaky, and if nothing else, it would make her feel better. But just as she was about to say that—

"Finally. We're here," Adonis said in annoyance.

And with that, the first band arrived at the battlefield.

The place was like a fortress. A huge number of Solists surrounded the entrance to the caves, setting up turrets and fortifications, while grammar mages covered the ground in spells. It was an impregnable barrier, indeed.

*There's enough people here to fill a town…*

Climbing down from the stemgrass shell, Belle looked around the area, and she locked eyes with the Solists from the vanguard band who were building the fortifications. She wanted to smile and say a good word about their efforts, but she was too stunned.

Everyone was glaring at her like they were looking at something foreign—as if their nemesis had appeared right in front of them. Runding let out a soft howl, an aura of hostility rising from the blade. Whatever made the people act this way must have stemmed from the battle they'd fought to secure the entrance. Days of repeated combat must have worn down their emotions.

*But if that's the case, why is the place in such good shape…?*

There were no marks or signs of fighting in the area. In fact, the place looked so peaceful that Campari the Conductor was telling them to take a rest before entering the caves.

*No, wait…*

Belle keenly sensed the stench in the air. It smelled intensely of blood. It wasn't so much a smell as it was a miasma, though, as if blood had pooled in the very air, lingering like a presence. It was

the remains of a vicious battle, an invisible cadaver constantly spreading its stench.

*They washed the blood away to hide it…*

They had likely been instructed to do so by the castle. Belle assumed that the battle had been fierce, defying imagination, with who knows how many casualties on both sides—yet the place was almost unnaturally sterile.

Realizing that, the Solists' expressions left her shocked all over again. Everyone else from the fortress had also gathered there, staring fixedly at Belle's band. Their faces revealed pains of preparing backstage, and the low-ranking Solists who didn't have pedigree on their side, unlike Perrier and his ilk, had the kind of dry hatred in their eyes only seen in the oppressed. Yet Belle also picked up on something else: a hint of pity. And it was that emotion that shocked her so much.

*How does that make sense?!* Belle screamed to herself, and indeed, a raspy breath escaped her lips.

All of a sudden, this camellia uniform felt like it was cursed, because the reason the other Solists pitied them was clear. Even after all this fighting, they had no hope of victory. The reason they had established this clean, sterilized stage for the first band was so there would be room to pile up the next wave of corpses.

Their task of setting the stage was finished. No matter how many of their allies got hurt or killed, they had survived. And having survived, they were now watching a new band, the source of their pain, ascend to the stage where they would be slaughtered.

Belle sensed this all in the space of a second. And though Runding's reaction reinforced that impression, Belle's intuition was almost as accurate as mind reading.

None of the other band members seemed to notice this—except for one.

*Adonis…*

He was the only person she could count on.

"You okay? You look pale."

Sure enough, he was the first to notice the change in Belle's expression. Had that nasty couple seen it, they no doubt would have mistakenly assumed she lost her nerve or something similar.

She unconsciously reached out and took Adonis's hard, gloved hand.

"This isn't a joke… It's awful… I can't help but feel depressed."

Those few words were enough to communicate everything to him.

"No, it *is* a joke; a nasty one. A tasteless joke God is making at our expense." His lips curled in his usual sarcastic smirk. "So at this point, we just have to beat Him down laughing. We'll survive and laugh at Him for trying."

He squeezed Belle's hand back.

## 8

The Schwertmusik began.

Hands gripped swords, steel clanged, footsteps rumbled, spells were chanted, shields were raised, and voices sang valiantly. Gordon stood at the front, leading Perrier and the other mid-rank Solists into the cave under Campari's direction. The two flanks followed, maintaining formation.

They threw flamestones, producing floating fire, and the Chorus set up barriers. Their song became supportive recital magic that maintained the fire shields hanging in the air and drove back the darkness of the cave.

Under the command of Director Benedictine, they set up visual barriers between the flames, controlling the fire to further push away the dark. Their song echoed louder through the cavern.

They ran across the shallow water at their feet using a three-layered spell formed by Benedictine that controlled fire, light, and water. The barrier changed shape freely as the band moved, which showed how skilled she was at controlling it.

However, Belle soon noticed that the barrier was primarily focused on only one section of the band, stretching out over the front and almost completely ignoring the two flanks. In other words, it prioritized Gordon, as well as the Conductor, the Director herself, and the Libretto, providing no protection to the Chorus supporting them from the back, either.

*Is this really going to work…?*

They were going deeper into the caves due to the barrier's shape, and Belle was starting to fear that before long they'd be

cut off from the Chorus, making it harder to get in touch with the people outside the cave. Campari, meanwhile, swung the short sword he used as a baton and ordered them to continue their march inside. It wasn't a sword for combat, but one only meant to be placed on the scales to earn coins. Seeing it flash in the darkness, Belle felt it was incredibly unreliable.

The band suddenly stopped in its tracks. The front line seemed to have run into a trap. No one was injured, but Gordon's loud complaining mingled with the Chorus's song, making it incredibly loud.

But his voice soon became alarmed and tense. Campari deployed the two flanks to help support the front line. At least in that, he was quick to react. Belle moved left alongside a few mid-rank Solists, and then she saw it—a massive insect flower. It had multiple legs, spreading out like a cave branching off into a labyrinth, and its entire body was covered in thick hair. It clicked its fangs at them menacingly, and even those fangs were coated in fine hairs.

Gordon howled, swinging his ax at the snarling insect.

*Don't…!*

Belle tried to call out, but she couldn't make it in time. How hadn't he noticed? Did he not know? The insect's stomach was oddly inflated, and despite not having a nest here, it wasn't moving—because it had already planted its roots. The flower bloomed, its ferocious petals opening at once.

*No good!*

Belle reflexively swung Runding horizontally, stopping the Solists behind her in their tracks. She'd retreat if she could, but their command wouldn't allow it. Everything was moving sluggishly, as if they were in the water.

Gordon's ax noisily crushed the insect's head, sending pieces of broken fangs flying every which way. The insect died on the spot, but that only made things worse. Gordon stepped over the insect's corpse with a victorious smile and ordered the rest of them to follow his lead.

"Get away from it, you idiot!" Belle couldn't stop herself from calling out.

The first to respond to her voice was Adonis. Gordon, meanwhile, seemed outraged at being called an idiot, but then

went pale with terror. Countless spiders emerged—their mother flower's death had unleashed countless seeds, which had hatched. They tore through the spider mother's stomach with their black fangs, spilling out into the cavern. Filled with unbelievable hunger, the newborns began consuming everything alive around them, their mother included.

Therein lay the trap—what they had initially fallen for was just a diversion. And worse yet, this trap was a diversion for *another* one.

*I have to do something…*

The enemy was trying to isolate their band by cutting off their contact with those at the back. Campari had probably picked up on that, but with the front line stretched so far forward, out of formation, his orders couldn't reach them in time.

The front line collapsed in a matter of seconds. Though they were only the size of pops, the spider flowers rushed Gordon and the rest of the band, putting the Solists in a state of frightened frenzy. It was clear that none of them knew anything about these insect flowers.

But despite all that, the band didn't stop. They were trying to continue their advance, but with the barrier focused around the front, they remained pinned down, unable to either advance or pull back. While they were stuck in place, the darkness began closing in on the band, as if it intended to swallow them.

Belle no longer trusted the barrier for protection. Others were being sacrificed like pawns, burned away in fire along with the barrier to exterminate the insects. Belle gritted her teeth and raced deeper into the cave, into the gloom lying behind the crawling spiders. There, she finally stopped in her tracks.

They didn't need her help with these insects anyway. If the band only calmed down, they'd see the spider flowers weren't a threat. Belle thought they could have still pulled themselves back together and regrouped—but that idea was currently being crushed under the hammer of panic and fear. They still had a chance.

The lights were starting to go out. One by one, the light barriers set by the band were being extinguished, leaving voids of darkness in their wake. The ones in charge of their illumination were systematically being killed. Their foe was focusing their

attack on the rear, as expected, and the fact that Belle hadn't run into a single enemy even at the very front of the line was proof of that.

Another light went out. Nothing was scarier than the dark here. The song had turned to screams, and the sound of clanging swords was audible in the distance. Belle got chills from how precise their enemy was.

Some people tried to run to the back row, but there was nothing they could do. The orders flying around simply confused everyone further, and staying clear of the attack on the band's barriers was all they could manage.

*What is this? What's going on? Can something this brutal happen? I can't even manage a single swing of my sword. We're losing so easily…!*

More lights went out. That would only make more people succumb to terror and forget the reason they carried their swords.

And yet, a light remained. The Solists trapped in the back surged forward, and although this was exactly what the enemy wanted, their ferocious charge allowed them to avoid being routed. With this, the front line, both flanks, central body, and back line all joined together as one, dispelling the darkness around them and sweeping away the enemy's blades.

But then—

*What…?*

The moment the enemy started falling back, Belle felt Runding make a strange howl. Through that growl, Belle realized someone was watching her, their eyes filled with such cold malice that a shiver ran down her spine.

*Is this Tiziano…?*

But she couldn't see anyone. As she deflected the enemy's swords, crushing them with her own, Belle tried to sense the presence with every fiber of her being. Runding's howls grew louder. Danger was approaching, but she couldn't grasp what it was. As the band was gradually regaining its footing, Belle only felt the alarm in her heart intensify.

It was then that she noticed something cold touching her ankles. She tried to pull her legs away out of reflex, and a few things all happened at once.

“What’s that?!” Benedictine shouted, controlling the three-layered barrier.

“Aaagh!” Gordon let out an agonized howl.

“It’s water! Watch your footing!” Realizing what was happening, Adonis forced the right flank to withdraw, and Belle followed his example.

Belle’s sense of danger had come from the water. It gradually pooled at their feet, and before they knew it, they were in it up to their ankles. Belle thought it must have been produced by Benedictine’s barrier, but she was immediately forced to reassess the situation. Even Benedictine herself seemed alarmed.

Gordon’s arm sprouted out of the ground. He was floundering, trying to get out, but to no avail. He sank, swallowed up by the water. A pool of water that was only a finger’s length deep was swallowing up the Solists from the front line.

“This isn’t a barrier! It’s consuming magic! Get away! Get away from it!” someone shouted. Belle thought it must have been Adonis.

She saw something burst out of the water, as if responding to his voice. It was a single warped, twisted, serrated blade.

Seeing that sword emerge from the gloom made Belle shudder. Runding’s howls were directed at that weapon, accurately gauging the danger it posed. The moment it appeared, the sword began moving rapidly toward the center of the band. No one seemed to notice it streak toward them, and if anyone did, it was only when they were slashed from below and sent sinking into the water.

Belle tried to shout out a warning, but all the noise drowned out her voice. The enemy took advantage of the chaos to rush them, like darkness trying to snuff out a single ray of light.

Campari was screaming, his voice so high-pitched it no longer sounded like he was saying words. And then, all of a sudden, his screams were cut off, like a thread snapping. His arm trembled violently, and his short sword that had likely never cut an enemy glinted in the darkness like a voiceless cry. Guinness, who’d been standing by his side, screamed in his stead.

The twisted, oddly curved sword dug itself into Campari’s back. It only took a moment for it to run him all the way through, and

the Conductor fell into the puddle of water, swallowed up in its depths.

With that, everyone fell into complete panic.

## 9

Belle was all alone. She had no idea where she'd run off to, and as she ran, the routed members of the band had vanished into the darkness one by one. Still, she gritted her teeth and continued to swing her sword, and before she knew it, there were no enemies in sight anymore. For that matter, there were no allies, either.

She was in a dimly lit corridor. Glowstone ore glimmered like starlight in the walls, and Belle leaned against them and caught her breath. Her hands gripped her sword tight as the pale glow shone on her crimson uniform, light and darkness cast in equal measure over her body. In that very moment, she stood at the brink where she would either be dragged into the darkness or remain in the light.

*I've got this bitter taste in my mouth…*

Could it have turned out another way? Could she have done anything differently? The more she asked herself those questions, the more she recalled how deftly the enemy had dispatched them, using multiple layers of traps to target their back line and get them in position to striking at their center. The whole time, Campari's command had only ended up causing them to walk straight into their enemy's plans, making all the members of the band dance to their tune.

They were being toyed with, like a group of helpless children trying to fight adults.

Belle grimly scanned the darkness around her.

*Tiziano…*

The sight of that twisted, ominous sword was burned into her thoughts. Belle believed the wielder of that blade must be the leader of the evil Solists, who had decided to deliver the final blow themselves.

If Tiziano truly was that skilled as a Conductor, they would try to cut down their scattered enemies one by one to keep them from revealing their tactics to the next band that would enter the caves. Runding's howling also conveyed Tiziano's intense desire

to take revenge on the just Solists. This battle was by no means over.

Belle slowly swallowed the bitter lump in her throat. Her sword changed rapidly, taking on its lily-white, majestic form that could tear through the darkness.

“I feel like you might be able to cut through things now…”

Belle stepped away from the wall and silently started walking down the dark path, unsure of where it would lead.

*Well, I just ran into someone unpleasant…*

Belle had almost said this out loud when she ran into Benedictine, the Mermaid woman who served as the band’s Director. She looked terrible. Belle could see an intense mixture of horror and anger painted all across her face.

If her horror managed to win over her anger, she would turn her back on the enemy and run, which in this situation was tantamount to suicide. What she needed was to hold on to her anger, even if she forced herself to, so she could stave off the fear, choose to fight rather than flee, and keep death at bay. In fact, Benedictine’s anger and bloodlust seemed to have been honed to sharp points, emanating in all directions like blades of ice.

*She’s in a bad state…*

What’s more, her emotional state was terribly fragile. Belle couldn’t tell exactly what Benedictine was thinking, but she was sure of that. And since they were both women, this only seemed to intensify her dislike of Belle. Had she been a man, maybe Belle would have been able to soothe her somewhat.

“Uh, hey,” Belle called out brusquely as she approached.

Benedictine immediately plucked the string of her bow. She didn’t seem keen on thinking too much about who was talking to her, but Belle was at least partially at fault for not calling her name.

The powerful water-steel bowstring produced a deadly tune. Benedictine’s bow didn’t fire arrows, but bullet-like projectiles. The bullets were water crystals that could fit in the palm of a hand, which burst when shot into its target’s body, tearing up their insides. It may have only been water, but it served as a medium for offensive magic unique to Mermaids, which greatly intensified its efficacy as a weapon.

It was, without a doubt, a lethal blow, but Belle blocked it head-on by slashing through the bullet, and the water crystal dispersed in midair. This also prevented Benedictine's backup tactic of using the water as a catalyst to form a barrier around her opponent.

The sword stopped right in front of Benedictine. The tip was still a short distance away from her, but its power exceeded physical distance, shaking an opponent's heart. What's more, Belle had swung down her sword and cut the bullet in half faster than it could travel—Benedictine had never seen anything like it.

"You monster…!" Benedictine froze up and spat out in anger, but honestly, Belle couldn't blame her.

"…Hey, can't you stop that? We're both on the same side," Belle said, casually lifting her blade away.

"What's your problem?! The way you called out to me, it's like asking me to kill you!" Benedictine cried out, shouldering her bow.

Her sarcastic, offensive attitude made Belle momentarily consider cutting her down anyway.

"Why did this have to happen to me?! What were *you* doing?! You didn't even try to save Gordon! Is holding your allies back all you're good for?!"

She was running her mouth incoherently, almost like if she didn't bluster about something she wouldn't ever calm down. But listening to it was unbearable, and Belle felt that bitterness fill her mouth again.

They moved down the corridor, unsure of where they were going, how many of their allies were still alive, or where they would find any that were. Benedictine kept complaining, and Belle was worried that her voice would draw enemies to them. But when Belle turned to silence her, Runding let out a sudden howl.

"Gordon!" Benedictine exclaimed, her voice suddenly taking on a sweet, fawning tone.

Belle stopped walking with a frown. Gordon was indeed approaching them from the other end of the passage, but he looked blurry in the gloom. The closer Gordon came, the louder her sword howled in alarm. Benedictine, who'd left Belle behind and hurried over to him, stopped in her tracks.

“Gordon…?” Her anxious voice trailed off, vanishing into the dark.

At this point, Belle could see it, too—there had been a gaping slash running from Gordon’s shoulder to his chest. There *had been*, because the wound was currently filled with something that flickered with light, encroaching into Gordon’s body. Something was *infesting* him. And it was flickering like a spell on a sword…

Belle suddenly made the connection. It was like the God Tree. And just as that realization filled her mind—

**…The Undine all shoulder an unavoidable fate,** the Guidance suddenly spoke in her mind. **Among them, Mermaids have hearts like pure-white ice. Frozen water can become corrupted by what’s inside it, turning brittle and sharp… And for that reason, sometimes they also cannot help but be driven mad.**

She couldn’t make sense of what it was saying. The Guidance had a way of always informing her of things she didn’t know, even against her will. But this time, even more so than usual, she couldn’t understand why it was telling her this.

Runding continued howling, as if to chastise Belle for her confusion. It was then, with Benedictine right in front of him, that Gordon raised his ax high above his head and swung it down.

Belle rushed forward, mostly out of reflex. She jumped up and lashed out with her sword. Runding deflected Gordon’s ax with a dull, heavy clash that shook the passage’s walls. Thinking to herself that this was a close call and that she wasn’t sure why she’d stepped in to save Benedictine, Belle launched her next attack, connecting with Gordon’s flank and sending his hulking form flying. He hit the wall and slumped to the ground.

However, shockingly, Gordon slowly got up and furiously swung his ax at Belle. It was a blow filled with bloodlust, and one several times faster and heavier than his first. Belle couldn’t fully deflect the blow, and her body bent violently.

Much to Belle’s surprise, Benedictine was offering her covering fire. Gordon was silent the whole time, his eyes alone glinting viciously. Benedictine’s bullet hit him straight in the face, but he didn’t so much as let out a grunt of pain. The only one screaming was Benedictine herself, who was shocked at the way Gordon’s

face had been half destroyed by her attacks. Gordon raised his ax again, but Belle knocked him away a second time.

"His blood's stagnant… He's dead… He's already dead, and they're controlling him…," Benedictine said, turning white as a sheet when she glimpsed his wound. Something like this was well within the abilities of Mermaids, who could control all forms of liquid.

But then Benedictine's behavior took an odd turn.

"We have to destroy him, no matter what…," she muttered to herself, continually firing bullets at Gordon as he sluggishly got to his feet.

It seemed she was intent on fully destroying his body to make him stop moving.

**…The hearts of Mermaids reflect others like a mirror, turning them into their own reflections.**

"I think…I'm starting to understand."

The words and images the Guidance communicated through her consciousness allowed Belle to grasp the situation. Mermaids, as well as many other Undine races, had a callous lack of emotion and a tendency to pursue love with countless partners of either gender—natures that seemed conflicting at first sight. This was because their hearts tended to gravitate toward extremes. They based their hearts on those of others, constructing their personality on the basis of the people they interacted with like emotional parasites.

So if they accepted a compassionate person, their heart's balance would start to tilt toward that sort of personality. In the worst-case scenario, if their partner died and they had nothing to reflect, the mirror of their heart began to rust over and shatter, leading to a breakdown of their emotions. So to safeguard their hearts, they had to keep their emotions shallow while interacting with many men and women.

This meant that Benedictine's combative personality came from Gordon. They were in a state of synergy, proof of how closely linked her heart was to his.

Benedictine suddenly fell to her knees, breathing heavily, and looked up at Gordon with a pained expression. Seeing Gordon slowly get back up again must have been her worst nightmare. She no longer had the power to harm him, and a mirror that

couldn’t properly reflect had no choice but to be shattered by its owner. Benedictine reached her arms out to the lump of flesh that had once been Gordon, openly accepting her fate.

But before that could happen, Belle swung Runding, shattering Gordon’s ax above the heartbroken Mermaid’s head. In her eyes, Benedictine had already received the punishment she deserved and needed to live on carrying its weight. Her punishment for not stopping herself from becoming too entangled with another person’s heart—an act that ended up polluting both her own heart and his. There was no way she could atone for that.

Yet in the back of Belle’s mind, there was another Mermaid other than Benedictine. The wielder of that ominous, distorted sword, whom she hadn’t seen properly yet—Tiziano.

The Guidance told her as such. That they were the one who’d killed and controlled Gordon, trying to sacrifice and devour all the just Solists to atone for sins that couldn’t be forgiven. She didn’t know what had driven Tiziano to do something like that, but she could tell they were acting out of madness. The moment she’d crushed Gordon’s hammer, Belle had come to that realization.

For a moment, that thought occupied Belle’s mind. She foolishly assumed she’d beaten Gordon. As she stood with her back turned to him, offering a hand to Benedictine, the man got to his feet again, shattered ax in hand. Runding let out a terrifying howl, and by the time she turned around, Gordon was already thrusting the handle of his broken ax toward her like a spear.

**EEERRREEEHHHWWW…!**

Belle’s eyes widened in shock, and she let out a cry that overlapped with her sword’s howl. A shudder ran through her. Again and again, she’d beaten Gordon down, but he just kept getting back up, looking stranger than before. Until eventually, he’d…

But then something peculiar happened. The grip of Gordon’s ax snapped inches away from Belle and caught fire. The flames raced up his arms, igniting his clothes and hair. Gordon’s collapsed face looked toward the ceiling, and he let out a breath that was almost a wail. This was his first and last scream as a moving corpse. Belle’s lily-white blade slashed down diagonally

from his shoulder, cutting him in half. She did it without even realizing what she was doing.

*The sword cut him…?!*

The top half of Gordon's body collapsed with a thud, embroiled in flames and unstirring. His legs remained upright, illuminating the cave like a lit torch. As the flames burned, Belle could see it—a magic circle at Gordon's feet inscribed with a perfect mathematical formula.

"My goodness. That was quite dangerous."

Belle heard a familiar voice speak up from the other side of the flames behind Gordon.

"Kitty…," Belle murmured to the short-statured white shadow.

## 10

A repugnant stench hung in the corridor.

"I don't want to stay here a second longer!" Benedictine bellowed, pointing at Gordon's remains. Though she was directing a finger at him, she was clearly looking the other way. "And I won't stay with you, either!"

Her rejection was firm, and Belle turned to look at Kitty, at a loss for words.

"That wouldn't be wise. Right now, we need every person we can get on our side, no? Or would you rather be left alone and meet the same fate as the Minotaurus?" Kitty asked.

Benedictine violently shook her head, as if trying to deny the side of her that wanted to accept the easy way out.

"Who are you anyway?! Just popping out of nowhere and ordering me around!" she demanded like a young girl throwing a tantrum. That was how deeply this Mermaid was submerged into the quagmire in her heart.

"Ordering you around, eh…?" Kitty shrugged.

Benedictine glared at him and looked like she was about to go off on her own, but Belle grabbed her hand to stop her. Her expression immediately turned to one of shock at having this strange woman touch her with her filthy hands, and at the same time, she was overwhelmed with fierce anger and bloodlust. Through Runding, Belle could feel her fragile, dangerous state of mind.

*I just really can't wrap my head around this Mermaid…*

Just as that thought went through her head, Belle saw Benedictine swiftly draw her sword. She hopped back to dodge it, delivering a merciless slash to counterattack. Benedictine's weapon was a bending sword, a type of blade unique to Mermaids and similar to a rapier. It had a slender blade forged of water steel, granting it incredible sharpness and flexibility, making it very hard to break.

Knowing that, Belle didn't expect it to break, nor did she intend to break it. She only wanted it to disarm the other woman, but Benedictine wouldn't let her. She drew back, like Kir had during their duel.

The bending sword took Belle's blow, winding and bending like its name implied. It was incredibly sharp and fast. Yet Runding's silver-shining steel snapped it—no, *cut* it in half with a sharpness that surpassed any toughness or flexibility.

The tip of the sword went flying, hitting the ceiling and stabbing into the rock. Benedictine stared at her bisected blade with a look of utter shock. Her sword arm was trembling, not from the strength of Belle's blow, but out of anger. Belle's sword, which was even capable of crushing an opponent's arm along with their weapon, had cut through her sword like butter, leaving her unharmed.

"I didn't mean to break it…," Belle tried to explain, pulling her sword away, but Benedictine grabbed her by the arm and clung to her.

Her rapier fell to the floor with a clatter, and Benedictine crumpled to the ground, dragging Belle down with her.

*What am I gonna do now…?*

Benedictine was sobbing. This enchanting woman was clinging to Belle like a weeping child. It made her look so fragile. But for how sweet it was, Belle felt annoyed by it. Maybe because they were both girls, but having someone start bawling moments after they'd been trying to cut her was weird. Belle patted her on the back in a dispassionate attempt to placate her, and this only made Benedictine cling to her tighter.

"This will be useless now," Kitty said calmly.

He wasn't speaking of Benedictine, but her sword. The sword would only wilt now, and he kicked it with the edge of his shoe

and shrugged at Belle, asking what next. Belle had no idea, either. Their only choice was to keep moving, but before she could propose to do that, they heard voices coming from a nearby passage. They sounded alarmed and nervous, but she couldn't tell where they were coming from. The tunnels branched off in all directions.

Soon, the sources of the voices revealed themselves as two Solists from their band. The Libretto, Guinness, and the Pianist, Cassis.

"Monsters! Monsters…!" Guinness called out in a panic, screaming louder upon seeing Belle and the others.

"Shut up, you're gonna draw attention to us," Belle said, annoyed.

"Wh-what's that burning over there?" Cassis asked, his voice muffled under his mask. "Is that…G-Gordon?! Don't tell me you did this!"

Belle nodded gravely.

"Did he go mad, too? Are you all right?"

Apparently the two of them had gone through the same thing Belle and Benedictine had.

"Worry not. We're all quite sane, I assure you," Kitty said jokingly.

Guinness and Cassis looked very much alarmed, but Kitty went ahead and introduced himself without being asked and explained the situation.

"What is a traveling Rabbitia doing here…?"

"I was asked to assist Belle Lablac by someone close to her."

The only person among them who was close to Belle and would ask a Rabbitia for a favor was the Arch-Solist, Gaff Shandy. Belle was convinced Gaff had set this up.

Kitty then asked, his tone playful, "Incidentally, what has you two in such a hurry?"

Guinness turned around in alarm, looking back to the passage they'd just emerged from. He pointed at something glinting in the air—blades. There weren't just one or two of them, either; a small army filled the passage, headed right for them. Even Belle couldn't help but shudder.

"I think we would do well to flee this place. Do any of you know the way?"

“I—I do.” Guinness raised his hand reluctantly. “The map says there should be a room we can hide in past here.”

“Oh, you have a map? Do you know our current position?”

“Y-yes, I can tell by smelling the wind…”

He looked around at the rest of them, as if to say that it was stranger that they *couldn’t* tell where they were. Sheepeyes had a sharp sense of direction that stood head and shoulders above other races. Belle instantly trusted Guinness, and Kitty nodded at her, apparently having decided to do the same. Cassis was only there to watch over them, and he didn’t seem to have any concrete objections.

This just left Benedictine, but if she was going to start objecting to everything, Belle was intent on dragging her along if need be. Yet shockingly, Benedictine seemed to have cried herself to sleep on Belle’s chest.

“Honestly…”

It seemed Mermaids truly did only care about their own mental state. Calling them idiosyncratic would be an understatement. Benedictine wouldn’t even wake up when Belle slapped her lightly on the cheek. At a loss for words, Belle got to her feet with her sword in one hand and a fast-asleep Benedictine leaning on her shoulder.

Kitty volunteered to watch their backs. Now quite literally burdened by a weight, Belle ran alongside Cassis. She glanced at Cassis’s sword, which he noticed.

“Don’t count on me in a fight,” he said matter-of-factly. “I can’t wield this sword of my own will.”

Belle couldn’t tell what sort of expression he was making under his mask, but both she and her sword could sense the bitterness in his heart. He called his sword a Chained Blade. As the name implied, its hilt guard was secured with multiple chains that had no keyholes, and its blade could not be drawn.

“So long as I have this mask and these chains carved from the God Tree, I am a Solist in name only who cannot draw his sword. As a representative of the God Tree, I must observe battles and report them to the king.”

It really did feel as if this was why he comforted himself by viciously criticizing those who actually did the fighting, and Belle nearly let that thought slip out.

Cassis explained that the chains on their swords would only be released if the God Tree ordered them to cut down one of their own, or if the entire band was defeated and he was the sole survivor. Belle shuddered to think of that outcome.

And yet…

"So you're saying you can't act because your sword is chained?" Belle asked coldly, implicitly accusing him of lying.

"Yes," Cassis said with an incredible lack of emotion. "That's right…"

Silence followed. Behind them, Kitty was casting his magic formula, calculating flames on the walls and floors and everywhere else around them. As he kept the enemy at bay, he urged Guinness on.

Guinness ran ahead of them, his expression frantic. One wrong turn could lead them to a dead end where they could be cornered. He had to suss out enemy ambushes, instantly make the necessary adjustments to their path, and do it all without making a single mistake.

Belle was surprised that she felt like she could trust Kitty and Guinness enough to be able to run alongside Cassis and talk to him. It seemed completely different from how she'd felt as part of the band earlier.

"Over here!" Guinness called out.

His keen, skittish Sheepeyes had spotted a door that looked indistinguishable from the wall. Guinness hurried inside, followed by Cassis, then Belle carrying Benedictine, and finally Kitty. Belle swiftly examined the corridor outside through the peephole, only to spot Kitty outside, taunting the enemy forces to give chase.

"It's an illusion," Kitty explained behind her in an easygoing yet hushed voice. "I'm not sure if they perceive us with their eyes, but I thought it would be best to have it just in case."

"What is this place…?" Belle asked. She lay Benedictine down on the floor and warily looked around the room.

"I believe this room was used long ago by the those who managed the Catacombs," Guinness said.

True enough, judging by the worn-out, discarded furniture set around the room, it looked like the room had been furnished to accommodate four or five people at once.

“These caves were originally a place of worship. There are cemeteries where people are said to be buried without distinction for whether they were just or evil. See all the raven flowers scattered about the floor? They’re proof that the ones who managed this place were priests,” Guinness explained.

He confidently rummaged through the junk littering the room and picked up an old hand lamp.

“We should be able to get to one of the underground lakes from this room, but from there things get a bit harder… We’ll probably have to look for the exit based on the air flow or by listening for water.”

“Oh. We’re not really good at sensing that sort of thing, but can you do that?”

“I think I can manage to find us an airway…”

“That’s good enough for us. Hmm, what can we do to find the others, then?”

“If we intentionally try to look for them and gather everyone together, it’ll be hard for us to tell friend from foe. Instead, we should set our formation so we’re prepared to meet our allies wherever we might find them…”

*He’s not as flighty as he looks…*

Under the soft light of the lamp, Belle was impressed by Guinness’s exchange with Cassis. Once all the noisy people surrounding him were gone, Guinness started looking like a talented young man to Belle. His horns, too short to fully spiral, now made his youth seem encouraging. His form, which she initially thought was scrawny, along with his wise, golden eyes and blond curls illuminated by the light of the glowstone lamp actually made him look quite handsome.

Now that Belle thought about it, Benedictine was an above-average Solist. The same was true of Gordon. As Solists, they were indeed high-class, yet even they had ended up being routed like that.

“I guess it just comes down to compatibility…”

The selection process was the real problem here. That was the only explanation. Why had the king chosen so many people? But then, these didn’t seem like the sorts of thoughts she normally had. It wasn’t that they belonged to the Guidance, but because they resembled someone else’s way of thinking.

*Adonis…*

He couldn't have been defeated—not someone as tenacious as him. Yet she still couldn't help but feel anxious. Belle looked around for a moment restlessly.

Then she heard it.

"Mmm."

It was a long, drawn-out sound that made everyone react with surprise—then sigh in exasperation.

"Oh. I see some new faces here."

It was Benedictine. She had woken up, looking incredibly relaxed given how shaken she'd been earlier.

"You okay?" Belle asked teasingly.

This seemed to be enough to inform Benedictine about who had carried her all the way there.

"When that happens, we enter a state of lethargy. I couldn't help it, could I? But withdrawing into myself helped me calm down."

The way Benedictine didn't even thank Belle felt very typical of her. In her eyes, it was only to be expected that an ally would help her. And while that wasn't a very pleasant sentiment, it made Belle smile to see how desperate the Mermaid was to hide her embarrassment.

"That's good, then. But you sure were a handful…"

Suddenly attacking her, then bursting out crying. Belle was about to say it out loud, but Benedictine huffily cut her off. Cassis and Guinness, for their part, were surprised to see Benedictine acting like a carefree girl. They couldn't believe it was the same woman…

"Like I said, I couldn't help it!"

Hearing her repeat it over and over, Belle smirked impishly, yet neither of them found this exchange unpleasant. Looking back, Belle hadn't had any friends who were girls ever since she'd left her foster parents' care years ago—not that she thought of this Mermaid as her friend. She wasn't sure why she'd gone out of her way to help her, either. It might not be nice to think that way, but when had "nice" gotten her anywhere with this woman?

"Wait, I hear something…," Benedictine said, suddenly cutting her off.

At first, Belle thought she was just trying to change the topic… but Belle paused before she said anything. A Mermaid's ears weren't just keen—they bordered on the supernatural, to the point where they could accurately shoot a target with their eyes closed just relying on their sense of hearing.

Everyone quieted down at once. Benedictine's third ear, a unique trait of Mermaids, fidgeted busily.

"I hear talking…," Benedictine whispered.

She stood up and started searching the walls. Guinness did the same, walking around the room without making a noise, and the two of them found the spot at the same time. Guinness turned to Benedictine, who nodded silently.

The next moment, a door appeared in the wall. To Belle, who hadn't realized it was there until just then, it looked like the door had suddenly materialized. They opened the door, but all they could see was darkness. It seemed the passage continued on for quite a long way.

"It smells of water in there," Guinness said, and Benedictine nodded in affirmation.

Apparently, this was a path to one of the underground lakes. Everyone got to their feet and entered the passage—Benedictine led the way, guarded by Guinness and Belle on both sides and Kitty and Cassis from behind. No one had ordered them to take this formation—they'd just assumed it naturally, and it was the correct choice.

"I smell blood…" Holding the glowstone lamp, Guinness whispered this so as to not disturb Benedictine's hearing.

Belle could smell something, as well. Something nasty. She could also hear muffled voices. They turned a corner, and Guinness quickly operated the lamp's spell to put out the light. There was a faint glow up ahead. Benedictine moved to the side of the passage and aimed her bow. Belle and Guinness stood on either side of her, ready to jump out at any time, and Kitty started to prepare a formula to provide backup. But then—

"Hey, how many of you survived?" someone called out to them from the end of the passage. It was a familiar voice.

Belle felt heat blossom in her chest as she ran down the hall. The others moved after her in a hurry, ready to provide cover, but then lowered their weapons when they saw who the speaker was.

“Adonis, you’re safe…!” Belle said, relieved.

The man nodded curtly. He was seated on a beaten-up wooden chair, smoking a pipe much like the ones Reutelites used to draw spells. And sure enough, a glowing spell floated in the air, its light revealing a figure lying on the ground.

Just as he was about to approach, Guinness let out a high-pitched screech.

“Eek…!”

“He died a short time ago,” Adonis said offhandedly.

The intense stench of blood filled Belle’s nostrils, and she stared in shock at the youth lying at Adonis’s feet—Perrier. The Cateyes boy who’d boasted about how he’d never particularly cared for being a Solist. He was so young. Belle felt that bitterness fill her mouth again. She withstood the urge to spit and swallowed it instead.

“I’ll be taking his sword, if no one minds…” Adonis got to his feet and looked around, like he was asking if someone else wanted it.

“Sword Thief…,” Cassis hissed under his breath, his mask looking straight at Adonis.

Adonis coolly ignored the words and emptied his pipe.

“I’ll take it, then.”

He kneeled next to Perrier and took the sword in his hand.

“Bamboo,” he called out softly, and the sword vanished into thin air, now stored inside the stomach of his familiar. For just a split second before the sword disappeared, those fangs lined with spells had flashed through the air.

“In tribute to you, I’ll be sure to bash their brains in,” Adonis said in a low, detached voice.

He was referring to Tiziano, of course. Belle felt something was off with Adonis—his mood reminded her of a certain mourning Mermaid she’d faced not too long ago. It carried a mixture of fear and anger, forming a core of bloodlust. But unlike Benedictine, Adonis’s bloodlust was directed solely at Tiziano.

Even then, however, that bloodlust of his seemed abnormal. Under his red bandanna, Adonis’s emaciated features glared into space. There was no doubt he must have gone through something even more enraging and terrifying than watching Perrier get

butchered, yet Adonis's emotions were always all-consuming, never showing up in reality.

"Including this new member, so far only six have survived…," Adonis said. Kitty had already taken the chance to introduce himself.

Adonis sneaked a glance at Belle, and she was suddenly struck with an intense sense of pity. The look in his eyes filled her with the urge to comfort him, regardless of the situation. Even in this regard, he differed from Benedictine.

*What happened to you…?*

Whatever it was, it must have been related to Tiziano. His poor mental state stemmed from him feeling like Tiziano appearing and slaughtering the top-dog Solist band was his own fault. Yet his eyes contained not just sorrow but boiling anger, too.

Outwardly, however, Adonis spoke with absolute coldness.

"The lake is past here. For the outsiders, this is a place where the souls of the dead find comfort, regardless of whether they're just or evil. Apparently, there's a spectacle there. Anyone who wants to see it should follow me. Ideally, everyone should come."

"Hmm. A spectacle?" Kitty asked.

"I don't know what it is, either."

"…Then who told you?" Guinness asked the obvious question.

The answer they got, however, was just as shocking.

"The evil side's Conductor. Goes by the name of Ginbuck."

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

"What…?" Cassis's voice was frighteningly low. His hand jumped to his chained sword. "Yes, come to think of it, you were an outsider, weren't you? As is this person you spoke to."

"Correct."

"What were you thinking? Where did the person you were talking to just now go? Why did they hide?"

"Because of people like you," Adonis said bluntly. "Listen to me, everyone has the wrong idea. It's not just us. In terms of this battle, the evil side are under the same impression. Who are we going up against here? Huh? Who's our enemy? Who orchestrated this battle in the first place?"

"Tiziano…," Guinness replied honestly.

"That's right. Our enemy is Tiziano, and only Tiziano. And they're a devilish enemy that both top dogs and underdogs have

in common.”

Belle noticed a change in Adonis’s attitude toward Tiziano. Earlier, during the selection, he’d seemed to show something close to sympathy toward them at the thought of Tiziano turning against the top dogs to defend himself… She had sensed some praise in Adonis’s cynical remarks. But all that sympathy and praise were gone without a trace now, the vacuum left in their wake filled with a terrifying hatred and bloodlust toward Tiziano.

And it was in this state that Adonis raised his voice and announced:

“I’ll say it once more: Our enemy here is Tiziano—and *only* Tiziano!”

## 11

The moment they stepped out of the corridor, the entire group let out a collective gasp. That was how vast and imposing the sight before them was.

Below them spanned a clear surface of water, as smooth and transparent as a mirror. They couldn’t see a ceiling, and the surrounding walls were lit up by the faint light of glowstones that allowed them to distinguish the water from the air above it. The cave’s depth and height seemed to go on forever, which almost gave the impression that they were being drawn in.

*Splish.* Deep in the darkness ahead, they could see ripples form on the water. Each of them followed the faint splashes of water reflecting the light, be it with their eyes, nose, or ears—and there they were.

A beautifully carved blue tourmaline bridge spanned the shore to the center of the lake, where it connected to a chapel. The splashing sounds were coming from over there. A figure with the flowing form of a fish was seated by the chapel with the gracefulness unique to Mermaids.

*So pretty…*, Belle thought.

Tiziano was covered in a robe made of water steel. It was a type of armor made by Mermaids, capable of deflecting fire and sword alike. The silver garment glowed, reminiscent of funeral garb, which seemed somehow fitting for a demonic priestess who

had fallen from grace and manipulated the dead in the depths of darkness.

Above the robe, they could see her face. Belle could tell that her sharp, bladelike features were filled with seething, inexplicable urges. And tucked into the chest of her robe was that ominous, twisted blade.

Suddenly, Tiziano screamed. To Belle, it sounded like a low clanging sound. Benedictine plugged her ears in pain and whispered in annoyance.

“She’s calling for someone… She’s trying to do something on the bridge.”

And she was right. Soon after, an army of the dead began rising from the waters of the lake and climbing up both sides of the bridge. Their numbers were startling, and some of the warriors already had all the flesh missing from their bones and raven flower roots wrapped around their bodies.

They all watched on in terror as Tiziano turned the bodies of both the just and the evil into shambling corpses, using both sides like playthings. And then, obeying some signal Belle couldn’t hear, the dead began fighting atop the bridge. They clashed swords, let out voiceless screams, and thrashed around as they bit and tore into each other. In every wound, they caught a glimpse of some sort of parasite that flickered as it nestled inside their bodies, morphing and twisting them into unnatural forms.

“She’s playing God…,” Adonis said.

It gradually became clear that both sides of the bridge were divided, with one side being the bodies of the top dogs and the other being that of the underdogs. Cruelty wasn’t a strong enough word to describe it. Some of the bodies still had some consciousness left from when they’d been alive, and they sobbed as their bodies were eaten from the inside out. The flickering spells that reminded Belle of the God Tree eventually covered their entire bodies, and they fell silent as it manipulated them down to their very souls.

Whoever won that fight kneeled before Tiziano, clinging to her. It was an obscene sight. It all happened in such silence that they all couldn’t help but wonder if it was all just some sort of an illusion. But out of everyone, Kitty alone looked on with cold eyes and spoke calmly.

“By embedding shards of her sword into their bodies, she can control the dead. To think she would try to imitate a divine symphony in this way…”

“A ‘divine symphony’…?” Belle asked, turning to look at him. Her face was pale, but Kitty met her with a composed smile.

“A symphony that pleases God, entertains its performers, and gathers all in creation betwixt order and chaos to fulfill the will of God and the people. In my country, we call this a divine symphony. It seems to me that…in her love for God, this woman is trying to become God herself, yes?”

For some reason, he directed the end of his explanation toward Adonis.

“It’s a Mermaid’s nature of earnestness and fragility. She hated God so much that, at some point, that inverted itself into her adopting God’s nature. She had to go mad in order to keep the scales of her heart balanced. And because of that, her tendency to have her suitors fight over her like a prize turned into this exaggerated act.”

Adonis replied calmly as well. Belle could only partially understand their exchange, and the others seemed to feel the same. They understood logically what Kitty and Adonis were saying, but they couldn’t grasp how Tiziano felt. Only Benedictine seemed to understand how she felt to some extent.

“She’s not enjoying this at all,” she muttered.

“I’d imagine she doesn’t enjoy being a mock god, yes.”

“What’s that…?” Belle asked quizzically.

Kitty fixed his gaze on Belle and said in a whisper, “A mock god is the name given to a person who has taken after a fallen God and been forced to adopt their Thema as their reason for being. Their other name is Deus Ex Machina…”

But Kitty trailed off there. Suddenly, everything had gone very quiet, and a deafening silence hung in the air. Within that frozen quiet, a terrible gaze fixed on their group, gripping them with terror. Thankfully, none of them screamed.

And then a cascade of events unfolded.

The dead all stopped in their tracks and turned around.

*“Aaaaaadooooooooniiiiiiiiiis…!”*

A high-pitched voice filled the vast cavern. But just as Belle recognized it as Tiziano’s howl—

“This is bad news. Get away!”

An unfamiliar voice spoke, and figure appeared behind them. Benedictine fired a shot in its direction out of reflex, but…

“An illusion…?!”

The phantom form of an old Reutelite man smirked as he pointed at their escape route, then vanished.

“We have to run! Follow me!” Adonis said, racing off.

The rest of the group followed, running as fast as they could down the passage. Adonis was in the lead, followed by Cassis and Guinness, then Belle and Benedictine, and Kitty once again bringing up the rear. They rushed back into the room at the end of the corridor and slammed the door shut behind them.

“Stand back. I will make this door as hard as an iron wall.”

Kitty deployed a formula, and glowing calculations appeared on the door. Belle heard the dead swarm against it, as if fighting back. It shocked her how fast they were. A group of them faced the door, holding up their swords, but Kitty cried out, “Pointless!” and a flash ran through it. Something formed explosively outside the door, sweeping away any who dared to touch it.

“Anybody who touches the door from the other side shall suffer the scorching heat of an inferno. It can only be opened from our side… Rest easy.”

Everyone was stunned by what had just happened. They’d never seen skills like that before.

“Let’s go!”

At Adonis’s word, they all broke into a run again. He led them out of the room and through a passage, sure in his navigation, and everyone followed him desperately. They heard the sound of something dripping—water droplets from the ceiling, and it wasn’t long before the group found themselves facing another lake. Everyone noticed it, but no one stopped.

“Bamboo, get me the hot sword that breaks easily,” Adonis whispered.

He raised a hand, grabbing a sword handle that appeared and drawing it out of thin air. This was the first time Belle had seen Adonis wield a sword with the Question mark etched on it. Since they had been split up into left and right flanks in the band, they hadn’t seen each other fight.

A few dead soldiers appeared in the water, using Rest au Rant magic to cross over. Adonis leaped and slashed into them like a whirlwind. Dodging their slashes, he thrust, driving the blade into a dead soldier's face.

As he'd requested, it was a "hot sword," manifesting flames at its wielder's will and swiftly burning through the dead soldier's face. But then, to Belle's surprise, Adonis used the soldier's jaw as a fulcrum with which to purposely snap the sword—presumably why he'd asked for the one that "breaks easily." Without a pause, he drove the remains of his blade into another dead soldier's flank, using its ribs as a lever and slamming down with his fist to shatter the blade. The fragments digging into the dead soldier's body billowed with flames, burning it from the inside out with an incredible stench.

His skill with a blade was spectacular to behold. Belle couldn't imagine fighting while using swords as a disposable resource like this. It was truly the fighting style of a Sword Thief that made every sword he laid his hands on cry out in sorrow.

He threw what remained of the sword into the lake, causing the surface of the water to boil and sizzle. The water that bubbled up tore apart the hands that tried to emerge from the water, setting them ablaze. Adonis's Schwertmusik was terrifying and merciless, as if he only cared about the most effective way to slay his prey.

Belle could tell right away that she couldn't agree with his method of fighting. Adonis's Schwertmusik and her own were like light and shadow.

What would happen if she fought Adonis? The thought made Belle shudder. They likely wouldn't be able to accept one another, and their swords would reject each other. Whoever lost wouldn't be allowed to hold a sword again, and it would be a fierce, cruel battle.

She didn't want to fight him. She felt this from the bottom of her heart. Not against Adonis… Not ever.

Adonis continued fighting, ignorant of Belle's thoughts, as he single-handedly swept through all the enemies, ignoring Belle's and Benedictine's attempts to cover him from the side. He strove ahead, like he was possessed by something.

"There."

Adonis finally stopped in his tracks. His hand, covered by his thick leather glove, touched the wall. This opened a door that was masked perfectly as part of the wall, and Adonis walked inside confidently and carelessly. Belle hurried after him, intending to stand beside him, but Adonis held up a hand, stopping her. Once the group was inside, the door closed behind Kitty and the room lit up.

"You're here, finally…," said the old Reutelite man.

Standing silently around him like guards were six Froggies and three Cateyes. Each and every one of them was an underdog—a Solist on the side of evil, that stood in opposition to the just Solists like them.

"Well, that's quite the group we have here, eh?" the old Reutelite said in admiration as he looked over their party.

As Adonis had told them earlier, the old man's name was Ginbuck. Among the underdogs, he was a famous Conductor known for being a seasoned veteran. The one who'd driven the top-dog Solists to such a humiliating retreat at the very start of this battle hadn't been Tiziano, but Ginbuck, due to his brilliant command. Apparently even Tiziano, mad though she was, was under his command. Belle and the rest had had no idea how capable this old Reutelite man truly was.

But be that as it may…

"That water sprite wasn't like this when she first showed herself to me," Ginbuck said with a tone of pity. "I mean, she did feel dangerous, like she was hangin' by a thread, but as far as I could tell, her head was still in workin' order and there was a spark in her eyes. But all that was wrapped in water steel, ya ask me. She told us the top dogs were comin' in droves to attack the Catacombs. Told me she left the castle for her own reasons and came here to oppose the just Solists. Wanted to join forces with us…"

Belle frowned, as did the others. Wasn't Tiziano the reason they had attacked the Catacombs to begin with? They were under the impression that if they just defeated Tiziano, they had no more business in these caves. But if Ginbuck was to be believed, it sounded like the top dogs had stormed these caves with the intention of occupying them.

“The king’s divine proclamation turned this battle into predetermined harmony,” Adonis said, turning to look at the suspicious top-dog Solists. “Tiziano was an Arch-Solist at the top of the hierarchy. It stands to reason they would have known about this battle ahead of time. The rationale for this battle just ended up being flipped. Otherwise, it would mean that the king… or God…knew that Tiziano would fall to evil ahead of time.”

As Adonis spoke, Ginbuck gazed steadily at him.

“Say, do you need me to tell you when the water sprite went all crazy?”

Adonis turned to look at him.

“The moment she saw me. Right?”

“Aye.” Ginbuck smirked at him, a nasty sort of grin that read into the other man’s heart. “Soon as she laid eyes on you, that tense thread she was hangin’ on by snapped. I thought she was just controllin’ the water to seal off your escape route, but then she started slashing at everyone blindly. So ya see, Adonis, I suspect it was you who made her go all crazy.”

Belle was taken aback. If that was true, she felt like it explained Adonis’s extreme anger and bloodlust, as well as the way Tiziano had screamed out his name. But her heart ached. Some emotion she couldn’t quite name hung over her heavily.

Stern-faced, Adonis nonchalantly denied the accusation.

“It wasn’t me; it was another man. That man fought back against a losing battle and died. Unlike with your side, old one, the king’s proclamation forces insiders to fight battles they can’t win. It was a fight just like that. He didn’t want to die a violent death in that sort of a battle, so he left his band, became a fugitive, and ended up being killed by a Pianist priest.”

“So where do you come into the picture?”

“Only two top dogs survived that battle. Even the priest who cut the man down died. One of the survivors was a man called Gaff, and the other was me. It was due to my achievements in that fight that I was named Arch-Solist… And I was the one who told Tiziano how the man they loved had died. That was when they started acting like God. After a while, the other survivor, Gaff, shattered their sword, which made Tiziano docile…but eventually they went mad. Seeing me must have brought back those memories.”

In other words, Adonis had been a trigger, not the reason for Tiziano's madness. Yet Belle intuited that this was wrong. Adonis wasn't lying, but he wasn't telling the whole truth, either. Maybe it was something he couldn't tell because of his position as a Solist at the top of the hierarchy—or maybe Adonis and Tiziano were…

Belle tried to reject that thought. At this point, she had no way of knowing how close her intuition was to Adonis's heart, but what she clearly understood was that she could never reach his true feelings. Pity alone wouldn't spur him to answer her.

"Well, that's good enough for now. The one thing we know for sure is that if we don't do somethin', we'll all end up bein' controlled by that water sprite and forced to fight for the death for her," Ginbuck said casually. "And so I have a proposition for ya. Why don't you guys join forces with us?"

Adonis had repeatedly said their only enemy was Tiziano. She could command the dead, so they had to beat her, even if it meant joining forces. If they didn't, it was doubtful they'd ever escape this place alive. If they absolutely had to war over which side they were on, they could do that once their common enemy was out of the picture. That was Ginbuck's explanation.

Benedictine and Cassis were firmly against the idea.

"This has *got* to be a joke," Benedictine said. "How do we know this isn't a trap? And even if it isn't, fighting on the same side would mean exposing our swords to you."

It would reveal the nature of their weapons and tactics to the enemy. What's more, the stage they were on still firmly gave the underdogs the advantage. They could backstab Belle's group at any time, and given the top dogs didn't even know the way out, they were at a huge disadvantage.

Belle already trusted Ginbuck at this point. If he was going to betray them, he wouldn't have made this proposal but instead picked them off one by one under the cover of the cavern's darkness. After all, if the underdogs were intent on fighting them, having the top dogs know the face of their Conductor wasn't in their favor.

Besides, this wasn't Belle's first time meeting Ginbuck. She still remembered how capable his command had been and how fast he'd been to flee when she rescued Mr. and Mrs. Mimosa. And

while they were on opposite sides then, he made for a reliable ally when he was on her side.

But just as she was about to voice her thoughts…

“What, do you have mush for brains? We’re the ones at a disadvantage here!”

Surprisingly, it was a girl who shouted this. Her name was Mist, and she looked to be about Belle’s age. She was a Froggie, whose tribes were always led by a woman, making her the effective leader of this group.

Perhaps it was due to her position, but she was bright. She made basically the same arguments Belle had in mind, adding that if they wanted to leave, the underdogs would draw them a map, and that they should get the hell out if they weren’t going to help. However, she added, the exit was flooded with water, so if they wanted to leave, they should either be ready to become fish food or be caught by Tiziano… With that, she had effectively picked apart everything Cassis and Tiziano had said.

Belle couldn’t help but laugh out loud. The sight of Benedictine reeling in the face of a young girl was hilarious.

“Come on, Benet, take the loss. Our best option would be to join forces with them,” Belle said. The nickname was, of course, just to annoy Benedictine.

“Hmm. Fine, Belle,” Benedictine said with a steely smile. “If you say so, I’ll follow your plan.”

Calling her Belle rather than Lablac was Benedictine’s own show of sarcasm, but it was also an implicit way of telling Belle that she was responsible for whatever came of this.

The two smirked at each other.

Looking at the two of them apparently getting along like sisters, Ginbuck clapped his hands in satisfaction.

“All right. Let’s start assigning roles, shall we?”

First, they decided on the Conductor—though, there was only one choice.

“No one minds me doing it, right?” Ginbuck asked like a child, to which no one objected.

Next, they had to pick a Director.

“Why don’t you give it a go?” Ginbuck said to Kitty.

“Oh, me?” Kitty asked, amused.

Once again, everyone seemed to approve of this choice. Kitty the All had managed to prove his wisdom and display his fearsome capabilities in this brief period of time. Still, it was unheard of for a traveling Rabbitia to take orders from a Conductor, even a veteran one. Yet Kitty had no reason to be part of this battle in the first place except for his desire to help Belle. In Kitty's eyes, so long as he kept Belle safe, the methods didn't matter. Ginbuck was confident of that.

"Aye, from where I'm standing, you're the only one who fits the job. Plus, helpin' us out, ya might end up findin' somethin' on the ground."

"Hmm? Such as?"

"Hee-hee. Ya see, just the other day, one of my young'uns picked up a little trinket. A shiny gold watch."

"Oh-ho. A gold watch, you say?" Kitty asked back with a jocular expression, his red eyes turning to Mist.

None of the others, Belle included, knew of Kitty and Ginbuck's prior meeting. Mist picked up on Ginbuck's unstated intentions and pouted sulkily.

"That's a machina watch, ya see. Trinkets like that are hard to come by in this country," said the old man.

Kitty's gaze returned to Ginbuck.

"It seems the threads of fate show no sign of unraveling just yet…," he muttered to himself, apparently pondering for a moment.

"That watch may be mine I misplaced the other day," Kitty said with a smile.

This was his way of saying he would serve as Director and, at least for the time being, follow Ginbuck's command. But it was the old Reutelite who truly profited the most here, as having Kitty work under him made for a unique achievement in his career. He would no doubt go down in Schwertland's history as one of the few Conductors to ever command a Rabbitia.

"Hurry up, Mist. Hand over the trinket you picked up," he chided the girl.

She was in no position to object but tried to argue anyway.

"Sir Ginbuck, can't we hand it over after the battle's over?"

"Come now, lass. That wouldn't be proper."

Mist glared viciously at Kitty but produced the gold pocket watch and reluctantly handed it over. Kitty instantly squirreled it away in one smooth motion, as if he'd known all along that he would be reunited with his watch. Seeing this, Mist looked outraged.

"You only gave up on it because you knew things would turn out this way, didn't you?" she mumbled argumentatively.

Even Mist was aware of how absurd an accusation that was, but with a traveling Rabbitia, it didn't seem that outlandish. The accused party, however, simply twitched his long ears in a conflicted manner.

"I guarantee you that was by no means the case…"

Mist turned her eyes to the Froggie boy standing next to her. His name was Cloud, and he was her twin brother and lieutenant of the group.

"Forget about it. It didn't suit you anyway," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Even you said so yourself."

"You shut up!" Mist went red in the face.

Seeing she'd found a new target for her ire, Kitty took the chance to speak to Ginbuck. "Well…as a courtesy for picking this up for me, I will perform the role you asked."

"Aye, good." Ginbuck clapped his hands, pleased.

And so, one by one, the roles were filled. Guinness wrote it all down and showed it to everyone.

*Conductor: Ginbuck*
*Reutelite, underdog*

*Director: Kitty the All*
*Rabbitia, Nomad*

*Libretto: Guinness*
*Sheepeyes, top dog*

*Pianist: Cassis*
*Cateyes, top dog*

It was then that Guinness called out to Ginbuck, his voice returning to its original sheepish lack of confidence.

“I’ll do it if you tell me to, but…”

He seemed to be wary of people making more horribly contradictory demands of him. Belle could tell that he was troubled by it, but she wasn’t sure the underdogs would understand.

Ginbuck looked at him, confused, and Mist scolded Guinness in his place.

“He’s asking if you’re even motivated! Stop trying to shirk responsibility right from the start!”

“U-umm… Then it depends on what kind of script you want me to write…”

“What kind of…? Figuring that out is *your* job!”

“Well, yes, but…I mean, if you have any requests…”

“Is this always how ya do things, boy?” Ginbuck asked, baffled.

“That’s stupid,” Mist said, doubling down. “What, ya got soup for brains? Just write whatever you want. I can see why your plan was so spotty earlier; you keep trying to please everyone. Anyone could beat you that way, not just Sir Ginbuck.”

Guinness was taken aback by Mist’s indignation. Froggies were a race normally much less respected that Sheepeyes, and they hardly ever appeared among the top dogs. If *she* could assert herself so firmly…

“…You’re really strong,” he said.

“Well, gee, thanks. Meanwhile, you keep hiding behind your own weakness. What a disgrace.”

Her words were scathing, but for some reason she gave him an earnest smile.

“You’re right…” Guinness smiled back quietly, his expression making it clear he had somehow overcome his problem. He turned to face Ginbuck and said clearly, “I’ll do it. There’s a script I’ve been wanting to try.”

Cassis was next in line to baffle Ginbuck.

“What d’you mean, Pianist? What are ya even here for?”

Ginbuck wasn’t being sarcastic; he genuinely didn’t understand. Belle could tell Cassis flinched behind his mask. With his sword chained, the only benefit Cassis provided was the fact that he always carried some sacred ash on his person.

“Ah, a healer, are ya? Talk about a luxury…”

The underdogs, however, didn't much value a healing specialist. Having a healer handy was useful, but they saw someone who couldn't swing a sword as useless.

"No, my duty is to report to the king…"

"So yer a spectator?"

"I am no mere spectator. I oversee the tide of battle, at times making pained decisions…"

"Yeah, yeah, I get the idea. Just stay in the back and don't get in the way," Ginbuck said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Speak to me if ya feel like drawin' your sword. Otherwise, keep yer mouth shut."

Cassis was stunned into silence. Belle could tell he was gritting his teeth, holding back his frustration that he couldn't draw his sword. She thought he should just cast his mask aside and let her shatter the chains for him. But she knew he wouldn't allow it. Cassis was a priest first and a Solist second.

The formation of the Solists was decided in a similar way.

Guinness wrote it down as such:

Solists, Right Flank
Tom Collins—Cateyes, underdog
John Collins—Cateyes, underdog
Sandy Collins—Cateyes, underdog
Adonis Question—Cateyes, top dog

Solists, Left Flank
Belle Lablac—unknown, top dog
Benedictine—Mermaid, top dog
Mist—Froggie, underdog
Cloud—Froggie, underdog
Toady—Froggie, underdog

Solists, Rear Guard (carrying the Conductor's palanquin)
Snow—Froggie, underdog
Coral—Froggie, underdog
Flows—Froggie, underdog

"I've always thought that rather than command both flanks individually, it would be more efficient to split the front in two and integrate them. That way, you can give orders to the front

lines, and they can communicate between themselves," said Guinness.

Ginbuck nodded as he looked over Guinness's formation.

"Also, the position of the Director should be in front of the Conductor, not beside him… We'll have the Libretto on the side."

"Havin' the Director actin' independently in the front is an interesting idea."

"Personally, I believe that setting up barriers should be the secondary duty of the Director… They don't just place barriers where they're needed, but move the Solists accordingly… Depending on the skill of the Director, I believe they could also set different barriers around each flank…"

While Guinness and Ginbuck quietly discussed their plans, the Solists compared their sword techniques. They had to avoid the natures of their swords conflicting and getting in each other's way, so they shared the bare minimum of information needed for that. They also took that chance to introduce themselves and establish as much trust as possible in the band given the short amount of time they had.

However, the Cateyes with the surname Collins only spoke a word or two to Adonis before going quiet. Since they were defending the right flank together, they should have tried to communicate as much as possible.

But when Belle commented on it…

"There's little a parent and child can say at this point," one of the Collins casually replied.

"Parent and child…?" Belle stared at the Cateyes in surprise.

"Yes. I didn't expect we'd end up performing Schwertmusik together. This is a joyous occasion," he said earnestly.

This was, as it turned out, Adonis's father—a man who came off as incredibly chic. His name was Tom Collins, and he was one of the Catacombs' wardens. It was the Collins who'd first proposed the idea to form this mixed band, and Ginbuck had initially been against it. It was their particular situation in this struggle that had eventually convinced him.

They buried the dead regardless of which side they were on and planted raven flower seeds. They would bloom into the same number of flowers as friends and relatives the deceased had and take flight to announce their passing. To the wardens who

handled the dead and raised the raven flowers, the Catacombs were a sacred, neutral place that eclipsed the conflict between the top dogs and the underdogs.

The underdogs had only been more familiar with the terrain here because of the Collins wardens. Anyone who infringed upon the Catacombs for personal reasons, even if it was a fellow underdog, would be driven out. Conversely, any who came to the Catacombs to show sympathy for the dead, even top dogs, were welcomed with open arms.

In other words, the ones who had fought back when the top dogs attacked the Catacombs were mostly the Collins wardens. It was no small wonder, then, that Adonis had run into the room earlier without a second thought.

“Our family has always been underdogs, however, we see ourselves as neither just nor evil. Our mission for generations has always been to guard these Catacombs.”

To that end, in their case alone, Guinness referred to them as underdogs but not evil. Belle recalled Adonis’s room in the lodging house and the black feathers littering the floor—raven flower feathers. Tom Collins went on to tell her, in a cold yet penetrating voice, of how many members of the Collins family had laid down their lives to defend the Catacombs.

Some had died in battle, others by the giant insect flowers living in the caverns…but most of them died from exposure to the miasma of death from years of sowing the raven flower seeds. The grief and malice of the dead ravaged their hearts and bodies. Tom said that perhaps those emotions were purified and atoned for by passing through the Collins family.

“By the way, Adonis. Your hands…?” Tom said, but Adonis shook his head.

“I see… So not even the sacred ash could help.”

“That’s not why I became an insider…,” Adonis said.

“I know. But at this point, you’re no longer bound by the Collins name.”

Belle could tell this was a tense topic, and the two of them fell silent right away. The atmosphere wasn’t one that would tolerate her asking about it out of crude curiosity. But just as Belle was growing anxious, someone called out to her.

“Do you have a name, wild child?”

It was Mist. Her tone was annoyed, seeming to say that if Belle had time to spend talking to Adonis and the Collins, who were on the right flank, it would be better spent getting to know the people *she* would be fighting with. What's more, Belle would be the one pulling the most weight on the left flank—so *she* ought to be speaking to *them*.

"Yeah, sorry. It's Belle Lablac. Nice to meet you… But what do you mean, 'wild child'?"

"Oh, don't pay it any mind. It's just what we call you." Mist shrugged it off casually but then stared into Belle's eyes and asked, "Why didn't you kill us?"

Belle could tell she was talking about the raid from some time ago.

"I don't know, either. I probably just couldn't cut you."

"What d'you mean?"

"I used to be able to cut through anything I wanted. Or at least, I think I could. But now… Something happened. I can't tell what I can or can't cut. At least not until I try."

"Hmm," Mist murmured in thought. "How about me, then? Can you cut through me?"

It was a direct, sincere question that allowed for no falsehoods. Belle paused for a moment, then shook her head.

"I could probably cut through your sword, though."

But at that moment, Cloud forced his way between the two of them.

"C'mon, just say we're counting on her, would you? You're so stubborn, Mist."

"Quiet, you!" Mist loudly silenced him. She stared at Belle, then whispered with a smile, "You can cut swords, huh…? Fine, then. I'll believe you. I won't rely on you, though. You don't like relying on others and being relied on, right?"

"Not really…"

But in truth, Belle instantly liked Mist's liveliness.

*She couldn't be more different from Benet*, Belle pondered as she watched Benedictine talk to the other Froggies with an anxious expression.

Yet she failed to notice that, at some point, without even realizing it, she'd started referring to the Mermaid by her nickname.

The Collins were the first to notice it. Having taken care of the dead for as long as they had, they were the first to sense the miasma of death beginning to creep into the room.

“Sir Ginbuck…,” Tom Collins said, his expression alone telling the old man all he needed to know.

“Aye. Now then, shall we do some light warmin’ up?” he said animatedly, turning to face the nervous members of the band.

Ginbuck had the look of a seasoned veteran who’d faced the horrors of battle countless times without ever getting overwhelmed. He pulled out his sword like a baton.

“Take yer positions! The real battle’s gonna be after this, so for now, let’s get in tune!”

At the sound of the unknown number of savage beasts with blades like fangs who’d taken many lives, the band moved. They raced for the door, with Belle leading the charge. Adonis stood by her side and Kitty at her back, and both flanks had their swords drawn. Ginbuck was on his palanquin in the rear with Guinness beside him, who seemed to be desperately trying to keep his thoughts in order. And last behind even them was Cassis, who looked like he was struggling with his shame.

Water began seeping in from the gaps between the door and the walls. Moisture started gathering on the walls and ceiling, permeating the room. But they felt no fear—only elation. A shiver ran down Belle’s spine, and the band unified, their reasons for picking up their swords coming together as one.

*I’ve never felt this way before…*

Belle was overcome with a sense of intense joy at being part of this band.

*Here they come…!*

At Ginbuck’s signal, Belle lifted Runding overhead with glee. Kitty swiftly deployed his formulas, and calculations appeared all over the room—and the next moment, flames appeared around the band. It was common knowledge that fire was the most effective way to fight off dead soldiers, but even Ginbuck had to hold his breath and marvel at how swiftly the barrier had formed.

The flames stopped the influx of water and served as a signal for the rest of the group. The Solists all unleashed their attacks.

This was a new tactic for them, but under swift and precise command, they were able to strike at the dead rising from the water a step or two before they could do anything.

**EEERRREEEHHHWWWOOONNN…!**

Belle's blade howled viciously, sweeping through the dead lunging out of the water in a single swing. It was a powerful attack—it cut through some and smashed others, equally fearsome against the dead as the living.

At the same time, Adonis crossed his arms beside her—or so it seemed. In fact, he'd drawn two swords at once and took on a dual-handed fighting stance. He smashed his swords against the enemy, shattering them himself and scattering their fragments. He then discarded the shattered, useless swords and exchanged them for new ones.

Both flanks continued at that pace, and before long the dead stopped surfacing near the front line. One by one, the defeated dead soldiers were burned away by Kitty's creeping, dancing flames, with their movements communicating further orders to the Solists under his command.

The flames then parted, and Belle ran through the opening with Adonis close behind her. They secured the exit to the room, but just as they were cutting down the enemy soldiers coming through the door, hoping to established a foothold with the barrier—

"Get back!" Belle shouted, stopping Adonis and putting everything she had into a slash she slammed horizontally into the door.

She destroyed it—and not just the door. The wall there was blown off, showering rocks over the dead soldiers on the other side and blocking the water. It was a slash that exceeded anything Belle had ever performed. Taking an attack like that head-on would no doubt send anyone flying.

Belle exhaled loudly…and only came to when she noticed the rest of the band staring at her in surprise. With her sword still trembling from the shock wave, the fire spread to protect Belle, who was the first to emerge into the corridor. She stood there, as if enveloped by the flames, her sword shining silver. In dramatic contrast to Tiziano, who made the dead her playthings, Belle held

herself like a saint. Her appearance that didn't match any race made her stand out all the more to those present there.

They could win this. With this heaven-sent child, the band could emerge from this battle alive. Belle had become an indispensable member to everyone in the band, including Adonis at her side.

With the danger that would have come from going through the narrow door averted, Ginbuck ordered the band to leave the room and led them down the hallway. Belle followed Ginbuck's orders one after the next, be it clearing out the enemies in front of them or deploying the left flank to establish a position. She launched multiple charges, only to then be ordered to stop in her tracks and prioritize the barrier or check the distance with the right wing and confirm the situation with Adonis.

It was fulfilling. It felt like being in this band had helped Belle to draw out power she'd never even known she had. They were an incredibly skilled band that made good Schwertmusik. Belle ended up forgetting this was a mission she had to complete to depart on her journey and became absorbed in the fight itself.

But then Belle turned around and saw Ginbuck. His voice was excited, and his expression lively, but something was wrong. She stared into his eyes, and she felt hope as well as a chilling shadow of death. Her sword howled, conveying a terrifying resolve to Belle.

*Death, death, death…!*

That was the emotion swirling in the veteran Conductor's heart. And it wasn't anything as simple as him pondering how many people he would have to sacrifice to defeat Tiziano.

With an army of the dead at his beck and call and the water serving as her potent weapon, Tiziano would be a formidable foe they could only defeat by hitting her with everything they had. But even if they went that far to defeat her, would the dead return to their eternal slumber?

Ginbuck didn't think they would. Even after Tiziano's defeat, her madness would linger in the dead, spurring them to attack and devour the living. And by that point, the band would have exhausted all its strength and lack the power to face the scores of dead. Would they be able to defeat Tiziano with the strength they had left over?

Again, Ginbuck thought now. So he wasn't even considering survival. If he didn't squeeze every bit of power out of all of them, they didn't even have a chance of winning.

*You've gotta be joking…!*

Belle held back the urge to shout. The sixteen of them were all alone, trapped and isolated deep underground, so she knew that was the only way for their impromptu band to win. And her sword's howling told her that while Ginbuck was fiercely resolved, he had by no means given up.

If they were to beat the dead, they would have to fight like the dead—even if that meant resolving themselves to die. And indeed, the more resolved they became, the more this would prove they were still alive. They would overcome death through their resolve. This was a battle between the living on the verge of death and dead disallowed eternal slumber, a clash between life and death itself, Schwertmusik where both sides were pushed to the extreme.

Belle sensed his thoughts in a split second, in something closer to intuition than clearly defined thought. And so, with her eyes fixed on Ginbuck, Belle gave him a faint smile. A savage, greedy sort of smile that only the living could make.

She faced the next approaching enemy and swung her sword.

Aside from Belle, the first one to notice Ginbuck's resolve was Guinness, who stood by his side. This wasn't a matter that could be expressed with words to begin with, but a resolve that had to be experienced and ruminated on to grasp. So Ginbuck chose to remain silent and let his resolve naturally spread among the band.

*What do I do? What do I do…?*

Unlike Belle, Guinness feared death with all his heart. He didn't want to die in this place, no matter what. And the more he thought of it, the more he felt like he was already standing with one foot in the grave. This made him alert, keeping his thoughts keen. His body was awash with cold sweat, and with a tense expression, he considered countless ideas and innumerable threads of logic that he would have to refine into a single script.

"Is it ready?" Ginbuck suddenly asked him.

"Mostly…"

"Tell me. Keep it brief."

“Three acts.”

“Gimme a bit more.”

“We burn them all.”

Ginbuck raised an eyebrow. “Burn ’em, ya say?”

“Yes.”

Guinness gritted his teeth, his face pale as a sheet and a glint in his squinting eyes. Right now, it was a bloodcurdling sight.

“All right, then. Stay outta the fight. Just keep thinking.”

“I will.”

Ginbuck’s small sword whooshed through the air.

“Let’s get this show on the road, then.”

**Act 1—Scene 1**

As soon as they stepped out of the corridor, the space in front of them suddenly opened up. What looked like endless darkness stretched in every direction, and the sound of flowing water echoed all around. A large underground river flowed beneath them, and falling into it would mean being cut by Tiziano, from which there would be no saving.

The Collins siblings moved swiftly. Adonis had two older brothers, the eldest one being John and the younger one, Sandy. The two of them split up and activated the glowstone lamps near the corridor’s exit, causing two lines of pale light to stretch out into the dark. It was an elegant tourmaline bridge, wide enough for a goblet flower to cross. Its railings were made of glowstone, and their light made it seem like the bridge crossed through the darkness itself.

“This bridge’ll be our terrain,” Ginbuck said. “We won’t just cross it—but use it as our fortress!”

It seemed this was one of Guinness’s brilliant plans. The water currents beneath them were far too strong for the skeletons to use Rest au Rant to emerge from there. The ceiling was too tall, as well, and the moment they emerged from above, they’d just come crashing down to the floor. The Collins family called this huge stream the Bowels of the Earth, and the wide space on either side of the bridge meant their enemies couldn’t come from that direction, either.

All of this meant that the dead soldiers could only come at them from both ends of the bridge. Until now, the band had had

to contend with them attacking them from all sides at once, but now the tables had turned. Kitty rapidly began calculating, but his spell wasn't large enough to cover the entire bridge. In fact, it was just barely big enough to fit everyone in the band.

"Here they come," Belle said, aiming her sword at one side of the bridge.

Flames billowed in front and behind her. It was a small barrier, but it seemed to be enough to block the bridge and push back the waves of dead soldiers. Still, it wasn't as potent as before, so the duty of driving the dead soldiers back fell to the Solists.

But they, too, were gradually pushed back, and as the flames weakened in intensity, water began to flow at the Solists' feet. If things were to continue like this, it would just be an encore of when the top-dog band had first been attacked. The water was already reaching up to the knees of the Solists carrying Ginbuck's palanquin.

"Sir Ginbuck…?!" one of them cried out, gripped by the terror of not knowing when he might get dragged down into the water.

But then Ginbuck swished his small sword like a baton. That was their signal.

The Solists all drew back, retreating and—astonishingly—leaving Ginbuck behind. Even Guinness and Cassis fell back. The dead soldiers rushed the barrier, and countless swords shot up from below, thrusting toward Ginbuck.

But then, with perfect timing, Ginbuck rose up into the air, narrowly evading the attacks. The Froggies carrying him, boasting an ability to jump that matched Belle's, carried him up as they leaped away nimbly and landed behind the Solists.

The dead soldiers remained within the barrier, their target lost to them—and then a rumbling blast rang out. Fire exploded inside the barrier, forming a pillar of flame that shot all the way up the ceiling and burned all the dead who had rushed inside it to a crisp.

This was barrier inversion. At the same time, thick walls of flames re-formed around them, blocking both the dead soldiers and the water from the bridge for the time being.

"Go on, hurry it up!" Ginbuck urged the band with a flick of his sword.

But despite his current composure, the old man marveled at Guinness's plan of inverting the barrier, as well as the other clever schemes this Libretto had proposed to him while standing under the shadow of death.

The flames separated in two and spread to the other side of the bridge, shielding each of the two flanks. With that, the front line and both sides were fully integrated, moving like two separate bands and winding about like a two-headed serpent made of flames. As formations went, this one forwent all notions of common sense.

And once again, as the flames lost intensity, the band was forced to start edging back, the water flooded their feet. Yet this time, the distance wouldn't allow them to jump to safety.

The dead soldiers' hands and the swords they gripped began to rise up at the Solists' feet. But then they all froze over, as blades of ice rose up from below the water, skewering the dead soldiers that had started to emerge from the water and cutting them to pieces.

It was Benedictine's barrier. She covered the bridge's surface with a layer of thin ice before Tiziano's water rushed in. This was another of Guinness's schemes, taking the enemy's method of attacking them from below and turning it against them. Next, a wall of flames ran along the edge of the frozen floor, forming a dual-layered barrier.

But their goal wasn't to hole up here.

"It won't matter how many dead we burn to ashes if that water sprite won't show herself," Ginbuck said.

Guinness nodded desperately.

"How do we draw her out, then?"

"We pressure her, then give her an opening and make her think she can finish us off. And we make her angry. *Anger*. That'll be her motive to show herself."

Guinness was trembling, every hair on his body standing upright, like he was terrified of someone glaring at him. That was how scared he was of Tiziano.

"You're somethin' else, y'know."

Seeing Guinness come up with these plans despite his fear, Ginbuck grew even more impressed with the young Sheepeyes.

**Act 1—Scene 2**

The walls that seemed impregnable gradually started to fall apart. That was at least partially intentional, since holding on to this stalemate might give them a chance to rest, but it did nothing to improve their standing and only impacted their morale.

But there was also the fact that the dead soldiers continued charging at them without regard for defense, which was pushing them back. No matter how many times they set fire to their bodies or cut into their flesh and bone, there was no stopping their charge.

And before long, the dead soldiers' unique tactics were starting to gradually frighten the band.

Belle and Adonis, at the very front, were the first to realize the fearsomeness of these tactics. Adonis drove his sword into an enemy, who simply held their ground and let the sword pierce them. The undead soldier grabbed Adonis by the shoulders, while another grabbed onto his side, blocking his other sword by driving it into their body. More undead charged toward them, clearly intent on running Adonis through while fully prepared to skewer the undead holding his sword in check.

Adonis just managed to free himself, at the cost of tearing his clothes and losing his right glove. He was covered in wounds, but they were all shallow. Belle could tell the real problem was the loss of his glove, though.

That time she saw it for sure. Every time he swung a sword in his bare hand, the blade warped and bent like it was growing at a rapid pace. The change the swords went through wasn't actually all that fast, but through Runding's howling Belle could hear the swords scream as Adonis grabbed them.

They were wilting. As he swung them, they rapidly wilted away. Their screams were unusual and strange, completely unreflective of a sword and a Solist, as if Adonis's hands were making them rot and decay.

But Belle didn't have much of a chance to remain distracted by Adonis, either. A few dead soldiers charged at her at the same speed from multiple directions. It was an attack that wouldn't be possible for living soldiers because no matter how they swung their swords, they had to cut through their own allies to land a blow on her.

Belle dodged and deflected their blades, taking shallow wounds to her arms and flank. Whenever she evaded, their attacks ended up hitting the shoulders and heads of other dead soldiers. They were hurting each other left and right.

Some of them drove their swords into other soldiers' stomachs, trying to hit Belle by running their comrades through. Seeing that made Belle shudder as she smashed her enemies.

*She's toying with them…*

The dead soldiers' tactics didn't feel like they were just out of desperation, but rather as if Tiziano had just come up with it on a whim. She was playing with them like dolls. It made Belle sick. Still, this didn't mean the dead soldiers were holding back. Since they were already walking cadavers, they didn't care where or how much they were cut.

The fact that these tactics didn't drive the band into a complete panic was a miracle in and of itself. But in truth, Guinness had predicted Tiziano would do this and warned Ginbuck ahead of time, and the fact that this had helped to keep their band from losing their nerve was just one more thing that left Ginbuck surprised.

"I used to bash my toys together until they broke as a way of comforting myself, too," Guinness said in a way that seemed to sympathize with Tiziano.

"…Ya know, lad, yer givin' me more and more reasons to be scared of ya," Ginbuck replied. But it didn't sound like he was joking.

**Act 1—Scene 3**

The dead soldiers' unusual tactics showed no sign of stopping.

A few more appeared, their stomachs bulging and inflated to an unnatural size. Seeing this gave the Solists a very bad feeling. They all started hesitating to strike those soldiers, but they couldn't afford to stop attacking. Left with no other choice, they slashed through one of those soldiers, and as soon as they did, its wounds spilled out a large amount of water. The dead were using their own bodies to flood the place, which would let Tiziano summon more undead soldiers. Many among them had their bodies swollen up with more water, looking like they'd drowned to death.

One of the Froggies couldn’t take the sight, and he fell to his knees and vomited. The dead soldiers instantly slashed at him, which he dodged by rolling away, but they were upon him in moments. Cloud moved in to cover for him, but this was a bad decision that created a gap in the formation of the left flank.

And more unfortunately still, one of the dead soldiers thrust their blade forward, skewering one of their comrades from behind and cutting Cloud’s side where it emerged from their body.

“Cloud!” Mist screamed in terror.

Without a second thought, Belle moved the front line back and let the barrier handle the rest—but she didn’t make it in time. Cloud toppled over, and the Solist that had been sick moments ago stood up to cover for him, only to be stabbed through the shoulder, leaving Mist the only one standing. She alone couldn’t guard a position that required three people. A flurry of swords swung her way.

But then, all the swords drawing on Mist shattered. With a crisp sound, Benedictine pulled back the water-steel string of her bow, saving the Froggies. Each time she plucked the bowstring, three water crystals went flying, smashing the dead soldiers’ skulls and freezing them. But doing so left Benedictine wide open to attack.

“Benet!” Belle couldn’t help but call out.

But by the time she did, the horde of dead soldiers had already turned on the Mermaid. Staggered by their attacks, she continued firing her bullets, crushing one of their skulls to bits.

“I’m fine.”

Belle turned around and saw Benedictine’s face. The left half was stained red with blood, and a horrible sword cut ran straight down from her brow to the bottom of her cheek. Her left eye would never see again.

An outburst of anger spurred Belle on.

“How dare you!”

It was an explosion of emotion that sent the dead swarming at the weakened left flank flying, and the ones in the front were dismembered by Belle’s slash. Runding howled madly in Belle’s hands, a sight so terrifying even the dead soldiers seemed

bewildered by it, which showed Tiziano had momentarily shuddered at the sight of her.

But this only made the dead soldiers rage all the more. Belle stood alone, occupying a spot that required five Solists to defend, and no matter how desperately she kept swinging her sword, she couldn't keep up with their attacks. She was being forced back one step at a time—but then a projectile shot through the enemies, covering for her.

"Benet…!"

Belle turned around in surprise, only to find Benedictine grinning at her through her bloodied face.

"It's okay, Belle."

She was shooting her bullets of water with her eyes closed, aiming by using her hearing instead of her sight. Though this was enabled by the superior hearing true of all Mermaids, it was still a formidable feat.

But what truly surprised Belle was something else entirely. Benedictine's voice had become *masculine*. And not just her voice—her facial features and physique, while still retaining some of their androgynous charm, had taken on a masculine cast.

"I can feel the woman within me settling into slumber… Perhaps she'll never awaken again," Benedictine whispered as *he* fired a water crystal with his eyes closed.

Mermaids could change their gender as needed. However, it was a partially unconscious, physiological act, detached from one's own will. Perhaps it was the injury to Benedictine's face, or maybe her body had felt a need to adapt and become a more robust form and suitable for combat. Or perhaps, on some unconscious level, he'd decided that Belle should be the mirror his heart would reflect.

Either way, Benedictine had transformed into a male Mermaid capable of shooting through hearing rather than sight—and with that, the one-eyed sniper was born.

**Act 2—Scene 1**

"C'mon, we finally got some work for ya," Ginbuck told Cassis.

He asked him to use the sacred ash, which only priests were allowed to use, to heal the wounded. There was a total of five wounded Solists; the three Froggies, including Cloud; Sandy

Collins, the younger of Adonis's older brothers; and Benedictine. Once they'd been treated, everyone was far from fully recovered, but they were no longer in life-threatening danger.

The other members of the band turned down using the sacred ash out of concern for how much they had left, but the truth was that Cassis was the only one who'd remained unscathed. Even backliners like Ginbuck and Guinness had been injured.

"Now then, let's get started on Act Two," Ginbuck called out, gathering the band into formation.

They were in another room used by the Catacombs' wardens. Having given up on the bridge as their terrain, the battle was about to begin in earnest. This room was also a position they were able to fortify, but it meant they'd be stuck in place, so they elected to give up on this advantage and move freely about the sprawling caverns instead.

The Catacombs gave the impression of an endless maze, but the Collins family's guidance meant they were able to move through this complicated, branching, impossible-to-memorize labyrinth without getting lost.

"Sensing the wind or searching for flowing water sources are fine ways of tracking, but those methods aren't always reliable in the underground's darkness. And when that happens, all you can rely on is your own sense of being, born of the connection that surrounds you and binds you to the earth," Tom Collins said during one of the occasional short breaks they took. These words would go on to be a great revelation for Belle, but at this time, all she felt was surprise and wonder.

"Close your eyes and look within yourself. Sense the earth's presence to find your direction. Believe in the vision you glimpse within your heart, for it is an invisible intent that guides your existence. Grasping the power to see the unseen deep within the darkness is a difficult feat, but I believe that it is not a power unique to any race. Everyone is capable of it, and we all do so on some unconscious level."

Tom Collins, head warden of the Catacombs, spoke as he guided the band's way. This was the power of the living, held by the one who enshrined and handled death for many years. And using that power, he guided the band to sources of water around the caverns, which they sealed off. Following Guinness's script,

they placed seals on the water to dam it up and ward off the entrance to the lakes.

Belle couldn't imagine why they were going around doing this. Apparently, this was to gradually restrict the amount of water Tiziano could control, with the end goal being to completely cut her off from water. But she had no idea what their plan was after that.

When Guinness had finally finished his script, he simply looked at Ginbuck and Kitty with a ghastly expression and said, "It's done."

They didn't tell the Solists what the plan was, as Ginbuck had intentionally decided not to disclose the contents of the script. But Belle had seen the way his eyes had widened in shock upon seeing the script, which made it clear that whatever was written in it was far from conventional.

However, no matter how absurd the idea might be, it wouldn't come to anything if the band didn't have the strength to carry it out. Walking around the caverns was clearly exhausting the band, and this was especially true of Kitty, who was using multiple barriers to protect them. He didn't so much as whisper a word of complaint, but it was clear to all of them that he was incredibly exhausted. If he wasn't here, the band would have been that much weaker.

Guinness knew all this perfectly well, which is why his scheme had once again proven successful. Ginbuck and Benet, and occasionally Adonis, used their pipe, water-crystal bullets, and disposable swords to set up several barriers and illusions as they continued farther. Each individual ward was small and not very durable. In exchange, though, they were disposable like Adonis's swords, so whenever the dead soldiers tried to occupy them, the barriers could be reversed to burn them.

"Oh my, it seems I took on a bigger task than I first realized," Kitty said, appreciative of Guinness for giving him a chance to rest.

Yet despite all this, the Solists were gradually becoming gripped by a fear that the result of this was inevitable. Their arms and legs grew heavy with fatigue, they were running out of breath, and their wounds ached. And the thought that they would have to keep running through the dark like this for a long time

yet to come made their determination and excitement, that would normally push them to keep fighting, slowly wither away.

Seeing this, Kitty turned to Ginbuck.

“We’re almost at our limit…”

Ginbuck nodded, restlessly moving his baton sword. He gave it one long flick, to which the Collins family reacted.

“So it’s come to that…?” Tom Collins said with a pained expression. Still, he didn’t argue or disagree but just continued to lead the band along their predetermined path.

“Where are we going?” Belle asked.

Adonis replied with the same sour expression as his father.

“To a garden of death we call the Celestial Graveyard.”

**Act 2—Scene 2**

The shrill caws of bird flowers filled the air.

Before them bloomed a field of ink black raven flowers. They’d found themselves in a large dome-shaped cavern spacious enough to contain the entire castle. The ceiling above them was wide open, with the starry night sky visible above. Compared with the underground darkness, the night sky illuminated by Earth felt bright and kind. Everyone stopped to gaze up in wonder.

It was evident why this place was called the Celestial Graveyard.

Belle could tell the hole in the ceiling was for the raven flowers to fly off and inform the bereaved of their loved ones’ death. Ravens were a type of bird flower that took wing through the night sky.

Directly under the hole was a large, two-story mausoleum. Its white, chalky walls glowed under the pale indigo illumination of the Earthshine. And much to Belle’s surprise, it was in front of this mausoleum that Ginbuck disembarked from his palanquin. The old man who had led their band this far looked up at the structure in silence for a moment.

“This will be the terrain for our final battle,” he told them solemnly, turning around. “I’m sorry, Collins. I know you wanted to avoid this place if possible…”

Tom Collins shook his head. “You picked this place because you believed it would be instrumental to our victory. We will follow

your judgment.”

To the wardens of the Catacombs, the mausoleum was the sole site of worship within the caverns and was singularly the most sacred, inviolable domain. The dead were brought here for many rituals, after which they were buried somewhere in the vast Graveyard with a raven flower seed planted by their graves. It was here that the dead all returned equally to the earth, regardless of whether they were top dogs or underdogs, just or evil, and found their eternal rest.

Kitty began to set up a barrier around the area, as if to protect the slumber of the deceased. It was the largest formula he’d made thus far, producing a barrier big enough to cover the entire Graveyard and requiring quite some time to complete. As he was still working, the Collins family reported that the living dead were approaching.

The Solists all picked up their swords, clearly aware that was their final stronghold. Ginbuck got off his palanquin, allowing the three Froggie Solists to join the ranks, visible proof of his resolve.

Why this place, you might ask?

Firstly, it was significant in that it cut off Tiziano’s supply of dead bodies. This wasn’t the only cemetery, but Tiziano had dug up bodies from smaller sites. What’s more, the dead buried in the Celestial Graveyard were mostly occupied by skilled Solists. The idea of Tiziano breathing her madness into those bodies was a daunting one.

Conversely, the band coming here was a risk in that it informed Tiziano of the Celestial Graveyard’s location. This was, perhaps, the most daunting prospect of all. Additionally, the place only had one exit, which, while it made it ideal for intercepting the enemy, it also meant they’d backed themselves into a corner. The ceiling may have been open, but it was so high that even Belle couldn’t jump to reach it.

Ginbuck and Guinness didn’t explain the meaning behind that, even at this point. But this wasn’t just a passive line of defense born out of desperation. That much was clear from their expressions. The two men had their eyes fixed square on victory, and were constantly thinking, trying to find any chance to push them to victory. Belle could tell that much.

And so, when the dead soldiers appeared, the Solists weren't gripped by any doubt. They fought back fiercely under Ginbuck's command. However, the barrier defending the band as a whole was spread widely and thinly over the entirety of the Graveyard, and its size made it ineffective. The dead soldiers were able to penetrate it and start pushing the Solists back, and as the band was forced to retreat, the dead soldiers started digging up the corpses buried in the Graveyard and planted ominously glittering fragments of Tiziano's blade into them, instilling them with her madness.

The band would be surrounded if they didn't do something here. The only thing at their backs was the mausoleum, which by now was the only place they could run to. But if they ran in there, they would be even easier to surround. So what should they do? The Solists could only pray that Ginbuck and Guinness, standing behind them, would come up with some sort of a plan that would let them turn the tables.

However, a rumbling in the distance dashed their hopes. It was the sound of the water they'd sealed up and dammed throughout the caverns finally breaking free and overflowing, rushing straight toward the Graveyard. The rumblings of a nightmare.

**Act 2—Scene 3**

"Sir Ginbuck!" Mist raised her voice in a scream.

The Solists were overcome with a cold, paralyzing despair. Tiziano had likely gone around breaking all the seals stopping the water, and controlling its flow to direct it toward the Graveyard. The rumbling of the rushing water grew louder and closer.

That wasn't good. They had nowhere left to run. In mere moments, both they and the dead soldiers would be washed up by the tidal wave, with the only fate left to them to be picked off one by one by Tiziano's blade.

Ginbuck, however, remained stern. He didn't move, and his eyes stayed fixed on the battle ahead.

"Can I truly bear this burden? I, too, was meant to be buried here before long."

All he said were these baffling words.

"I don't want to bear this burden, either," Guinness said, trembling skittishly. "But this…is our only option…"

His eyes were glinting more than ever before with what came across as an unstable sort of madness.

“But I want to believe it’s worth it. That my life…has value…”

Ginbuck cackled.

“Aye, true enough.”

And then it arrived.

Countless raven flowers flapped into the air as the fearsome current of water rushed toward them, powerful enough to eat away at the rock walls by the entrance and washing over the entirety of the Graveyard. It consumed everything—the ground, the grave markers, raven flowers that were too slow to fly away, and scores of dead soldiers. It was like a gigantic beast hurtling toward the band, hell-bent on crushing it.

But then, Ginbuck flicked his baton sword, and its sound cut through the rumbling of the water.

“Fall baaaack!”

The only place they could retreat to was the mausoleum, and the Solists immediately turned around and ran. Although they’d been directly ordered to retreat, it looked like they’d just been routed.

“That’s right. Just like that…,” Guinness whispered keenly as he inched back, the other Solists running past him.

“You get going, too,” Ginbuck told the young Sheepeyes.

“Okay,” Guinness said, turning around and running into the mausoleum.

Kitty was already standing right in front of the entrance, his eyes moving between the old Reutelite and the rushing water as if he was carefully gauging something. Belle and Adonis turned around to look at Ginbuck, but—

“Go!” the old man exclaimed in a thundering voice, forcing them to reluctantly run away.

It looked like they’d all left their Conductor behind and escaped. Left alone, Ginbuck stood behind the band gazing at the wave of water rushing toward them—which was the crux of the plan he, Kitty, and Guinness had come up with to lure Tiziano out and turn the tables.

“We meet again, water sprite…”

Seeing the malevolent sword appear across from him, Ginbuck’s lips curled into an indomitable smile, and he swiftly

turned around and started sprinting toward the entrance of the mausoleum.

But just as he was inches away from stepping inside, the evil sword swung up from below him, slicing through Ginbuck's right leg above the knee. It was only then that Ginbuck realized the water had reached under his legs.

"…I forget how slow I am," he muttered self-deprecatingly, staring at his severed right leg.

His expression was one of relief. Letting it all end here meant he wouldn't have to bear the burden of the atrocity to come. He'd had a good run given his age. But as he muttered these words, he turned around to look at the mausoleum, and his expression instantly changed.

Belle and Adonis had come back for him.

"You fools! Forget about me!" Ginbuck shouted at them, his voice pained.

Dead soldiers surfaced from the water, but the sight of Ginbuck's injury infuriated Belle. Her anger was palpable, and with a single swing of her sword, she instantly shattered the dead soldiers' swords and sent them flying before slamming her heavy blade into the ground. It produced a shock wave that rattled the area, splashing away the surge of approaching water and scattering the dead soldiers attempting to emerge from its surface.

By the time she finished her attack, Adonis had already picked up Ginbuck, put him on his back, and run off.

"Run, ya fools!" the old man chided them.

Belle didn't need to be told twice. She followed Adonis to the mausoleum as fast as her legs would carry her. The door was already half-closed, but Kitty stood in front of it, his eyes fixed on Ginbuck.

With the last of his strength, the old Reutelite swished his baton sword—and right at that moment, something unbelievable happened.

The current of water surging toward the mausoleum suddenly vanished. It was like they'd snapped out of a nightmare. There were still some currents of water flowing into the Graveyard, but the rumbling of the surging water petered out instantly.

And where just moments ago was water—it now blazed with crackling flames.

**Act 3—Scene 1**

“Whoa…,” Belle couldn’t help but murmur, amazed at what had just transpired.

She was still sprinting into the mausoleum, but all of a sudden, everything around her had turned to blistering flames. The Graveyard, the dead soldiers, the flowers—even the flowing water had been enveloped by the conflagration.

“Hurry!” Kitty called out to her.

Belle didn’t need any encouragement. With all the water now turned to flames closing in on her in every direction, Belle dived through the mausoleum’s door for dear life. The door swiftly closed behind her, already covered with numerous formulas of Kitty’s, clearly there to keep the flames at bay.

“Talk about cheating death…,” Belle said as her legs carried her up the stairs.

“Ya could have just left me there, but ya had to go stick your nose where it doesn’t belong,” Ginbuck said sternly as Adonis carried him on his back.

“You don’t get to go down in a blaze of glory,” Adonis replied solemnly. “Not after pulling off something like that.”

As they climbed up to the rooftop, the remaining members of the band looked around, dumbfounded. All around the rooftop were formulas meant to stave off the burning inferno and barriers set by Benedictine. Looking up, they had a clear view of the open ceiling of the cavern, through which they could see the night sky. This place seemed to be an observatory of sorts.

Looking across the mausoleum’s surroundings from afar, they saw everything burning bright red. Something fell onto the rooftop with a flutter—burning raven flowers.

It was a literal firestorm that burned through the sky, and it made Belle shudder. Never before had she been so acutely aware of just how many different, terrifying shades the color red could have. The blaze was that intense.

“So this was what the first barrier that covered the entire Graveyard was for…?” Tom Collins asked rhetorically. His voice

made it sound as if the sheer depth of his sorrow had deadened his heart to the pain.

“Aye, that’s right,” Ginbuck uttered in response as his severed leg was being treated.

Their plan had begun when they’d sealed off the water all over the catacombs. They’d done this to make it look like they were cutting Tiziano off from the water, but in truth, they had intentionally made the seals and wards weak and fragile so they’d break easily to any blow. However, at the same time, they had set the seals to display an illusion once broken—an illusion of a flood.

It was an incredibly convincing, immersive illusion that felt more like water than *real* water. By overlaying them on top of the actual streams of water, they became realistic enough to fool even a Mermaid’s senses.

The many meticulously placed seals would then guide all the water currents to the Celestial Graveyard, creating the illusion they were sweeping over the band.

What’s more, the plan to make it seem like they’d cut Tiziano off from her supply of dead soldiers only to then burn away all the dead, including the ones still slumbering in the soil, wasn’t the sort of plan a sane mind would come up with. The sheer number of raven flowers spoke to how many bereaved families were still waiting for the return of their loved ones, unaware of their passing.

No one could anticipate or plan for such a blasphemous act. What this plan had done was take this uninterrupted tradition honoring the dead, the pillars of the past that supported the present, and put it to the torch.

“In order to ensure our own survival, we burned the dead, along with this place of worship…” Tom Collins closed his eyes morosely.

“But you still have raven flower seeds. So long as you have those, you can grow more,” Adonis said quietly, his back turned to his family.

“We have lost much today. That much is for certain.” Tom Collins eventually opened his eyes and nodded. “But we have not lost ourselves. Painful though this may be, I am still here. That is something I must accept…,” he whispered, gazing at the fire.

“I can’t accept this…,” Mist said, glaring at the towering flames. “This is unforgivable…”

She repeated it over and over, and each time, a wave of sorrow washed over Guinness’s expression. The fact that he’d been the one to come up with this plan agonized him. Throwing himself off the roof and meeting the same fiery demise as the dead soldiers almost seemed preferable to this…

Belle could feel Guinness’s mental state, as well as everyone else’s here. It was like their emotions were flowing directly into her body through Runding’s howls. She felt sorrow. Anger. Awe because things had come to this. Relief that perhaps they might be saved. A mixture of joy and pain at the fact that they were still alive that burned within her like fire.

That, more than anything else, was proof she was still alive.

**Act 3—Scene 2**

She was furious.

They had used illusions and deceptions to turn the natural protection water afforded her as a Mermaid into a weapon against her. It encroached upon her maddened heart. It was water—not life itself—that was the final refuge of peace for her heart. The only source of a mother’s comfort that embraced her still. And they had taken that water away from her. She had nothing left to mother her. She would have to fight with her life on the line to reclaim it.

“Here she comes…,” Ginbuck said, watching over the exit of the observatory.

Without having to be ordered to, the Solists assumed their formation. Three dead soldiers approached them, enveloped in fire. Their bodies were inflated like balloons, bloated to the point where their facial features were indiscernible. They opened their mouths, from which copious amounts of water gushed out.

“So she did come at us like this,” Ginbuck said, flicking his baton sword to adjust their formation.

“Yeah. I guess it could be said that they are her last remaining water sources…,” Guinness said, finally drawing his sword.

With his right leg lost, Ginbuck couldn’t ride his palanquin and instead sat on the spot. He didn’t have anywhere left to go anymore anyway. This truly was the final act.

The dead soldiers burst with a pop. Their bodies tore apart, releasing three red streams cascading toward the band.

A voice was raised in a battle cry—not one particular voice, but a collective howl as they fought back. The red streams to their left and right summoned more dead soldiers as they flowed, and the two sides clashed. Swords snapped and went flying and bodies were crushed as the horrific sounds of the firestorm pierced the underground and the heavens, life and death.

The red stream running through the center didn't summon any soldiers, but simply extended toward Ginbuck. The old man had invited it to do so, hence why he'd spread out the left and right flanks wider than necessary. The blade appeared in all its warped, evil splendor and bloodlust as it rode the current straight toward Ginbuck. No one was in a position to stop it, and Ginbuck beckoned it closer. They had to ensure Tiziano showed herself here, even at the cost of their Conductor's life, or all of this would have been for naught.

"That's it! Come get me!" Ginbuck shouted.

He stood up, balancing himself on his remaining right leg. With only his baton sword in hand, he stood there like the very image of a man attempting to achieve something even if it meant his death.

But it didn't come to that. The Froggies forced their way to the middle current. The many emotions they felt through this battle reached the point of bursting, spurring them to move and act. Ginbuck shouted at them to stop, but there was no deterring them now.

"If only it wasn't for you!" Mist shouted.

It was this cry that guided their swords. As one, the Froggies all unflinchingly attacked the distorted demonic blade. They clashed head-on—and a red spray erupted around them, dying the white floor with crimson spots. Tiziano's sword had swept through them all in the blink of an eye, but their spirit as the living resolved to death repelled the red stream of water.

"Mist! Cloud! Toady!"

Ginbuck called their names in a shriek.

"Snow! Coral! Flows!"

All he could do was call out to them. Mist got up before him, a horizontal gash across her stomach, and faced the stream that

changed direction to charge at them again. Her sword was already half-broken, and her expression was pained. But even in the face of death, she was determined to make Tiziano pay.

But then Guinness stepped forward and stood in front of Mist, his sword held up to protect her.

“You’re not dying here!” Mist called out to Guinness’s back. “I won’t let you die! Not after coming this far, not after all this…!”

Yet her voice was drowned out by the clashing of metal, gone without being heard. Both sides attacked, and the red current flowed and splashed up just as Guinness swung his sword down.

Guinness’s left arm was severed and swallowed up by the red current. A scream erupted from Guinness’s lips—everything below his left elbow was missing. He wasn’t screaming because of the pain, though, but because the stream had left him behind and was rushing toward Ginbuck with terrifying speed.

There was no one left to protect Ginbuck. Belle and Adonis were occupied on each of the flanks, desperately fighting to deflect the other two currents of water, and couldn’t reach him in time. The current was too fast, and Ginbuck swung up his baton sword with a glint in his eyes.

But just then, he moved. The one man who had remained completely unscathed in the battle thus far—the masked priest, Cassis. He spread his arms wide, standing in Tiziano’s way, as if to embrace her bloodlust. And just as it seemed like the two would meet, dead soldiers drenched in blood like newborns emerged from the water and their blades bit into Cassis like the fangs of a beast.

Cassis’s body was run through with swords that tore into his flesh. Ginbuck could only watch on in disbelief as the weapons burst out of the priest’s back. The ivory mask covering his face slipped off and fell to the marble floor with a clatter, exposing black fur. It was a masculine Cateyes face, and blood leaked from his lips. Even with his body so run through by the swords, Cassis didn’t so much as let out a groan.

He only raised his voice once he’d completely given himself over to death and gripped his sword. It was, indeed, a roar—an explosion of his life condensed into a single moment, and at that time he was able to break the divine chains holding his sword in its sheath.

Cassis swept his blade, cleaving through the dead soldiers stabbing him and sending them flying. He continued his attack, deflecting Tiziano's blade that came flying from behind the dead soldiers, his sword shattering the tip of hers.

A shrill shriek filled the air. Tiziano was there, clad in her silver water robe. Cassis's savage counterattack had finally knocked her body out of the stream of water. At this point, Belle and the others had destroyed the dead soldiers in their way and were charging at Tiziano, who was now fully exposed.

As they did, Cassis succumbed to his stab wounds and crumpled to the floor in front of Ginbuck, who sat there in shock. A final breath leaked from the unmasked priest's lips. Guinness kneeled next to him, as did Mist, who leaned against Guinness due to her injuries.

"…Was there no other way?" Guinness asked.

Cassis looked at Guinness, whose features had formed into a smile. Having accepted death, the priest had finally been able to draw his sword of his own will for the first time, hence this final smile.

"You fool…," Mist said, her voice thin and trembling.

Cloud walked over to him and placed a hand over Cassis's remains.

"Thank you."

Cloud then picked up his sacred ash and moved to treat the injured.

"Am I going to end up like this, too…?" Mist whispered blankly, hugging Guinness's remaining right arm.

The sacred ash had somehow managed to seal her wounds, but fragments of Tiziano's blade had bonded to the injuries, infesting them like parasites. The fragments gave off a faint glow as they gradually sank deeper into her wounds. There was no telling how long it would take them to invade her entire body.

And it wasn't just Mist; Guinness's left arm and the injuries of Cloud and the other Solists had all been infested in the same way.

"Conductor. I suggest we all climb to the edge of the roof," Guinness said, his voice restrained. This was his final show of resolve.

If those cut by Tiziano risked becoming dead soldiers, this would give them the option to cast themselves into the fire of

their own volition before their individual wills were lost to them.

Guinness could feel Mist trembling where she held his arm. She clung to his chest.

“I never imagined I’d end up with a guy like you next to me at a time like this…,” she whispered.

But Mist’s whisper was drowned out by a shout from Ginbuck.

“Don’t get ahead of yerself, whelp!” the old man hollered, his voice lacking in patience. “Ya did well… But ya don’t have to go that far. ’Sides, that water sprite can only control the dead. If yer all still alive when we shatter her sword, victory is ours. We just need to wait that long. Don’t just give up and leave everythin’ in the hands of those who can still fight.”

Guinness realized the shadow of death had completely left Ginbuck’s face. The Sheepeyes chuckled—he was so relieved it was almost pathetic. He was laughing, and on the verge of tears at the same time. He felt his body go limp as all the tension drained from it.

But before that, a thought came to mind.

“Mist, take this…”

Guinness handed his sword to the girl on his arm. She looked at him, silently asking what he meant.

“I want you to raise this sword in my stead. I’m not strong enough to raise a sword with just one arm. But if you use it, it’ll be spared from wilting away from neglect.”

It was a lily-steel sword, a material that was rare and hard to come by outside the walls. Mist stared at its white glow for a moment, dazed. It would be a difficult sword for her to raise.

“What is this spell…?” she asked, her finger tracing the spell on the sword’s side: **EVREN**.

“It’s the most important word among the Sheepeyes. Courage and cowardice. Lacking either and having only one isn’t enough to grow… That’s what it means. I’ve taught it plenty of cowardice, so this time, I want you to teach it courage.”

Mist let out a chuckle.

“Like when I yelled at you?”

“Please…”

Guinness’s body slumped, but this time Mist hurriedly caught him in her arms.

“Is he dead?” Cloud asked flippantly.

“No, he’s not, you idiot!” Mist hollered, hugging Guinness and his sword like she was making it clear she wouldn’t let him die.

Cloud grinned and shrugged.

“About time you *actually* received a gift from a man.”

Mist smiled, looking as if a burden had finally been let down from her shoulders. And with that expression, she turned her gaze to the final confrontation unfolding before her eyes.

**Act 3—Scene 3**

She could only be described as malformed.

As Tiziano stood there, finally exposed, Belle just stared in amazement. She wore her robe, which looked like a burial gown, but was otherwise naked. Yet all over her smooth, beautiful skin was the same flickering light given off by her sword—and by the God Tree.

Her sword, extending from the fold of her robe, was pitch-black. It was covered in so much dark blood that it almost looked like part of the blade. The flickering lights running through it were like stars sparkling in a dark-red sky, and its colors extended to the end where she gripped it.

No—in truth, it was hard to distinguish the sword from Tiziano’s hands. The sword had amalgamated both her arms, and it was impossible to tell where the blade ended and Tiziano’s fingertips began. Steel, flesh, and bone were melded together, pulsating as they tried to consume each other.

*The sword’s eating away at its wielder…?*

It was an unthinkable prospect. Belle couldn’t imagine what made such a thing possible. All the while, droplets of blood dripped from the sword’s broken tip, shattered from Cassis’s counterattack. The sword was bleeding red—a sword that was both steel fruit and the flesh of its own wielder…

Though warped, the spell upon its blade was still just barely legible—**LEGNA**.

“Legna, the Envoy… A pitiful word at this point,” Adonis whispered.

This was the spell of the mad Solist who had loved God and been deposed for their love. Who had grown to hate God and lost the balance in their heart and, in the end, had tried to become a God themself.

A sharp whooshing wound cut through the air, and Adonis held two swords in his hands. Belle pondered this.

*Why is that…?*

It was a question that had been nagging at Belle. Using a sword with one hand was one thing, but using two swords with two different attributes in both hands was a feat Belle couldn't even imagine. It required a fearsome amount of skill to pull off.

Adonis was incredibly talented, so what had happened to make him unable to raise a sword of his own?

Tiziano and Adonis. The two faced each other, a woman consumed by her weapon and a man who consumed swords, and to Belle's eyes, it looked like there was some sort of strong force of destiny binding them together.

It wasn't just Belle and Adonis doing battle with Tiziano, either; Tom Collins and Benedictine were there, and Kitty was backing them up with his flames. There were also the other Solists who, despite being heavily injured, were still alive and watching the battle.

It was five against one.

Yet of them all, Adonis's bloodlust in particular made Belle's hair stand on end. That bloodlust seemed to stem from a deep-seated connection between him and Tiziano—something Belle couldn't discern the depths of that made her heart throb painfully.

*What is this feeling…?*

But Belle rapidly quieted her wavering heart and gripped her sword tightly. More dead soldiers were appearing. The blood dripping from the broken tip of Tiziano's sword had only formed a tiny puddle, but the dead were starting to emerge from it.

*"—Adoniiiiis…!"*

Tiziano grinned, calling out his name in an eerie tone. It was a ghastly smile. To Belle, it looked like the expression of someone hell-bent on revenge—yet also as if she was thanking him.

"Finally run out of toys to play with?" Adonis said, his lips also curled up into a daring, provocative smile.

Only a dozen or so dead soldiers had emerged from the puddle, and to the Solists who'd fought countless scores of them by now, this seemed like an insignificant number they had to overcome if they were to be victorious.

Adonis charged ahead fiercely, closing to striking distance in the blink of an eye. Both sides swung their swords, clashing with a mighty clanging of steel as they attacked furiously, stabbing and slashing in an exchange of life and death.

Adonis was unstoppable. He pierced through and tore apart the dead soldiers, swapping out his broken swords for new ones time and time again. At one point, he even held two swords in each hand, discarding a total of four swords to cut into Tiziano.

*He's amazing!*

The two let out screams as they struck at each other. The sword in Adonis's left hand snapped in two, and he immediately thrust out with the sword in his right hand, threw the broken sword at his opponent, and used that hand to draw a new sword. Next, his right sword was shattered and tossed away, only to be dodged, and a swipe from his left sword was deflected as he drew another sword and furiously attacked her.

He left a shallow wound across Tiziano's throat, but that was all. She swung down at Adonis, who blocked the attack by crossing his swords. All of this happened in moments. In that time, how many blows had they exchanged and dodged? It was a truly spectacular performance. Belle intended to help him, but she ended up rooted in place, unable to get involved.

There was no stopping this. The mortal combat ensuing between Adonis and Tiziano was at this point the main performance, with the battles between the other Solists and the dead soldiers playing second fiddle. In the flow of the battle, if either one of them were to beat the other, that side would soon swallow up their opponents.

*We can do this…!*

Belle was the first to grasp the flow of their battle. Since she used its fragments to manipulate the dead soldiers, Tiziano's sword was duller than it would normally be. If Adonis could just catch her by surprise, he could definitely beat her. But how would they do that?

Adonis showed Belle the answer as if it was all quite obvious. Having shattered his swords one after another, the ground at his feet was covered with broken blades. And then, suddenly, Adonis kicked up one sword lying on the ground, causing its tip to gouge directly into Tiziano's stomach. She screamed, and her

movements became dull. Having been focused on blocking attacks from both of Adonis's hands, this attack struck at her blind spot.

If Adonis were to fight Belle with this method…would she be able to block it? As she watched them fight while staving off the dead soldiers, Belle couldn't help but ponder that question with fear and awe.

But surprisingly enough, Tiziano counterattacked even after that injury. She'd been stabbed in her stomach and chest with multiple swords, reaching as deep as bone, yet despite that, she continued attacking Adonis. He once again crossed his swords to block her attack, but one of them broke, its fragments leaving a shallow cut on his shoulder. As Tiziano followed up with another attack, Adonis hopped nimbly back and discarded the broken sword that shattered upon impact with the floor.

It was gruesome. No other word could suffice. One side used what felt like an infinite number of swords as if they were disposable weapons, while the other stood smirking like she felt no pain no matter how many weapons injured her. The smooth, naked skin beneath her funeral-gown-like robe was streaked with red, creating a sight that was both terrifying and beautiful, truly worthy of someone called the demonic priestess.

"I see. Who's puppeteering who?" Adonis whispered mysteriously.

He let out another intense scream and charged to stab the woman standing over the puddle of blood. Tiziano's body swayed strangely, and she held up her sword to take Adonis's attack head-on. Adonis's own speed was his own worst enemy—he couldn't stop, so instead he thrust his other sword forward. The sword sunk into Tiziano's side, moving diagonally through her body and piercing all the way through her shoulder.

For a moment, it looked like Tiziano had embraced Adonis as he'd stabbed her. The two stood close enough to peer into each other's eyes. Belle couldn't even guess what they saw in each other's gazes in that long moment.

But then, with a hissing sound, the red puddle they were standing on swallowed them up. Tiziano dived into her own pool of blood, taking Adonis with her.

"Adonis!"

It was consuming magic. Tiziano had taken a leaf out of Adonis's own book and used the blind spot at his feet to get him. The two were lost within the puddle, in another dimensional space detached from this one.

Belle smashed through the dead soldiers around her and went after the two of them out of sheer impulse. As she did, she bashed and slashed any dead soldiers that gave pursuit. She was panicking—if she followed Adonis in there, Benet and the others would have to handle more dead soldiers without her, so she tried to thin their ranks as much as possible before she did.

That said, she couldn't take her time, either. She prayed Adonis would be safe. Scolding her own fatigued arms, Belle matched her heart to her sword, unleashing more of the power contained in Runding. Yet this just exhausted her all the more.

"Prepare yourself!" Kitty shouted.

It was sudden—an order to do or die, directed at both friend and foe alike. The flames raged indiscriminately. This was their tactic to burn everything away, and the dead soldiers let out voiceless screams as the inferno overtook them. As it did, Benet put all his power into setting up barriers to defend himself, Tom Collins, and the others.

And then—

**EEERRREEHHH…!**

Runding howled, cleaving a path through the sea of flames. Belle didn't even realize she could do that—the fact that her sword could break down formulas was something that left even her shocked. As Belle put her faith in her sword and charged into the fire, Kitty followed right behind her.

"Hmm. Indeed, even flames so intense cannot stand in my beloved's way…"

He narrowed his red eyes, like he was gauging Belle's capabilities. His long ears standing upright, he followed after Belle, who dived into the blood puddle.

"Heavens!"

And with a prayer, he jumped in after her.

It was a space that reminded her of something.

She found herself dazed, despite herself… There was something familiar about this place. It was a red world with no

sense of direction or up and down—a vast expanse of crimson-glowing darkness that she was floating in. Any who were swallowed here would become the living dead when they were spat back out into reality. This place looked fitting enough, given that fact.

*Somewhere, at some time, I was in a place that felt like this…*

She wondered to herself, asking a question that wasn't a question. Because as soon as the thought came to mind, the answer surfaced.

*The stone egg…*

Those words drifted across her thoughts, then trailed off. It was how she'd come into this world, but by now, there were hardly any fragments left. Just what was the egg? What did it mean? Belle had never known, and she had to search for a way back to her homeland without any knowledge of it to guide her.

But then Belle suddenly remembered why she was fighting. Her hands tightened around the grip of her sword, and she stood as one who opposes this sweet space. It was then that Belle felt how suddenly her senses of balance and direction stabilized.

"Kitty…"

Her eyes widened. Her feet were standing firmly on something—a meticulously written formula. It wasn't limited to just the floor—the calculation spread out in a square, granting her a sense of clear up and down. It was like the spell had introduced order to this vast, boundless space. Belle was positively impressed.

"Heh-heh… Determining the vertical and horizontal, position and direction, time and place. Those are the very essence of mathematics," Kitty said boastfully.

He looked less like he was pleased with himself and more like a child showing off a toy he'd made, with an innocent mixture of bashfulness and pride. It was hard to match that image with the person who, just minutes ago, had unleashed an inferno that would have consumed their allies alongside the dead soldiers.

*He really is a strange guy.*

Belle chuckled and held her sword tight. The sound of clashing metal was audible somewhere in the distance.

"Over there…," Kitty whispered.

It happened right as Belle turned her blade in that direction. In between the edges of the square calculation, she could see it. Adonis was standing on a sword, using its hilt as a foothold for both his feet. It disappeared into thin air halfway along its length, and where the blade vanished, she could see fangs carved with spells holding the sword in place.

Bamboo was holding it in place from another space.

One shattered sword already floated near Adonis. Alongside it were droplets of blood that had leaked from his wounds, forming roundish bubbles. Belle realized that with Bamboo providing him footing, he couldn't draw any more swords. Adonis discarded his left-hand glove, his right having already been lost.

And then he touched the surface of his one remaining sword with his bloodied fingers. Belle couldn't see it from this distance, but he was using the blood on his fingers to write something on the blade's surface.

"That's…," Belle exclaimed as he held the sword aloft.

It was Perrier's sword. A treasured, magnificent weapon passed down in his family for generations. It was long and firm, its blade sharpened to a keen edge with a shining spell carved into it.

**OUROBOROS**

The Eternal—such was the meaning of this ancient text from the Age of the Gods. Many old, respected Cateyes families favored this word, and Perrier's family was likely one such case. It was proof of the family's generations of combat, and unexpectedly enough, this word was fitting to be the one that would put an end to this battle between life and death.

And carved into the sword at the end of the word was Adonis's Question mark. It was the symbol of the Skeptic, but how had he managed to carve it into the blade? He couldn't have etched it into the steel simply by tracing it with his finger.

"It seems everything his hands touch begins to wilt," Kitty said, calmly analyzing the situation. "And things wilt especially fast the more he wishes to touch them."

He didn't question the possibility of such a thing but simply fixed his gaze on the reality unfolding before his eyes, seeing things as they were and putting all doubt aside.

"How is that possible…?" Belle asked.

“We just witnessed the metal wilt from the touch of his finger.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

Still unconvinced, Belle held her tongue and watched. Tiziano had suddenly appeared, swimming through the red space toward Adonis with incredible speed, like a bird gliding through the air.

She unleashed a powerful attack at him, but Adonis dodged by just barely moving his body. The tip of the sword drooped and he just barely kept his footing on the hilt of the sword Bamboo was supporting.

Tiziano swam freely through the red space, unleashing slashes from every direction. It was unbelievable—as Kitty and Belle watched, Adonis dodged every single slash. On occasion, Tiziano landed some shallow cuts on him, but her blade never dealt any fatal blows. It was like his body was flexibly bending out of the blade’s way, but what Adonis was actually doing was kicking against the hilt he was using as footing to land on another hilt Bamboo produced.

Adonis hadn’t swung his sword yet, only used it to deflect any swipes he couldn’t evade. He was dodging her like a ghost, visible to the eye but intangible to the touch. His movements were gradually starting to adjust to Tiziano’s. And then he jumped—soared, even.

He unleashed a slash that matched Tiziano’s movements perfectly, his blade cutting into her gently. It was like a caress of the blade. Tiziano pulled away from him, and a moment later, her left hand was severed at the elbow, her sword dangling from it.

It was a graceful attack, one that Adonis devoted all his might and skill to. The more his face tensed up gravely, the more limber, supple and graceful his movements became. He hopped from sword to sword, discarding each one as footing as he alternated between offense and defense.

He cut Tiziano’s face, tearing through its left side. Following that, he cut off her right leg, which separated from her body with the unpleasant sound of bone being cleaved.

“He’s getting her back, tit for tat…,” Belle whispered, horrified.

Adonis was inflicting the same injuries on Tiziano that she had dealt to Guinness, Benedictine, and Ginbuck, namely the more fatal ones. He cut off an ear, tore open her stomach, then stabbed

her through the chest. Belle felt like she had to look away from this gruesome sight.

However, Tiziano terrified her even more.

She was smiling. With a ghastly grin, she continued engaging Adonis in this dance of death, like she was enjoying being cut into. And perhaps she really was deriving pleasure from this. Horribly enough, it seemed likely, because the more Adonis cut Tiziano's body, the more warped it became. Her severed arm was consumed by her sword, becoming a part of the weapon. Layers of what looked like mineral branches sprouted out of her wounds, flickering spells on their surface.

"That sword, it's just like the God Tree…," Belle finally said aloud.

She hadn't been able to say this in the presence of Cassis, the priest.

"A cancerous sword," Kitty affirmed with a tone of certainty. "Through fatal illness, it becomes the host of a false god… Or perhaps it would best be called a crucible for a fabricated soul."

"What's a false god…? And why is Tiziano looking more and more like the king? Is this her imitating God, too?"

"You sound just like him. Nothing but questions," Kitty said teasingly, which made Belle frown. "You'll understand in due time. The war between the ancient false god and the people of paradise is already underway."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand."

"Nor should you. Even in Denariland, the false god is the ultimate enigma wrapped in countless riddles…"

"You're not making any sense."

Kitty shrugged. "Either way, we should decide on how we will help him from here. If this continues, Adonis will be the one cut down. Of course, I imagine he'll struggle to get a final chance at her before that happens."

"I'll do it," Belle said, her voice firm and resolute.

Kitty didn't ask what she meant by "it." He simply did as Belle asked, creating an opening in one of the walls of calculation surrounding them.

"We haven't much time. With one side of the calculation missing, this structure won't last long."

Belle nodded wordlessly. She assumed an unusual stance, holding Runding in an underhand grip, with its tip aimed at the two combatants.

“I believe in you,” she said, then gently kissed the sword.

Adonis suddenly let out a sharp gasp, and Tiziano rapidly closed in on him. At that moment, Belle simultaneously unleashed all the strength she’d been storing up.

**EEERRREEEHHHWWWOOONNN…!**

With that, Belle *threw* her sword.

Tiziano swung her blade, and just then, the colossal sword rushed her from the side with all the intensity of a bolt of lightning. It had no wielder—the sword alone ran into her, like it had been discarded.

Tiziano and Runding clashed, and the power stored within the sword was unleashed in an explosion that blew off half of Tiziano’s body. There was no skill to this attack—if the sword had had a wielder when it had released this dangerous power, it would have blown off their arm.

The next moment, Adonis’s sword came down on Tiziano’s head. As Belle expected, Perrier’s sword cracked her skull and sliced into her brain.

That had been Adonis’s last sword. He couldn’t draw a new one, and his eyes widened in shock as he saw Tiziano’s features retain their demonic grin even as she stood, her body half-ravaged.

But then, something unbelievable happened. As Adonis saw Tiziano’s blade cutting through the air toward him, he caught a glimpse of another sword. Belle had swooped down between them, Runding in hand, despite having discarded it moments ago, to come down on Tiziano’s sword from above.

This wasn’t a technique of any kind. The sword Belle had sent flying had returned to her hand like it had been pulled back by gravity. It was a feat only achievable by a sword and a wielder who truly resonated with each other as one, a stunt only possible for a person who felt their sword’s pain as if it were their own. This was, in fact, the secret behind how Belle was able to freely handle such a heavy sword regardless of how strong she was.

Tiziano’s demonic smile froze over in shock. To Adonis’s eyes, it looked like a flash had run through both Tiziano and her sword

in a straight line—but in reality, she'd been cut through. The water-steel robe slipped away from Tiziano's right shoulder, and at the same time, the amalgamation of her arm and her sword was cleaved in two.

Blood spattered—from the sword rather than her flesh. Only a weak trickle spurted from her actual shoulder, and this was followed by the emergence of branches reminiscent of those of the God Tree, but they rapidly began to wilt.

A raspy breath left Tiziano's lips. To Belle, it sounded like a child letting out its first cry. Tiziano looked at Adonis, her eyes bright with surprise, like she'd just awakened from deep slumber and returned to reality. And then…

"Adonis…?" Tiziano called out to him peacefully.

The Cateyes man was frozen in place. She reached out to him, her arms no longer shaped like hands anymore. But she did so, stirring feebly, as if she couldn't see what she had become.

Her face, shattered and bloodied from the blow to her skull, softened into a gentle, pained smile. And seeing that gentle expression, a doubt crossed Belle's mind.

*Was she being controlled by her sword, just like those soldiers…?* Belle wondered, watching Tiziano's severed sword floating through the space.

This sword had once been shattered, yet somehow it had been restored and turned against its wielder. That was the conclusion Belle came to comparing this sight with Adonis's story. And that thought made the situation that much sadder. The idea that a single sword was capable of producing such a gruesome tragedy was frightening…

"It's fine now, Tiz," Adonis said, his voice gentler than Belle had ever heard it. She looked at Adonis with surprise. For some reason, her heart throbbed painfully hearing him say this.

Adonis reached out, grabbing the arm that he himself had severed, and pulled Tiziano into an embrace. He held her with his bare hand, his smooth fingers comfortingly caressing her ravaged body.

"It's fine now even if my hands touch you…"

He trailed off there, his expression turning increasingly more pained. Tiziano said nothing—her eyes stared off into space, bereft of the light of the living. Only a fragment of her soul

remained like a wisp of smoke, a lingering trail of her existence still felt, but even that would soon fade like mist.

Adonis's tired expression suddenly became filled with fear. His fatigue deepened at once, but it wasn't the satisfied, fulfilled tiredness of one who'd fought to the bitter end.

"…I'll plant a seed in your body," Adonis said, the regret clear in his voice. "I'll tend to it so it may bloom into a beautiful raven flower."

He said this like he was hoping that in so doing he could escape the guilt that would come.

Had his words reached the ears of the dead?

And so the Mermaid who had caused this flurry of madness passed on with a tragic smile on her lips. Belle tried to say something, but she couldn't find the words. Her heart ached with anguish. She could feel, all too vividly, that she couldn't go where Adonis was—that the woman's dead body blocked her path. Right now, he wasn't able to see her or anything else. All that remained was a plaintive light, fiercely condemning something deep within.

With the woman's dead body between them, Belle and Adonis simply floated on in the crimson womb.

*To be continued in Volume 2.*

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