I Surrendered My Sword as a Mage for a New Life

Shin Kouduki

Art: necömi

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Camilla Hennefeld
Soma Neumont
Sophia Neumont
Nina Kanzaki
Albert Ottomeyer
Lina Neumont


He thought back to the secret technique
he had learned during his previous life,
which he had cultivated and made his own.
“Hmph.”
Sword Theory.
God Slayer.
Dragon Slayer.
The Dragon’s Divine Protection.
Assured Slash.
Ability of Discernment: Individual Style.
Copycat.
Iron-Cutting Sword.
Soma inhaled sharply as
he swung his arm down.
It stopped right where
he had expected it to,
despite the thick trunk
that stood in its way.

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Chapter 1

As the man awoke, he found himself sprawled out facing the sky. The clear blue stretched out above him, without a cloud in sight. It felt close enough to touch.

Instinctively, he wanted to reach out and actually try to touch it, but nothing happened. His arm didn't move.

For a moment, he was confused, but something jolted him out of his thoughts.

"Impressive, human."

He turned toward the sudden voice and saw a huge mountain.

Well, maybe it wasn't really a mountain, but it was so big that he couldn't tell exactly what it was. The sight of the object before him caused him to remember what he had been doing and how he had ended up here.

Having recalled the situation, he finally opened his mouth. "It seems like I am the victor."

"Indeed. You still have all four limbs intact, and I... Well, you can see for yourself. There is no doubt in my mind that you are the winner here."

But it wasn't the large object he was staring at that was speaking.

A little farther away from the behemoth was something much smaller, lying limply on the ground like a doll. It was this smaller thing that had spoken.

The thing he'd mistaken for a mountain was its body. The smaller part was its head.

It was all relative, of course. Even the thing's head was several times larger than the man himself.

Eyeing the creature, he sighed deeply. "I must say, it is not a particularly satisfying way to win. You are still alive, after all. I'm surprised that you're still able to speak, though."

“Of course I can still speak. I am one of the most powerful dragons, after all; mere decapitation isn’t enough to slay me. I need not use my vocal chords to make these sounds, either.”

Indeed, it was a real dragon, one of the very few of its kind remaining. It wasn’t a look-alike or a mock-up.

Seeing this terrifying, majestic beast, capable of untold chaos, death, and destruction, soaring through the skies would be enough to take anyone’s breath away. Naturally, chopping off its head wouldn’t be enough to kill it.

“Hmph. This is the problem with you legendary creatures. You defy all sense of logic. Any reasonable creature would have had the decency to die when I took its head.”

“You’re one to talk,” scoffed the dragon. “You have defeated me, despite being a human. Even I was no match for you. The true affront to logic is that you could even lay a finger on me, let alone leaving me in this state.”

“That’s precisely why I challenged you. I wanted to know whether I would even be able to get a hit.”

Though the ferocity and power of the dragon itself wasn’t all that brought him to challenge it. Rather, it was the titles that people had given it.

“The most terrifying of all creatures.” “A god among dragons.”

He had sought to fight the creature purely out of curiosity, to answer some questions he held.

Having trained long and hard with his sword, he was proud of the status he had earned as the strongest swordsman in the land. But he wanted to know if he was truly worthy of that title; he wanted to know if he had actually mastered the sword.

Those were the questions that he had wanted to answer in this fight.

“You have your answer now,” the dragon remarked. “Your skills as a swordsman have long been enough to outmatch us dragons. You should be proud of what you have managed to accomplish with your human body.”

“I see. So I have finally mastered the art of the sword.”

“You have, I must admit. If not, you would not have been able to slay me.”

Hearing those words, the man felt a wave of satisfaction washing over him, like it had all been worth it. Dedicating every waking moment of his life to the sword had paid off. It had dominated his thoughts, and everything he had ever done had been for the purpose of developing his skills.

He had no regrets. Not one.

Having given everything he had to follow his dream, he finally made it. What could he have to regret?

“Therefore,” the dragon continued, “I shall say it once again. You have performed an impressive feat.”

“To tell you the truth, whether or not I defeated you wasn’t my main concern,” the man replied.

“Hmph. So you came only to measure your own skill, rather than to slay me. Perhaps that is precisely why you managed to make it this far. Nevertheless, I am satisfied. However...”

The dragon’s demeanor suddenly changed. In that moment, the man was reminded of why dragons were so widely revered for their power.

It spoke out once more, in a booming voice.

“Since you have impressed me so, to let you go empty-handed would be a disgrace. As such, I must ask: is there anything that you wish for?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand,” the man replied. “I just defeated you, and now you’re offering me a reward? Is this some strange form of masochism? Or are you asking without intent to follow through, in some ill-natured attempt to get my hopes up?”

“It is a matter of honor. They do not refer to me as a ‘god’ for nothing. As you have defeated me, I must offer you a reward.”

“My only wish in life was to master the sword, and I’ve already fulfilled that. In any case, being on the verge of death as I am, there’s no point in me wishing for anything more.”

It was already too late for him; the fact that he could no longer move his arm

was proof that everything he knew was about to come to an end. After what he had been through, it was no wonder that he was at death's door, but he had no regrets.

"If you so wished, I could breathe new life into that body of yours," said the dragon. "Although I don't suppose that's what you want."

"Not particularly. As I said, I have fulfilled my one wish, and I do not have any regrets, so—"

Just then, a thought occurred to him.

He did have a regret. Just one.

He had lost his family a long time ago, but apart from that he had never had a lover, nor any friends. What he had once briefly longed for had nothing to do with other people.

It was magic.

He had wanted to try his hand at magic, an art which was said to have long since been lost to this world.

That was the man's one remaining wish.

However, he felt it was pointless to bring it up now. While it was true that he wanted to try it, he had instead chosen the path of the sword. Even if the dragon extended his life now, it was too late for him to begin down the path of magic. It would be different if he could be reborn, but he knew that was most likely impossible. Thus, he stayed silent.

He didn't need anything more than he already had.

He was content to let his life slip quietly away, with that warm glow of pride and satisfaction still in his chest.

When he tried to open his mouth to let the dragon know of his decision, he realized he couldn't even do that anymore. The man's body had already surpassed its limits. His life could be extinguished any moment now. Once it was, his journey would have reached its end.

It seemed that the dragon could tell what the man's answer was from the look of satisfaction on his face.

“So that is your wish. Understood. With the divine power under my control, I shall grant it for you.”

Already only half-conscious, the man could not comprehend the dragon’s final words.

Instead, he drifted off peacefully, breathing his last.

Chapter 2

A boy was dreaming.

It was a long, long dream.

He dreamed of picking up the sword with the aim of mastering it. First, he was known as a skilled swordsman. Then, one of the best. Finally, he was seen as a god among men. Once he had attained that goal, he passed away, satisfied with the life he had led.

That was the dream he saw.

“Hmm...”

Soma nodded to himself as he stared up at the familiar ceiling and mulled over the meaning of the dream. No, it hadn’t been a dream; it was a vision of his former life. Now that his memories had returned, he finally understood the odd, unnerving sensation that had been plaguing him for so long.

He had been reborn, or possibly reincarnated, though the difference was somewhat trivial.

Soma was sure that if he told anybody about this, they would write him off as insane. However, that would not make it any less true. There was no doubt in his mind—assuming he really hadn’t gone insane—that he had been reincarnated.

“Not that any of that matters,” Soma muttered to himself, and he decided to drop this pointless train of thought.

It wasn’t as though he had made a groundbreaking discovery; this knowledge had always been hidden somewhere inside him. Even if he hadn’t been aware of his previous life before now, all of his actions and thoughts up until this point had been greatly influenced by it.

In other words, the fact that he actually remembered all of it now didn’t change a thing, so there was no point in dwelling on it.

More importantly, today was Soma's sixth birthday.

It was the day which he had been eagerly awaiting ever since he had learned of its significance, and the thought quickly pushed any pondering on his previous life out of his mind.

Soma turned his gaze from the ceiling to the window, working out the current time in his head. The sun was already high in the sky.

By now, everybody in the mansion should have been working, including his mother.

There was no need for him to wait any longer.

Making his decision, Soma sat up, threw the covers aside, and hopped down from the bed. He stretched a little, a smile rising to his lips as he thought about what was to come.

"I wonder what skills I'll have, and what others I'll be able to learn."

That was what he had been waiting for: his skill evaluation. Excitedly walking faster, he left his excessively large room behind.

It seemed as though the world in which Soma had lived in his previous life was completely different from this one. There were multiple ways in which this was true, but the most significant was the existence of skills in this world.

Most people believed that skills were a manifestation of a person's natural abilities. Soma wasn't sure how accurate that was, but it was close enough. Simply put, if you could identify somebody's skills, it would immediately tell you what they were capable of, and where they were likely to excel.

Under normal circumstances, however, there was no way to identify your own skills, let alone those of others. In order to find out what your skills were, you needed to be evaluated by somebody with a specialized assessment skill. There were also special magical tools to help people find out what skills they had, but using them came with certain risks. The tools wouldn't cause any side effects; the secondary effect was from the evaluation itself.

The evaluation's impact wasn't just immediate; it also affected the subject's future. The evaluation didn't just determine the subject's current skills, but also

which skills they were capable of learning in the future. It was probably this appraisal of your potential that led people to believe skills to be a manifestation of your natural abilities.

In short, through the evaluation process, you would find out what you were capable of at present, as well as what you would be capable of in the future. It sealed the subject's fate, in a way, but there were very few people who saw it as a negative. Most people saw the process as an indication of what they should strive for in their lives, and a natural part of growing up. You didn't need to be evaluated in order to be able to use your skills, but you wouldn't be aware of your particular aptitudes or how to hone them.

As such, most people welcomed the process, seeing it as something that would help them maximize their potential. That was also why it was seen as something to undergo as early in life as possible.

For example, if you were aiming to become a swordmaster, suddenly discovering you had no aptitude for the sword whatsoever would make all of your training up until that point completely meaningless. To find that out sooner rather than later saved you a lot of time and effort in the long run.

Despite all of this, nobody underwent the evaluation before their sixth birthday; before then, one's future was still not set in stone. This had been proven by extensive research, and there were even some cases where children's skills had completely changed from their birth to the age of four. It was thought that things settled around the time of your fourth birthday, but in some cases, it wouldn't happen until your fifth. Because of this, the safest bet was to receive your evaluation on your sixth birthday.

Today, Soma was about to undergo his own skill evaluation. In doing so, he would discover just what sort of things lay in store for him.

In most cases, learning about your skills would cut off many potential paths in your life, since the majority of people would only have the potential for a few skills. If you could learn five or more, you were considered gifted. Those who could learn more than ten were seen as nothing less than geniuses. Once you knew, there was no need to worry about the future anymore.

The evaluation was a nerve-racking time for many, but Soma was as excited

as could be. It had nothing to do with the fact that he now knew he was reincarnated, and may therefore be gifted. He was simply curious to learn what sort of skills he had the potential for, since, at the end of the day, it didn't matter too much.

That wasn't because he had given up on his future. Instead, no matter what skills he was capable of, he had long since decided what he wanted to do with his life.

While it was true that you had to undergo evaluation to know your skills and potential, the potential for some skills were basically guaranteed. These were known as base skills.

There were six base skills related to physical combat arts such as swordsmanship and spearmanship, known as martial skills. There was also the sorcery skill, which was necessary for someone to be able to use magic. These skills were as simple and basic as they came, but that also meant that the majority of people were capable of learning them.

Most of the aforementioned geniuses and gifted people didn't even usually count these base skills as a proper skill. In other words, it was a given that you would be able to learn at least one of them, whether it was one of the martial skills or the sorcery skill.

As a result, there was no need to worry that you couldn't learn one of these skills. Soma already knew what he wanted for his future: He wanted to become a sorcerer. He wanted to be able to use magic, and he didn't care what kind.

Soma wasn't excited about finding out which skills he could learn. He had just been looking forward to this day, when he would finally be able to begin training in magic.

He hadn't even considered that it might not be possible.

†††

"I'm sorry, what?"

Soma's voice echoed throughout the room.

Bewilderment, confusion, and shock—this whirlwind of emotions swirled

through Soma’s mind as he blinked at his mother in front of him.

“Could you repeat that, Mother?”

He silently begged her to say it was a joke, even though he knew that she wasn’t the type to fool around at a time like this.

His mother averted her gaze for a moment. Sighing, she turned back toward him and looked him straight in the eye before speaking.

“All right. I’ll say it again. According to your evaluation, you have no potential to learn any of the base skills—martial or sorcery—and no potential to learn anything else, either. In other words... you’re completely talentless.”

There was no doubt about it. She was one hundred percent serious.



Chapter 3

As far as Sophia Neumont was concerned, her son, Soma, was the very definition of a prodigy.

The Neumonts were a noble family, which meant that Sophia had the chance to meet all sorts of people. This included all manner of evil and benevolent characters, as well as those who were gifted and those who lacked any sort of talent at all. As a young noble, Sophia attended a royal academy to study sorcery, and she had spent much of her life on the battlefield. Now, here she was, widely considered the most powerful sorceress in the world.

However, out of all the people she had met during her lifetime, there was no one more overflowing with natural talent than her own son.

She wasn't just biased because he was her child; she really thought so. It was precisely because she had been with him since birth that she knew just how incredibly resourceful and quick-witted he was.

Sophia's first clue was when she realized that he never cried at all at night. In fact, Soma had never cried at all, apart from when he was born.

The fact that he was different was made even more clear as she was raising his younger sister, Lina. Unlike Soma, Lina cried day and night. What Sophia found especially astounding was the sight of Soma comforting his sister, even though he was only a year old himself. Not just once or twice, either. Soma often did this when Sophia herself was too busy with something. Eventually, she got used to this habit of his, and even asked him to take care of Lina when she couldn't. It was only now, thinking about it again, that she realized how impressive that was.

But that was just the beginning of her son's display of potential. There was also the matter of what happened after he started his education.

The education that children could receive even before their skill evaluation was usually pretty basic. It was only natural, since all of that education could

prove to be worthless as soon as the child was evaluated. Although, even after their evaluation, it wasn't guaranteed that they would be able to continue with an education. There did exist academies in this world, but they were only open to children aged nine and up, and the school fees were nothing to scoff at, either.

Since one's ability to receive an education depended entirely on the results of your evaluation, there were quite a number of people who remained uneducated their whole lives.

In any case, Sophia's view of a "normal" education was based entirely upon her position as a noble. For nobles, an education was basically guaranteed. It was common practice to hire a private tutor and to study with them. Unlike a normal education, the aim of the tutor was to make sure as little as possible of the child's potential would be wasted, no matter what their skills happened to be. While the curriculum they were taught covered a wide variety of topics, it was also somewhat shallow. These lessons generally wouldn't start until the child was five years old, usually as soon as the parents first glimpsed a spark of their child's potential.

In Soma's case, however, his education began at the age of four.

Anybody who caught wind of this probably thought that Sophia was being a bit overeager, starting her son's education so soon. Sophia even probably would've agreed with them, if she were the only one who believed so much in Soma's potential.

But she wasn't the only one. Her husband, and Soma's father, Klaus Neumont, was of the exact same opinion.

Anybody who knew Klaus was aware that the man was incapable of bias toward Soma, despite being the boy's father. He was strict but fair, and the type to never let his feelings influence his judgment. Klaus, the man who was widely known as the most powerful swordsman in the world, acknowledged his son's potential.

As such, there was no reason for Sophia to doubt that Soma was a genius, especially since her son was consistently able to not only meet his parents' expectations, but to constantly surpass them. It took him less than half a year to

learn everything on the basic curriculum, while most children took three. He had easily passed the few assessments he had undergone, and that was before including anything to do with practical skills such as magic or combat skills. “Intelligent” wasn’t a strong enough word to describe him.

However, Sophia had decided against having Soma undertake his skill evaluation early, as she worried that it would limit him. While it was true that the sooner Soma had his evaluation, the sooner he could begin fulfilling his potential, there was still so much that was unknown about the evaluation process. If one of those unknowns meant that Soma couldn’t follow a path that would otherwise have remained open to him, his parents would regret it for the rest of their lives. So they had decided to hold off and wait for his sixth birthday.

However...

“Even in a thousand years, I never would’ve imagined results like this.” Sophia sighed to herself as she thought back over the past few years. Her son—not that she could really call him that anymore—had already left the room, his face pale with shock.

Her eyes were transfixed on the sheet of paper in her hand. It hadn’t been cheap, as evidenced by the quality. Sophia had wanted no expense spared in the evaluation of her son’s future, and this single sheet of paper had cost around the same as an expensive grimoire.

Despite the price, however, the paper had very little written on it.

Aptitude of the Divine: Proof that the bearer is fully developed. This soul is incapable of further growth.

This was Soma’s “skill.” This was Soma’s present, and his future. This nonsensical skill was the manifestation of all of his talent. It had nothing to do with swordsmanship, spearmanship, bowmanship, martial arts, or even magic; despite its extravagant name, it was meaningless. She only needed to compare it against her own Magic Specialist skill to know that.

Magic Specialist: Magic skill. Grants the bearer a large bonus when learning anything new related to magic. Boosts magical power and skills significantly. Increased growth rate of intelligence and magical power.

All the details and effects of a normal skill like that were spelled out perfectly clearly. That his skill didn't have such a description only meant that it had no effect whatsoever. Sophia was aware of such empty skills, but she would never have thought that Soma would have one. The fact that he had no other skills to speak of just made it all the worse.

She wanted to believe that it was a mistake.

She wanted someone to tell her that it was all a misunderstanding.

However, it had been the Neumonts' private appraiser who had performed Soma's skill evaluation. She was a good friend of Sophia, and there was no way that she would give anything less than her honest evaluation. There was no escaping the fact that the words on the page in her hand were true.

Sophia knew that, and that was exactly why she hadn't told Soma about the one "skill" he possessed. It was better for him to believe he had no skills at all than to know that he had just one completely useless skill.

Still, though, Sophia couldn't help but wish that somebody, anybody, would jump in and tell her that there had been some sort of mistake. At this point, she didn't even care whether or not Soma was a genius; she was willing to accept the fact that she had been wrong about that. Unfortunately, the problem here ran much deeper than that.

If the Neumonts had been a regular family, then the situation would still have been salvageable. It was perfectly possible to live a normal life without skills, and there were all kinds of jobs which didn't require them. Skills were not the be all and end all of somebody's talents, and there were several people out there whose gifts did not translate into skills at all. You didn't need the Swordsmanship skill to swing a sword, and you didn't need the Instant Memory skill to have a good memory. Sophia could probably bring herself to accept that Soma's abilities simply lay outside of any sort of skill.

If they were a regular family, it would be a non-issue. Unfortunately, not only were they nobility, but they were the highest of the Four Dukedoms. That Soma, the heir to House Neumont, had no talent, let alone the potential even to learn any of the base skills, was utterly unthinkable.

A certain conversation she'd had with Soma long ago drifted back into

Sophia's mind. That day, Sophia had asked Soma what exactly he wanted to do with his future. They had no idea what kind of skills he would be able to learn back then, so the conversation had been entirely hypothetical.

"I would like to learn magic."

"Is that so? That shouldn't be a problem for you. I shall be sure to teach you myself."

That day, they had smiled at each other, full of hope for Soma's future. But that future—and virtually any other—was no longer a possibility.

"Why, oh why did I have to become a duchess?" Sophia lamented.

But it was already too late.

When she thought of what lay ahead, all she could do was let out a series of deep sighs.

Chapter 4

Soma walked through the forest alone, dappled sunlight filtering through the trees.

His oversized family home lay far behind him, no longer in sight.

He had come out here without telling anybody, after all, so it was no wonder that he was by himself. Although, under normal circumstances, since he was forbidden from leaving the house at all, to be out here alone was an impossibility for him. He had always been told that there were too many dangers in the outside world, and since he hadn't started any sort of training yet, there was no need for him to leave the house.

That rule had never stopped him before, and it didn't stop him now as he walked deeper and deeper into the forest.

This forest, known as the Dark Woods, lay behind the Neumont mansion, and was said to be particularly dangerous. It wasn't that he was giving up on everything; the path he followed now was one he knew well, having often strolled through these woods.

"So, I have no talent," he murmured to himself. "Although I suppose that doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things."

That was true; it was why Soma had immediately decided that he wouldn't dwell on the matter any further. Not because he refused to accept his assessment's result, or because he wanted to show that he was above it.

He had always been praised by those around him, but Soma now understood that it was all because he had been reincarnated. He felt bad for those who had believed he was a genius, but he knew now that he had already reached his peak. To learn that he was talentless hadn't fazed him in the least. The reason why he had been so shocked when his mother told him the result was something else entirely.

If he was incapable of learning any new skills, then that meant he was

incapable of learning magic, the one thing he had always wanted to learn.

Ever since he had been born into this world and learned of the existence of magic, his singular goal had been to learn it for himself. What shocked him was being told straight-out that it was impossible. That was why he had left the room in disappointment the way he had. But giving up wasn't in his nature. How else would he have been able to master the sword in his previous life?

Soma had wasted no time in picking himself up again and trying to find an alternative way forward. It was then that an idea had occurred to him. The reason he had come here to the woods now was to put that idea to the test.

As he walked, he ruminated more on his situation.

For example, there was the way that he was treated in this world. Because of that treatment, he had a feeling that the evaluation results were about to change everything.

The truth was, Soma still had no idea what kind of family he had been born into, although he could more or less guess based on the size of the house they lived in. He suspected that his parents were planning on explaining everything to him someday, and that they had good reason not to for the moment.

In any case, no matter what his status had been until now, it was probably about to be removed from him, and he would likely lose whatever inheritance he had. He was at least fairly certain about that, given what had happened. The way his mother had reacted told him everything he needed to know.

Even if Soma was indifferent to his lack of talent, it seemed that it stood to cause huge problems for his family.

He wasn't sure if the importance placed on skills was just how this world was, or if it was just this country, or if there was some other reason entirely. In any case, this whole business was likely to change his relationship with his mother. But if there was nothing he could do about it, then there was no point in worrying, either.

He decided instead to focus on what he could do.

Casting aside those unnecessary thoughts, Soma wandered deeper into the Dark Woods. Despite its name, it was peaceful here. He decided that he'd

probably been here long enough by now. A certain tree in his sights, Soma continued until he stood right in front of it.

“Hm... This one should do.”

The tree was large, with a thick trunk. A grown man wouldn’t be able to wrap his arms all the way around it, let alone a child like Soma. He picked up a stick from the ground and tapped the tree with it, satisfied to see that it barely moved. He wasn’t even certain if it would be possible to chop through such a huge tree with an iron sword. In fact, he was pretty sure even that wouldn’t be enough.

If it were possible, it would probably require some sort of suitable skill.

Was that really the case? Or was that just what the inhabitants of this world were taught to believe?

While it was true that those who had skills also had natural talent, that didn’t mean that those who couldn’t learn skills lacked any sort of talent. You didn’t need the Swordsmanship skill to use a sword, and there were records of those without any skills even surpassing skillbearers. Such warnings were often given to skillbearers to remind them not to get ahead of themselves.

But as long as there were exceptions to the rule...

“If those exceptions exist, it means that one does not necessarily need skills to succeed in this world.”

It was possible for those without skills to surpass those who had them. In that case, what exactly was the difference between those people? Just how much potential did those without skills hold if it was possible for an unskilled swordsman to defeat a skillbearer?

By the same logic, it should be possible for Soma to learn to use magic even without any skills. He had come out to these woods to test this idea.

He gazed at the massive tree before him. Even with the Swordsmanship skill, it was unlikely that Soma would even be able to leave a scratch on it using just the stick in his hand.

However, each skill had different ranks. The higher the rank, the more

effective the skill would be. There were four ranks: Amateur, Intermediate, Expert, and Specialist. Depending on your rank, the effects of using the related weapon would be completely different.

If he were a Specialist, or possibly even an Expert, in the Swordsmanship skill, he might be able to chop down the tree in front of him with the stick. If he were able to use the stick to chop down the tree even without that skill, though, then there was still a chance that he would be able to use magic, skill-less as he was.

Those thoughts running through his head, Soma took a deep breath before dropping his hand to his side. He realized that if he were able to use the stick to cut down this tree, he would be able to call himself a swordmaster.

Swordsmanship was the art he had practiced during his previous lifetime, something his old self left behind. The sword he had swung as naturally as drawing breath was a representation of that former life of his.

Soma had undergone the most basic of training in this world, but he had trained in nothing that could even remotely be called “swordsmanship.” No matter how much knowledge he had of it, there was no way that his current body would be able to keep up. But that would only be true if he were a normal person. He had been known as a god because of his skills. So why should the same rules that applied to everyone else apply to him? Who cared about his body? The skills that had led him to master the sword were imprinted upon his very soul. As long as Soma drew upon those skills, he would be able to swing the sword just as he used to.

He thought back to the secret technique he had learned during his previous life, which he had cultivated and made his own.

“Hmph.”

Sword Theory. God Slayer. Dragon Slayer. The Dragon’s Divine Protection. Assured Slash. Ability of Discernment: Individual Style. Copycat. Iron-Cutting Sword.

Soma inhaled sharply as he swung his arm down. It stopped right where he had expected it to, despite the thick trunk that stood in its way.

A small smile rose to his lips, even as he maintained his ready stance.

“I thought so.”

Immediately after he spoke, a sharp sound rang through the woods.

The tree had been split in two, and the trunk was sliding away right where Soma had slashed it.

He had done it. He had cut down the tree using only a stick.

That wasn’t why Soma was smiling, however; he was smiling because of the greater implications this carried.

“If I can do this, then there should be no reason why I cannot learn magic.”

He had proven that he did not need skills to achieve what even skillbearers might be incapable of. If it applied to swordsmanship, then it should logically apply to magic as well. That was the theory he had come here to test. Using the sword, with which he was already proficient, was the simplest way of doing so.

Soma was well aware that the chances of him being able to learn magic may still have been slim. Even so, the possibility existing at all was enough for him.

“All that remains is to look into how I might go about learning magic. Nothing else I can do for now but to start gathering information.”

All he had to do was to repeat the steps of his previous life. To dedicate everything he had to achieving his goal. Nothing more, and nothing less.

Eager as he was, however, it didn’t look as though it would be possible for him to get started right away.

“Well, of course not,” he muttered to himself.

The upper part of the tree in front of him finally toppled over onto the ground with a thud.

Soma nodded to himself as he watched it fall, when his own vision started to tilt along with the tree.

Soon after, he collapsed alongside it.

†††

A little farther away was a girl, who heard the sound of the tree falling. She jumped at the sudden, unnatural sound.

“Huh? What was that? Wait, but it can’t be! Why would someone be here?”

The presence of a sound like that meant that there had to be somebody to produce it.

But she was in the Dark Woods. Given its ominous name, there was no way that anybody would try to cross the border here. Why would someone willingly walk into a dangerous place like this?

“Unless...” The girl began, before suddenly realizing something.

She thought about reporting the sound, but was reminded of her own situation. She shuddered as she considered what might happen to her if she were to go ahead and inform the village of what she had heard.

“But if it is what I think it is, then I can’t just leave it,” she murmured to herself. “Maybe it’s nothing.”

It might just have been a tree that had died and fallen naturally.

On the other hand, that explanation seemed a little too convenient.

“I guess I should go and take a look. If I’m caught, I’ll just talk my way out of it.”

The girl silently prayed that she would not find what she was expecting. It wasn’t like she was here for any particular reason, in any case; she had just been wandering aimlessly.

Even though she knew there was a risk that she would be killed if she was discovered, she didn’t pay it much mind.

Strengthening her resolve, the girl made her way to the source of the sound. It was there that she found a large fallen tree and a young boy collapsed next to it.

Chapter 5

“Ngh... I may have pushed myself a little too hard,” Soma grumbled to himself as he lay on the bed, regret welling up in his chest.

As far as he was concerned, he was a failure. How could there be any other conclusion, given where he had ended up? It had been three days since he’d snuck out of his house, and he had spent nearly all of it bedridden.

It wasn’t a punishment or anything; he was technically bedridden of his own accord. Crippling pain shot through him if he moved carelessly, and since he didn’t want to deal with that, he decided that he wouldn’t move at all. It was just muscle pain from overexerting himself, not an actual injury.

“Although I must admit, I did not realize just how severe muscle pain could be,” he muttered darkly. Despite his words, he knew that he would recover eventually. That being said, counting from his previous life, it had been decades since he had experienced this.

In any case, it was his own fault that he had ended up here. It was his own decision to recreate that godlike technique from his previous life. He was probably lucky that muscle pain was the only thing he had to deal with after that. All his limbs were still intact, after all.

For the time being, he would just have to wait until his muscles had recovered, even if just a little.

“Hm?”

Just as he was wondering what he might do to pass the time, there was a knock at the door, followed by a familiar voice from the other side.

“Soma? It’s Camilla. Can I come in?”

“You may,” Soma replied.

The door opened, revealing a familiar figure with dark eyes and waist-length black hair. She was the Neumonts’ private skill appraiser, Camilla. She peered at

Soma, anxiety clear in her eyes. Since she was one of his mother's friends, she must have been in her late twenties by now, although you wouldn't have guessed from her youthful appearance.

Perhaps "youthful" wasn't the right word; "juvenile" may have been more appropriate. She was, after all, unnaturally short—still taller than Soma, of course, but she could have easily been mistaken for a teenager.

"I wonder how frequently she gets mistaken for a child," Soma muttered.

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"I was just amusing myself to pass the time. Pay it no mind."

"Uh-huh. If you say so." Camilla shrugged before shifting her gaze to focus on Soma. She seemed to be studying his face. After a brief pause, she let out a sigh. "You don't look pale, at least. How are you feeling?"

"Well, I still have pain throughout my entire body. And I may as well take this opportunity to mention again that I am extremely bored," Soma added.

"Sorry, I can't really help you with that. You're not even fit to read books right now."

"I thought I would mention it, but I was not expecting you to do anything about it. I am satisfied with you taking the time to come and see me every day."

The troubled expression on Camilla's face told Soma that she had picked up on some sort of hidden meaning in his words. While Camilla came every day, Soma's mother, Sophia, hadn't come to see him once in the three days.

However, Soma hadn't meant to draw attention to that fact in what he said. He had meant exactly what he said, that seeing Camilla every day was enough for him. It was only after he spoke and saw the change in Camilla's expression that he realized how his words might have been taken. At this point, though, taking it back and making excuses would only make matters worse, so Soma changed the subject.

"Hmm... How about you give me some assignments to work on?" he suggested.

"Assignments?"

“Indeed. You are my private tutor now, after all.”

While it was true that Camilla was the family’s private appraiser, she was also working as Soma’s private tutor. She hadn’t always been, but that was how things had ended up.

She had taken over this role three days ago, the day when everything had changed.

All of Soma’s private tutors had been let go on that day, and he knew exactly why: he had no value anymore. This had been his family’s decision, and thus his opinion was irrelevant. Partly because of what he had studied up until now, Soma could understand that much, despite how little he knew of his noble roots.

After everything that had happened, Soma had no idea why Camilla had now been assigned to teach him, given she was already employed as a skill appraiser. Soma had simply been told that she would be his new tutor, without being given any reason why. Frankly, however, it didn’t bother him *that* much.

“That’s true, but I haven’t had a chance to assess your current level of education, so I’m not really sure I could give you an assignment,” Camilla said.

“You do not need to assess me. My interest lies only in magic, and I haven’t yet been taught a single thing about it.”

Camilla could teach him about magic. That fact alone was so important to him that the exact reason *why* she had been assigned to him barely mattered. It was the very reason why he had pushed himself so hard to recreate that sword technique three days ago.

“Magic?” Camilla replied. “I’m not so sure I—”

“Even the most trivial information about it will do. I’m extremely curious about it.”

Soma knew exactly what Camilla was about to say, and that was why he had interrupted her. He had no skills, so he wouldn’t be able to learn magic. But Soma wasn’t about to let that stop him. He had no swordsmanship skills, either, yet he had managed to chop down a huge tree using only a stick. Why should his lack of magic skills prevent him from learning magic?

He didn’t tell Camilla any of this. As long as he knew he could do it, then all that was left was to push forward and do everything he could to achieve his goal. Camilla seemed to sense that he wasn’t going to take “no” for an answer, and she let out a resigned sigh.

“Very well. In that case, as your private tutor, I’ll give you some assignments on magic.”

“Thank you!”

“I should warn you, though, I’m not that good with magic myself. I’ll need to do a little research, so I’ll give you the actual assignment tomorrow,” said Camilla.

“Understood. I shall look forward to it.”

Needless to say, Soma meant those words from the bottom of his heart. After all this time, he was finally about to start down the path of magic, so he was naturally excited. His lips curled into a smile as he began to wonder just what sort of assignment Camilla would give him, and just what sort of things he was about to learn.

Chapter 6

When she saw Soma's excited smile, Camilla Hennefeld couldn't help but let out a small sigh. Perhaps she had been a little too hasty in promising to give him an assignment. It wasn't that she didn't feel confident about giving him something suitable; if that were the case, then she wouldn't have agreed to Sophia's request to tutor Soma, as much as it pained her to turn down a friend. There was something else that made her feel uneasy.

"I'll be sure to come up with something good, so just take it easy for the rest of the day and don't stress yourself out, okay?" Camilla advised.

"Even if I were to 'stress myself out,' it's not like I can actually do anything in this state," Soma retorted.

"I wish I could believe you, but knowing what you can do to your own body, I'm not so sure about that."

"You may have a point there."

Soma smiled knowingly at her, causing Camilla to sigh yet again. However, it wasn't just his words she was concerned about. There was another reason why she was sighing so much today.

Although she had told Soma that he was suffering from muscle pain, the truth was that muscle pain wasn't all that common. In fact, for those with martial skills, they generally weren't affected by muscle pain at all. Because of how skills worked, their use never pushed the body to the point of that sort of injury, and they essentially had the added effect of strengthening the user's body.

Of course, this didn't apply if the person in question had no skills. In fact, there weren't that many people who were able to use martial skills. While most people had the potential to learn them, many didn't ever need to. For these people, muscle pain was a real but rare possibility.

For example, they may be suddenly attacked by a monster and exert themselves in running away. At least in this country, monsters and thieves

tended to be few and far between in most places, but sometimes it was necessary to leave the country—on business, for example. It was entirely possible that people in those situations would find they needed to exert themselves to survive.

But that was all within the bounds of common sense, and it didn't account for the possibility of outliers like Soma. Camilla had never heard of any cases of this sort of extreme pain, or any that affected the entire body.

"While I think of it, your muscle pain," Camilla began. "What caused it? You must have pushed yourself quite hard."

"Not particularly. What I did was merely something I considered necessary," Soma replied.

"Is that so?"

Camilla could tell by the way Soma was looking at her that he fully believed that was the case. She could also see that he had no intention of going into any further detail.

"What exactly did you do, though?" she pressed.

"That's a secret."

It almost wasn't even worth asking. She had phrased her question as though it had been a passing thought, but the truth was that she had been waiting for the right time to ask him. Even so, she didn't expect him to answer her.

"You're keeping it a secret from me, even though I'm your private tutor?" Camilla asked.

"I am keeping it a secret from you precisely *because* you are my tutor. It was an embarrassing mistake, so that is exactly why I prefer not to tell you."

"Oh."

Again, Camilla suspected that he was telling the truth, but that was why she couldn't help but wonder just what would have become of this child had he never undergone the skill evaluation. Of course, if Camilla hadn't done it, somebody else would have. Who exactly performed the evaluation wasn't particularly important; she just wondered how things would have panned out

for Soma had he been born into an impoverished family of villagers instead of nobility.

After all, not everybody underwent skill evaluation. For some, it was simply too expensive. Even for the average person, it was a considerable amount. For many, it was definitely worth the cost, but whether or not you thought so depended on the person.

There were those who didn't believe it necessary if they weren't going to end up with any worthwhile skills. The fact of the matter was that most people didn't. There were those like Camilla, who considered it a necessary expense as it would help set the child off onto the correct path, but these were also the type of people who had never struggled with money. For those in poverty, it was fairly common to forego skill evaluation.

If Soma had been born into one of those families, she didn't doubt that he would have flourished.

Those without skills could never live up to skillbearers. That was just how this world was; there was no point in fighting it. There were skill-less people who had managed to best a skillbearer, and these were often held up as examples.

However, they were not held up as examples of hard those skill-less had worked. They were seen as having wasted their lives, only to be able to get to the same level as somebody who was at Amateur rank in their skill, the lowest possible rank. It was the very minimum you needed in order to be accepted as a soldier, but far from enough to excel. That was why it was seen as a waste of time to work so hard on something if you lacked the skill—you were doomed to fail from the very start. That was true even if you lacked the potential to learn any skills at all.

However, Camilla thought, even if you pushed yourself and trained to your very limit, it still shouldn't be enough to cause such intense muscle pain. Most people wouldn't ever experience such a thing in their lifetime, because they would end up seriously injuring themselves before they even got to that point.

So how had Soma managed to do it?

She couldn't help but wonder how far he would be able to go if nobody were to stand in his way. Could he surpass the Amateur rank? Or Intermediate?

Perhaps he could go even further.

Camilla almost believed that he could.

In the first place, it wasn't even necessary for him to be suffering from all this pain now. It could easily be cured with magic. In fact, there was likely no cure for it other than magic. From what she had been told, the pain he was suffering from was severe; enough to drive an adult, let alone a child, completely insane. That was what the doctor had said, so she had no reason to doubt that.

How on earth was Soma able to bear it?

In reality, Camilla didn't actually know Soma all that well. She lived under the same roof, so she naturally bumped into him from time to time, but they had never really spoken before now. Sophia spoke of her son often, so Camilla had heard a lot about him, at least. However, she had never really believed much of what his mother had said. She had always believed that Sophia was exaggerating her son's talents out of parental bias.

That was why Soma had never been much more to Camilla than an ordinary child who spoke strangely stiffly. All she really knew of Soma was the impression she had of him from these past three days.

But that impression was enough to frustrate her, and to cause her to lament the fact that she was just a tutor hired by the Neumonts. There was very little she could do for Soma without the risk of punishment for overstepping her boundaries. Even if she did try and help him, there was the strong possibility that there was nothing she could do, so it was no wonder that she would be punished for it.

"I'm curious about his potential, but I guess it's just my own selfishness," she murmured to herself. Once again, Camilla let out a small, rueful sigh.

Chapter 7

“I am back in action!” Soma announced, standing up on the bed.

It had been seven days, counting the day of the incident, but Soma was finally mostly free of his muscle pain. He still hurt a bit, but it was no longer debilitating. So, as far as was concerned, he was well enough to get out of bed today, just as he had planned. Having said that, however, he still couldn’t do much more than ask questions of people.

He would have gladly read a book or something, too, if he hadn’t already read everything in the house. He knew exactly who he wanted to ask, but since the sun had only just risen, it would still be quite some time before he could begin studying. Soma would have to find something else to occupy his time until then.

“I suppose I shall just get started with my daily exercises for now,” he decided.

After being bedridden for a whole week, he was out of practice, and now was as good a time as any to see just how far behind he had fallen. Nodding to himself in satisfaction, Soma snuck out of his room.

†††

Camilla walked alone, bathed in the light of the morning sun.

She was in the backyard, a place where few people would normally go, but she wasn’t up to anything particularly devious. She had just felt like a change of scenery for her training.

Camilla was in possession of the extremely rare Skill Evaluation skill, which allowed her to work as a skill appraiser. Since it was such a useful skill, those who had it were usually forced by the state to become skill appraisers. It was a fairly cushy job, so if given a choice in the matter, most people would accept it. Camilla, however, preferred physical combat. She knew a few axemanship skills, so she would often practice them to kill time and keep her body fit.

This morning, though, her need for a change of scenery was a result of her

other responsibility.

“Oh!”

The moment she began walking into the forest, Camilla came across someone. She let out a small gasp of surprise. She wasn’t expecting to find anyone here, let alone the person she saw.

“Oh my. What a coincidence to see you here, ma’am.”

“I wonder about that. What are you doing here?”

The other person was about a head shorter than her and spoke strangely formally. There was no doubt about who it was: Soma, the very source of her worries that morning.

“I am just going about my daily routine. Considering I was bedridden for an entire week, I must be terribly out of practice,” he explained.

“Your daily routine?” Camilla echoed. “You mean you’ve been here before? I thought Sophia told you to stay away from the forest.”

“Indeed she did. I never agreed to that request, however, so I do not believe it applies to me.”

“You really are cheeky.”

His reasoning was utterly illogical, but he stated it so brazenly that it made her feel as though *she* were in the wrong. She knew that wasn’t the case, of course, but it was Sophia’s job to scold Soma, not hers. That being said, Soma hadn’t seen Sophia lately, and Camilla was the only person around right now who was responsible for keeping him in line.

“I guess it doesn’t matter that much. It’s not like it’s that dangerous, after all.”

Now and then while training, Camilla would survey the area, but she hadn’t seen any beasts around in several years, so there likely wasn’t any need to worry too much. Besides, there was nowhere in this world that was one hundred percent safe anyway, which was probably why Sophia had forbidden Soma from leaving the house in the first place.

“Hold on. Didn’t she tell you not to go outside at all?” Camilla asked.

“I believe she did, yes. However—”

“You never agreed to it. Honestly. It looks like you’re much more of a handful than I’d heard.”

Even so, Camilla still found herself reluctant to tell him off. Sophia had her own way of doing things with Soma, but that didn’t mean Camilla necessarily agreed with them. However, now that Sophia had left everything up to Camilla, she didn’t see any reason why she shouldn’t use her own judgment, and she didn’t think it was worthwhile to nitpick.

“Anyway, I don’t think it’s my problem. How did you get out, though?”

“I snuck out.”

“Well, I suppose security isn’t that tight around here.”

It should have been at least tight enough to catch a six-year-old sneaking around, though. Perhaps there really was more to Soma than met the eye.

“Still, are you sure you should be telling me all of this?” Camilla asked.

“You’re my tutor. Besides, I think I can trust you.”

“Uh-huh.”

He wasn’t exactly wrong about being able to trust her. Even so, though, just as Camilla didn’t know Soma very well, he shouldn’t have known much about her, either. Not enough to place this much trust in her already, at least.

She was almost ready to dismiss it as childish naivete, but that didn’t seem quite right. Camilla was sure that Soma had a good reason for trusting her. Even if he was just a child, she could tell from the way he looked at her. She found herself struck again with the sense that there was much more to him beneath the surface.

“By the way, I was just about to do some training. Would you like to come with me?” she offered.

If they were together, then she would be able to keep an eye on him. Not only that, but she was curious to see what he was planning to do with that stick in his hand, since she knew from his personality that he wasn’t just going to play with it. Perhaps previously she would have dismissed the thought as a figment

of her imagination, but this encounter had already changed her impression of him.

“May I really accompany you?” Soma asked.

“Yes. I’m curious as to what you meant by your ‘daily routine,’ too.”

Soma agreed, to which she responded with a small smile.

She really was curious. The more time she spent with this child, the more curious she became. Perhaps it was merely down to his childish charms, or perhaps it was something else.

Initially, she had been starting to regret becoming his tutor, but now she found that she was beginning to enjoy it. Around thirty minutes after that thought passed through her mind, Camilla found herself staring up at the bright blue sky in utter bewilderment.

Chapter 8

To put it quite simply, Camilla hadn't seen it coming. Maybe that was her fault for not expecting the unexpected. Whatever may have happened, she was now gazing up at the sky, her mind blank.

"Hmph. Don't you think you're going a bit too easy on me, ma'am? I know you said we were only sparring, but there was no need to underestimate me quite that much."

Camilla turned her gaze toward the source of the voice. The boy's expression was about as displeased as she had expected. Soma was looking down at her, his lips twisted in a pout.

What surprised her more than anything else, however, was the lack of scorn or pride in Soma's tone; he truly wanted no more than for Camilla to fight him more seriously. That was ridiculous, though, and not just because she was an adult and he was a child; it hadn't even occurred to her to use more than a fraction of her strength against him. Because of that, however, she was now lying face-up on the ground like a fool. After getting to grips with what had happened, Camilla stood up, a smile on her face.

"Hehe. Sorry about that. But it's been a while since you've pushed yourself like this. You've still got some muscle pain, too, right?" she said.

"That may be true, but there was still no need for you to hold back as much as you did."

"I see. Well, I really am sorry."

His physical condition had indeed been one of the reasons she felt the need to go easy on him. On top of that, it was her pride and stubbornness that led her to give that particular excuse.

"Okay. This time I'll give you a proper match," she promised.

"Please do."

Before, when Soma had gotten himself into a battle stance, Camilla had almost found it cute. Now, though, things were different. She stared him down with everything she had, all unnecessary thoughts cast from her mind. She had a feeling that, if she didn't, she would only end up on the ground again.

This was all because, without thinking, she had asked him if he wanted to try sparring. She'd been watching as he carried out his "routine," which turned out to be sword-swinging practice. Upon noticing that his muscles seemed particularly well trained, she'd suggested it on a whim. She had only intended to play around, but everything from her weapon to her strength to her skills far outclassed Soma.

She was armed with an axe even bigger than herself, with a blade sharp enough to slice through a human body with ease. Meanwhile, Soma carried a stick that he had picked up off the ground. There was no question about who was better equipped for this fight.

In terms of strength, he was a child, and she was an adult. As for skills, he had none, and she was in possession of Expert-rank axemanship. It was comparable to an ant challenging a giant.

To attain an Expert rank in any skill, you had to be especially gifted. Those who made it that far were generally considered geniuses. There were some cases where, in a full class of talented students at an academy, not even one of them would attain an Expert rank. That was how difficult it was to obtain.

Camilla was fully aware of her own strength, and that was why she had held back. It had taken all her willpower to restrain herself that much, and it had led to her defeat. She wasn't arrogant enough to write it off as a coincidence, but she was still proud of her abilities—enough so that she wasn't about to let the same thing happen again.

Her opponent was a child. All he had to defend himself was a stick. His body was suffering from muscle pain, so he wasn't at his peak. On top of that, he had no skills to speak of.

But Camilla wasn't concerned with any of that anymore. Instead, she stared Soma down as though he were a swordsman capable of defeating her. With that in mind, she didn't hold back on her first attack, and if Soma wasn't careful,

it would kill him.

"*Expert Axe. Martial Accumulation. Spirits and Demons. Mind's Eye: Full Strength.*"

No sooner had she initiated the attack than she felt a dull resistance in her hands. It felt like she had caught her axe in something, and she reflexively jumped backward.

"Ngh!" Camilla let out a grunt as a flurry of slashes tore through the space where she'd been standing an instant before. It was only a fraction of a second before she had her axe, which had been wedged into the ground, back in her hands again and ready to take another swing.

"*Expert Axe. Martial Accumulation. Spirits and Demons. Mind's Eye: Full Swing*."

She didn't even have time to draw breath. Her voice pierced through the air.

"Haaah!"

"Hngh!"

Camilla's steel axe struck the wooden stick. For a split second, she was confused as to why she hadn't cut right through it, but she continued her attack. Thinking of nothing but her next move, the sound of her axe slicing through the air resounded as she continued to swing.

"*Expert Axe. Martial Accumulation. Spirits and Demons. War Cry. Crazed Waltz: Heavy Slash*."

One strike, three, eight, and on and on. By the time she reached ten, she no longer had time to think. Her body was moving completely on its own.

Although her attacks were growing slightly clumsy with fatigue, it was her superior range that allowed her to keep up the offensive. With longer limbs and a larger weapon, she had a wider range than her young opponent; for every step she took, he had to take three. This size advantage was the only reason why their fight looked even.

But Camilla, both reasonably and instinctively, knew for sure. With his sword skills, the boy in front of her was an even match.

No, that wasn’t quite right. In reality, he was actually starting to outpace her.

His movements were quicker and more precise. Hers, meanwhile, were clearly starting to slow. She had no time to think about what that might mean; all she knew was that it was only her physical advantages that kept the two of them evenly matched.

Their fight was perfectly balanced, but if even one factor were to tip the scales...

“Ngh!”

“Ah!”

In that moment, that balance was broken.

Soma suddenly moved twice as fast as Camilla and immediately closed the distance between them. That was all it took.

“I’ve got you now!” Soma declared triumphantly.

“No!”

But her movements were just slightly delayed. The technique of her swing was perfect; it was just too slow.

“Oh.”

At that moment, the stick slipped from Soma’s hand.

Soma watched it, dumbfounded, as did Camilla. It was too late to knock it away, dodge it, or even catch it.

Not sure whether this was part of Soma’s plan, Camilla prepared herself for what was to come. But there was nothing. Swinging against an attack that had been stopped in its tracks, Camilla was unable to stop her momentum as she fell forward.

She then collapsed on the ground, right on top of Soma. Camilla made a quite unladylike noise, but since there was nobody to hear it aside from this child, it didn’t matter too much.

She looked in annoyance at Soma, who was squashed flat underneath her.

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?” Camilla sighed.

“Please forgive me. That was rather impudent of me.”

“When your arm suddenly stopped moving just now, did that have anything to do with your sore muscles?”

“It may well have. Suffice to say, I lost my concentration,” Soma replied.

“You should’ve been more careful, since your muscles aren’t fully healed yet. Although it’s not really my place to say it.”

Despite her words, Camilla allowed herself an inward sigh of relief. If Soma hadn’t messed up like he had, she was sure that the match would have gone to him. She wasn’t sure she could have faced the humiliation.

Personally, she would have accepted defeat, but she was his tutor as well as the holder of Expert-rank axemanship skills. There was no way she could allow herself to be bested by this skill-less boy, especially when she had been going all out.

“In any case, I’ve managed to get myself back up to where I was before,” Soma said.

“I’m glad to hear it, but I think I’m done with you for the day.”

“What? Why?”

“I only came with you for a change of pace. I should be heading back now,” Camilla explained.

Technically, she was telling the truth. The fact that it allowed her to quit while she was ahead was just a bonus.

“It seems to me as if you are trying to escape, lest I defeat you next time. However, I suppose if you have work that you must do, there’s nothing to be done,” Soma murmured.

“Sorry!”

It was clear by the look on Soma’s face that he was somewhat unsatisfied with the outcome, but since he knew just what Camilla was heading back to do, there wasn’t really any way he could voice his complaints. After all, she would be going back now to work on something for his education.

“I shall attain victory next time,” Soma promised.

“Assuming we get the chance to spar like this again,” Camilla responded, not intending for it to ever happen again if she could help it. She didn’t want to think about the very real possibility that she might be defeated by Soma. Perhaps she was being immature, but she didn’t want her student to see her humiliate herself any more than she already had.

If she had been just a little younger, she might have been willing to give it another go—she would’ve trained harder, so she could defeat him the next time they fought. As she was now, though, fully knowing her own limits, she had no intention of doing any of that. She knew now that Sophia’s opinion of Soma hadn’t been mere parental bias. Now that she had seen Soma’s capabilities firsthand, she didn’t want to be his rival; she wanted to be his teacher.

“Maybe that just means I’m getting old,” Camilla muttered with a sigh.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just talking to myself.”

“I see. In any case, could I ask you to perhaps get off of me? You are rather heavy,” came the voice from below her.

“Excuse me? It seems the first thing you need to learn is how to speak to a lady!”

“You are so heavy, I fear my bones will break!”

“I’m not that heavy! How dare you!” Camilla snapped, but she quickly broke into a smile.

She had been excited to teach Soma before, of course, but she had initially agreed to it out of a sense of obligation. She had been concerned that their personalities would clash, but that no longer seemed like it was going to be a problem.

As those thoughts ran through her mind, Camilla’s smile widened.

Chapter 9

After seeing Camilla head back to work, Soma collapsed onto the ground and stared up at the sky. He wasn't tired; he was just disappointed in himself. Victory had been within his grasp, but he had let it get away when his concentration slipped.

Usually, he would have easily been able to bring himself back from a momentary mistake like that, but he was far from being in top condition. The fact was, Soma still wasn't used to wielding a sword with this body. Other than some light practice, this was the first time he had ever made a blunder like that against an actual opponent.

During their fight, he had slowly gotten used to his weapon. Then he had grown careless, which had led to his defeat. He could still barely believe he had allowed that to happen.

"I could spend all day coming up with excuses, but there would be no point. I just need to keep improving myself. Wouldn't you agree?"

As soon as he spoke those words, a tree behind him trembled slightly, along with a sharp intake of breath. It stopped almost immediately, but it was already too late. The continuing silence as Soma waited made the presence even more obvious.

"There is no need to hide anymore. I am already aware of your presence," he eventually said.

"H-How did you know I was there?!" came the response. The familiar face of a young girl poked out from behind the tree. Her red hair swayed slightly as her scarlet eyes blinked at him.

She seemed to be a child around the same age as Soma. Her sharp eyes would ordinarily give the impression that she wasn't somebody you'd want to cross, but they were alight with with anxiety right now, giving the opposite effect.

It was probably because Soma had detected her so quickly that she felt uneasy. Evidently, she hadn't been planning to show herself.

"Hmph. I cannot tell you, really. I just knew," Soma replied.

"B-But the lady who was here before didn't notice me!" the girl protested.

"Ah, yes. It seems Camilla was not expecting anybody else to be here. That was likely why she was not paying attention to our surroundings."

"So the difference between you and her is that you knew I'd be here?"

"Indeed."

Even though he replied in the affirmative, the girl didn't seem to believe him, but Soma figured that wasn't his problem. He said he "knew," but in reality it was an educated guess; it was mere coincidence that he had noticed the girl. The reason he had lost concentration in the battle with Camilla was because he had realized that she was there.

In reality, he had noticed her because he knew of her existence beforehand. If he hadn't, then there was no telling whether he would have picked up on her presence.

It occurred to him that it was quite rude to be talking to her from the ground, and so Soma stood and turned to her before addressing her again.

"In any case, it is good to see you again," he said. "It has been precisely a week since we last met, hasn't it?"

"Um, yeah. Good to see you."

"I realize this comes rather late, but I would like to thank you for saving me back then."

Soma had first met this girl one week ago, when he had collapsed after carelessly performing that move on the tree. She was the one who had saved him then, by letting him lean on her shoulder as they made their way back to the Neumont's rear garden.

"You don't have to thank me," she said quickly. "I mean, it's not like you asked me for help."

“That is irrelevant. No matter how you look at it, you saved me. The thoughts behind the action do not matter. I am therefore obligated to thank you, and you are free to accept my thanks as you see fit,” Soma replied.

“You’re being pretty condescending for someone who’s supposed to be thanking me.” The girl sighed. “Anyway, I guess I’ll accept your thanks.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Even though I still don’t feel like I deserve it,” she added. She looked a little dissatisfied as she studied Soma, but he merely shrugged in response. He was vaguely aware that the way he spoke and acted could be seen as condescending, but it was ingrained into his character at this point.

“That aside, I—Wait a moment. I do not believe I ever asked your name,” Soma said.

“Well, yeah. I mean, there were more important things to worry about. I think names were the last thing on our minds.”

“Right now, they are important. So please do tell me your name. Mine is Soma, although you may call me whatever you wish.”

“I’m not sure I agree, but whatever. My name, huh?” The girl blinked.

“If there is some reason why you cannot tell me your real name, then you may give me an alias,” said Soma.

“An alias?”

The girl gave him an exasperated look, but Soma just tilted his head in confusion. She apparently thought he was joking, but he wasn’t. He could clearly see she was hesitant about giving her name away. But, at the same time, he needed some way to distinguish her from others. The specifics weren’t particularly important, so he was willing to accept an alias, whatever it might be, as long as she was happy with it.

“Whatever.” She sighed. “I guess I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. My name is Aina. But feel free to call me whatever you want, too.”

“All right, Aina.”

“Whoa! You don’t have to say it right away!”

“I beg your pardon? I just wanted to make sure I had it correct. Is there something wrong with that?” Soma asked.

“Erm, no, it’s just... I guess it caught me off guard,” she mumbled.

“If there’s nothing wrong with it, then I shall say it again. Aina.”

“Okay. Well, then, your name was, um, Soma, right?”

“Indeed.”

“How come you’re not even fazed?!”

“Should I be?”

“Argh! Never mind!” Aina cried.

Soma blinked in confusion as Aina’s cheeks turned slightly pink. It seemed she was fairly short-tempered, and she seemed to be upset about something, but he wasn’t quite sure what. He felt it would be unwise to ask, however; even Soma had his sensitive moments.

“Anyway, Aina,” he began, changing the subject.

“Yes?”

“Your cheeks appear to be red. Are you perhaps suffering from a cold? If so, I suggest that you return home and go to bed immediately. It is important to get plenty of rest at the very first signs of illness.”

“Shut up! Just get to the point already!” Aina snapped.

“Why have you lost your temper with me? I do not understand,” Soma sighed. While Soma did have his sensitive moments, they were few and far between. “What I mean to say is that if there is anything you are having trouble with, you should feel free to tell me about it,” he explained.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Aina said. “I’m not having trouble with anything.”

“I fail to see what you do not understand. You saved me. Therefore, if there is anything I can do to return the favor, either now in the future, you need only ask.”

“If that’s what you meant, you should’ve said so in the first place! Anyway, as

I said, you didn't ask me for help, so I don't think you really owe me anything."

"In that case, the next time you require it, I shall save you without you needing to ask," Soma decided. "That makes us equal, does it not?"

"Are you being serious?" Aina let out a small giggle, albeit an exasperated one. Not only that, but it was the first time Soma had seen her smile since he'd met her. He found himself chuckling softly in response.

"What's so funny?" Aina demanded.

"Ever since I met you, I thought that you would look much better with a smile. And it seems I was right."

"Excuse me?"

"You are far more endearing when you smile," Soma explained.

"Hey, I got it the first time! A-And what do you mean, 'endearing'?!"

"Are you unfamiliar with the word?" Soma cocked his head at her. "In that case, I shall attempt to define it. Although it may be a little tricky, I—"

"That's not what I meant!" Aina jumped up and down as her face turned an even deeper red than before.

Soma didn't get it. She had asked him a question, and he was about to answer it. Why was she getting even more upset?

"You can try and sweet talk all you like, b-but I'm not gonna fall for your tricks, all right?" Aina declared.

"Sweet talk?" Soma echoed. "I fail to see how simply stating the truth could be considered 'sweet talk,' as you called it."

"Fine! Whatever! Just—We're not talking about this anymore!"

"Hmph. I do not see what the problem is, but if that is what you want..."

Aina's shoulders were heaving and her face was scarlet as she looked at the boy, who simply gave a bemused nod. He found himself wanting to ask what all the fuss was about, but he decided it would be better to change the subject.

"Just remember: if you are ever in trouble, whether you ask me to or not, I shall come to your aid." Soma paused. "As long as it is something I am able to

help with, that is.”

Condescending though he was, Aina couldn’t help but smile a little as she nodded back.

Chapter 10

“And *that* is why it’s known as the Dark Woods.”

Camilla’s voice resounded through the room which was far too large for its purpose, Soma nodding repeatedly as he took in every word. It was only the two of them here in his bedroom, and they were in the middle of their first lesson together as teacher and student.

It had been around two hours since Soma and Camilla’s sparring match and his encounter with Aina. Nothing of much importance had happened in that time. By the time Soma returned to the house, Camilla had still needed some time to prepare for their lesson. It wasn’t like they had decided on a particular start time, though, and as the student, Soma didn’t feel like he had a right to complain. He still had some assignments left over from when he was bedridden, anyway, so it wasn’t like he was unoccupied in the meantime.

Eventually, the lesson began.

Soma hadn’t expected her to be such a good teacher, although he felt it may be a little rude to think so. Camilla had said herself that she was more familiar with martial arts than magic, but there was also the fact that she was primarily employed as a skill appraiser, rather than a tutor. She was clearly smart, having prepared the lesson so quickly, but perhaps she also was more informed about magic than she let on.

“I see. So it is known as the Dark Woods because it borders an area where demons reside,” Soma said.

“It’s also because demons used to wander into it in the past. However, none have been spotted there in the past decade,” Camilla explained.

“Hmm. Do you know why that is?”

“Huh? Well, I have a theory.”

“May I ask about it?”

“Might as well. I have to warn you, though, it’s not very exciting,” Camilla replied.

According to Camilla, the demons had been trounced so thoroughly that they dared not cross the border there again. That was easy enough for Soma to understand, and it helped him realize something else.

“So that’s why this house of ours is so ridiculously big,” he murmured.

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“The size of a house tends to correspond to the social status of the family who lives within it. The fact that the demons live so close means this area must be a border between two countries. There’s only one sort of family who would live right on the border.”

Soma had never fully understood just what kind of social position his family held. But, thanks to what Camilla had just told him, he finally had more of an idea.

“If not a marquisate, this must be something quite close to that.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, then it explained a lot; for example, the way he had been treated after it had been confirmed that he was incapable of learning any skills. He had his suspicions, but this revelation had more or less confirmed it for him.

“You think so, do you?” The amused glint in Camilla’s eye told Soma his conclusion wasn’t far off. “You shouldn’t know much about nobility at this point,” she continued, “so how exactly did you work that one out? You’re full of mysteries, aren’t you?”

Soma just shrugged, knowing that there was no point in telling her that it was knowledge he retained from his previous life. Even if it wasn’t, though, he probably could have worked out much of it on his own. The tutors he’d had before Camilla had taught him much, even if none of it was related to social class. As such, he had naturally come to the conclusion that the information was being withheld from him for whatever reason.

How that led to him answering Camilla like that, however, was another story altogether.

“Even knowing that much, there is still something that I am unclear on,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I do not understand the need to have an estate like this built so close to the border.”

There were advantages, of course, but they were dwarfed by the potential disadvantages, especially considering the period of time when this area was at its most dangerous. Whoever had ordered the construction of this estate likely had ulterior motives.

“Ah, I see. I’ve heard that it was originally planned to be built farther away,” Camilla said.

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

“However, they were worried that that would cause a response to an attack from the demons would be delayed, so it was decided that the estate should be built here instead.”

“Decided by whom?”

“Your parents.”

“My parents? I didn’t realize they were so foolish.”

“Hm. Well, maybe they are.”

It was almost laughable. Perhaps they were just overconfident. “They didn’t choose this place just because it had been so long since the last demon sighting, did they?”

“They may be foolish, but they’re not quite that foolish,” Camilla replied. “After all, they were the ones who defeated the demons.”

“And this happened more than a decade ago, correct?” Soma prompted.

“There is a reason they were allowed to build their estate in a place like this.”

“Hmm...”

At his peak during his previous life, perhaps Soma would also have been that confident. He had no idea just how powerful these demons were, though, so he

was in no position to judge. He needed more information before he could be sure of anything, which Camilla was willing to provide.

“You probably don’t understand how impressive a feat that was, so I guess I should tell you just a little more about these demons.”

“Ah. I was hoping you might,” Soma said.

“Oh? You saw right through me, did you?”

“I have spoken with you long enough to be able to predict which sort of direction you are planning to bring the conversation.”

When Camilla got into a particular topic of conversation, she would be sure to fill him in on the details he didn’t know, as she was doing now about the demons. Then, once another topic of interest came up, she would move on to a detailed explanation of that, too.

Once she got going, it would be interesting enough to keep Soma’s attention for a long time. The more the topic drew Soma in, the harder he worked to understand, so he found that he was learning more and more. This was what Soma had been thinking of when he had asked for something a little more challenging.

“I’ve been speaking for almost an hour now. I’m pretty impressed that you’ve managed to understand everything,” Camilla said.

“It is in no small part thanks to the pace of your lecture, ma’am.”

“Even then, you seem to have a good head on your shoulders.”

The first topic of Camilla’s lecture had been the country in which they lived—also a subject on which Soma’s previous teachers had neglected to educate him, which was why he had never been able to work out how he had ended up here.

He was aware that they were part of an empire located in the center of the continent that had existed and flourished since olden times. It wasn’t until today, however, that he learned of the existence of the northwestern kingdom in which he lived. He had also learned about the steep mountains that surrounded the small kingdom, as well as the existence of two paths serving as

the only points of entry and exit.

One of those was the Dark Woods, which was how they had come to that topic of conversation.

“Now, about these demons,” Camilla began. “How much do you know? It seems like you already know a bit, right?”

“I know a little, but you may as well assume I am totally clueless.”

“Tell me what you *do* know,” she pressed.

“Only that they are hostile toward mankind as a whole.”

That was something that any ordinary child would know. After all, children who misbehaved were often warned that the demons would come and take them away.

“Right. So you really are clueless, huh? That’s not actually true.”

“As expected,” Soma said with a nod.

What wasn’t expected was his response. Camilla blinked at him in surprise, looking at him curiously.

“You mean you knew?” she asked.

“If it were true, then human nature dictates that we would have attempted to wipe them out as soon as possible. Even if there hasn’t been a sighting in over ten years, the fact that they would go so long without attacking us is unthinkable. I’m also speaking from experience.”

“Experience?” Camilla echoed.

“Never mind.”

“Huh. Anyway, you hit the nail on the head. Most people say that they haven’t tried to attack because they know it’s not worth it, but if they really were the enemy of humanity, you’d think they would have made a move against us by now no matter the cost,” Camilla explained. “By the way, what exactly do you think these demons are?”

“Hmm... They are likely descended from a race which really did hold such hostility against humanity. Aside from that? I would imagine they are a group

made up of outcasts, troublemakers, and those who have been shunned by others, who have banded together." Soma was merely reciting the vague line of reasoning that he had come up with, but there was a flash of astonishment in Camilla's eyes, for some reason.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. I just think I'm starting to understand you," she replied.

Soma blinked at her in confusion, but she made no move to elaborate. He figured there was no point in chasing the matter any further.

"Anyway, you're right again. Just make sure you don't repeat any of that to believers, because to them, the 'enemy of humanity' thing is all true," Camilla said.

"Understood."

When Camilla spoke of "believers," she was referring to the single organized religion that existed in this world: Sanctism. There were technically varying denominations of this religion, but the distinction was unimportant to most outside the religion. After all, the believers tended not to mingle with nonbelievers, anyway. Around eighty percent of the inhabitants of this world were part of that one religion, although only around ten percent of them could be called devout. Of those who didn't follow Sanctism, most of them—including Camilla, and Soma figured he was likely in this group as well—instead followed indigenous teachings. There were also those who followed neither, but they made up only a tiny percent of the overall population.

"Now, about these demons..."

Suddenly, Camilla stopped. She took a small pocket watch out of her breast pocket, glanced at it, and nodded slightly.

"Is something wrong?" Soma asked.

"I was just thinking it might be about time we took a break."

"It would not bother me if we kept going."

"I was thinking you might need one, since you're still recovering. But I guess you seem fine, so we can keep going if you like," Camilla suggested.

“Yes, please.”

The things she was teaching him were so interesting that he didn’t feel tired in the least. The more she taught, the more Soma came to realize just how many things he didn’t know about this world.

One of those things was magic, the one topic he was more eager to learn about than any other, but it would be a little bit before they got to that. In the meantime, Soma sat up attentively as Camilla resumed her lecture.

Chapter 11

Camilla couldn’t help but let out a small sigh as she studied Soma, who was listening to her with intense focus. He really was something.

Although Soma likely wasn’t aware of this, what Camilla was telling him wasn’t something you would usually discuss with a six-year-old. Normally, one wouldn’t be taught about demons until much later in life, being a subject only discussed at the very highest levels of education for scholars and researchers, while children were only warned about monsters. For anyone to make it that far, they would already have to have been taught the crucial information about this country. Less than half of the country’s population made it far enough to be taught about these topics.

It wasn’t that the information was classified; rather, it was thought that much of the population either wouldn’t understand it or that the information spreading would cause mass panic. Yet here was this six-year old, taking it all in as though it were the easiest topic in the world. There really was something special about him.

“I thought so,” Camilla murmured.

“Hm? What are you referring to?”

“Oh, no. I’m just talking to myself. Anyway, as you said, the demons are not a malicious group. Still, though, their strength should not be underestimated. In order to fight a demon, your skill must be at least Intermediate rank,” Camilla continued.

As she spoke, Camilla recalled what had happened when Soma’s previous tutors had conducted the handover with her. That was what they’d called it, but in reality she had barely been “handed” anything. In particular, they had failed to inform her just how far ahead Soma had been with his studies.

General studies, arithmetic, international history, and more—Soma had studied these subjects under various teachers, but none of them would

comment on his progress. There was no way they had taught him nothing, though; they had all been tutors officially hired by the Neumonts. Right now, they were apparently teaching Soma's sister, Lina, which meant that they were still employed.

At first, Camilla had assumed that they simply didn't like Soma. She could see his attitude and manner of speaking getting under a lot of people's skin, and the sorts of tutors who were hired by nobility in particular tended to be quite prideful people. She wouldn't have been surprised if Soma had clashed with some of them, but every single one? It seemed a little much.

She also considered that it may be a matter of pride, but over something else altogether. No matter what the reason may be, to be told halfway that they were no longer required as a private tutor was probably a cause of shame for them. But if that were the case, then they likely would have left the estate completely. The fact that they were still here teaching Lina ruled out that possibility as well.

While no other reasons come to mind, the issue ran deeper than the tutors' apparent attitude toward Soma. They had left her a good number of high-level textbooks, but they had remarked that it didn't really matter that she didn't know how much Soma already knew. It almost seemed petty to her.

So where on earth was she supposed to begin with teaching him? Soon, that question was all she could think about and her mind was overloaded.

Wanting a change of scenery, she had stepped out into the rear garden, which was where she had come across Soma. It was a good thing she did, too, since her sparring session with Soma had prompted her to come up with her answer. Not only had the break helped, but the solution was so simple that she questioned why she hadn't come up with it before: She could just ask Soma himself how much he had studied. She was stunned that, for no reason, she had taken so long to come up with such a simple answer.

When Soma told her, Camilla realized something else; there was a reason that his previous tutors had left such high-level textbooks for her: because that was to be the next step in Soma's education.

It hadn't been an act of pettiness at all; Soma had already finished up all the

material in the intermediate-level textbooks.

Needless to say, Camilla was astonished. She also realized that none of the previous tutors had told her how much he had studied as a way of warning her not to underestimate this boy's abilities.

It would have been a lot easier if they had just told her that outright, but to be so blunt was rare in this country. It likely also had something to do with Camilla's position as a skill appraiser.

"So that means that demons are believed to possess skills of a rather high rank," Soma cut in.

"Yes. At the very least, their high skill ranks are why this country considers them to be so strong," Camilla replied.

"But I was under the impression that to identify somebody else's skills, let alone their level, is something that is quite difficult to do in most circumstances."

"That's right. We skill appraisers are able to identify the level of somebody's skills, but not without physically touching them."

"In that case, why do we presume to know how strong these demons are?" Soma countered.

"It's an educated guess. They're strong, so their skills must be of a high level. The truth, however, is that no one has ever directly evaluated a demon's skills."

"Is that so?" Camilla could more or less tell what Soma was thinking as he continued speaking. "Do you not think that this country places just a little too much importance on skills? I have been thinking that for a while now. I understand that categorizing everything based on skills makes things easier, however..." Soma paused. "Or is it perhaps a characteristic peculiar to this country?"

"You're absolutely right. Other countries value skills too, of course, but they aren't the be-all and end-all, unlike here."

"In that case, there must be a reason why such a way of thinking developed."

"Yes, although there isn't that much to it."

The importance this country placed on skills dated back to its very foundation. It used to be part of the adjacent nation until it claimed independence due to poor treatment over its lack of agriculture, which in turn led to low tax yields. As such, the area was largely seen as unimportant, despite the fact that it bordered the Dark Woods. In fact, it was treated as a buffer; it served as an area that the demons would first have to pass through in order to get to the main part of the country.

Many disgruntled citizens with Specialist-rank skills moved to this area to drive out the demons. They ended up completely crushing them, before immediately declaring this part of the country to be independent. One of those people became the king, and, in a move to protect the new country, he began gathering as many people as possible, judging and selecting them based on the rank of their skills.

“He selected them according to their skills?” Soma asked.

“Yes. More accurately, it was thanks to the military that skills became seen as something much more important than they used to be. There’s a famous tale that states that this country was able to turn the tables on its previous government precisely because having martial skills was a necessary requirement for joining the army.”

The truth, though, was that this country had no other choice but to cling to the importance of skills. The citizens understood that the country had a need to prioritize whatever it could in order to survive. In any other nation, such a change in policy would likely cause an outcry from the population and fail, as evidenced by the fact that no other nations valued skills as highly as this one.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Soma murmured.

“That isn’t the whole story, though,” Camilla continued. “I mentioned that the king selected people according to their skills, right?”

“Right. You said that this place was stricken with poverty, but I have seen nothing to suggest that so far. I had thought that was because of where I was born, but could it be that citizens were assigned to agriculture and other areas based on their skills, too?”

“As perceptive as ever, I see. Too perceptive, almost. Are you really sure

you’re six years old?” Camilla asked.

Her tone was exasperated, but Soma’s guess had been correct once again. Because the system of skill-based personnel allocation had been extremely successful, the country’s belief in skills above all else remained strong.

“I see. Everything you have relayed to me should help me in understanding the current situation, but...”

“Oh? Is there something else you’d like to know?”

“Not particularly. I was just thinking that you’re awfully knowledgeable about these affairs,” he replied.

“Well, it’s all part of the nation’s history; it’s also only been a few decades since this country’s forming, so I was around for a lot of it. It’s not like I’d start forgetting at my age,” she said. However, age wasn’t the only reason that she wouldn’t forget that period of time.

“Hmm...”

“What is it?” Camilla prompted.

“No. It is just that I understand my own position much more clearly now.”

“Oh. Right, I guess so.”

If Soma had been born in any other country, he likely would not have faced any issues, and would probably be allowed to remain the heir to his noble family even without any skills. This country was the only one where such a thing was unthinkable; this country’s inhabitants would never allow it. It didn’t matter how Sophia herself felt; it was just the way things were.

“I wouldn’t blame you for holding a grudge against me.” Camilla suddenly spoke up.

The reason Camilla had agreed to tutor Soma was so that she could make amends, thanks to Sophia giving her the opportunity. It was just like when Sophia was ten years old, and she had been told that she would be hailed as a hero, only for Camilla to throw her life into disarray.

Unable to bear that burden, she had resigned from her post, which was when Sophia had hired her as the Neumont’s private appraiser. Camilla doubted that

Sophia planned to have Soma take revenge, but even if she had, she didn't think she would have minded. In fact, that might have been exactly what she wished for.

"Hmm? Why should I hold a grudge against you?" Soma stared blankly at her, confusion written clearly on his face.

"Well, skill appraisers are the only ones who can see the skills of others and their details. If I had lied about your evaluation, or made something up, you'd still be able to live a fulfilling life," Camilla explained.

"Perhaps. But the current situation does not concern me in the slightest," Soma replied.

His expression hadn't changed at all since she'd brought up this topic of conversation, suggesting that his lack of concern was genuine. In doing so, he also inadvertently threw out Camilla's worries.

"It doesn't concern you?" she echoed. "That was the biggest turning point of your entire life—a turn for the worse—and yet you say it doesn't concern you?"

"As I believe I have already stated, my only interest is learning magic. My evaluation results simply mean I now have more time for that. I have no reason to bear a grudge against you. In fact, I believe I should be grateful."

Grateful? Camilla stiffened at that word. She wasn't quite sure what sort of face she was making. There was one thing she knew, though: She was on the verge of bursting into laughter.

"Oh. I see." Camilla nodded absentmindedly.

After her match with Soma, she had found herself excited to teach him. Now, though, she was more excited than ever.

The burden on her heart eased a little, Camilla broke into a smile.

Chapter 12

It had already been a year since Camilla had started teaching Soma.

Recently, she'd expanded into teaching him a wider variety of subjects, but thanks to her teaching style he was able to handle it with no troubles whatsoever.

He had also finally started learning about magic, which only made things even more enjoyable. When they had discussed it the previous day, he had found himself asking question after question.

"It seems as though I am still not able to use it," Soma remarked.

"It didn't work, huh?" Aina asked with an exasperated sigh as Soma continued to swing. Up and down, up and down. As he swung, he stepped forward, matching his movements to the image in his mind. It was the same training he had been doing for decades now. He kept up the conversation as he did so, his movements not faltering in the least.

"No, but I never believed that learning magic would be easy. Everything is still going exactly as I expected," Soma replied.

"As you expected? I'm surprised you're still going, considering you've made zero progress. Or is this one of those cases where the journey is more important than the destination?"

"Not at all. I am working toward a goal. The goal is what has meaning here, not the process. In my opinion, at least."

"Huh?" Aina sounded surprised, but Soma still didn't look in her direction as he continued training, swinging his arms down and stepping forward.

"But it must mean something to you if you're coming out here like this every day, right?" Aina asked.

"Hmph. I am not quite sure what gave you that impression, but I would not say this activity itself holds any real meaning," Soma responded.

There was no particular reason why Soma continued his daily training, but he didn't feel that one was needed; it was just his routine. He had been doing it for decades in his previous life, and it had become such a habit for him that it almost made him feel unwell if he didn't keep it up. His reincarnation had done nothing to break that habit, since even if he had no particular reason to continue, he also didn't have a reason to stop. To him, that's what it meant to have a daily routine.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Aina said.

"As long as it is a question that I am able to answer," Some replied.

"O-Okay, umm... You think there's no point in doing something if you don't get results, right?"

"That is rather presumptuous. However, you are not wrong. If there is ever a point to such things, it is only when the results are achieved."

Soma was proud of the work he had put in to master the sword in his previous lifetime. However, as far as he was concerned, all of that effort had been meaningless until the very moment he had achieved his goal. If he had never made it, then all of the effort he had put toward it would have been completely pointless. The results were what determined whether any action had meaning.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. That means that everything I—"

"Meaning is one thing, but value is another entirely," Soma interrupted.

"Huh?"

"Why do you look so bewildered? Meaning is determined by results, while value is determined by the individual. Therefore, even if an action is pointless, if you believe it has value, then it does."

"So even if it ends up being pointless, you're studying magic because you think it has value?"

"I wonder about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Because I am yet unconvinced that my efforts will turn out to be

meaningless.” Soma was aware of the possibility, but that didn’t mean that he was about to give up.

“Even though the chances of this working out are so low?”

“It is enough that the possibility exists, no matter how small. Even in the most extreme event that I only learn how to use magic the very moment before I die, that shall be enough to satisfy me.”

“You stupid or something?”

“I must be, to be doing what I am.”

“Yeah.”

There was no scorn in Aina’s voice; there was warmth... and something more. Soma was a little curious about the intent behind Aina’s question, but he decided that it wasn’t worth pursuing.

“My pursuit of magic is much like this daily routine of mine.”

“Daily routine?” Aina echoed.

“Indeed. I do not believe this routine will ever amount to anything meaningful. I do it because I believe that it holds value.”

“If you don’t think it has meaning, then what value does it have?” Aina pressed.

“Well, thanks to this routine, I am able to deepen my relationship with you,” replied Soma.

“Huh?!”

Soma never failed to perform his daily routine, but a few things about it had changed over time.

One thing that changed, of course, was that Soma regained his memories. Another was that, over the course of the past year, he would spend more time speaking to Aina as he practiced with the stick.

Ever since they had met each other after Soma’s sparring match with Camilla, Aina would show up daily during his training and they would have a short conversation. It wasn’t something that Soma had planned, but it was now as

much a part of his routine as anything else.

Their conversations, however, were largely insubstantial, mostly consisting of Soma discussing what he had done the previous day. He still knew very little about Aina apart from her name, but recently she had started to open up a bit more. This was why Soma considered his routine to have value.

“What the heck are you saying?! Are you stupid or something?!” Aina cried.

“I believe I already stated that I am,” Soma replied smoothly.

“Th-That’s not what I meant!”

Soma found his lips curling upward at Aina’s flustered wail. It wasn’t like he enjoyed tormenting her; ever since they’d first met, he’d felt as though there were a barrier between them. Now, though, it seemed like that barrier was coming down.

“You are starting to lower your guard around me. Should I take that as a sign that you have finally accepted me? Or does it mean you are starting to trust me?” Soma asked. She probably hadn’t reacted that way consciously, which is what showed Soma that she was beginning to trust him.

“You mean you knew?” she asked.

“No matter what I spoke about, you would barely offer any input yourself. For whatever reason, you were being cautious around me.”

“You really didn’t understand why?” Aina said. “To be honest, I’m more amazed that you were so open with me when you barely know anything about me. I mean, I’m pretty suspicious, right? I think you need to be a bit more cautious.”

“Oh? So that is why you kept your guard up around me, is it?”

Apparently she considered herself “suspicious.” It was only natural, then, that she should find him suspicious in turn for not being wary around her. The reason she had kept that barrier between them was so that she could get a better sense of what his intentions were.

“So had I been a little more cautious, you would have opened up to me sooner?” Soma pondered briefly before speaking again. “However, I do not see

much point in being cautious when there is no need to be."

"No need? Why?" Aina stared at him. "First, I save you in the middle of this forest where no one's supposed to go, and then I keep showing up all the time. Isn't that basically telling you that I'm suspicious?"

"You didn't tell me anything of the sort," Soma retorted.

"Yeah, but my actions did!"

"Generally, if one believes oneself to be suspicious, they tend not to announce that fact. Besides, if one of us here is suspicious, it would undoubtedly be me."

Soma was the one who had collapsed in the middle of a forbidden forest. That was suspicious enough in itself, and was the point at which he lost the right to distrust his savior. Plus, the fact that she'd helped him at all told him that she was trustworthy.

"That's not true!" Aina protested. "What if I only saved you to gain your trust?"

"Then you would not have 'saved' me, you would be 'manipulating' me. Had that been your intention, I would have been able to tell."

He wasn't bluffing—as a swordsman, being able to recognize people's intentions was just as important as being able to swing your sword. Even if he wasn't aiming to be a swordsman in this life, the skills that he had spent decades perfecting were still useful. He would have been able to tell if Aina had some ulterior motives.

"S-So?" Aina prompted.

"Hm?"

"You were waiting for me to lower my guard, right? That means there must be something I have that you want. I mean, if you didn't, you wouldn't be talking to me every single day like this. I'm pretty suspicious, after all," she added.

"As I have already stated, that is not how I see you. However, I cannot deny that there is something I want from you."

“Thought so. I mean, I am...”

“It is nothing major, though. I am merely wondering what it is that is troubling you.” Soma cut her off.

“Well, a dem—Huh?”

“Hm? Is something the matter?” Soma asked.

“How did you know that something was troubling me?” Aina asked slowly.

“How did I know?” Soma echoed thoughtfully.

He briefly considered replying that there was likely something, given that everyone had worries, but he suspected a quip like that wouldn’t go over well. In truth, he’d just realized it by watching her.

During their conversations, every now and then, a melancholy expression would cross her face. Combined with her coming to see him every day, it wasn’t hard to guess that there must have been some sort of reason behind it.

“When I first met you, I definitely considered that you might be plotting something,” Soma began. “However, it was not long before my impression of you changed.”

“S-So? Since you know there’s something troubling me, what are you gonna do about it?” Aina pressed. “Are you gonna use it to threaten me?”

“First, I must ask that you please stop jumping to such farfetched conclusions...”

Soma sighed, deciding he’d trained enough and stopping his movements. Even if he hadn’t, though, he wanted to speak to Aina properly.

“You may recall that I promised to ‘save you’ around a year ago. By learning what it is that troubles you, I may be able to fulfill that promise. That is all.”

Aina sighed, a mixture of complex emotions on her face. It was hard to pinpoint just what she was feeling, but she seemed somehow close to both tears and laughter at the same time.

“You’re right. I’m not as wary of you as I was, and there is something troubling me. Plus, I’ve spent so much time listening to you, maybe it’s time for

me to talk," she said.

"Indeed," Soma agreed. "It is only fair that you should tell me about yourself now."

"Yeah." Aina smiled slightly before sighing again. "The truth is... everyone else thinks I'm a failure."

Thus, Aina began to recount her troubles.

Chapter 13

The reason Aina was known as a failure was because of a certain event that took place just over a year ago.

It had been part of Aina's coming of age. To be more precise, it was the one of the first ceremonies that she had to undergo to be accepted as an adult in her culture, which a child would experience every year until they reached adulthood.

The event in question was, essentially, her skill evaluation.

"I see. So it is the same thing that was done with me at the estate," Soma murmured.

"I guess so. They do that sort of thing everywhere, right?" Aina replied.

"So your skill evaluation failed?"

"No, the evaluation itself was fine."

According to Aina's evaluation, she had a Specialist-rank Magic skill.

"I see," Soma remarked.

"Huh? You mean you already know what happened next?".

"Indeed. Because you possess a high-level skill, they thought you arrogant, and challenged you to a fight."

"What? That's not what happened at all!" Aina retorted. "Where did you come from, where that's your first guess?!"

As she raised her voice, Soma stared blankly at her in confusion. "Do you mean to say I am wrong?"

"You're like, a million miles off!" Aina snapped.

"Oh. Well, given that it was a joke, I cannot say I am surprised."

"A joke?! Come on!"

For a moment, Aina wondered whether Soma was really planning on hearing her out after all. However, it wasn't long before he spoke again.

"You do not need to tell me, but I do not mind listening if it is bothering you. I can always repay my debt to you on another occasion, if that would be preferable."

Aina sighed deeply again. "Thanks for the concern, but you don't need to worry. I'm the one who decided to talk, after all."

"Is that so?"

"I mean, you said it'd be unfair if I didn't, right?"

"Indeed I did." Soma's lip curled upward, but Aina was being completely serious.

That being said, though, she agreed with his sentiment. She had no idea why Soma had been coming out here, day after day, for an entire year. Even so, she was immensely grateful that he had, so it didn't feel right for her to continue like this without telling him anything about herself.

"I want to talk, but I'm not gonna force you to listen to me," she explained.

"If that is what you want, then by all means, speak. Besides, as I have already stated, I have been wondering about what it is that is troubling you."

"It's not that long of a story," Aina began.

At her evaluation, it was discovered that she possessed a Specialist-rank skill. At first, everybody had congratulated her, but that attitude only lasted until the following day, when a party was thrown, partly in celebration of her newfound skill.

"So what happened?" Soma asked.

"It turned out that I couldn't use magic."

Everybody had been deeply disappointed when they found out, and their attitude toward Aina was completely flipped on its head.

"I understand, though. They had all been so happy about it, and then I went and let them down," Aina continued.

“You’ve lost me somewhat. You possess the skill, yes? So what precisely do you mean when you say you cannot use magic?”

“I just can’t use magic. Lemme show you...”

Aina extended her right hand before reciting the incantation to create flames, concentrating magic energy into her palm.

Magic Specialist. Satan’s Divine Protection. ____: Magic. Light. (Misfire).

No flames appeared. As long as she possessed the skill, she should have been able to use it no problem. She didn’t need to know the theory behind it, nor should anybody have to teach her. Aina knew how to use fire magic because she possessed the necessary skill, and she’d acted according to her knowledge. It wasn’t just fire magic, either; thanks to her Specialist-rank skill, she had access to all sorts of magic, but she had never successfully used any of it.

“Everyone in the ca—I mean, everybody in the village checked, but they all said my method was correct. We tried everything, and we even went right back to the basics, but no one could figure it out. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t be able to use magic,” Aina explained.

Even if nobody could explain it, though, the fact remained that she couldn’t use it, and she had no idea why. She asked all sorts of people, got their help, and practiced as much as she could, but she never even got close.

“I tried all sorts of things. Three days passed, then a week, then a month, but it was hopeless.”

Eventually, Aina could no longer handle the way everyone was watching her, so she ran away, although she left that part out. She ended her story with her stumbling upon him one year ago.

Right now, Aina was staying in a town near the forest with an elderly couple she had bumped into one day. She didn’t feel she could tell Soma that, either, because if she told him, she had no doubt that he would realize what that meant. Knowing him, he had probably already worked it out, but she didn’t want to voice it out loud just yet.

“If I may ask just one thing,” Soma suddenly began.

Aina didn’t understand what about her story could have possibly confused him, but she listened as he continued.

“Nobody could explain your inability to use magic. In other words, although they examined you, they found nothing that could have caused it.”

“Huh? Um, yeah, that’s right...”

“In that case, they have no reason to think that there is something inherently wrong with your skill. Or perhaps they are simply clueless. Hmm... Whatever it is, if I were able to cut it off, perhaps we would have our answer.”

“Huh? What the heck do you mean by—” Aina began, but she was immediately interrupted by a flash of light before her.

By the time she registered what was happening, it was already over. She’d felt something being cut, but somehow she didn’t feel even a twinge of pain.

“Wh-What did you just do?” she asked.

“Hmph. That should have done it. Now, try and use your magic again.”

“Like I said, I—”

Aina didn’t finish her thought, cutting herself off with a sigh as she realized the pointlessness of arguing. She knew that Soma had done something, but it was a mystery to her exactly what it had been. However, she also knew that he wasn’t the type to do something like that without a reason.

“All right. You just want me to try and use magic, right? I’ll warn you now that it’s pointless, though.”

It had been an entire year since Aina had run away from home, and it wasn’t like she had spent that time doing nothing. She had tried all sorts of things to be able to use magic, but none of it had borne fruit, so she had no reason to expect this to work.

“Flames.”

She stretched out her hand.

Magic Specialist. Satan’s Divine Protection. Great Flame: Magic. Light. (Accidental Fire).

There was a flash of light in her palm.

“Huh?”

Thanks to the knowledge her Specialist-rank skill granted her, she knew what had caused the spell to fail: She had put too much power into it, causing the magic to dissipate before the flames had time to form.

“Oh? I do believe I saw some flames for a brief moment there,” Soma said.

It wasn’t like before, where nothing had happened at all. This mistake had been a legitimate one. Aina could feel something welling up inside her, but she forced herself to stay calm. Trembling, she repeated the incantation. She carried out the same actions as before, being careful with the amount of magic power that she used.

“Flames...”

Even though it was barely a whisper, the effect was immediate.

Magic Specialist. Satan’s Divine Protection. Great Flame: Magic. Light.

A tiny flame danced upon her palm.It barely gave off any light at all, and would probably only barely be able to set fire to a pile of coals, but it was the first magical flame that Aina had ever produced.

“It seems as though it went well this time,” Soma remarked with a nod. “I thought cutting it off would do it. Although it is somewhat disturbing that I had to go to such lengths, I suppose we should just be happy for your success for the time being. Congratulations, Ai...na?!”

Aina had been staring at the flame in amazement, but Soma’s panicked tone brought her back to her senses. When she looked up at him, he seemed to be in even more of a panic than she’d expected.

“Wh-Whatever is the matter?! Did I spring some sort of trap? Ngh! How could I have been so blind?! I should never have cut it off so hastily! I...”

She stared at him in confusion. Then, the very next moment, she felt something warm on her cheek. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she suddenly understood why he was so riled up, but she couldn’t stop now, even if she tried. The tears continued to flow.

Despite having believed her skill was totally empty, she now knew for sure: She wasn't powerless, and she had a mission to fulfill. Aina knew she still had a long way to go, but she couldn't stop crying. Her eyes sparkled as she broke into a smile.

"I don't know what you did, but I know that this," she said, gesturing to the flame, "is all thanks to you. So thank you, Soma."

With a beaming smile, she thanked him from the bottom of her heart.

Chapter 14

It had been around half an hour since Aina had cried in the forest.

Soma walked through a corridor in the estate, relieved that she had been crying from happiness rather than anything else. Even though he had returned from sneaking out, he made no move to keep his footsteps light. There was no need for him to pretend that he hadn't left the mansion. He hadn't obtained permission to leave the house; a whole year had passed, but he was still not allowed to go outside. Given that he hadn't seen his mother, the very person who had put that rule into force, in that entire time, there wouldn't be any way for him to obtain that permission.

"Hm?"

"Ah!"

At that moment, Soma spotted a familiar face at the end of the corridor. The figure was short, and although the color of their hair and eyes were different, they looked very much like Soma's. It was Lina, his younger sister.

"Hello, Lina. It has been a while."

"Y-Yes, Br—um, Soma..." Lina replied timidly.

Although Soma gave her a warm smile, Lina's response was a little icy. Her eyes were darting around the corridor, and she was clearly determined to look anywhere but at Soma. The most telling thing was that she called him by his first name.

"I am relieved to see that you are well. However, you do realize that it is perfectly acceptable to refer to me as 'brother' like you used to, right?" Soma said.

"No, I can't."

"Hmph."

He knew it was a long shot, given that he hadn't seen Lina in about a year,

either. He knew that things had changed since his evaluation, but even then it was a very dramatic change.

At the sight of his sister's tired face, it occurred to Soma that maybe she was finding it hard to relax within the mansion. In that case, a change of scenery could be all that she needed.

"You seem a little tired. Might I suggest you venture outside from time to time?" Soma suggested. "You may recall that we snuck out together a long time ago. I would be happy to take you—"

"Thank you for your concern," Lina replied. "I'm grateful for your generous offer, but I'm afraid I don't have time for that sort of thing, unlike you. Why don't you stop sneaking out, Br— Soma, and start doing something a bit more constructive? If you did, then... Wait, never mind."

"What is it, Lina?" Soma urged.

"I'm afraid I must excuse myself. I can't afford to waste time chatting here."

With those words, Lina quickly scurried away. Soma watched as she disappeared around the corner of the corridor, without looking back once. A troubled expression crossed his face as he stared at the spot where she had stood.

"I suppose that is that, although perhaps our meeting was not entirely meaningless." Soma sighed.

That they had met on this day in particular was especially important. Not only that, but if their meeting was the result of his actions so far, then that gave those actions meaning, too. Whether anything would come of that meaning was another matter, given the person in question had disappeared before his very eyes.

"Time waits for no man, it seems."

Soma shrugged to himself as he thought back to the young sister, who used to pull him along excitedly behind her.

†††

"I wonder if she really has come to hate me," Soma lamented.

“Sorry, I couldn’t tell you,” Camilla replied.

Once she had reached a good point in the lesson to take a break, Soma had relayed what had happened that morning, but Camilla hadn’t responded with much more than a shrug. What else could she have said? Camilla had met Lina several times, but they weren’t very close, and it had now been a year since their last encounter. She had no clue what Lina thought of her brother, although she could guess, to some extent.

“I’m more interested in what you mentioned earlier,” Camilla said.

“You mean about Aina?”

“Yes. You mentioned that you saw something attached to her, and after you cut it off, she was able to use magic. I can’t say I expected less.”

“Oh?”

“There’s no need to be modest, but I can’t say I’m surprised that your sister scolded you for wasting your time, either.”

“Hmph. I am not sure what you mean by that.” Soma paused. “However, her impression that I have nothing better to do is not entirely inaccurate.”

“That’s not what I meant. Anyway, if you’re an example of somebody who has ‘nothing to do,’ then what does that say about everyone else in this country? A bunch of layabouts, if you ask me.”

“Really? I wouldn’t go quite that far, personally.”

Soma continued to peruse the book in front of him as Camilla sighed. Here was a boy capable of understanding and giving his thoughts on complex research papers. He of all people shouldn’t have “nothing to do,” or maybe he was only able to get where he was so quickly because of all his free time.

In the end, though, whether or not his efforts would pay off was another matter altogether.

“Although, I think I can understand why your sister ended up running off without finishing what she was saying,” Camilla added.

Currently, Lina was studying to become the head of the family. Personally, Camilla thought that it was far too much for her, considering the girl’s age, but

Soma casually coming up to her and suggesting she go outside more was probably insulting. She was just taking her frustrations out on him, most likely because she very much wanted to accept his offer.

Camilla never told Soma that she had carried out Lina's skill evaluation almost immediately after he had been declared skill-less. Being asked to do that was no surprise to her, since if Lina was also found to be skill-less, then the future of the Neumonts would have been in jeopardy. Fortunately, that wasn't the case, and Lina's results had been phenomenal. As such, Lina herself realized that, if she took her brother's place as heir, then the future looked bright. Now, Soma was reaping the benefits of his sister's decision.

For example, if he were still in line to be head of the household, Soma would not be able to go outside as freely as he did. Almost nobody within the estate bothered with him anymore apart from Camilla, so he was able to leave without even being questioned. At first, it seemed cruel that everybody was ignoring him, but it meant that there was nothing holding Soma back. While some people may have seen the situation as negative, that was not how Soma saw it at all.

Perhaps Sophia had arranged things like this precisely because she realized Soma would benefit from it. In any case, it was all thanks to Lina that Soma was able to live as freely as he was now, and Soma himself likely recognized that. That was probably why he wanted to look out for her. Lina would likely have accepted his kindness one year ago, immediately following her skill evaluation. But, over the past year, her outlook on life had been completely changed as a result of her evolving situation.

Her studies to become the next head of the household were slightly different from the education that Soma had been receiving, omitting some subjects at Sophia's request. As a result, she had slightly fewer tutors than Soma had had.

They were all tutors who would teach Lina to rule, but Camilla had heard of one of them in particular who seemed to be rather nasty. Apparently, she was the type who took pleasure in seeing her students succeed. On its own, that was fine, but the problem was that she wasn't afraid of bringing down others to achieve that.

More specifically, she derived pleasure in deriding others so that they would feel that she had helped them achieve something when they hadn't. It was the gratitude they expressed to her that gave her a kick. She was the kind of person who Camilla hated from the bottom of her heart. Not only that, but she had set her sights on someone as a potential victim: Soma.

The two had never met, but even though Soma was currently kept out of the public eye, he wasn't hidden completely. Not only that, but the tutors working at the estate were the servants' superiors, so if a tutor were to request information from a servant, the servant would be unable to refuse. She would then be able to use her position to twist that information and spread harmful rumors about Soma, a possibility that Camilla found sickening.

She didn't even want to think about what sort of effect these potential rumors would be having on Lina, who would no doubt be hearing them over and over again. While she was wise and mature for her age, she was very much still a child, highly vulnerable to the influences of those around her.

That was likely why Sophia had been so careful in the selection of her tutors, but there was only so much that she could do. As long as the tutor was just a "bad influence" and did nothing further, Sophia had no grounds to expel her from the estate, either. This was a noble household, and annoyingly, people trained to teach her specialty were rare. Sophia had to be careful not to act too rashly.

At the same time, though, if she were to cross the line, she would be out of there in a flash, so Lina was probably okay for the time being. Although there seemed to be some cracks forming in the relationship between Soma and his sister, that was still far from public knowledge.

"I guess sometimes we just have to accept that some things are out of our hands," Camilla murmured to herself as she watched Soma read his book.

Chapter 15

“Hm? Ma’am, may I ask a question?”

It was just as Camilla was deep in thought about the siblings that Soma spoke up.

“Of course. Are you stuck on something? Or is there something that you’ve just worked out?” Camilla asked lightly.

For the most part, Camilla rarely found herself able to give an answer to any of Soma’s questions. Right now, he was reading a highly technical research paper. Camilla had completed her higher education, but had never gone any further than that. No matter what Soma was about to ask her, she doubted she would know the answer.

Soma was reading a fairly high-level book on magic; not exactly Camilla’s area of expertise. The fact that he was able to read something like that now, when a year ago he was completely clueless on the subject, wasn’t because of how hard he had worked. He had worked hard, of course, but magic wasn’t normally something that was taught until you made it to higher education.

Currently, magic was something that was entirely dependent on natural ability. In other words, if you had the relevant skill, you would be able to use magic. Since having any knowledge of the theory behind it or how it worked was unnecessary, those who took time to study magic theory were few and far between. As a result, most of the materials that existed on magic theory were high-level research papers, so that was all Soma had to read.

“I have a query,” Soma began. “According to this article, magic cannot fail. Is that really true?”

“Well, since I’m not a magic user, I can’t say for sure, but that’s what I’ve heard. It’s not just magic, though, you know,” Camilla replied.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Right, I guess you wouldn’t know. When a skillbearer uses a skill, as long as

their opponent doesn't have a skill that outranks theirs, it cannot fail."

If you were to use a Specialist-rank swordsmanship skill, that skill would never miss. Even if your opponent were to warp backward, your attack would also warp through space to strike them.

"It makes sense, I suppose, given that it is the highest rank. So Specialist-rank skills are able to outclass any opponent's attempt to dodge or defend themselves?"

"Well, it's up to the researchers to sort through the details of why that is. For us regular folk, it's enough just to know that it is what it is."

"Incidentally, what would happen if the skillbearer were to miss the target on purpose?"

"That's another matter. If you intend to miss in the first place, then you can't really say that the skill 'failed.' As long as you aim your skill properly, it will hit, provided your opponent's skills don't outrank it."

That was why it was usually recommended to spar with a partner with the same skill rank as yourself. Otherwise, the person with the higher-rank skills would have to be limited to defending, and their opponent to attacking. If the higher-ranked person attacked, their opponent would be unable to dodge at all, and the entire exercise would be pointless.

In the case of Camilla and Soma's exercise, Camilla's attacks may have been excessive. However, Soma fighting with a stick had been even more absurd, so that fight probably hadn't followed the usual rules.

"Hmm..."

"What's the matter?"

"You said that skills should never fail, yet I witnessed such a thing quite recently."

"Oh, right. I remember you mentioning that."

Although Camilla knew that Soma was still keeping up his daily routine, she hadn't accompanied him since that time they had sparred. Now and then, however, the topic would come up in conversation. Soma had told her about his

meetings with a girl named Aina in the Dark Woods and about what he had done there on one particular recent occasion. Soma didn't often go into too much detail, though, which meant Camilla was usually left to fill in the gaps herself. His tales also helped her understand just how unusual Soma was.

"He doesn't seem to realize it himself, but even if he claims to know that skills aren't everything, it seems as though he can't make himself fully believe it," Camilla murmured.

"Did you say something?"

"Oh, no, just talking to myself. So you wanted to know why that skill failed? Well, what I said isn't actually 100% true. Skills generally do not fail, but Specialist-rank skills are an exception."

"That means it is not a hard and fast rule, as you suggested."

"It's a little hard to explain. Basically, Specialist-rank skills are so powerful that they work beyond the limits of the usual rules. They can't be classified with other skillbearers to start with, so any 'hard and fast rule' doesn't necessarily apply to them."

For example, if the strikes of a Specialist-rank swordsman were able to warp through space to hit their target, then they were clearly too powerful to be bound by any normal rules.

"Really? That sounds like a normal technique for a swordsman to achieve. All he would need is a bit of training," Soma said.

"I think we need to work on your definition of 'normal.' Anyway, only Specialist-rank skillbearers are able to cause their skills to fail on purpose, when that would otherwise be impossible. The skill you saw fail was Specialist-rank, wasn't it?"

"Hmm... Apparently, the skill failed because she put too much magic power into it. Is that not something that can occur with all magic skills?"

"Could be, I wouldn't know. I've never heard of that happening, but it could just be that our country is behind on its magic research. You'd know more about that than me."

“I suppose I would,” Soma said, grimacing slightly. He probably knew that Camilla was right, and that most of the research papers that existed on magic were of no use to him. Most of them were written to proselytize for the Church of Sanctism, after all.

If magic skills were based entirely on your natural ability, then how could you improve those skills? It wasn’t even fully known how magic skills could be learned in the first place. Swordsmanship was easy; as long as you kept practicing with your sword, you would eventually learn corresponding skills and they would gradually rank up. But since magic wasn’t well understood, a common way to learn magic skills was to join the church.

It wasn’t that the papers produced were nonsense; they were still the result of serious research, even if they were commissioned by the church to recruit new believers. Unfortunately, it was already challenging enough to get your research published; the fact that most of what was already out there originated from the church was probably discouraging, to say the least. It led to less unbiased research being published, which in turn led to the church having more of a hold on research into magic.

Soma likely wouldn’t be able to take most of what he read seriously. It also meant that, no matter how hard he tried, he wouldn’t be able to make any progress. It was no wonder he was grimacing.

“How did she know why her magic failed, though?” Camilla murmured to herself.

Perhaps she had moved here or fled from a different country. If that was the case, then she would have to make moves to protect the girl very quickly, not least because she was in possession of a Specialist-rank skill. Camilla wasn’t affiliated with the military anymore, and it’s obvious that anyone with a Specialist-rank skill would stand out. It sounded as though the girl had been able to use magic thanks to Soma’s actions, and it wouldn’t be too long before people found out.

What made things potentially tricky was that this girl seemed to be, from Soma’s descriptions, in this country illegally, but that didn’t actually worry Camilla too much. Even though this area was a duchy, it wasn’t uncommon for

people to enter the country illegally around here. After all, it was only to be expected, given that this place was built so close to the Dark Woods and the border. Keeping the demons out was a higher priority, so as long as those illegal immigrants weren't demons, they were usually left alone. They might have problems if they committed a crime, but if Soma trusted this girl, then Camilla trusted his judgment. Not only that, but everyone who lived near the Dark Woods was properly documented. The girl was presumably staying at one of these documented households.

However, not everyone who lived in the Dark Woods was under the duchy. *Wasn't there a small village on the demons' side of the border?* "She couldn't be..."

"Outside the limits of the usual rules?" Soma murmured.

"What's that? Did you come up with another wild idea?"

"I beg your pardon? What do you mean by 'another'?"

"I can tell by the look on your face that you've thought of something," Camilla remarked. She wasn't a fan of most of the ideas he came up with, but telling him that wouldn't change anything. "Anyway, what is it?"

"If a skillbearer with Specialist-rank skills isn't bound by the usual rules, then could it be possible for me to learn magic from them?"

"If so, then that certainly would be outside the normal limits of the rules." Camilla sighed. Which was more absurd, she wondered: having your slash attack warp through space, or being able to teach magic to somebody else? Both of those ideas were already far beyond the bounds of common sense the moment they popped into Soma's mind. As somebody who was born within those limits of logic and common sense, Camilla was unable to decide which was further from sanity.

"Well, I don't think there would be any harm in asking her."

"Indeed!" Soma replied eagerly. "In fact, I shall keep asking her until she accepts!"

Camilla couldn't help but let out a small chuckle at the way Soma's eyes lit up. Her smile deepened as she realized, once again, that Soma was also one of

those not bound by the usual limits.

Chapter 16

“Therefore, it should be possible for you to teach me how to use magic!”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

Aina returned Soma’s excited declaration with complete confusion. Maybe she was more surprised than confused, considering Soma had neglected to greet Aina before giving her that outburst. Naturally, Soma expected that sort of reaction. He savored it for a moment with a satisfied smile before explaining.

After listening to his explanation, Aina paused for a moment before replying. “I know what you said about these people being ‘outside of the usual limits,’ and I guess as a Specialist skillbearer, that would include me, but I’ve only been able to use magic for a day at most. I barely know anything myself, so I don’t think I could really teach you much.”

“Oh? Personally, I should think that it would be much simpler to do than having your sword strike warp through space,” Soma countered.

“Just so you know, I can’t do that, either!” Aina snapped.

Since he was able to do that, Soma had thought it a reasonable comparison to make. It seemed as though he was the only one, however.

“As with all things, we shan’t know unless we try. It may actually be easier than we anticipate.”

“‘We’?” Aina echoed. “Does that mean you don’t think it’ll work, either?”

Soma was silent.

“What, you thought I wouldn’t notice? C’mon, say something!”

It wasn’t that Soma thought that it wouldn’t work; it would be more accurate to say that he hoped it wouldn’t. He still wanted to learn how to use magic, of course. It was just that this method of learning seemed a little unsatisfactory to him, despite the fact that it was his idea in the first place. If it really ended up being so simple, then all of his hard work up until now would have been for

nothing. Still, if it did work, and it allowed him to learn magic, then he would be over the moon.

“In any case, let us just say that in doing this, you will be paying me back for the favor I did you yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Aina paused. “Yeah, I guess I do owe you for that.”

“I know we said that yesterday I had paid you back for what happened one year ago, but even then it doesn’t seem quite equal.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I mean, compared to what I did for you, yesterday was—”

“You saved my life. What I did for you yesterday hardly compares,” Soma cut in.

“Wait, what?!”

For some reason, Aina seemed surprised at his words, but Soma couldn’t quite work out why. After all, all that Soma had done yesterday was swing his stick one more time than he usually would, while Aina had saved his life. The two acts simply didn’t compare.

“You just swung your stick?” Aina echoed. “To me, it was so much more than that. How did I save your life, anyway?

“I mean just that. If you had left me there, things may not have turned out so favorably for me.”

Not only had he been completely defenseless, but his situation had posed a problem, too. Since he had been in the middle of the Dark Woods, the chances of him being found were low, and the estate may have declared him a runaway. It wasn’t until after he had collapsed that he had started to be treated with indifference, but he still wouldn’t be surprised if they would have used that opportunity to get rid of him.

Thinking about it like that, Aina really had saved his life.

“I still feel like you’re overreacting a bit, but I guess trying to argue with you about it isn’t gonna help.”

“I see you know me well.” Soma smiled.

“Of course I do. We’ve seen each other nearly every day for a whole year now, so I couldn’t help but get to know you.”

“Does that mean you regret it? If so, I shall not push the issue further.”

“Th-That’s not what I meant!” Aina retorted.

As such, the two decided to give it a go. As Aina had said, there was still a lot that she didn’t know herself, so for the time being Soma decided just to try and copy what she did.

“So, I am to stretch out my right hand like this,” he murmured to himself. “What now?”

“Focus your magic energy into your hand, and—”

“Wait a moment.”

“What?”

“I am not sure how one focuses one’s magic energy. Not to mention I am not sure what ‘magic energy’ is in the first place.”

“Huh?”

It didn’t take long for the gaps in Soma’s knowledge to show themselves.

“Magic energy is...” Aina thought for a moment. “I mean... magic energy is magic energy.”

“But I have no idea what magic energy is supposed to feel like. Or perhaps it would be best simply to skip this part of the exercise.”

“You gotta be kidding. You can’t use magic without magic energy!”

“I have an idea. Why don’t you simply explain the process to me using swordsmanship terminology? I have no doubt that I should be able to understand the concept more easily then,” Soma suggested.

“I’d love to, if I knew anything about swordsmanship!” Aina huffed.

Aina was the sort of person who preferred to rely on intuition rather than theory. She attempted to explain the process to Soma, but by the time she started using sound effects to describe it, the whole idea fell apart.

Incidentally, Soma himself also tended to rely on his intuition more than anything else. If Aina could just explain to Soma how it felt, everything would probably be much easier. However, because he lacked any experience with magic, it would likely be difficult for him to understand. It was clear that this wasn't going anywhere.

Soma, being who he was, wasn't ready to give up just yet. He began to think deeply, wondering if there wasn't something else they could try.

"Perhaps I do not know how it feels because I do not understand it," he murmured. "So if I could understand it first..."

"I don't like that look on your face," Aina cut in. "What exactly are you planning?"

"I was just wondering whether I would be able to understand the feeling if you were to attack me with magic."

Aina gawked at him.

"Perhaps I should be more specific. At this point in time, I am most familiar with swordsmanship. Therefore, if you were to 'slash' at me with your magic, perhaps then I should understand."

Aina gawked at him. Apparently, his second explanation hadn't made it any easier for her to accept what he was saying, but Soma didn't understand why she was confused.

"Had you not thought of that possibility yourself?"

"I'm just... Are you serious?"

"I am always serious."

Aina sighed before glaring at him. "Since you've said it now, I guess there's no talking you out of it, huh?"

"Precisely."

"Okay, then I won't say anything. Just prepare for a world of hurt, okay?"

Aina had already started making distance between herself and Soma before he had time to ask what exactly she meant by that.

She got into her stance. Soma braced himself.

“Flames. Show your power, and bend to my will. Burn away all that stands in my way!”

Soma could tell instantly that what she was doing now was something completely different than what he saw yesterday. Not only was the incantation different, but right now Aina had both hands out in front of her instead of just the one. On top of that, she seemed more determined than she had the day before. As far as Soma was concerned, that was nothing but a good thing.

Sword Theory. The Dragon’s Divine Protection.The Ability of Discernment. Mind’s Eye. Converging Spirit. Eye of Empty Space: Judgment.

Soma’s gaze sharpened as he eyed his opponent and swung his stick. As he did so, he noticed something gathering in front of Aina’s outstretched hands. Most likely, that was her “magic power.”

“Even looking at it now, I am not quite sure I understand it,” Soma muttered.

If it were some kind of “life force,” he felt as though he might understand it a little better, but that description didn’t seem to fit, either. Soma wasn’t quite sure why he felt that way, but all he knew for sure was that if he focused, things that were previously invisible would become visible. Perhaps he could use that to study the magic power in front of him.

That was also how he had managed to pick up on the strange thing that was attached to Aina’s body, so there was no reason why this shouldn’t work. Unfortunately, all he understood from focusing his vision like this was that he had no idea what the power in front of him was. Not only that, but he no longer had the time to study it further.

“Flame Arrow!”

Fire gathered in front of Aina’s palms. The very next moment, it was launched toward Soma like an explosion. The flames shot toward Soma in a single straight line, just like an arrow.

Sword Theory. God Slayer. Dragon Slayer. The Dragon’s Divine Protection. Assured Slash. Pandemonium’s Sword. The Ability of Discernment: Individual Style. Copycat. Demon-Slaying Longsword.

His stick drew an arc in the air. With that single slash, it cut through the flames shooting toward him.



Soma let out a deep breath and released the tension within him as he watched the embers scatter into the air. Understandably doubtful that his stick would be able to cut through an arrow of flame, Soma ended up relying on the technique he had learned in his past life, and it had taken quite a bit out of him. Unlike one year ago, however, it didn't cause him to pass out this time, which was nice.

"What the...?"

As Soma took the time to admire his own growth, he heard a dumbfounded voice. It camed, of course, from Aina. Turning his gaze toward her, Soma studied the astonished look on her face.

"Are you all right? I must say, that expression on your face is not very ladylike. Is something the matter, perchance?"

"Sh-Shut up!" Aina snapped. "Who cares how I look?! Do you even understand what you just did?!"

"Of course I do. Why would I not?"

All Soma understood was that he hadn't been able to do anything at all. Sure, he had used his sword skills to destroy the flames, but he had learned absolutely nothing from the exercise.

"As I thought. Mere observation will not suffice. I shall have to think of something else."

"That's not what I mean!" Aina interjected.

"Hm?"

Apparently, what Aina was concerned about was something completely different. Not only that, but for some reason she was getting worked up. Seeing that Soma was only getting more confused, Aina sighed dramatically.

"You know, whenever I hang out with you, I always feel like I'm the weird one," she muttered.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Forget it! It's just like you said! Magic never fails, right? But I tried to hit you

just now! I thought that if I did, you'd understand how much it hurts and how silly your plan was! But then you cut my fire outta the sky!"

"I don't believe it's anything to get so worked up about. Perhaps it was created by magic, but it was, after all, merely an arrow made from flames." Compared to a fire-breathing dragon, Aina's attack had been nothing.

"I'm a Specialist-rank magic user! You shouldn't be able to cut down a Specialist-rank attack like that!"

"I beg your pardon? I fail to see how it should be any different than causing one's sword strike to warp through space, and it was certainly no more difficult."

"It's completely different!" Aina snapped. "Listen! You need a high-rank magic skill for your attack to move through space like that. When you kept going on about a swordsman being able to do it, you were probably thinking about a Specialist-rank swordsman against an Expert-rank mage! In that case, yes, the swordsman should be able to slice through the mage's attack by launching his sword strike through space."

"So what you are saying is that if the mage possessed Specialist-rank skills, that would no longer be possible?"

"Yeah. In that case, the swordsman probably wouldn't even be able to launch his attack through the air, let alone his opponent's magic."

"I was able to do it, though."

"That's what I'm saying! It doesn't make sense!"

Soma found that he was still a little confused. Perhaps that was why Camilla hadn't gone into too much detail when she had explained it to him. Soma made a mental note to ask her more about it later.

"At the end of the day, I managed to cut through your attack, and there is no changing that fact, so I fail to see what the fuss is about. I was still unable to learn anything about magic or magic power through it, so it was ultimately meaningless."

"Only you would try and just brush something this crazy off." Aina sighed, and

Soma found he was very much on the verge of doing the same himself.

As he had both feared and hoped, it was going to take more than this for him to learn magic. All this meant, though, was that there were lots of things left to try. In any case, this would probably be a good place to stop for the day, since Soma hadn't even started on his sword practice yet, and that tended to take a while.

Fortunately for him, time was something that was very much on his side; there was no need to rush. The only thing that Soma knew for sure was that Aina was going to be invaluable to his efforts. Not only that, but Soma couldn't imagine carrying out his routine without her anymore.

Soma decided that there was no point in thinking too hard about what that might mean, so he gave up on it.

Instead, he got into position with his stick, and began to swing it just like any other day.

Chapter 17

Lina Neumont was incredibly angry.

This was not something that had come from out of the blue; she had been for a long time now. In other words, something had made her angry a while ago, and she still wasn't over it.

She stared out of the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the source of her anger, but he was nowhere to be seen. His absence making her even more angry, Lina let out an exasperated sigh.

Unfortunately for her, her sigh did not go unnoticed.

The voice that had been speaking the whole time suddenly stopped, and Lina could feel a sharp glare piercing through her. She reluctantly turned her gaze back toward her tutor, who, unsurprisingly, was glaring at her.

"Lady Lina. Are you listening?"

Lina let out a smaller sigh, hoping that this one would be drowned out by her tutor's shrill voice. She was almost tempted to admit that she wasn't listening, just to see what would happen. But that was more trouble than it was worth, and so instead she remained silent.

She hadn't been listening because she didn't feel she needed to. She already knew all of this. Listening to it again was just a waste of time.

"I am. Thanks to my mother's efforts, this country achieved peace. And, because of her enduring efforts now, we can continue to live in peace, as the demons dare not attack," Lina recited.

"W-Well, yes. That is correct. However, there is more—"

"And," Lina continued, cutting her off, "thanks to my father's efforts, foreign nations dare not invade us, either. I know."

"O-Of course. Please excuse me. However, I would ask that you face forward when I am speaking so that I can be sure that you are listening."

“I’m sorry. Something just caught my attention outside the window.”

“Outside the window?”

She knew why she looked so confused, given that there shouldn’t have been anything interesting to see outside her room’s window. Lina’s room was situated on the east end of the estate. Not only that, but the window next to her only looked out over the east side of the house, where there was nothing interesting to see at all.

It was a tranquil view, but nothing about it drew the eye. All there was to see was earth, grass, trees, and the occasional passing bird. From time to time, figures would be visible, headed toward the rear garden.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lina said. “It’s not there anymore, anyway.”

“Very well.” Although the tutor still seemed somewhat dissatisfied, she probably knew better than to argue with the duchess’ daughter. “I shall get back to the lesson, then. Please be sure to pay attention, or else you risk ending up like you-know-who. We wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“No, ma’am.”

Without even bothering to pretend that she was still listening to the lecture she’d heard many times before, Lina turned her attention back outside the window. She was going to be bored either way, so she may as well try to make her situation even just slightly more entertaining.

Then she saw the very person she had been searching for. She immediately bit her lip to keep her anger from seeping out.

It was his fault. He was why she had been in a constant state of irritation recently. Biting her lip like that was only a natural response.

“Who am I kidding?” she murmured to herself.

Suddenly, the figure disappeared from view. He hadn’t even stuck around for a full minute. Lina sighed again.

The events of the previous week came back to her. She had met that person—her once-beloved brother—for the first time in a full year, but nothing about their reunion had elicited any joy. Instead, it had angered her. It was their first

time meeting in a year, and he spoke to her as though he had just seen her the day before. A small part of her had wanted him to be happy, or to say something about how pretty she had gotten, but that wasn't what really upset her. It was his face that had gotten on her nerves more than anything else. He had looked so happy and fulfilled, and Lina hated it.

If that was all that had bothered her, she could have just greeted him normally and been on her way again, but she couldn't, because of what he had proposed.

If all he had done was invite her to go outside, it wouldn't have bothered her. After all, she went outside much more than he did—albeit because she was told to, not by choice—but that still counted as "going outside," as far as she was concerned.

Had he invited her without bringing up that time, she wouldn't have reacted in the way she did. That was the only time she had followed after him. Even now, she remembered vividly just what she had seen then. It had made her feel like her brother had tainted her with his own hands.

She knew, of course, that notion was just a figment of her imagination, but she still couldn't stand hearing him bring it up. It was a miracle that she'd managed to resist the urge to come out and say everything that had been welling up inside her, not that anything would have changed if she had. The separate paths that Lina and Soma had started walking a year ago had led them too far away from each other.

"Do not think of him as your brother anymore. In fact, you should imagine you never had a brother in the first place."

That was what Lina's mother had told her at her fifth birthday party. Lina's birthday had always been a quiet affair celebrated by her brother, her mother, and the people who worked at the estate. That had always been enough for her, but her fifth birthday party had been unusually lavish. She had been delighted about that, of course, but only until she looked more closely at who was in attendance. That was when she realized her brother wasn't there.

Naturally, she asked her mother where he was. That was when her mother said those words.

However, those words weren't the saddest thing about that ostentatious gathering; it was that Lina instantly accepted what her mother's words had meant.

In truth, Sophia hadn't expected her daughter to agree so easily. To her, Soma had been exceptional, despite his age. However, she always saw Lina as an ordinary child. She had only said that to Lina because she felt she was obligated to do so. She never thought that Lina would accept it without question. In fact, it pained her that she would have to gradually teach Lina to disown her own brother.

"I understand, Mother."

However, when Sophia saw the look in Lina's eyes then, she knew that Lina wasn't an ordinary child; she was mature for her age. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say she was a natural genius. Soma's intelligence came from the fact that he had been through life once before, but Lina's intelligence was something that came from her natural talents.

Just from her mother's words, she had understood the positions of herself, her brother, and her mother. Both Sophia and Lina recognized just how tragic that was, but there was nothing either of them could do about it. Just like Soma, Lina had a good idea of the kind of family that she had been born into, and she also knew about the responsibilities of being nobility. That also meant that she could have pretended to be ignorant, and Lina probably wished that she had, but she also knew that to accept her mother's words would be the best for everyone involved.

She looked around the room, but her tutor was already nowhere to be seen. Now that she thought about it, she vaguely recalled her leaving the room. She hadn't scolded her for zoning out, and she wasn't sure whether that was because he simply hadn't noticed, or because he didn't feel like starting an argument.

"I suppose it hardly matters." Lina sighed.

She pulled her pocket watch from her breast pocket. She still had a bit of time left before the next tutor was due to arrive.

Perhaps that was why she saw what she did. Returning her gaze from her

pocket watch to the window, luckily, or perhaps unluckily, she spotted Soma there, returning from the back garden.

Lina had really looked up to her brother. No matter who he was faced with, he stayed true to himself and his principles. There was no doubt that this attitude influenced Lina greatly. No matter the situation, he stayed calm and confident, and never backed down.

Now, though, Lina knew that it had all been a front. After all, Soma was completely skill-less, and his potential to learn anything was nonexistent. His lack of talent meant that all that confidence must have been faked. Or maybe it was an empty, childish bravado. If he were any other child, that would have been a possibility. It could easily have been the type of false confidence that children were known for.

This was Soma. Surely he must have known that he was talentless.

Perhaps, at that point, he still had reason to be confident. After all, he hadn't undergone the evaluation yet, back then. It wasn't strange to think that he would still hold out hope for the future, whether he had confidence in that hope or not. Lina knew that he had always been heartily praised by the estate's private tutors, so even if his confidence had been false, it at least had a grounding in reality. However, once he was evaluated, that all changed. Everything that he was now was completely fake.

"Please stop..." Lina murmured.

She hated that he acted as though nothing had changed. Even if he was just doing it for his own sake, it just seemed so utterly pointless. She also wished he wouldn't go into that forest anymore.

Lina could still remember the techniques he had performed with his sword that day. They had impressed her immensely, although that might have partly been because she was just a child, and perhaps his techniques hadn't been as good as she remembered. She wasn't sure anymore, but she had always wanted to believe that they were first-class. Now, though, she knew that couldn't be true.

Lina looked down at Soma's smiling figure below, her fists clenched by her side. That smile was all it took to push her to her limit. There was one thing that

Lina had forgotten, though. Not just Lina, but Sophia, and the estate's private tutors had all forgotten that Lina was still a child. No matter how mature or talented she might have been, Lina was a child. That was why she was unable to recognize the flaws in her reasoning.

Starting with the tutor who had just left the room, all of Lina's new tutors would scoff about how incompetent Soma was, and those criticisms of Soma had a larger effect on Lina than they realized. Despite her youth, she was still working hard, while the boy at whom she gazed was smiling as though her efforts meant absolutely nothing.

That was the final straw for Lina.

If they couldn't even exchange words, then it didn't matter what the truth was. All that mattered was the sight before her. It didn't matter that she longed for those memories to remain intact. It didn't matter how much talent she had inside her. She was already long past her limit.

Lina watched as Soma disappeared from her view. In that moment, she decided that she would destroy each and every one of the once-precious memories she had of him.

Chapter 18

Lina walked alone through the sunlit forest. She knew exactly where she was going. She had been here once before.

It was around two years ago. Soma was sneaking out of the estate early in the morning, and Lina, who had happened to know where he was off to, followed secretly after him. Two years ago, and yet the image still remained clear and vivid in Lina's mind. That was how impactful it had been to her. If she closed her eyes, she could even remember how hard her heart had been pounding, but maybe because it was doing the same now.

Back then, her thumping heart had been the result of curiosity and the knowledge that she was doing something wrong. Now, it was a little different, but just like back then, she knew what the consequences for what she was doing would be.

In actuality, she had no way of being sure that she was heading to the correct spot, but she had decided to try for the same place as two years ago. That seemed to be the right choice; she could already see him and hear his voice. To her, that was proof that her memories had been correct. However, she had not been expecting to see what she saw now.

He wasn't performing the same techniques that he had back then. He wasn't alone this time, either; there was a girl standing close next to him. She seemed to be of a similar age to the siblings, and her hair was a fiery red. The girl was yelling something, her long red locks swinging as she did so.

"What the heck did you do that for?!"

"It was the only logical conclusion," Soma replied. "In order to learn what magic feels like, I had no choice but to charge straight into your attack."

"I was this close to actually casting before you stuck your big head in the way!" the girl retorted. "If you'd been only a second later, you'd be on fire right now, you idiot!"

“There is no cause for concern. If necessary, I would have cut down the flames before that could happen.”

“That attitude’s even more dangerous!”

For some reason, seeing this girl causing such a fuss there next to Soma was getting on Lina’s nerves. It was completely different from the anger that Lina had felt looking down on Soma from her bedroom. In fact, this anger wasn’t directed at Soma at all. She was annoyed at the girl; at the way she was standing just a bit too close to him, and at the way she was acting just a bit too familiar with him.

“Oh...”

Lina’s eyes met Soma’s. Lina had been glaring at the girl when Soma suddenly seemed to cut off her gaze by turning to look right at her. It was just like that day, two years ago; Soma had caught Lina off guard just as he was doing now, like he had calculated her decisions before she had even made them.

“That’s impossible,” Lina mumbled to herself. “This must just be coincidence.”

There was no way Soma could have foreseen this. He had no skills, after all. So how could he have noticed Lina, who had been completely silent, and completely hidden her presence?

Intermediate Self-Concealment: Seclusion.

This was the skill that had allowed Lina to sneak out of the mansion undetected. But, for some reason, whether by coincidence or something else, Soma had noticed her. She had wanted to get him back for that day by catching him off guard, but it seemed history was destined to repeat itself.

Frustrating as it was, Lina consoled herself with the fact that she would get her payback soon.

“Hello? Earth to Soma?!”

The girl’s voice interrupted Lina’s trail of stubborn thought. The girl hadn’t noticed her, which meant Lina’s skill was working perfectly, which was a relief. It was still strange that Soma had noticed her, but since it had likely just been a coincidence, Lina could easily dismiss it.

“Hmph. I wonder just how I should explain it...”

“Huh? Explain what?” the girl said.

“Perhaps it would be easier for you to understand if I simply showed you. Look over there,” Soma said.

“Where’s ‘there?’” the girl asked. “I don’t see any— Huh?!”

For a moment, the girl stared blankly in Lina’s direction, but soon her eyes opened wide. Lina found that she couldn’t help but break into a smile. The girl had reacted in just the way she had been hoping for.

Possessing Self-Concealment at the Intermediate rank was qualification to become a highly-ranked assassin. While using the skill, you could walk right past someone and they wouldn’t even notice you if they weren’t concentrating.

Since Lina hadn’t learned it for specialist reasons, she was probably more easily spotted than most professionals, but even then she could usually get around unnoticed. In any case, the look of surprise on the girl’s face was a slight confidence boost for Lina, even if this girl was just a child like herself.

“H-Huh?! No way! She just appeared out of nowhere!” the red-head cried.

Feeling confident, Lina walked closer. At that moment, she realized she was still smiling, which reminded her of something her mother taught her. The first step in greeting someone was to smile. Despite her intentions here, she mustn’t forget to smile. She approached the pair until they could all see one another’s faces clearly before she opened her mouth.

“Good morning.”

Chapter 19

“Would you like to spar as we did before?”

At Soma’s words, Lina nodded without hesitation. That was her goal in coming here, and him suggesting it himself made things easier. Lina smiled a little as she watched the girl who had introduced herself as Aina walk away to a safe distance. There was no way for her to get between them now.

“Are you ready?” Soma asked.

Lina only said, “Yes.”

She looked down at her hands before nodding at Soma. In her hands she carried a stick that she had found on the forest floor. Soma held one as well. It was the kind of stick that a child might pick up to play with, just like what Lina had seen two years ago.

Soma was holding his stick as though it was something special, but it was just like that day. Aina was probably familiar with that stick, too, but Lina couldn’t help but wonder why the girl hadn’t said anything yet. If she could see what was happening, she should have said something by now.

The stick really was nothing more than a toy. There were several reasons why Lina hadn’t realized this the first time, but Aina should have known by now. Judging by how close she and Soma had seemed, she must have seen him using the stick many times now. Even if she hadn’t realized at the start, she should now know that the stick was nothing more than that.

If Soma had just admitted that to her in the first place, then there would be no reason for Lina to be doing this now. *Perhaps I’m just being petty,* Lina thought.

After all, it had been Lina’s decision to come after Soma, beat him down, and teach him about the harsh realities of life, so the responsibility for this lay solely with her. She had already decided to accept the consequences, even if Soma held a grudge against her for the rest of her life. She had no right to try and foist

this off on somebody else. In fact, Lina should have made Soma realize the truth a long time ago: he had no skills, and all his efforts were therefore useless. The stick in his hand was just a toy.

Nevertheless, whatever regrets she had were going to be wiped away after this.

Lina's grip on her stick tightened determinedly.

"Let us begin," she announced.

"Very well. Come." Soma nodded.

He wasn't in something that one would call a battle stance. As somebody who was actually able to learn martial skills, Lina could tell immediately. Unable to watch his embarrassing facade for much longer, she decided that she would end things quickly. She would take a single leap and end up right in front of him. The whole thing would be over before he knew what happened. It was for the best.

She would teach him the true meaning of power, and then he could stop swinging that stick around like a fool. Lina prepared for what would be her first and final attack, adjusting the power so that it wouldn't hurt him too badly.

Swordsman Specialist. Converging Spirit. Power Reduction: Slash Attack. Rushed.

She hadn't chosen to weaken her attack because she considered Soma inferior; it was more because she was worried for him. Specialist-rank skills were unbelievably strong and incredibly rare. Specialist-rank swordsmanship skills could cause untold damage. Even with a simple tree branch, you could slice your opponent limb from limb, and that was if they had some sort of skills to begin with. Lina wanted to have Soma on the verge of death, but she didn't want to actually kill him, so she focused on holding back.

"Huh?"

Somehow, Lina had ended up face-up on the ground.

What happened?

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she knew, but she just didn't want to

accept it. Soma had dodged the strike to his chest as though it were nothing, then countered by hitting Lina atop her head. Caught off guard, Lina had stumbled and ended up on the ground.

But how?

While it was true that Lina had weakened her attack to laughable levels, a Specialist-rank skill like that shouldn't have been able to be countered even by an Expert-rank skill. There was a reason why these skills were considered to be on a level of their own.

"I realize a spar is not to be taken too seriously, but even that was a little ridiculous," Soma remarked.

Lina let out a small growl as she realized he was making fun of her, like he thought that was the best she could do. In actuality, she had been the one who was making fun of him, by doing her absolute best not to deal the strongest attack she could. Despite that, she was the one who had ended up on the ground. Perhaps that was why she had ended up on the ground, because it was what she had wanted.

Lina leaped to her feet and kicked off the ground as if to leave those thoughts behind her. She swung her arms down into a much more powerful attack, although she still hadn't forgotten that Soma was skill-less.

Swordsman Specialist. Converging Spirit. Power Reduction: Slash Attack.

She heard a small sigh, and then she felt something strike against her head. She held her ground, a small part of her having already expected his counterattack. That part of her mind remained calm—even logical—as it whispered to her: *I saw this coming.*

This was Soma, her brother, who she was battling. He was capable of much more than this. At the same time, though, the rest of her mind cried out against that tiny voice.

No.

Impossible.

This is impossible.

This doesn't make any sense.

There's no way this makes any sense!

Her brother had no skills, but what if that didn't mean he was talentless?

In that case, then why was everybody treating him like dirt?

It made no sense. It was totally illogical.

Her brother was rejected because he had zero potential. But if that wasn't the case, then why had this happened to him?

Swordsman Specialist. Converging Spirit. Focused Will: Sword Flash.

"Not bad, although you still have a long way to go," Soma remarked.

Lina angrily attacked again, but Soma dodged it with disappointing ease. He struck her head once more. Lina wasn't ready to accept defeat; she couldn't.

Swordsman Specialist. Converging Spirit. Focused Will. Crazed Waltz: Unstoppable Bloom.

Step and swing. Bonk. Step and swing. Bonk. She was dancing in the palm of Soma's hand.

As they continued, the events of the previous year ran through Lina's mind. Over the past twelve months, Lina had been praised a lot. She had attended parties as the heir to the Neumont house, and she had been studying how to become an heir. Both of those things had led others to speak highly of her.

When it came to skills, people both inside and outside the estate spoke in wonder of the great peace this country would have now that the next duchess would possess Specialist-rank swordsmanship skills. In her studies, whenever she mastered one topic and moved onto the next, she would be praised. Her tutors would admire her, remarking almost on a daily basis how proud they were to be able to teach such a gifted child.

However, it was her mother who had praised her most of all, doing so constantly even for the smallest things. Lina was almost certain that her mother had done so every day. No matter what Lina did or what she said, her mother praised her. It was like she was praising her daughter for two, as if to make up for somebody she was no longer allowed to admire.

That was what the past year had been like for Lina. Praise, praise, and more praise from those closest to her and from those who knew nothing about her.

Everyone had seemed so happy for her, but it hadn't pleased Lina in the least.

Swordsman Specialist. Converging Spirit. Focused Will. Unbeatable Strength: Secret Slash.

"Hmm. Yes, not bad at all. There is just something missing, however," Soma said. "Could it be that you have little experience training with others?"

He was absolutely right. Lina possessed Specialist-rank skills, so she could only practice with other Specialist skillbearers. She had never even had a serious match against an Expert-rank skillbearer.

Any person with an Expert rank in swordsmanship would be classed as one of the very best swordsmen out there. None of the private tutors at the estate could fit that description, and to ask for one of Specialist rank was a waste of time, so Lina's swordsmanship tutor had ended up being Intermediate rank.

She was lucky to have a tutor even of that level, but it did mean that her exercises during the lessons were always done alone. The tutor would merely lecture as Lina did exactly as she said. She taught Lina how to hold the sword, how to swing, and how to step. She even taught Lina how to keep the correct frame of mind. Even as her tutor watched her in awe, Lina did her absolute best.

That was why, when Lina had seen Soma and Aina together, she had been jealous.

Swordsman Specialist. Converging Spirit. Focused Will. Unbeatable Strength. Intermediate Self-Concealment: Strike. Path of Misfortune.

Perhaps it had been jealousy that had caused her to come to the decision that she had.

The attack that Lina had just unleashed was the culmination of all her training up to this point. It was simple, but that simplicity was the basis for its immense power. It was impossible to follow where the sword began and where it went. It less a swordsmanship skill and more an assassination technique.

“Impressive. However, you should take more care with how you lead into that attack. It makes your following movements far too easy to read.”

Again, Soma dodged easily. Again, he struck Lina’s head.

Even then, Lina wasn’t ready to give up, not after coming this far. She was determined to hit him at least once; the situation as it was now was unacceptable.

The people from outside the estate, who praised her while knowing nothing of Soma’s existence. The tutors within the estate, who praised her without knowing about Soma’s true abilities. The people who praised her for having turned out so much better than him. The people who praised her, even though they knew of Soma’s talent, who always seemed like there was something they wanted to add.

The way their mother acted.

The way Soma acted, like none of it mattered to him at all.

It was that, most of all, which Lina refused to accept. It was like he was telling her that her efforts were meaningless. Everything she had learned over the past year, everything she had worked so hard for, the sword techniques she had honed even though she had nobody to spar with—all of it. There was just no way she could accept things as they were. Rejecting it was her only way forward, but Soma was right on the verge of taking that choice away from her.

“I... I...”

Heaven’s Sword. Swordsman Specialist. Limit Break. Humanity’s Arbitrator: Battle Arts. Star Sword.

All Lina remembered was swinging her stick with all her might.

Chapter 20

When Lina's senses came back to her, she was staring up at the sky.

Above her was a mixture of blue and green, and she could feel the earth pressed against her back. It didn't take her long to realize that it had happened again. The only difference this time was that she couldn't find the will to stand up again.

Weariness throbbed throughout her entire body, but she wasn't in the least bit of pain. The only part of her that had been hit was her head, but even that didn't hurt. That was why she knew just how easy Soma had gone on her. She had been completely and utterly defeated.

They had only been sparring, so there wasn't technically a winner or loser here, but she couldn't make herself see it like that. Lina had given it everything she had, and she had been completely defeated.

There was no room for excuses anymore. Everything had just been undone.

"That final technique was amazing, you very nearly hit me. Each swing was better than the last. You really are gifted."

"Huh?"

Soma's face appeared in Lina's line of vision. Suddenly, she felt something on her head. It wasn't his stick this time; he was gently ruffling her hair.



His words could have been mocking, depending on how you looked at them, but Lina knew that he meant them, because she remembered that two years ago, he had said those exact same words to her.

It was when those words came back to her that Lina could finally accept everything. She felt as though she now understood why she hadn't wanted to lose this fight, and why everything had just been turned on its head. It was then that she felt the last sliver of resistance leave her body. She didn't need to keep her guard up anymore.

"I would still recommend sparring with a partner from time to time, however," Soma continued. "You also made me aware of how rusty my own skills are becoming. Perhaps I should spar more often, although I don't doubt that may be difficult."

At those words, something flashed very briefly in Lina's mind, but the thought didn't linger.

"I haven't a sparring partner," Soma said, "and even if I knew of somebody, I would be hesitant to ask them."

Did he just glance at her?

It was so brief that she almost brushed it off as a figment of her imagination, but his intent was clear. Whether she was allowed to accept it or not, however—whether she was even allowed to want to accept it—she wasn't so sure.

Is it really okay for me to ask for something so selfish?

The look on Soma's face was telling her that yes, it was okay. Perhaps that was just wishful thinking on her part. Lina opened her mouth.

"Brother, I..."

†††

"I would like to be your sparring partner!"

Lina's request reached Aina's ears from where she was standing a short distance away. She sighed. After everything that had happened, his sister was still asking for more? Or perhaps it was because of what had happened.

Although there was exasperation in Aina's sigh, it was mixed with envy. She knew that she would never be a good match for either of them. Aina knew from the moment she laid eyes on Lina that the girl was a Specialist skillbearer, also known as a giftbearer in certain parts.

Aina was one as well, of course, but magic giftbearers could excel only in magic, and nothing else. In a close combat fight, they could even lose to an Expert-rank skillbearer if they weren't careful. Aina would be no match for the siblings.

She didn't let that upset her too much, though. After all, Aina knew that there were things that only she was capable of. She couldn't do what Lina did, but Lina couldn't do what Aina did, either.

Anyway, Lina's and Soma's match, which had seemed long despite lasting only seconds, was now over. To Aina, it had almost seemed like a siblings' quarrel with Lina throwing a tantrum. Aina sighed again.

"Since you two are done, I think I'm gonna head home for the day," she announced.

"Is that so?" Soma asked. "That's a shame. There were still a few things I had been hoping to try."

"Is that because of me?" Lina piped up. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," Aina said. "Besides, as long as Soma's gonna be doing dumb things like sticking his head into my fire attacks, I think I'm done here."

"Oh? Is that really so different from the sorts of things I usually do?" Soma asked.

"You really don't have any self-awareness, do you?!" Aina snapped.

Aina had no idea where Soma got his wild ideas from, but when the pair tried them, they almost always led to a situation where a slight misstep could've led to him being seriously injured. Soma seemed to regard those possibilities the same way as ending up with a few scrapes and bruises, but Aina wasn't having it. It made her anxious with worry, and no matter how much he said that he now owed her, she was beginning to get tired of it all.

“Dangerous as it may be, we shan’t know if it will help me to learn magic unless we try it,” Soma pointed out.

“That sounds like something you’d say, Brother.” Lina smiled.

“Huh? Is that really something to be smiling about?!” Aina gawked. “Are you sure you’re not insane?!”

Now that Aina thought of it, Lina seemed to have changed quite a bit since she showed up a few minutes ago. It was like some sort of weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Either way, this seemed to be her true self, and Aina wouldn’t have been surprised if she was just as strange as her brother.

“Anyway,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Very well,” Soma conceded. “It is a shame that you are leaving already, but you are free to do as you wish. See you tomorrow.”

“I don’t think I can come tomorrow,” Lina said, “but I hope we can meet again soon!”

Apparently, Lina had ditched her classes to be here today, and she wouldn’t be able to get away with it two days in a row. However, she had said that she would skip again in the future to come and spar with Soma, so Aina was sure it wouldn’t be long until they could see each other again.

She was quite surprised that Lina had been so casual about cutting class, but apparently the tutor whose class she’d missed was highly concerned with her reputation. So as long as Lina was back before anybody apart from this tutor noticed, she should be fine. As for the lesson itself, it followed the textbook to the letter, so as long as Lina read up before the next class, she wouldn’t miss anything. This also meant that she knew exactly what her lessons would be covering each day, so she would be able to come out here to spar with Soma on a fairly regular basis.

The calculating way in which Lina announced her plans was almost scary, and Aina could immediately see just what sort of influence her elder brother had on her.

“See you later.”

Aina turned away from the pair and left them behind her.

For a while, she could hear their voices as they chatted with one another, but before long those were gone, too, leaving her with nothing but her own footsteps and the occasional rustling of the trees in the wind. Aina sighed deeply.

The memory of their battle flashed through her mind. It had been all she thought about ever since she left them. Her memories of it were so vivid, it was like she was seeing it play out right in front of her again.

The only conclusion Aina could come to was that Lina was incredible.

She was a swordsmanship giftbearer, and Aina had barely been able to keep up with her movements. If she had been the one up against Lina, she wouldn't even have lasted a second.

In spite of that, Soma hadn't let her get a single hit in, which was even more impressive.

It wasn't that Soma's movements had been particularly swift; Aina had been able to keep track of them no problem. They had been completely normal, which was exactly what was so strange about them. Watching them spar, Lina had looked to be much more skilled.

In spite of that, Soma had emerged the victor.

He hadn't done anything particularly special, but he had still won. In other words, that was just how much stronger he was than Lina.

Aina had spent countless days watching Soma train. She was used to seeing the swing of his stick, and though she was aware of how clean his movements were, this was only the second time she had seen him spar with a partner.

She had been plenty impressed with him the first time, too, but he had made a lot of improvements since then. Aina hadn't understood the bottomless depths of Soma's talents until she had seen him face off against somebody. That those opponents had been giftbearers just made him even more impressive.

Just how much potential does Soma have? All Aina knew for sure was that

Soma was no ordinary child. The thought that this gifted child had asked her to help him learn how to use magic caused Aina's chest to well up with pride, along with a strong mixture of other emotions. If it hadn't been for Soma, she would never have been able to feel like this; like her days were enjoyable, and like she had something to look forward to every day.

A year ago, she would never have thought such positive emotions were possible for her.

"I've finally found you."

They'd allowed her to forget her problems.

"Huh?"

"Do you know how hard I've been searching? To think I'd find you here, of all places."

She had forgotten that happiness was fragile and could be easily destroyed with the slightest touch.

"Albert?" she croaked.

"Indeed. It's good to see you again, Your Highness."

He bowed his head toward her. By the time he raised his head, all the happiness in Aina's heart had frozen and shattered as she stared back at him in shock.

Chapter 21

The place was worn and old-fashioned. It may once have been decadent, but now it was unrecognizable.

It was gloomy, and the round wooden table in the middle was filthy. The ten figures who had gathered there were clad in black, their faces covered. One could go on for hours describing all the nooks and crannies in the room, but the strongest impression came from the shrouded figures in the center.

They would probably have been glad if told as much. They would agree, saying that was exactly the air they were trying to give off. It would no doubt be a big morale boost for them, not that they were particularly unmotivated already.

“Welcome, everybody. I have some good news to share with you all today: The target has finally been found.”

The announcement was initially met with gasps of surprise, but the clamor quickly turned to one of excitement. After all, they had finally managed to take the first step toward their goal; it was truly something to be celebrated.

There was one, however, who remained calm amid the chatter. After briefly mulling over the news, he opened his mouth.

“Are you absolutely sure of that?” he asked.

“I just met her myself. There is no doubt,” the first speaker reassured him.

“I see.”

In the face of this confirmation, even he could not conceal the satisfied smile that rose to his lips. He swallowed as he struggled to contain himself, though he was on the verge of trembling with glee.

“I assume this means exactly what I think it does?”

“Yes. Finally... Finally, we will be able to thrive once more!”

At that proclamation, every single voice in the room cheered. In that moment,

every heart in the room was filled with joy. They knew now that all of the time and effort they had spent up until this point had not been in vain.

“It will not be long before the wrongs of this world are righted. And, when that time comes, He shall lead us forward. Let us remain vigilant until then.”

“Yes! In fact, let us be even more vigilant than before so that we are ready when He comes for us.”

“Everything for the Demon King!”

“For the Demon King!”

Their voices rang out through the dingy room, their jubilation obvious even in the darkness.

†††

“Here I come, Brother!”

“I’m ready!”

Sword Theory. The Dragon’s Divine Protection. The Ability of Discernment. Perception: Dodge.

Lina charged at Soma with a yell. Predicting her movements, he dodged her attack with nothing more than the movement of his arm. Allowing him to dodge, Lina followed up immediately with another attack. He dodged her first four strikes, but was forced to block the fifth with his stick.

“Yay! I finally got a hit!” Lina cheered.

“Indeed. Very impressive, but why did you stop there?” Soma asked.

“Oh.”

Lina felt herself being struck on the head. Although she had finally managed to make Soma block, things had ended up how they always did.

“Sorry... I was just so happy that you couldn’t dodge that I let my guard down afterward,” she said.

Lina’s shoulders drooped as she spoke, but there was no doubting the skill of her maneuver. It had been a month since she had reunited with her brother, and since then, Lina had come out here to see him once a week. This was their

fourth practice session, and she had already managed to force him to block. He was rather impressed, despite the fact that his sword skills weren't as sharp as they had been in his previous life.

"Since you've acknowledged your mistake, I suppose I shall allow you to pass this time. However, you still have a lot to learn before you'll be able to hit me properly," Soma warned.

"Hmph! I'll get there one day, don't you worry!" Lina retorted.

"I shall look forward to it."

He meant it, too. He wondered whether this was what it felt like to have somebody learning under him. It wasn't a concept that had even crossed his mind during his previous life.

Perhaps it was only because he had decided not to pursue the sword this time around that he was able to experience it now. In a sense, this was a way to kill time for him.

If he aimed to master the sword, then any sort of training he did related to that would be strictly for his own sake; that had been the case in his previous life, at least. He simply hadn't had the capacity to consider anybody else when it came to his practice. In general, he was happy to do things for others, but when it came to his sword, he was determined to reap every last benefit himself.

In this world, that was likely how things were going to go with his magic training. Every time he came across some promising written information on magic, he would keep it to himself, and use it solely to progress his own training and understanding.

For now, though, Soma felt they'd reached a good stopping point.

"Shall we leave it here for the day?" Soma suggested.

"What? Already? But I can keep going!" Lina insisted.

"Perhaps you can. But I would rather not cause her to sulk."

"Oh... right."

Soma and Lina cast their gazes toward Aina, who was standing around some distance away. She looked back at them, although she seemed unfocused. She

didn’t look bored; rather, she seemed as though her mind was preoccupied with something else.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting, Aina.”

“Sorry...”

“Huh? Oh, no, it’s fine. I kinda like watching you two spar,” said Aina.

“Really?” Soma seemed doubtful.

“Why would I lie? If I didn’t wanna watch, I’d just come later, or not come at all,” Aina pointed out.

“I suppose you have a point,” he replied.

Soma exchanged a confused glance with Lina. For while now, Aina had been acting strangely. It was hard to spot just speaking with her, but when she was left alone, it was obvious. Soma had never seen her acting like this before.

He had first picked up on it about a month ago, but since Lina had also noticed it now, he could no longer dismiss it as a figment of his imagination. Although, when he really thought about it, it had been around the same time that he had started leaving Aina by herself while he sparred with Lina. Or perhaps she had been like this even before then, and Soma simply hadn’t noticed because he had been too busy concentrating on swinging his stick.

Over the past month, Aina had seemed a little more timid than usual. He knew that she probably had a lot on her plate, but this didn’t seem like the kind of thing he would be able to help with by coaxing the problem out of her. There was only one thing that he could think to do.

“Be that as it may, the fact remains that you have nothing to do while we spar, correct?” Soma pressed.

“I mean... I guess so.”

“In that case, might I suggest you make better use of that time?” Soma said.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Aina.

“For example...” Soma paused. “Perhaps you could come up with a signal in the event that you are kidnapped.”

“Huh? What do you even mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said.” He hadn’t meant anything by it in particular; it just seemed to him like a good idea to have a clear signal in case such a thing should happen.

“You know something like that’s never gonna happen, right?” Aina asked.

“The possibility exists, no matter how small. And it is important to be prepared for anything.”

Even Soma agreed that it was unlikely, but he wasn’t asking this of her because he thought it was going to happen. He was spouting nonsense. He just thought it would be nice to offer Aina some way in which to pass the time, and if it helped to keep her mind off things, then it would all be worth it.

“Even if I could tell you that I’d been kidnapped, would you even bother to save me?” Aina said.

“Of course I would,” Soma replied, as though he considered it a silly question.

It probably wouldn’t happen, but if it did, there was no doubt that he would come to her aid. He thought that much, at least, should be obvious. So why did Aina look so surprised?

“Huh? I-I mean... You’re kidding, right? This is one of your stupid jokes, right?!”

“I must say, I am a little offended by your reaction. However, if you were to be kidnapped, no matter the perpetrator, and no matter where they took you, I would, without question, come to save you.”

“Oh, um... okay.” Aina nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? You have nothing to apologize for. I merely—”

“Okay! I get it! We’re done talking about this now!” Aina snapped.

Soma frowned at her in confusion. Whatever she said, Soma wasn’t sure that she “got it,” as she put it, at all, but he decided it would be best to drop the subject. This conversation had been nothing but nonsense from the start, after all, even if it had ended up leading to some unexpected places.

“What about me, Brother?! If I got kidnapped, would you come and rescue me, too?” Lina asked eagerly.

“You?” Soma thought about it for a moment. “In your case, things are slightly more complicated.”

“Huh?! Why? You mean you wouldn’t rescue me?”

“Your circumstances are fundamentally different,” Soma explained. “You are already undergoing training precisely so that you can protect yourself from such evildoers, are you not?”

“Huh? I mean, yes, I am! But...” Lina paused. “Does that mean I should stop my training if I want you to come to my aid?”

“Where’d you get that from?” A small smile rose to Aina’s lips as she sighed.

Seeing that expression on Aina’s face, Soma breathed a small sigh of relief. Lately, Soma had been asking Aina to try all sorts of things to help him learn magic. He was keeping track of it so he could repay the favor later, but he did feel that lately he may have been asking a little too much of her. He hoped that it was helping to keep her mind off things, though, even if that wasn’t his primary goal. He knew that it would do nothing to solve her troubles, in any case, whatever those troubles may have been.

Soma sighed to himself again, casting glances in Aina’s direction as he continued to speak with Lina.

Chapter 22

“How about we talk about humanity and the demons today?”

Soma tilted his head in confusion. *Why now?* Camilla had already spoken on the topic several times.

“I know what you’re thinking, but this stuff is important to know. Just listen for now, okay?”

“Very well.”

It was the first time Camilla had ever stressed the importance of a topic, so there must have been a good reason for it.

“Let’s get started. Do you know what the word ‘humanity’ officially means?”

“Of course. It refers collectively to the races which fall under the umbrella of mankind in a general sense,” Soma answered.

“Correct. It includes humans, demihumans, forest spirits, ogres, and vampires. These five groups represent the origins of mankind, and make up what we now officially call ‘humanity.’ That being said, when we speak of humanity, we’re usually talking specifically about humans.”

It wasn’t until the topic had come up before that Soma learned that this world was actually home to several races. Since most of the people working in the estate were human, and even those who weren’t were visually indistinguishable from humans, he wasn’t aware of other races’ existence before then. Those non-humans in the estate were exceptions; usually, you would be able to tell that the person wasn’t human from their appearance.

Members of each race had a lot in common, so as long as you knew what to look for, you would be able to identify their race straight away. For example, demihumans, who referred to themselves as beastmen, had beastlike features. Most only had minor peculiarities, such as ears or a tail, while others were closer to being half man, half beast. Demihumans were probably the easiest to identify at a glance.

Ogres were also easy to identify; to put it simply, their features were often monstrous. Because of that, there were those who categorized them as monsters rather than part of humanity, and so ogres were often mistreated.

Forest spirits, also known as elves, were also not too difficult to identify, as many of them were unbelievably beautiful. In fact, there were stories of particularly attractive humans being mistaken for elves. They could also be identified by a glance at their pointed ears, which were unlike those of any other race.

Vampires were the hardest race to identify from their appearance alone; their main distinguishing feature was their pale skin. They also tended to be attractive, although not to the same extent as elves, but they had no obvious peculiar features apart from that. They possessed a long pair of fangs, but the chances were you weren't going to get a long enough look at the inside of their mouths to notice. For the most part, they were the easiest to confuse with humans, and they also had the easiest time disguising themselves as such.

The reason why all of these races were considered part of humanity was simple, but it had nothing to do with what Soma himself thought. It was humanity itself which had decided on it, declaring all these races to fall under the same umbrella.

"By the way, do you happen to know why these five races are all considered part of humanity?" Camilla asked.

"I do not, although there is one thing that I am curious about. I would have thought that the answer would be based on appearance. However, if that were true, I would have thought that spirits would be included, too."

It wasn't just the five races of humanity who lived in this world, but for some reason, none of the other races were counted in the same group. Soma had wondered about the reason why ever since Camilla had first brought the subject up.

"It's quite simple," Camilla replied. "It's about whether the race has its own country or not, and whether that fact is accepted by the other races. After that, it doesn't matter whether said country actually has a mix of races in it."

"I see. So that's why spirits are not included," Soma murmured.

“Yes, because they don’t have their own country. The same goes for ghosts, although it’s somewhat debatable whether or not you could even call them a race.”

“How about dwarves and similar creatures?”

Dwarves, gnomes, and Amazons also lived within this world. They were so rare, however, that it was said to be good luck if you spotted one.

“They’re a little different. They’re not even considered races, after all,” Camilla explained.

“Why not?”

“There aren’t enough of them to establish them as a race. Most of them have gone on to mix with other races, so there are very few left that are pureblooded.”

“I see.” The reasoning made some sense; personally, Soma had objections to the idea, but there would be no point in voicing them. “So is that why you are here, too, ma’am?”

“I’m sorry? What do you mean by that?”

“You are a dwarf, are you not? A pureblooded one, too, if I’m not mistaken.”

Camilla stared at him. It seemed his question had taken her entirely by surprise. However, her reaction was what surprised Soma.

When fully grown, dwarves were no taller than a human child. That was how you could identify them. Judging from Camilla’s height, Soma thought it was only a natural conclusion that she was a dwarf, but perhaps his assumption had been incorrect. Soma frowned in confusion as he tried to interpret her response, but it wasn’t long before Camilla gave him an exasperated smile.

“You really are something, you know that? I never thought anybody would realize...”

“Really? I thought it was rather obvious myself,” Soma remarked.

“We dwarves aren’t just rare; we’re critically endangered,” said Camilla. “Most people wouldn’t expect one to be sitting right under their nose. Dwarf genes tend to be recessive, too, so half-breeds often pass as the other race. I

usually just tell people that I'm a very late bloomer."

"I see."

"None of that is really important, though, so let's get right back to it," said Camilla. "Why do you think we decided to create the classification of humanity in the first place?"

For a moment, Soma was silent. He'd never really thought about it. Previously, he had been taught that it was just the way things were.

"Presumably because it was necessary," he finally said.

"Indeed."

"Which means it must be something to do with the demons, yes?"

Again, Camilla smiled. He was right.

"How did you reach that conclusion with so little information?" she asked.

"You introduced the lesson by saying we were going to speak about humanity and demons," Soma pointed out.

"Oh. I guess I did. My mistake."

"I wouldn't call it a mistake," Soma countered.

It had just been a clue to help the lesson progress more smoothly. Still, Camilla let out a disappointed sigh, as though her great reveal had been ruined.

"Well, you're absolutely right. Humanity was officially named as such because of the demons. Or rather, the demons were designated as the cause."

Chapter 23

Before the term “demon” was coined, the many races of this world were in a constant state of conflict. When the dwarves were pushed to the brink of extinction, though, the races realized that they were on the path to destroying each other. While this was partly due to dwarves continuing to produce offspring with other races, it was mainly a result of the overwhelming casualties that resulted from the wars.

“In order to stop the fighting, they made up a new race: demons, the enemy of humanity,” Camilla explained.

Soma scoffed. “How foolish.”

“Agreed.”

As Soma had already learned, the demons were a group whose bad reputation had been forced upon them. There were, of course, some among them who deserved that reputation, but they had mostly just been on the wrong side of history.

However, the reason why Soma considered it “foolish” was because it hadn’t worked.

For a while, the wars stopped; races signed peace treaties with each other, deciding that it was far more important for them to work together to destroy the demons instead. Those who had engineered the entire situation knew that the demons posed no threat whatsoever, but they weren’t interested in sharing this truth with others. Those races joined forces and focused their efforts on the demons, as well as some other races and countries while they were at it.

There was no saving the demons, because it was the human nations which worked hardest and did the most to wipe them out. They created “humanity” together, and they made sure the entire world knew it. They did not, however, harbor the least amount of trust for the other races. Those other races, meanwhile, worked to defend themselves against them should the worst

happen, so the feeling was probably mutual. They had been fighting each other up until that point, after all, so for relations to completely change overnight was asking a little too much.

Back then, wars were on a whole different scale compared to now. So, foolish as the effort was, it wasn't entirely unwarranted. The main country behind that foolishness was called Veritas.

Veritas was a kingdom which represented the purest and most traditional form of humanity, or so it claimed. It was also the country that Radius, the place where Soma now lived, had split off from. Veritas' inhabitants were made up of all sorts of different races.

"It makes one rather glad that Radius achieved independence from them," Soma commented.

"I couldn't agree more."

"Just one question. Why does the term 'humanity' continue to be used to this day?"

"That's an easy one. It was an officially designated term. They wouldn't be able to reverse that declaration now, even if they tried."

"That's even more foolish..."

The term "humanity" had served its purpose long ago. *The endurance of history and tradition sure iss annoying.*

"Incidentally, why is this necessary for me to learn?" Soma asked. "It sounds more like something I am not supposed to know."

"Of course you aren't." Camilla blinked at him as though that was meant to be obvious. "Very few people are aware of this."

"That just makes me even more curious," Soma said. "Not only about why I should learn about all of this, but also about how you know of it."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. I'm only telling you because your situation is a lot more complicated than you think."

Soma immediately understood. In other words, he didn't officially exist here. But there was one thing that was certain: Even though he "didn't exist," his

being here was a problem. He was considered a nuisance by many, and there were probably others who wanted to take advantage of his unique status.

The biggest problem wasn't the people in this country, though; it was the people abroad.

"This country is still in its infancy," Camilla continued. "All it would take is a single major problem to bring it down."

"I think I see what you are saying." Soma nodded.

"You need to pick your friends carefully."

Radius was home to several different races. Even though this area was mostly populated by humans, you would probably meet all sorts of different creatures if you ventured to the capital. However, there was one race which was not welcome even in this country, despite being relatively free: demons.

Because of what had happened in the past, humans continued to hold a grudge against demons. Even if there was no real substance behind this resentment, it nevertheless continued to this day.

If any child of a particularly high social status were to befriend or even come into contact with a demon, they would be instantly punished. Since nobody in the country would condone that child's actions, their family's social status would collapse, with grave repercussions throughout the rest of society.

"I understand what you are telling me, but in that case, why did you not just tell me I should not associate with demons when we first started?" Soma asked.

"Because knowing you, you would've gone out of your way to find out why," Camilla explained with a sigh. "It would've been a real pain. That's why I'm telling you all this now."

"Just out of curiosity, what would happen if I were to speak of this lesson to somebody else?"

"Firstly, you or Sophia might get into trouble, but since I'm the one who told you all this, my life would be effectively forfeit."

"I see. Well, that would certainly be a shame." Soma considered his options. "I suppose I shall remain quiet, then."

“I’d appreciate that.”

There was still one other thing that bothered Soma, though; he wasn’t sure why Camilla would even mention the possibility of befriending demons if he wasn’t even allowed to get close to them.

“Oh, that’s simple,” Camilla assured him. “It’s because you’re not planning to stay in this country. Right?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Sophia already seems to be making plans to let you stick around. She’s probably going to have you become Lina’s personal attendant. That’s the impression I get, anyway. However, I doubt you’re going to let that happen.”

“You think so?” He didn’t have any plans in mind to leave yet, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to.

“If you end up learning magic, that is,” Camilla added.

“You have a point there.”

Soma’s ultimate goal in this world was to learn magic. Even if he couldn’t master it, just being able to learn it at all would be a victory. With that aim in mind, it wouldn’t be absurd to think that he would end up sticking around here. If he weren’t able to, though, that would be a different story.

“If things aren’t working out, you’ll probably end up heading off somewhere,” Camilla said. “Likely demon territory.”

“It seems you know me well.”

“I am your tutor, after all. I get the impression that your attempts at magic aren’t going that well, so there’s a pretty good chance that you’ll be leaving soon.”

It was true. In fact, the idea of leaving *had* crossed Soma’s mind, if only briefly.

“I wouldn’t be able to stop you, and I wouldn’t want to,” Camilla continued, “and I’m sure Sophia feels the same way. That’s why I told you all of this while I had the chance. You can live your life however you want, but I’d appreciate it if you remembered the position we’re in while you’re at it.”

“I shall bear it in mind. In any case, I am not going anywhere for the time being. I still have plenty of time to plan out my moves.”

“I guess not. You’re still quite young, after all.”

In this world, the age at which you were considered an adult varied between countries and races. In Radius, you were an adult at age fifteen, the age at which you would graduate middle school. After that, you were able to take responsibility for yourself, and had a lot more freedom. Before that, you would need your parents’ permission to even travel over to the next town, let alone leave the country. However, there were still exceptions to that rule.

“So before that happens, I’ll do everything I can to get you really attached to this place.”

“I am fine with being attached, although your ‘really’ gives me pause.”

When Soma had said he’d bear Camilla’s and Sophia’s positions in mind, he meant it. He fully intended not to do anything that would put them in danger. However, he was aware that it might not be completely possible, and should he fail in his attempts, he hoped that they would forgive him. The fact was, he didn’t fully trust himself not to make a mistake somewhere.

He was unable to voice that thought out loud. Instead, he let out a small sigh.

Chapter 24

A silent unease rippled through the dimly lit space, spreading through the gazes of the people who sat there. The face of the man those gazes were focused on didn't even twitch. He continued his report as though the matter was of no concern to him. Even as every eye in the room watched him anxiously, he made no move to hurry through his speech.

"That is all," he concluded once it was done.

"What?!"

Gasps exploded throughout the room. It was no surprise, considering preparations had been ongoing for a month. Everyone knew the plan would take time, but it had already been more than long enough since the first step was taken. In fact, things should have been progressing a lot more smoothly now that the difficult part was out of the way, and they were quickly running out of patience. At this point, they just wanted to see that progress was being made.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" the speaker asked. "I didn't see any issues with my report, yet you seem dissatisfied."

"You know what the problem is!" somebody snapped. "You were the one who promised that we'd be able to thrive soon!"

"Yes, soon," he admitted. "However, we have been waiting all this time. Surely you are able to wait just a little longer?"

Compared to how long they had waited, even another year shouldn't have been too much for them.

"That's not—"

"Oh, I must apologize," the speaker cut in. "I misspoke. It seems I am unable to hide my delight, after all."

"Huh?"

For a second, it was unclear what the speaker meant, but before long, astonishment appeared on the face of the man who had snapped at him.

“You don’t mean...”

“Yes. I apologize for the wait, but the preparations are finally complete.”

“So...”

“Indeed. I shall get started with the final checks. The rest is up to her; however, if things go well, I believe we shall be able to get started in a week’s time.”

Again, gasps exploded throughout the room. This time, though, it was because things were moving too quickly.

“We’re starting next week?!” one voice exclaimed.

“We’re not ready!”

“It would appear not, so I would like to ask that you hurry up, else we shall have to put things off again,” the speaker said.

“You... You should’ve told us earlier!” somebody growled.

“My apologies. I thought it would be more entertaining if I caught you off guard.”

“Oh, well, I hope it’s been entertaining for you!”

Though that voice was dripping with sarcasm, the speaker still couldn’t hide his excitement. After all, the time was nearly upon them—it was almost time for them to thrive once more.

“Make sure you all do your part carefully now. Everything for the Demon King.”

“For the Demon King!”

They joyously shouted as one, the sound ringing through the gloomy room.

†††

Aina stared at the scene in front of her. Soma and Lina were sparring... no, they were training together. Their movements were nothing short of beautiful,

and Aina found herself captivated.

Lina was probably unaware of how clean her technique was. Her slashes were clearly focused, with no aim other than landing a hit on Soma. Unfortunately, the way Soma deftly moved his body in response made that impossible.

Last week, when Lina had managed to force Soma to block, it had seemed that the gap between them was shrinking. Now, though, it seemed like she was back to square one. Perhaps Soma had been holding back last time, or perhaps Lina wasn't the only one who was improving. Either way, it was clear that Lina still had a long way to go before she would reach Soma's level, and Aina herself was starting to develop an eye for these things.

Before, their sessions had been a complete blur to her, but now she was learning to follow their movements. She was improving, even if she wasn't necessarily aware of it. Even if she had noticed, it probably wouldn't have meant much to her. After all, being able to keep track of the fight wasn't a skill she had much interest in.

Aina sighed as she watched them fight. She felt like she wasn't going anywhere, which was only made more apparent by how the Neumont siblings were making marked progress.

That wasn't to say she wasn't growing; even her magic ability was improving at a fitting rate for a Specialist like her. In fact, she had every right to be proud of herself. Anyone who watched her progress would probably be driven to despair out of jealousy by the difference between her abilities and theirs.

Aina was aware of that, but she didn't truly feel like it. It wasn't enough. She still wasn't able to teach Soma magic like he wanted. That was everything to Aina now.

Again, she sighed.

She considered giving up. In fact, she had been thinking about that for more than a month now. In all this time, she hadn't been able to do anything to repay Soma. She didn't know what Soma thought about their situation, but if she couldn't teach him, that's how it was.

Perhaps she should just apologize and then stop coming here. That would be

easy.

She probably wouldn't have come to this conclusion by herself; it was because of what he had said to her, that day. It had been Albert, a man who she was very familiar with.

"Isn't it about time you returned to the Demon King?"

Aina was a demon, as the other races called them. They rarely used the term themselves, given that it was derogatory. Not only that, but it was a name given to them by outsiders, so they saw no reason to adopt it. The demons had their own names for their territory and villages. However, there were two exceptions: the Demon King and Hell's Commanders.

Humanity spoke of these two exceptions with such fear that the terms eventually fell into use among the demons. The Demon King was, of course, the king who ruled over the demons' territory, while Hell's Commanders were an all-powerful group who followed his every order. They were much like the humans' Seven Heavenly Kings in terms of power and skill, different only in numbers; the Seven Heavenly Kings had, of course, seven members, while Hell's Commanders had four. The difference made sense considering the sizes of the human and demon populations.

Over ten years ago, one of the Seven Heavenly Kings had completely crushed one of Hell's Commanders. It was a testament to the power of the Hell's Commanders that even one of the strongest Kings was only able to defeat one of them.

The Demon King and Hell's Commanders ruled the demons, and Albert was one of the latter. He was the one who had suggested that Aina go back.

Aina had run away because she was unable to cope with everybody's disappointment. She should have wanted to return, but she wasn't able to give him an answer. Even though she was now able to use her magic, that deep fear remained in her heart. Not only that, but her days were so much more enjoyable now. Being with Soma was fun. He made her happy, and she didn't want to have to leave him. Lina joining them only made the days more enjoyable. Aina didn't know if it was one-sided, but she considered them her friends.

Aina had hoped that the passing of time would help her come up with an answer, but it had only made her decision more difficult.

“I shall see you tomorrow,” Soma called out to her.

“Bye-bye!” Lina called.

While she had been absorbed in thought, Soma and Lina had finished their training. It seemed like all she did lately was thinking, and it wasn’t just when she was watching the pair training. Even when she was trying with Soma, it seemed her mind was eager to jump back into its web of thoughts at the slightest opportunity.

Although that may have also been because she and Soma were quickly running out of new ideas. It probably wouldn’t be long before they had run out altogether.

“Bye,” Aina replied, noticeably without a promise to see them again.

Even as she turned her back on the pair, she still didn’t know what she wanted to do. She had the impression they wanted to say something, but she ignored it. Instead, she began to walk.

“I believe it is well past time for you to reach your decision.”

Aina had expected Albert to show up, so she wasn’t caught off guard by his sudden appearance.

As she looked up into his face, everything seemed to fall into place. The answer seemed so simple, she wondered why she had spent so much time mulling over it like she had.

Aina couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“What is it, Your Highness?”

“Right. Sorry, I wasn’t laughing at you. I just find it kinda silly that I was finding it so hard to come up with an answer.”

How could she have been so stupid? The correct answer was right before her all along; there was no need to take so long thinking about it.

“So? Your answer?” Albert prompted.

“I’ll…”

Chapter 25

“What were you planning to do for school, by the way?”

Camilla’s question came during their magic lesson. For the most part, it was a self-study exercise for Soma, where he’d scour any magic-related research papers that he could get his hands on. Soma was used to Camilla throwing questions his way as he was reading, and he already knew how he was going to answer her.

What he didn’t know, however, was why she was asking it in the first place.

“Ask as you might,” Soma responded. “We both know I have no choice in the matter.”

“Do we? Look, I know you’ve already got your eyes set on this magic goal of yours, but you still have a lot of options when it comes to your education.”

Soma eyed her dubiously.

“I may well be allowed to attend an educational institution. The problem is that I doubt I will be allowed to choose which.”

“Aah. I thought something wasn’t adding up here.”

“Do you mean to tell me I am wrong?”

“Yep.”

He hadn’t been expecting her to say that.

“If there’s one you’d prefer, you should let them know,” Camilla told him. “I’m sure they’ll help you get there.”

“I am allowed to state a preference?”

“Of course. Is there a problem?”

“It is all well and good for you to be telling me this, but how exactly am I supposed to get this information to my mother?”

Soma hadn’t seen Sophia in over a year. She hadn’t even attended his latest

birthday party, so he doubted they would be crossing paths again any time soon. It wasn't that he minded; he understood the reason well enough. Thanks to Camilla, he had even deduced that his mother wasn't entirely happy about the situation, either, but the fact remained that if he couldn't see her, he couldn't tell her his wishes, either.

"They do say the walls have ears." Camilla smiled at him. "Perhaps if you were to speak your preference out loud, it might somehow make its way to Sophia."

"Is that so?"

Camilla nodded.

"Might this be related to that nameless young lady with whom you are acquainted who recently sent me a birthday present?" Soma raised an eyebrow.

"You could say that."

In other words, there was someone who would tell Sophia of Soma's preference on his behalf, so they didn't need to meet in person. Incidentally, the present he had received from that "young lady" was a pocket watch, something he'd learned was something you were gifted once you became an adult. It was common among noble families for children to receive one after their sixth birthday and skill evaluation. Soma was also supposed to have received one.

"I had never considered the possibility that I could choose my own school," Soma murmured to himself. "I am not even sure what my options are, although of course I would prefer one which specializes in magic."

The curriculum in this world varied between institutions. While general schools did exist, most were highly specialized and directly influenced the direction their students would go after graduation. If one were interested in magic, one would attend a school specializing in that. Naturally, admission to specialized schools was generally dependent on one's abilities; for example, magic schools required their applicants to have an aptitude for it.

"Normally, a school like that would be completely out of reach for you," Camilla remarked, "as I'm sure you know. It's still not entirely out of the

question, though.”

“Is it not?”

“No, but you’ll need to have some luck on your side.”

“Luck?”

“Like any specialized school, magic schools require a letter of recommendation with the application,” Camilla explained.

Since magic was reliant on having natural ability, people without it wouldn’t bother to apply, leaving magic schools with relatively few applicants. After cutting those who were unqualified, you were left with only a small number of students, which meant a small number of schools. It was difficult enough to even be accepted for the entrance exams.

“All you’d need is for Sophia to write you a letter of recommendation. She could probably come up with some reason or other why you need to learn magic for your future,” Camilla explained.

“Which leaves the exam.”

“Right. And that’s where luck comes in.”

Soma blinked at her in confusion as Camilla began to explain.

The exams changed year to year. They depended on the nature of the school itself, as well as the examiner, but they were always practical. In other words, luck played a part in the contents of the exam.

“If you end up needing magic, you might as well give up on the spot.” Camilla shrugged.

“I should think magic is required every year.”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes, they’ll ask you to do something specific with magic, but not always.”

If the exam required him to use magic to defend against the examiner’s attacks, Soma would be stuck. However, if the exam required him to defend against the examiner’s magic in any way possible, he had a chance.

“Even if you used your sword, as long as you defended successfully, you’d

likely pass," Camilla said.

"Really?" Soma looked doubtful.

"Of course. They asked you to defend, and you defended."

"In that case, I suppose the next problem would be whether or not the examiner would be willing to accept that."

"Right. It's all down to luck."

Personally, Soma thought Camilla was being a little too hopeful, though he couldn't deny that her idealized exam was a possibility. In any case, he now knew he had a choice of schools, whatever he decided to do with that choice.

"You don't need to rush and figure things out just yet," Camilla added. "Be sure to take some time and think it through first."

"Understood."

The topic had come up so suddenly that it still didn't feel real to Soma, though he knew that it was a decision to consider carefully. At the moment, he wasn't sure if he should even apply for a magic school, let alone whether he felt confident about the exam. If he ended up failing, he could always just apply for somewhere else, but that wasn't the main issue.

It had been over a month since he'd started trying out different things with Aina in an attempt to learn magic, but so far his efforts had been fruitless. By now, Soma doubted that anything was going to change, though he didn't know exactly why he felt that way.

He knew he had to find a different approach, but he wasn't entirely sure that magic school was going to be the answer. If his hunch was correct, then he would be wasting his time and merely putting off his acquisition of magic even longer.

On the other hand, it might be worth trying anyway, if only to have access to the school's library of magic resources. Plus, he would be surrounded by magic-users for all hours of the day, putting him in constant contact with it. That might also prove to be invaluable.

In any case, since getting into a school was unlikely if not impossible in his

current state, it probably wasn't worth getting excited over. He would have to take a different route. In his previous life, Soma had needed only a single small clue to get him started on the path of a swordmaster. There was no reason the same thing couldn't happen with magic, and it was quite possible that the clue he needed could be found in a different school altogether, or even somewhere else entirely.

"I wonder what it might be like to set off on a journey," he murmured, half to himself.

"What? You mean you don't want to go to school?"

"It's just an idea." Soma paused to think. "Not a half-bad one, either, if I do say so myself."

"Well, nobody ever said that you *have* to go to school. If you really want to travel, there's nothing stopping you."

"I shall think it through."

It would mean saying goodbye to both Aina and Lina, but so would going away to school. It wasn't like he had any deep ties to this place aside from those two, anyway. Lina would probably be sad to see him go, but given how much she'd grown, she would probably be fine not seeing him for a while.

Soma would have been more worried about Aina—or at least he would have, until yesterday. Something about her had changed. This morning, when they'd met, she seemed remarkably clear-headed. Soma hadn't asked her what had changed, but it was obvious to him that she had solved some sort of problem that had been plaguing her. He knew she probably had some troubles remaining, but he was convinced now that she would be able to take care of herself. It made him slightly regretful to think that he was never really able to do anything for her, but that was how it was.

He would be fine; they would be fine. Soma wasn't necessarily ready to set off just yet, though. If this journey of his was to be a replacement for school, then he still had over a year to wait. Until then, his days of classes and training would likely continue just as they had been.

"A journey..." Soma murmured again.

He didn’t dislike his current lifestyle. It was plenty of fun, and he was content with almost everything. His only problem was magic, but that was enough to taint everything else. Soma was ready to pursue his goal until the moment he died, but now he really was getting ahead of himself. His only worry right now was making sure he didn’t have any lingering regrets when that moment came.

Chapter 26

“I do apologize to keep you all waiting for so long. However, as one of Hell’s Commanders, I can now announce that everything is in place for our plan to move forward!”

His words rippled through the silence, echoing off the cavernous walls. The entire room was speechless. It took all their self-control to keep themselves from trembling with excitement; they couldn’t even find the words to express it.

“F-Finally...” somebody eventually managed to croak.

His hood hid most of his face, but the width of his smile was impossible to miss. However, the first speaker made no attempt to reply, having fully anticipated just this sort of reaction from the men sitting before him. He basked in the satisfaction, but soon felt a slight guilt gnawing at him.

“Yes... I admit it has been a while. I do apologize. Should things have gone a little more smoothly, I daresay I would be announcing the plan’s conclusion now, instead of its beginning.”

“No, no,” the other man quickly replied. “It wasn’t really your fault. We all understand that. Besides, it’s given us the extra time to make sure this plan is as perfect as possible.”

“Indeed. Perhaps if she had made the correct choice earlier, we would be further along, but that would mean nothing if our plan were still a mess.”

There was no need to worry about the quality of the plan itself now; in reality, it was never the problem. The problem was the sacrifice. If they had forced her to come with them before and caused her to feel real fear, she would have been perfected by now, but then they would have run into trouble. They weren’t allowed to kill her, after all, and locking her up would also have been risky. This was the only way to ensure that the plan could be put into motion without a hitch.

In reality, the only reason for all the fuss over the previous week had been everyone's impatience. The man cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed at the methods he'd put in place to obscure his progress. All that had passed, though, and there was one thing that was certain now: They were about to achieve their greatest wish.

The man stood up, reassured by that single thought. "I shall bring her here," he announced.

"What? Already?"

"My apologies. However, I feel that I can wait no longer."

"Hmm... Well, I certainly understand how you feel."

Every face in the room broke into a smile, creating an uncharacteristically light atmosphere. He spoke the truth, though, and everyone here was eager to set things into motion. Even the man who had stood up responded with his own smile.

"I shall bring her here," he began, "then I shall leave the rest to you."

"Very well."

"Everything for the Demon King."

"For the Demon King."

With that, the speaker left the room.

†††

Aina sat alone in the forest, sunlight filtering down on her through the trees. Her eyes were unfocused, gazing vaguely off into the empty distance.

She was waiting for Soma, and didn't have anything to do until he arrived.

"Ugh... I'm so bored."

She sighed in frustration, but it did nothing to improve her situation. She examined her surroundings, but nothing had changed since she'd sat down. There wasn't even anybody around to hear her sighs.

Soma would normally have been here long ago, but he hadn't shown up. Aina wasn't surprised, though, since he had told her yesterday that he was going to

be around thirty minutes late today. Aina still came at the usual time because she had nothing better to do for those thirty minutes.

Maybe it was just force of habit. Aina scoffed at herself as she feebly tried to justify it. The truth was, there was only one reason why she was here—why she had stayed.

That didn't change the fact that she was bored, though.

Staring off into space, Aina began to daydream about what she might do with all her newfound spare time.

"Stay where you are."

"Huh?"

The command came out of nowhere. There had been no sign of anyone else around, but suddenly there was something pressed against the back of her head. She couldn't tell what it was, but she felt that it was definitely sharp.

However, the voice, rather than the object, was what really disturbed her. It was one she recognized. After all, she had heard it just the previous week.

"Lina? Is that you?"

"Yes. It's me."

Aina let out a sigh of relief. It was just Lina, and she was answering her questions properly, too. Sure, she sounded a little more stilted than usual, but that wasn't exactly Aina's top concern at the moment.

"Um... do you mind maybe not sneaking up on me like that? Besides, weren't you gonna stay in class today?" Aina asked.

"I was, yes," Lina admitted. "However, I decided that I would come today instead, in order to surprise my brother. Fortunately, it seems that he hasn't yet arrived..."

"Huh? Why, so you could catch me off guard? I mean, you did," Aina prattled on. "But you could at least have done it without the weapon, you know."

"Why would I do that?" Lina asked, no hint of laughter in her voice.

"Why? Well..." Aina stopped as she suddenly picked up on Lina's tone.

She's just fooling around, right? Why would she do this?

"Killing a demon is much easier with a weapon," Lina hissed.

Aina's breath caught in her throat. Lina knew, and it was pointless to ask her how. She was smart, and it wasn't like Aina had been working hard to hide it, either. If Lina had asked her outright what she was, Aina had been intending to tell the truth, as much as she didn't want to. It was that reluctance which caused her to lose hope now.

Now that Lina knew the truth, she knew there was no point in resisting. She just wished she would've gotten to see Soma one last time.

"Honestly! Don't you know how to defend yourself?"

"Huh?!"

With that, Lina stepped away from Aina and let out an exasperated sigh, her bloodlust from the previous instant nowhere to be seen. Aina had been confused a moment ago, but it was nothing compared to how she felt now.

"You... What... Huh?!"

"Don't just gawk at me. If I had been anybody else, I could easily have killed you," Lina snapped. "If you're going to be wandering around a place like this, at least be more careful!"

Aina was having trouble forming a coherent sentence. *Now she's lecturing me? Why's she suddenly acting so normally?*

"You're... not gonna kill me?" she finally managed to ask.

"I beg your pardon?" Lina frowned. "I don't dislike you that much, despite how close you get to Soma sometimes."

"B-But you just..."

"I was just playing around, of course," Lina explained. "No, that's not quite right. Let's call it a warning."

"A warning?"

"You need to understand how much danger you're in. Both you and Soma barely pay any attention to your surroundings when I'm around."

She wasn't exactly wrong. Even though Aina knew Lina could look after herself, the fact remained that she was being careless.

"I understand that Soma doesn't have any real need to be careful, but you definitely do. In fact," Lina continued, "I've been wanting to speak with you about this for a while. Good thing Soma isn't here yet."

"Right..." Aina replied listlessly.

Lina didn't appear to be lying, and Aina didn't see why she would be, so she gradually let herself relax.

"Y'know, you nearly gave me a heart attack. You shouldn't fool around like that," Aina said.

"I wasn't 'fooling around.' I needed to scare you to get my point across."

"I mean, I get that."

But at least let me complain! Aina thought to herself. It seemed like Lina was genuinely ready to kill her.

"Please just be careful, okay? If there really was somebody who wanted to do you harm, you—"

Suddenly, Lina jumped backward. Aina didn't have time to try and figure out why; not a moment later Lina's body was flung away by some sort of invisible force.

"Lina!" Aina cried out, spinning around.

She instinctively felt some kind of magic force behind her. Her eyes widened when she spotted the familiar face who was behind it.

"Albert?!"

Even now, she had no time to let her guard down. Albert was already stretching out his right arm, preparing for some sort of attack.

Aina stuck out her own arm, ready to counter.

"Fla—"

"Shockwave."

She had barely opened her mouth before she heard a thunderous rumbling from behind her. There was a loud thump, likely the sound of Lina being thrown to the ground.

Before Aina had time to check on her, Albert had already disappeared from view. She whipped around to see him standing over Lina, his hand reaching for the small girl collapsed on the ground.

Racking her brain to try and work out what was going on, she suddenly remembered what had happened just before Albert had appeared. Even if Lina hadn't actually been planning to harm her, there was no way that an observer would see it that way. Aina wasted no time in crying out.

"Stop, Albert! She wasn't trying to hurt me! Y-You don't have to protect me from her!"

Not sure what she should say, the words tumbled out of her mouth without thought. Luckily for Aina, Albert hesitated.

"Is that so?" he breathed. "Yes... If she were truly trying to harm you, there would be much worse ways that she could go about it. How... Oh? Hm. Is this because of my devotion? Or is it a sign from the Demon King?"

"What?" Aina asked anxiously.

Nervousness bubbled up inside her, telling her to run away, but she couldn't leave Lina. As Aina hesitated, Albert picked up Lina's limp body. Aina was relieved to see that her friend was still breathing.

"Al—"

"Do not worry, Your Highness. I shall not kill her, as it seems she would make for a good sacrifice as well."

"What are you talking about?!" Aina frowned, a shiver running down her spine.

Alarm bells were ringing in her head. *Run away. Run away.*

"Now, Your Highness. The Demon King calls for you. If you would come with me..."

"I told you no!" Aina snapped.

She had come to her decision immediately when she saw Albert again. Her real worry had been how to stay here, not whether she should. She already knew that she would never be going back.

“Oh? Should I take that to mean that you don’t care what happens to this girl?” Albert asked.

Aina stared at him in shock. Now he was planning to use Lina as a hostage? Aina couldn’t believe it. She never thought he would go that far.

“Y-You can’t do that... He wouldn’t let you!” she cried.

“Didn’t you hear me? These are orders from the Demon King.”

“No way...”

There was no way the Demon King—Aina’s father—would allow something like that.

“It looks as though I shall have to use force, as I had intended to from the very beginning.” Albert sighed.

There was nothing Aina could do even if she wanted to. The next moment, her body was flung to the ground. In the corner of her vision, she watched as a familiar pair of feet passed by.

At this point, her body was no longer listening to her commands. All she knew was that she was being lifted up because she could see it.

“Let us return. It looks as though I’ll be bringing back more than the Demon King asked for. He will surely be pleased.”

Aina spoke one final word before her consciousness was lost to the darkness.

Chapter 27

It had taken more than an hour for Lina's disappearance to be noticed at the estate. The reason it had taken so long was that the person who should have reported it, the one who first noticed she was gone, had not done so.

"So you're telling me that for the past month, you have been allowing Lina to be absent from your classes, as long as she returned by the time the next class was due to start?" Sophia asked the trembling woman in front of her.

"Y-Yes, Your Grace..."

"And when she didn't show up to your class today, you just assumed she was skipping as usual," Sophia pressed. "And that is why you didn't report it?"

"Erm, correct."

"Even though it would usually have been tomorrow that she skipped?"

"W-Well, I just thought maybe she wanted a change..."

"I suppose I can understand that." Sophia sighed. "You may leave. It doesn't look like picking your brain further is going to do any good."

"But I—"

"Take your leave. Do not make me repeat myself."

"Yes, Your Grace."

The tutor's face was deathly pale as she bowed to excuse herself and left the room. Camilla wasn't sympathetic in the least, letting out a sigh as soon as the tutor had left the room.



“I still don’t get why you hired somebody like her, you know,” she remarked.

“It isn’t because I wanted to,” Sophia replied. “She was simply the lesser of two evils.”

“Huh?” Camilla blinked in confusion. “Listen, I know you were in a rush and that the best tutors were already taken by other families, but... Actually, I’m surprised you let the previous tutor go.”

“That’s because I wasn’t planning on having Soma taught that subject this early on. Besides, those tutors cost a fortune.”

“You mean you weren’t going to let Soma end up as a drain on society? Must be tough being born as a noble, huh?”

“That has nothing to do with it. This country is small and young. That is why I cannot let him be.”

“And since you just managed to hire this tutor, you couldn’t just let her go, right?”

“Yes. However, this time she went too far. Now, as for what to do with her...” Sophia muttered, her eyes narrowing.

Personally, Camilla thought that her friend should have done something about this tutor much sooner, but she dared not say it out loud. The result would be the same in any case. The tutor would just be fired, but that was enough. She was the kind of person whose pride and arrogance could be taken advantage of. If you kicked her down, she would do the rest of the job of tormenting herself without any further encouragement. That wasn’t any reason to soften her punishment, though, and this wasn’t the time to bring that sort of thing up, either.

“Anyway, we know that Lina’s been gone for more than an hour... It’s probably reaching two by this point,” Camilla said. “It was at that point that no one could find her in the estate, but she ate her meal here, didn’t she?”

“Yes. I took my meal together with her,” Sophia replied.

“So she left after that. I wonder if she left by herself, or if someone took her?”

Camilla was suddenly struck with a thought. In all probability, Lina would have

left the estate herself. First off, she had her Self-Concealment skill. Camilla was well aware of this, being the one who had evaluated her, but that wasn't all.

She knew that Lina left the estate once a week, and she also knew where the girl went. She had heard it from Soma, though she had failed to pass it on to Sophia. It was negligent of her, of course, but if Sophia found out about it, she would have no choice but to act.

Camilla knew that would only lead to a no-win situation for everyone, and so she kept quiet. However, that meant she would have to come up with another reason for her deduction, not that that was going to be very difficult.

"If you ask me," Camilla said, "I reckon she probably sneaked out."

"What makes you say that?"

"With the defenses you have here, I don't think anybody would be able to get in."

Sophia was widely known as the strongest person out of all of humanity; she was a Specialist-rank mage and swordswoman. The moment anybody even thought of sneaking into the estate, they were already finished. It was impossible, no matter what they tried, and that included Specialist-rank Self-Concealment skills. It was impenetrable from the outside. The inside, however, was a different matter.

If somebody managed to get in, then even with the most basic of Self-Concealment skills, they would easily be able to pick off everybody inside without being noticed—except for one particular person, but that was irrelevant to the current situation.

The inside was the estate's one weakness, but that rarely led to any problems. That was what Camilla was here for, after all.

"The moment anyone fishy set foot in here, you'd notice them right away," Camilla said.

"Aah."

Soma and Lina weren't the only ones whose skills Camilla had evaluated. She also had a duty to evaluate the skills of everybody who set foot within the

estate, whether they were here to work or for other purposes. If she picked up on a skill that was even slightly suspicious, that person would be barred from working for the Neumonts, and if they had no skills at all, they were simply written off as unqualified. Even if somebody like that managed to get in, there were people in the mansion who could deal with them.

Not everyone would be able to deal with an intruder, but the person who Camilla was thinking of was an exception among exceptions, not to mention somebody she cared about. In any case, if somebody disappeared from the estate, it meant that they must have left of their own volition.

“She’s amazingly skilled to boot,” Camilla added.

“Indeed. It’s only natural that nobody spotted her.” Sophia sighed. “I suppose I should have seen this coming, especially since she’s been going out every week for the past month.”

Sophia had long since noticed Lina’s escapades, which was partly why she had agreed with Camilla’s interpretation so readily. With both of them on the same page, it was highly unlikely that their conclusion was wrong.

“Although I cannot help but wonder why she went out today rather than tomorrow,” said Sophia.

“She’s the only one who could say,” Camilla pointed out.

“In that case, it would do no good to think too hard about it.”

“I agree. What’s more worrying is that she’s taking so long to come back today.”

They had no way of knowing exactly why Lina was still gone, but it was safe to assume that something unexpected must have happened.

“What are we going to do, now that she’s gone?” Camilla asked.

Sophia paused for a moment before responding. “May I ask something of you?”

“Ha. I knew there must be a reason you called for me.”

“That isn’t entirely true. I wanted to discuss the situation with you first.”

“That still counts as a reason why you’d ask for me and not anyone else. That means you must want something that can’t be done as a group this time,” Camilla reasoned.

“Yes. To tell you the truth, I would have liked to go out and search as a group. However, that is not possible.”

This country was small and still young, so if a large scandal were to occur, the consequences could be severe and far-reaching. As such, Sophia had to solve this problem quickly, before word got out.

“I get it. If you could just run around doing what you pleased like that, you could’ve carried on treating Soma as your son. “As a duchess, you’re making the right decision, just like you did back then.”

“As duchess, perhaps. But as a mother...” Sophia’s voice trailed off.

“If that’s how you feel, then you should apologize. I promise I’ll do my best to give you that opportunity.”

“Thank you,” Sophia replied quietly.

“Don’t mention it.” Camilla smiled. “After all, I’m used to cleaning up your messes by now.”

With that, Camilla stepped out of the room. She couldn’t waste any time. No matter what had happened to Lina, the longer Camilla took to find her, the higher the chance that things would get worse for the girl.

Camilla strode down the long corridor, her mind racing.

“Do you happen to know where to search?” came a voice from below her.

She barely managed to suppress a squeal as she looked down to see the very boy she had been searching for.

“Soma! Don’t tell me you were eavesdropping?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Soma asked innocently.

Camilla sighed. It was obvious from what Soma had said that he knew that Lina was missing. He should’ve had no other way to gain that information than from Camilla herself, though, since everyone else in the estate treated him as

though he were invisible.

“I was not eavesdropping,” Soma insisted. “Simply by walking these corridors, I often pick up on what people say to themselves, or whatever gossip is floating around. That is how I learned that Lina has gone missing, and I assume that is what you were just speaking with Mother about.”

“Yes, it was,” Camilla conceded.

If Soma had learned of Lina’s disappearance, then it wouldn’t be too difficult for him to connect the dots and come to that conclusion. How he had learned this information was another matter, which had taken Camilla by surprise. Either the estate was full of good-natured individuals, or there were some who had placed their trust in Soma, despite his lack of skills.

“You never change, do you? Still, you’ve saved me the bother of having to explain. I’m going out to search for Lina now. I don’t know how long I’ll be, so just do some private studying or something in the meantime.”

“Certainly, ma’am,” Soma responded. “However, I must ask again whether you even know where to start searching for her.”

“I don’t,” Camilla admitted, “but I’ll probably start by having a look around the Dark Woods—or beyond them, I guess.”

The Dark Woods were another reason why Sophia couldn’t send out a search party. Whether they found Lina there or not, asking them to search that area could cause major trouble. If they didn’t find Lina in the woods, then they would likely need to send a group into the demons’ territory to search, which would be likely to upset the delicate political balance that existed between the two lands. The responsibility for that blunder would fall entirely upon the Neumonts’ shoulders, so it fell to Camilla to find Lina—or perhaps not find her—as quickly as possible.

“We have three days,” Camilla told him. “In the meantime, Sophia’s going to search the town and the surrounding areas. Not that I think Lina’s going to be there.”

“I quite agree.”

In which case, there were two choices, both of which were to give up—either

on Lina's life or on the future of the Neumont name.

It didn't need to be said which was the easier choice.

"We don't need to worry about that for now. I'll find her first," Camilla promised.

"I have confidence in you," Soma said.

"Hm?" Camilla blinked, having fully expected Soma to ask to come with her, although she would've turned him down.

"You're not planning anything... are you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course not. I swear that I shan't be doing anything as foolish as following after you."

"Are you sure you're feeling okay?" Camilla squinted at him.

"I beg your pardon? I thought you trusted your beloved student much more than this."

"Whatever you say. I don't have time to chat, anyway, so I'll see you later."

"I wish you the best of luck."

Camilla couldn't help but be suspicious of Soma's attitude. It was as though he wasn't concerned for his sister at all. He was the one who had come and asked Camilla about the situation, and yet it had seemed like he almost found it entertaining.

He must have been worried for her, but perhaps that was exactly why he was acting so strangely. In any case, Camilla had work to do.

With both Sophia's and Soma's expectations on her shoulders, Camilla continued to stride down the corridor as quickly as she could.

†††

"Seriously?"

"Is something the matter?"

"I thought you said you weren't going to follow me."

"I am not following you," Soma responded. "You are going to follow me."

Soma had been waiting for her at the entrance to the Dark Woods, ready to show her the way. Camilla could do nothing about it but sigh in resignation.

Chapter 28

The two of them made their way through the forest, moving so fast that anybody watching would probably think it was just the wind rustling through the grass. Camilla and Soma were still able to keep up a conversation easily, despite the high speed.

“Is there a reason why you’re so sure we’re heading the right way?” Camilla asked.

“Of course there is,” replied Soma. “Although I merely suggested it as a joke... I am glad I did now.”

“Huh?”

Soma was leading them toward something that was carved into the ground and pointed up high into the sky. The thing in question was special, however, and only visible to Soma.

As a magical symbol, you needed to fulfill a certain condition in order to see it. In this case, only Soma fulfilled that condition.

He had spotted it right away in the same place where he usually met with Aina, although he had been running later than usual today. While that symbol was there, Aina was not, but he could feel faint traces of her magic within it.

The magic symbol was a result of an offhand suggestion he made to Aina, serving as a signal in case she were to be kidnapped. On top of being a warning, it also served as a tracker to find where Aina had been taken.

“Just what on earth do you two get up to?” Camilla said.

“Never mind that now,” Soma replied. “The important thing is that it is working to our advantage.” Soma had to admit that he was impressed. No matter what had happened to Aina and Lina, Aina had managed to create the signal perfectly. If she hadn’t, then not even Soma would have had a clue where to start looking.

“Anyway, since the magic’s still active, it means that Aina must be alive and conscious,” Camilla remarked.

“Alive, perhaps. Conscious, we cannot be sure.”

“Magic usually stops working if the caster passes out,” Camilla countered.

“I have heard as much, yes. However, in this case, that would make the entire exercise pointless. In the event of a kidnapping, the likelihood of the victim passing out is extremely high, meaning her rescuers would barely have any time at all until the signal disappeared. That is why she created this symbol to last, even if she were to pass out.”

“And it worked?”

“I was the one who came up with the idea. However, she was the one to implement it, and I am not surprised that she was able to do so.”

“That’s amazing in itself, but how’d you come up with it?”

“It simply came to me.”

“Ugh, I don’t know why I even asked.”

Camilla sighed, but Soma couldn’t quite work out why. He accepted that it may be a novel idea to this world, but he didn’t understand what would elicit such a response from her. In any case, how the idea came to him wasn’t as important as the fact that it had helped further his understanding of magic.

“So this signal,” Camilla continued. “It means you can track down the kidnappers, right? Is it also how you realized that Lina had been kidnapped?”

“No, it was mere coincidence that I found that out, and it was only once I returned to the estate that I realized it.”

When Soma first noticed the signal, he knew that Aina had been taken. While he knew that the signal would lead him to find the kidnappers, he realized that he wouldn’t be able to follow them straightaway. When she first came up with this magic, Soma had suggested that Aina tailor it so that it would work in a wide range of situations, such as if the kidnapper were warping with her.

To account for that possibility, the signal was designed to appear in set intervals as the kidnapper moved with her, rather than as a long, continuous

path. The signal was created using pillars of light, which would be visible outside even if they originated inside a building. Soma also had Aina make the pillar thirty feet high so that they would be easy to track.

The time delay between the pillars would generally cause them to be somewhat scattered, especially in the forest, where obstacles were many and paths curved like snakes. However, right now, the pillars of light appeared in a straight line. Normally, that would suggest that the kidnapper was moving at a set speed and in a single direction. This time, though, one of the pillars was even inside a tree, which meant Aina and Lina's kidnapper was warping.

"Warping, huh?" Camilla murmured. "That takes at least an Expert-rank magic skill, or some kind of magical object to pull off. We must be dealing with someone pretty serious."

"I quickly realized that following after them so soon would not be possible, which is why I returned to the estate," Soma explained.

If the kidnapper was warping, their destination was likely somewhere relatively far, and the search would probably take quite a while, so Soma had decided that going home temporarily would be the best option.

"Why? So you could let me know you'd be gone for a while?" Camilla joked with a small smile.

"I certainly considered that, of course," Soma replied lightly. "However, the main reason was financial." Soma didn't have a penny to his name; after all, he had never needed money before. However, if the search ended up being more than a day, he would probably need at least a little bit. Even if he didn't mind sleeping under the stars, food was another issue.

He had returned to the estate to ask Camilla to borrow some money, which was when he had heard that Lina was missing, too. It had taken him no time at all to connect the dots.

"Two people missing at the exact same time... You'd be hard-pressed to try and call it coincidence."

"Either two separate kidnappings took place at the same time, or they were kidnapped together. Obviously, the latter is the more plausible explanation,"

Soma remarked.

“Right. Anyway, I guess the thing to do now is just to keep following them.” Camilla paused. “Actually, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Which is?”

“You almost seem too calm. I didn’t think you’d be losing your mind or anything, but I thought you’d at least get a little mad at your sister being kidnapped.”

“I seem calm? I am glad to hear that.” Soma clenched his fists. Inside, his emotions were reaching a boiling point.

“You mean...”

“Do not say it. I am aware that I still have much to learn.”

If only he had been there. If only he hadn’t been wasting time instead of meeting up with Aina as he was supposed to. Soma almost scoffed as he realized just how stupid he had been, but as much as he regretted his actions, there was nothing he could do about it now.

Though he knew that logically, it still didn’t stop him from wanting to punch a tree in anger. That he was allowing himself to be affected so strongly by his emotions simply showed that he needed more training.

“Well, it’s a bit reassuring to hear that,” Camilla told him.

As if waiting for Soma’s and Camilla’s discussion to end, the trees suddenly began to thin out, indicating that they were now on the other side of the forest, in the demons’ territory.

“It hardly looks like anything special, not that I expected it to,” Soma remarked.

There was an open field spread out before them as they pushed forward. This place looked nothing like what the stories about the demons had told him, but Soma wasn’t surprised.

“We will not be attacked out of nowhere, will we?” he asked.

“The demons shouldn’t be able to tell us apart. As long as we’re careful about

what we say, we'll be fine. Either way, there might be thieves or monsters, so we should still be careful."

Soma nodded, but shrugged it off for the most part. If they were attacked, then they would just have to fight back.

Their immediate problem was a lack of information. After all, they had no idea where they would end up; they just knew which way to go. They didn't know how far it was until their destination, nor what sorts of places they would be passing through on their way.

In an ideal world, Soma would at least want to know how long of a journey they were looking at, since then he could have at least worked out how much food they would need.

"I think it would be prudent to try and gather some information first. What do you think?" he asked.

"That sounds okay..."

Soma blinked, confused by her hesitation.

"I'm just surprised. I know you said you'd lead me, but I didn't realize you were in this for the long haul. You almost convinced me to leave this all to you, but I guess you do want my advice after all, huh?"

"Admittedly, I do not know much about this place, so I will likely be relying on you eventually."

"Eventually," Camilla repeated with a wry smile. "You know, I'm never really sure whether you impress or scare me."

"Oh?" Soma was well aware that he wasn't exactly immature, but he didn't realize she thought that much of him. Both Lina and Aina were mature for their age, too, so perhaps he just didn't notice how grown-up he seemed to others.

"How about we start by looking for a town or something?" Camilla suggested. "We know there should be people living around here, after all."

This was the border, so there would likely be people nearby who watched over it, and were ready to protect it if need be. If so, they should be able to gather information.

“Let us search,” he agreed.

While they didn’t have time just to stand around, being in too much of a hurry could be damaging to their cause, especially if they ran forward blind. The two of them began to swiftly and carefully search for civilization.

Chapter 29

Soma and Camilla found a town much more quickly than they expected. As soon as he saw it, Soma's eyes widened in astonishment.

"This is more a village than a town," Camilla remarked.

"Indeed. I would have thought whatever we found would be much larger than this."

The small village was surrounded by a wooden fence, and the number of buildings barely made it into double digits, with likely no more than fifty residents.

"Where shall we start?" Soma murmured.

As soon as they entered, they would doubtlessly be identified as outsiders, so people may be reluctant to share information with them. Townspeople were used to answering questions, but villagers tended to be more on guard. Soma wasn't optimistic about the chances that they'd talk, or if they did, that they'd be honest.

"We can worry about it all we want, but we won't know unless we try," Camilla pointed out. "I guess all we can do is go for it."

"Agreed," Soma said after a pause.

Unable to do anything but hope they would get lucky, the two of them began to approach the village.

"As I thought. That was a complete waste of time."

Standing alone at one end of the village, Soma gazed up at the sky.

He had been trying to ask passersby about the surrounding area, but those who didn't ignore his questions simply said they didn't know. He was completely helpless, and he suspected a part of that was to do with the fact that he was obviously a child. The villagers probably thought he was out to cause trouble, so it was no wonder that they were hesitant to help.

“I suppose my dear teacher wouldn’t have much luck in that regard either,” Soma muttered.

Camilla looked very much like a child, just as he did, so she was probably being treated in the exact same way.

Hoping to make better use of their time, the two of them had split up, but Soma was starting to think it might have been better if they’d stuck together. However, as long as they both just looked like a couple of kids, they would probably be treated the same, together or apart.

Soma began to reconsider their options.

“Young man, there seems to be something bothering you. What’s wrong?”

Suddenly, a voice interrupted his thoughts. Soma looked up to see an old woman standing before him. From how she spoke, it seemed she had been watching him for quite a while, which he’d been aware of for some time now.

He hadn’t approached her earlier, having seen the intense weariness in her eyes. He hadn’t expected her to approach him like this, either. She had clearly put her weariness aside to speak to him, and Soma was determined not to let this opportunity pass him by.

“Yes,” he replied. “I have a need to travel in that direction. However, I have very little knowledge of the surrounding area. As well as wishing to know how much I may need in terms of provisions, I should also like to find out what I might encounter out there.”

“I see. Now I see why everybody is hesitant to talk to you,” the old woman remarked.

“Oh?” Soma asked, intrigued.

“I wonder if I should be the one to tell you...”

The woman’s observations were correct. Everybody who stopped to listen to what Soma had to say had backed off after hearing just a few words. Asking this old lady for the reason would probably cost him.

“I am afraid I do not possess any particular talents, nor do I have much on my personage,” Soma explained.

It wasn’t just that he didn’t have “much;” in truth, he had absolutely nothing. If she wanted payment, then he might be able to borrow some money from Camilla, but he doubted that was what this woman was after.

“No, no, that isn’t what I mean. It’s just... Hmm. I wonder if you might have time to listen to a tale before I explain things to you?”

“A tale?” Soma repeated.

“It’s not a particularly interesting one, but I’ve been waiting for somebody who would be willing to listen to it,” she said.

Soma didn’t have any time to waste, but he still didn’t have any of the information he needed, either. This was a matter of trading time for information, and Soma decided to take that deal. There was something else that was bothering him here, too.

After briefly pausing to think, Soma nodded. “I don’t mind lending you my ear.”

“Thank you. In that case, I’ll begin. This tale takes place... just over a year ago now, I’d say. One day, we met a young girl.”

“A girl?” Soma echoed.

“People have ended up here from all over the place, and I immediately knew she was the same. People like that are always in trouble. I know I should have told her to move on quickly, but, well... in my heart, I felt that I couldn’t leave her be.”

“Incidentally, when you say ‘we,’ who else are you speaking of?” Soma asked.

“Ah, my husband was with me. His back’s been playing up lately, so he’s at home resting today. Anyway, I took the girl home with me. At first, I was planning to get her to leave as soon as possible. I planned to feed her, let her rest, and send her on her way. But when she woke up the next morning, she looked no better than she had the day before. I don’t mean physically—it was like there was a heaviness weighing on her heart. If I sent her away then, I could well see her ending up dead in a ditch somewhere.

“Worried as we were, there was nothing we could do apart from provide her

with food and a warm bed. We were at a loss. Something was clearly wrong, but we didn't know if it was something we'd be able to help with," the old woman explained.

"I can understand that," Soma murmured.

He had felt the same way himself. In fact, he had done even less for her; he hadn't fed her or given her a roof over her head, so the feeling of being unable to do anything was one he knew well. If this old lady hadn't approached him like she had, he might still be feeling that way.

"Now and then, though, the girl would come home with a small smile on her face, telling us that she made some friends," the woman continued.

"Friends, you say..."

"As the days passed, she started to lighten up. Even though we couldn't help her, that alone made us happy. We were never able to have children of our own, but before we knew it, she had become like a granddaughter to us.

"Even then, though, the clouds over her heart never cleared. Although she smiled more and more, now and then her expression would suddenly change, like she was overcome with pain and loneliness. However, recently... she really began to smile."

"I beg your pardon?" Soma asked. "Did you not just say that she had been smiling before?"

"Yes, but this time, she smiled from the bottom of her heart. Although we were helpless, we could tell instantly that somebody had saved her. Nothing could make us happier..."

"Ma'am?"

There was a quiver in the old woman's voice, though not a happy one. It sounded like something pained her.

"The truth is... we realized a long time ago just what she was, but we could never bring ourselves to admit it. You hear all sorts of things around here, but... but even knowing that about her, we were just so happy... because we knew everything was going to be okay... and we told her..."

“Told her what?” Soma asked.

“We told her... We told her she was going to be okay.”

“Ah.”

So this was where the story ended. Soma couldn’t blame the couple for their words, but the girl had run away from home. Even if the couple hadn’t known where home was for her, they had told her that she was “going to be okay.” To the girl, that probably sounded like they were telling her to go home.

“When we realized what we’d said, we thought she’d never come back—we thought she’d gone home. We were sad that she hadn’t said anything, but knowing what she was... it was probably safer that way. That’s what we wanted to believe.”

The old woman likely had no basis for coming to that conclusion, or if she did, it was simply because she felt guilty: that she had “forced” the girl to go home, and that she had said too much. Still, though, Soma had a hunch that there was more to it than that, which was why she was being so wary.

“I just wish I could have apologized to her.” The old lady sighed. “Anyway. Thank you for listening to an old woman’s tale.”

“It was interesting.”

She seemed like she still had more to say, but before Soma could ask her, she had already started talking again.

“Now it’s time for me to hold up my end of the bargain. You wanted to know what lies beyond this village, didn’t you?” she asked.

Soma was curious if everyone else’s refusal to answer his question was a result of unwillingness or inability, but there wasn’t time to ask her that now.

“I suppose that is what I would like to ask, yes,” he finally decided.

“Well, it’s no wonder you don’t know. Not many people do,” the woman remarked. “Beyond the village boundaries are some ruins.”

“Ruins?”

Apparently, a few hundred years ago, it had been a place where people would

gather to worship a certain god.

“Would it happen to be the Wicked God, by any chance?”

“Yes, indeed. That’s why people tend to stay away from those parts. They don’t want to get themselves involved, since there’s no way of knowing what happens if they do.”

“I see.”

The god they spoke of was evil and twisted. Hundreds of years ago, it had come to the mortal realm with intent to destroy humanity, only for humanity to destroy it instead. Needless to say, this was not the same god as was worshipped by the Sanctists.

According to their beliefs, this world was formerly inhabited by two gods, but after one of them lost its sanity, only one remained. Meanwhile, this “Wicked God” was worshipped by the demons. The human races insisted that the demons were descended from the Wicked God, but that was nonsense. In fact, the opposite was true; the Wicked God had been created in the demons’ image. It was convenient that the demons worshipped this god, since it gelled well with the narrative that demons were the enemy of humanity.

In truth, the Wicked God’s supporters were very few among the demons, and they were generally looked down upon, given that the Wicked God was said to want to destroy even the demons when the time came. Soma realized that there were always those with those kinds of beliefs, regardless of the world or era.

However, if ever a follower of the Wicked God were found out and the rumors spread, they would be forced to flee their home if they valued their life. It was no wonder that passersby didn’t want to get involved; it seemed demons were much like humans in that way.

Finally, Soma understood why the villagers had reacted the way they did to his question. While they had stopped listening as soon as they heard his question, none of them had been cruel enough to ignore him outright, only doing so when he mentioned the area beyond the village.

“Is it not dangerous for you to tell me this?” Soma asked. “Would it not be

safer for you to run away, too?”

“My husband and I don’t have much time left,” the woman explained. “Such things don’t scare you as easily at this age. Besides, we had a deal.”

“Well, I am certainly grateful that you chose to share this with me. Incidentally, how much time would it take to get to these ruins?”

“It should be about a day of walking, but I don’t recommend it. Apart from what I’ve already said, that place is filled with monsters,” she said. “If you’re going to go anyway, I’d take a detour.”

“I would, if I had the time,” Soma replied.

Soma was almost certain now that it was where Aina and Lina had been taken. He didn’t know why, but it didn’t take a genius to work out that the kidnappers didn’t have good intentions.

“How would I know once I have reached the ruins?” Soma asked.

“You said you needed to travel in that direction... but you mean to tell me you really have business in those ruins?”

“I cannot say for certain, but the probability is extremely high.”

The woman looked as though she wanted to protest, but seemed to decide against it in the end. She just told him that she had never been herself, so she wasn’t especially familiar with the area.

“Is there anything else in that area?” Soma asked.

“Oh? I thought you were only interested in the ruins.”

“I thought I should ask, just in case my business turns out to lie elsewhere, after all.”

“I see. Well, I don’t think there is anything else...” the old woman began.

Nevertheless, she gave Soma what little she could think of. Making a note in his head, Soma nodded. “Thank you for your help.”

“Don’t mention it, young man. I should thank you.”

“Even then, you have aided me a great deal.”

“Is that so?” The old woman smiled. “Well then, I’m glad I could be of assistance.”

“By the way, was there not something else you wanted to add to your story earlier?” Soma said.

The old woman inhaled sharply. Her shoulders trembling, she opened and closed her mouth repeatedly. Ultimately, though, no further words came out, and she shook her head.

“It was... nothing,” she eventually said.

“Very well.”

Soma could clearly see that wasn’t true, but he’d given her two chances. She had refused to use either of them, so it was clear she wasn’t planning to talk. This woman and her husband clearly regretted their actions deeply; even if she hadn’t said it, Soma could see it in her expression. With nothing more than a shrug, he turned his back to the woman.

“If you really wish to apologize to Aina, then perhaps it would be best to do it in person. Just as soon as we have returned her safely, that is.”

“What...?”

Soma could hear the astonishment in her voice, but he didn’t turn around, waving at her as he walked away. Just as she had quickly guessed by watching him what he had been asking passersby about, he’d figured out the identity of the girl quickly in their conversation. Soma had actually wanted to ask her a lot more, but he was sure that she felt the same way about him. That could wait until later, should the opportunity arise.

For now, Soma was simply content that he had another reason to rescue Aina as soon as possible. The old woman still on his mind, he hurried to the spot where he and Camilla had agreed to meet.

Chapter 30

Soma and Camilla met up at their predetermined rendezvous point, exchanged the information they found, and promptly left the village. Though Camilla had failed to get anything at all, what Soma had was enough.

They had also managed to work out why this border settlement was a village rather than a proper town, and it wasn't a particularly pleasant reason.

"That's kind of sickening," Camilla remarked.

"Perhaps. However, it is also quite logical."

The village was a warning signal. If this territory were invaded, then the village had no way to defend itself. The village would be destroyed, which would signal an invasion. The idea was born of necessity due to the vastness of the demons' territory; although their land was twice as large as Radius, the population was less than a tenth. Not only that, but there were several places in their territory which bordered other countries where humanity lived, and it wasn't possible to defend them all perfectly. As such, villages like this one were placed at the borders, so that they could serve as an early warning in case of invasion.

That wasn't the only reason for the village's position, though. Soma and Camilla had both determined that every villager lived there by choice, although their reasons for doing so may have differed.

Whether it was by choice or not, though, Soma had to agree with Camilla that the way the village was being used was abhorrent, so he hadn't objected when Camilla suggested that they leave immediately. In any case, there were more pressing matters at hand. Trying to clear his head of such unpleasant thoughts, Soma began to go through their plan for what would happen next.

"If it takes a day to walk there, then even though this is unfamiliar territory, it should take us around an hour," he reasoned. "The bigger issue is how we go about finding the ruins once we get there."

"Yes," Camilla agreed, "though I hope that won't take more than an hour,

either.”

They had more chance of running into danger on the journey over there. Since most decent people tended to stay away from that place, it might not be simple for Soma and Camilla just to waltz right in. Soma decided to add an extra hour to his calculations, in case of complications on their route. Whatever happened on the journey, they could probably deal with it.

“The biggest problem is likely to be the rescue effort itself,” he concluded.

“Mm-hmm. They’re bound to have their guard up, and we have no idea what our enemy is capable of,” Camilla said. “We can probably assume that they’re demons, and have access to Expert-rank skills, at the very least. Apart from that, there’s no telling anything about them. Unlikely as it might be, maybe we should even expect to encounter Hell’s Commanders there.”

“Hell’s Commanders, eh?”

He had been taught that they were the strongest of all the demons, as powerful as humanity’s Seven Heavenly Kings, and that was true even if you included the Demon King. Humanity could probably wipe out the demons if they wanted to, but that didn’t make Hell’s Commanders any less dangerous.

As those thoughts ran through Soma’s head, the scenery around them began to change, as fields gave way to forest once more. This forest was somehow creepier than the Dark Woods, and its vegetation seemed to be a darker shade of green.

Unaffected, Soma and Camilla continued to run, not having the luxury to pay the eerie atmosphere any mind. They continued following the pillars of light as they appeared through the forest.

“If we run into them, we are more or less destined to die, are we not?” Soma asked, picking up the conversation where they had left off.

“Yep. That’s not meant to scare you or anything; it’s just the truth,” Camilla replied. “Nobody can stand up to them, except for a Heavenly King, some sort of hero, or maybe some kind of blessed being. Even for those last two, they’d be better off just running for their lives.”

“Speaking of Heavenly Kings, I heard that one of them defeated a Hell’s

Commander once.”

“Technically, he wasn’t a Heavenly King when he won that fight; that fight was what earned him the title. That doesn’t mean the Kings are stronger than the Commanders, though. In fact, it was because another King was killed by a Commander that this new one could take his place.”

That was why the Kings and Commanders were said to be equal. That wasn’t to say that there weren’t humans who were close in strength, though, and the same could probably be said for demons.

“Incidentally, how would you fare against one of them?” Soma asked.

“Hmm... If you asked me a couple of years ago, I’d probably say I could win, but I know better now. They’d probably annihilate me. I’d be proud if I could hold out for, say, a minute or so, but realistically I likely wouldn’t last longer than a few seconds.”

“I see.”

“You know yourself how strong I am. I have Expert-rank skills, not Specialist. Anyway—”

Suddenly, Camilla swung her arm down. As the axe in her hand arched through the air, something leaped out of the grass, but it was too late. The creature—likely some sort of monster—was now a corpse, cleanly split into two.

Camilla returned her axe to her back. It had only taken a couple of seconds, and her run hadn’t faltered. Soma, of course, was still running alongside her, completely unaffected.

“I would have thought you would be a good match for them,” he commented.

“Thanks, but you’re giving me too much credit. Like I said, a while ago I would’ve thought so, too, but then I met Specialist-rank skillbearers.” Camilla sighed. “You know, at one point I actually wanted to be a King, but now I know it’s not even worth trying.”

“So you gave up because you realized there were people out there better than you?”

“Yep.”

“Were those Specialist-rank skillbearers also aiming to become Kings?”

“One of them already is: the Sword King.”

“Is that right? What is he like?”

“Uh... Well, it’s hard to explain.” Camilla pressed her lips together. “I guess he’s kind of like y—”

The old woman hadn’t been lying about this place being filled with monsters; this time, there were three of them. One of them leaped at Camilla, while the other two aimed for Soma, but things ended in much the same way as the previous encounter. The pair continued at the same pace, leaving behind the three cleanly-cut corpses.

Suddenly, Camilla’s lip curled.

“Is something the matter?” Soma asked.

“I was just thinking that that display just now was more than enough to disqualify me from becoming a King.”

“How so?”

“Ugh. I should’ve known you wouldn’t get it.” Camillla sighed. “It didn’t take us any longer to kill those three than it took me to kill the one, but I only fought one, and you took two. I was using an axe, and you have a stick, for goodness’ sake. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“I suppose.”

While it was true that there was a considerable skill difference between them, that did not mean Camilla was a slouch. For example, if she were to go up against Lina, Soma wouldn’t be surprised if Camilla emerged the victor, considering their basic axe and sword levels, as well as Lina’s current general combat experience. She was growing quickly, though, so the situation could still change over time.

In any case, Soma knew well that there was more to strength than just that, based on his previous life’s achievements. Not only that, but different people were suited to different combat styles.

He didn't know enough to say whether Camilla had the potential to become a King, but he certainly felt that she would be able to hold her own against one, as well as against a Commander. Soma was aware, however, that he may well be biased, since she was his teacher. Even if he were to voice his opinion, she would probably think he was just trying to be nice.

Something must have happened to her to give her this lasting inferiority complex, but Soma felt as though that didn't necessarily mean she should have given up on her dream.

"I wonder if these Commanders will grace us with their presence," Soma wondered aloud.

"Listen. I know you could probably hold your own against them, but it'd be hard to save Lina and Aina if you're busy fending them off. I get that you're craving the challenge, but leave it for another time," Camilla said.

Her assumption wasn't true, but Soma accepted it as an excuse. Even though it was unfair to Lina and Aina, Soma's thought was that if Camilla could have a fight against one of Hell's Commanders, she might regain her confidence. He wanted her to see the strength that he knew was inside her, but maybe that could wait. Right now, the priority was saving the girls, so Soma decided to change the subject.

"Do you think this is because we're having such an easy time, or because we are bragging too much?"

"I'd say the second part is your fault, but I guess this isn't really the time to be talking about modesty," Camilla remarked.

"Indeed," Soma agreed.

As the old woman said, this area was infested with monsters. Suddenly, though, their path was blocked with hundreds of them, which Soma thought was a bit much.

"I never even sensed them coming," he admitted. "I wonder if they set such a number of monsters on most people, or if it is just for us."

"They're probably here to fend off any rescuers," Camilla said. "It's hard to get monsters to follow your will, but gathering them in one place is pretty

simple.”

“That is some nerve these kidnappers have, although it certainly works to keep us busy.”

Soma swept his gaze over the creatures before them, but none of them seemed particularly strong, though in these numbers they might be more of a challenge. It would take a while to break a path through them, and even then, Soma and Camilla may just encounter the same situation once they were through. However, being held up here could easily mean death for Lina and Aina.

“I suppose we don’t really have a choice,” Soma muttered.

“No,” agreed Camilla.

Both on the same page, the two nodded at each other before turning to face the swarm in front of them and dashing forward even faster than before.

Chapter 31

Aina was in a dimly lit space, unable to see anything even after opening her eyes.

As she gradually regained consciousness, her eyes got used to the darkness around her, allowing her to see the stone ceiling that was high above her. Aina frowned as she struggled to remember where she was, but it wasn't long until she was fully awake, and the memories returned of what happened shortly before her loss of consciousness.

She scrambled to her feet, only to find herself in a room built from the same stone as the ceiling. On her right were iron bars, suggesting that this wasn't just a regular room.

"Is this... a prison?" she wondered aloud.

"It definitely looks like one."

Not expecting a reply, Aina spun around. Her eyes widened when she saw who had spoken.

"Lina?!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, it's me. Good morning, Aina."

"Oh, um... Good morning. Wait, no!"

The last thing Aina remembered was this girl sprawled out unconscious on the ground. As far as Aina knew, she may even have been dead, but now she seemed more or less unscathed. Aina couldn't tell for sure, but Lina was alive at the very least. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you're okay!" Aina paused. "You *are* okay, right?"

"That depends what you mean by 'okay,' but I feel fine. I'm not sure where we are or why we're here, though; all I remember is being attacked and falling unconscious, so I assume we were kidnapped. Do you know anything?"

Albert's words instantly sprang to Aina's mind—this was what the Demon

King, Aina's father, wanted. There was no doubt in her mind that they had been kidnapped, but she was still finding it hard to believe that her father would do such a thing. It wasn't like him, and Aina was highly confident of that. *What's going on?*

A single possibility came to mind. If it were true, then everything would make sense. Maybe her father had asked for this to happen, but indirectly.

Maybe he had only said that he wanted Aina back. If that were the case, it didn't necessarily mean that he had ordered Albert to use force; that might just have been how he had interpreted it.

It was said that being one of Hell's Commanders required more than just strength. You needed to be completely loyal to the Demon King, as well as at least ten nobles who could vouch for you, which they wouldn't do for just anyone. However, such blind loyalty could also lead to situations like this.

That was one possible explanation, but not the only one.

"Is something wrong, Aina?"

"I-It's nothing. I just... I think I might know why we're here."

"Really?"

For a split second, Aina considered hiding the truth from her, but Lina already knew that Aina was a demon. That was all Lina knew, but since her treatment of Aina hadn't changed, Aina saw no reason not to tell her everything. Lina accepted her. Aina wasn't sure how Lina would react if she spilled everything now, and it scared her, but she still thought it was important for Lina to know.

Aina told her everything, as well as her guess for how they had ended up here.

"Y-You're the Demon King's daughter?!" Lina gasped.

She knew Lina would be surprised, but there was no disdain in her eyes; she simply seemed shocked. Before long, though, she nodded in acceptance.

"I see. In that case, your reasoning makes sense. However..." Lina paused, and Aina looked at her expectantly. "I don't understand why that would require locking you up, nor why I would be taken as well."

“I guess not.”

Lina’s presence here was the real mystery. Thinking back, Albert had said something about a “sacrifice” and “more than the Demon King asked for.” However, Aina just couldn’t see the Demon King accepting such a thing, let alone asking for it.

If Lina weren’t here, then perhaps being thrown in here would’ve been intended as a reminder to Aina to know her place, but that explanation didn’t seem to fit, either.

Maybe this really is my father’s will. At this point, Aina’s mind was just running around in circles.

“You seem confused. I could explain things for you, if you’d like.”

Upon hearing a third voice, Aina spun around to see Albert standing on the other side of the bars. He was wearing the exact same black cloak as before, but in the darkness, he suddenly looked much more sinister. Aina gulped.

“Does that mean you’ll explain why you took me, too?” Lina asked plainly, while Aina was still struggling to form words.

Albert nodded. “Yes, although there isn’t much to explain. It’s just as I said before: you were brought here as a sacrifice.”

“But... That can’t be right!” Aina protested. “Father would never allow something like that!”

Albert neither agreed nor disagreed, blinking back at her in confusion.

“Ma’am? I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.” He paused. “Unless...”

This time, it was Aina’s turn to be confused. Not wanting to betray her confusion, she scowled at him. Her expression quickly faded when Albert sneered back at her, his lip curling into a scornful look that Aina hated.



“It seems you are under a false impression, ma’am.” He sighed.

“What do you mean?” Aina demanded.

“It should be obvious,” replied Albert. “Do you really think that we considered that man suitable to be the Demon King?”

“Huh?”

“Of course not. We have only ever worshipped one man as the Demon King, and we always have. Well, there are a few of us Hell’s Commanders who do refer to your father by that title, but once the true Demon King returns, they shall surely notice just how foolish they have been,” Albert said. “Once that happens, they shall be removed from the Commanders. Personally, I would like that to happen a little sooner, but as a new member to their ranks, I do not have that kind of power yet. It is frustrating, to say the least.”

Aina’s father had taken up the title of Demon King around ten years ago, when the previous King was overthrown. In other words, he hadn’t been born as the king. Because of that, there were a number of people who opposed him taking the position, which Aina had already been aware of. What completely shocked her, however, was that those people existed among Hell’s Commanders, too.

On top of that, there was something that Albert had said that she couldn’t ignore. Doing her best to remain calm, she opened her mouth.

“So when you were talking about the ‘Demon King’ before... you meant the previous king?”

“I have already said that there is only one man we accept as Demon King,” Albert huffed. “Would you like me to write that down for you so you don’t forget?”

“But he was overthrown. Killed,” Aina pointed out, ignoring his snide comment.

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

“And you still think he’s going to... return?“

“We know he will. After all, we have been preparing for that all this time.”

Bringing the dead back to life.

It wasn't unheard of, but if the rumors were to be believed, it was not a simple process in the least. In fact, it was very near impossible. Not only that, it required something very specific.

"When you said 'sacrifice'..." Aina began.

"You must know the meaning of the word. The Demon King requires more than just any old sacrifice, too. They will need a Giftbearer—somebody who holds Specialist-rank skills. And, as I've said, two is better than one."

"Two," Aina echoed. "Now I get it."

"Correct, ma'am. You will also be a sacrifice for the Demon King."

Chapter 32

Strangely enough, Aina was able to keep a cool head as Albert gave her a slimy grin. She had suspected this sort of outcome from the start, even if only subconsciously. If Albert had only brought her here at her father's request, there would have been no need to lock her up like this; in fact, it would only have made him angry. If Aina was to be a sacrifice too, however, then it all made perfect sense. She knew, deep down—she was just too scared to admit it to herself.

In any case, it was too late to worry about that now. They could try and escape if they wanted to, but even if they didn't, Aina was the princess. Lina was here, too. The two of them had plenty of people on their side.

"Do you really think you'll get away with this?" Aina challenged.

"Of course I do. Once the Demon King has returned, all those who denied him, your father included, will be stripped of their power and tortured to death. Then the time for revenge will be at hand. Revenge against those who deride us as demons!" Albert cried maniacally.

It didn't make sense to Aina. Why would the Demon King's revival mean that they could have their revenge? He would probably just be overthrown again, likely in a much more decisive way than before. However, she knew it was a waste of time to voice the thought out loud. Besides, she didn't need to keep up this conversation for much longer.

"I see," was all she said.

"I'm so glad you understand. I can only express my regret that you won't be around to witness it, but please, do not be upset. After all, your noble sacrifice is what will allow our plans to be set into action."

"Don't worry, I'm not particularly concerned about that."

Suddenly, a section of the iron bars was severed from the rest and sent flying. The next instant, Lina launched herself at Albert.

The whole time she had been talking, Aina had noticed that Lina was working herself up for something. Aina had been keeping Albert distracted, while Lina said nothing after her initial question.

In the younger girl's hand was a short stick of wood which she had broken off the prison's bed. While a stick normally wouldn't be able to accomplish much, in Lina's hands it was a lethal weapon, which she had just used to destroy the prison's iron bars. It had also caught Albert entirely off guard—or so she thought.

"Goodness me. Don't tell me you were hoping that I wouldn't notice what you were doing back there?" Albert drawled.

"Wh—"

It took Aina a while to realize what had just been launched through the air, or perhaps she just didn't want to accept it. She could clearly see a small body collapsed on the ground, and the dark red liquid oozing from it.

"My, my. Perhaps I went a little overboard. I'd say I was impressed, were I not her opponent. I am one of Hell's Commanders, after all. Of course I was prepared for an attack, even if she is a giftbearer. Hmph. It doesn't look like she has much time left now, so we'd better move quickly, but if she does end up dying, I suppose that wouldn't matter too much."

"Albert!" Aina thrust out her arm reflexively.

Her mind had no time to evaluate the danger in her actions. All she knew was that she couldn't forgive him. Albert turned his gaze toward her with a smirk. It was a look that Aina was all too familiar with; he didn't have to say anything for her to know exactly what it meant.

"You can't use magic. What do you think you can do?"

At that moment, Aina realized she had always hated Albert referring to her as "Your Highness." He had always said it with a hint of disdain, though she'd never properly noticed it before. Now, though, he made no effort to hide it, and she could see the hatred clearly. She opened her mouth, her next words containing all the hatred she had apparently been holding back over the years.

"I'll burn you to the ground! Flame Arrow!"

Magic Specialist. Satan's Divine Protection. Great Flame: Magic. Flame Arrow.

"What?!"

Albert's eyes widened as the arrow of fire shot toward him, but it was only visible for an instant before it was swallowed by the flames. For a split second, Aina felt the joy of victory sweeping through her. Unfortunately, though, that feeling was short-lived.

"What?"

"I see you have learned how to use magic," Albert remarked.

The flames vanished almost as quickly as they had appeared, and Aina was left staring at Albert in astonishment. He had never even launched a spell. When Lina had attacked him, it was different; just before she had gone down, Aina had seen remnants of magic from the spell that Albert had used, but he hadn't even needed to use magic to defend himself from Aina's attack.

Seeing that, Aina saw just how much stronger Albert was than her. She already knew he was powerful, but she hadn't realized that the difference between them was so huge.

"I must say I'm rather hurt," Albert said. "I went through all that trouble of sealing your magic away, and yet you somehow broke through that."

"You did what?"

"You mean you didn't notice?" Albert flashed a smug smile. "Well, I suppose there's no harm in telling you now, since you won't be alive for much longer. The reason, ma'am, that you couldn't use magic, is because I placed a seal on you. Nobody even noticed! You can see now why I was made one of Hell's Commanders, can't you?"

Aina gaped at him. Everything was his fault.

"But why?"

"That should be obvious. I simply wanted to throw you down into the pits of despair, as you had already been chosen as the sacrifice. I never imagined you would run away, however. That was a rather... interesting decision, although I supposed it all worked out in the end, since it took away their chance to notice

the seal. I must at least thank you for that, Ma'am." Albert bowed his head.

Aina could tell that every last word of his had been completely honest, and it made her blood boil.

It was all his fault. Everything. She couldn't forgive him.

Magic Specialist. Satan's Divine Protection. Great Flame: Magi—

"Al—"

"Would you mind terribly keeping quiet?" Albert sighed. "Your pathetic attempts at magic are starting to be rather irritating."

Aina wasn't quite sure what happened next. It was just like what had happened in the forest, as she was thrown backward and smashed into the prison wall. Unlike then, however, this time she could feel the pain. Thick liquid gushed from her throat, dyeing the ground in front of her dark red. She dropped to the ground, pain screaming through her body as she gasped for breath.

"You know, I've never been much of a fan of insect collecting... but playing with the collection like this might be a different matter."

Aina was brought to her senses as more pain shot through her arm. Turning her head, she saw Albert's foot crunching down on it. Through that pain, Aina lifted her head and glared at the man before her.

"You mon...ster!" she growled through gritted teeth.

"What's that? Not crying out in pain? My, something really must have changed over this past year. It seems things are about to get very interesting, indeed."

Albert ground his foot into Aina's arm, causing her to groan as more pain shot through her, but she still didn't scream. She didn't want to give Albert that satisfaction, the only form of resistance she was still able to present.

"It seems you are no longer the coddled little princess I once thought you were, not that it makes any difference." Albert smiled smugly at her as he continued. "Well, perhaps things are more entertaining this way, but I'm still going to snap your neck the moment I get bored. The only reason I've kept you

alive this long is so that I can kill you whenever I please.”

Though Aina no longer had the strength to respond, she continued to endure the pain.

“I am sure everybody else will be very interested to hear about this, too, and not just the other Commanders.”

Albert seemed to pick up on the questioning glint in Aina’s eye.

“Oh? You don’t understand? Although I am sure you could work it out for yourself, allow me to explain. First, though, a question. Why do you think I knew where to find you?” Albert didn’t bother to allow her to answer. “I was told. Simple, yes? Who told me and why is another matter, though. I am not malevolent enough to pass on that information.”

After a split second of confusion, Aina instantly knew just who he was talking about. There were only two people who she ever interacted with in that village, and therefore, only two people who could have given away her location. Aina knew that there was something Albert wasn’t telling her. While she had no reason to doubt that the couple had sold her out, there was still something off about the whole thing.

“You really are an irritating little girl. Why are you still conscious?” Albert sighed dramatically. “I suppose I’ll be a little more assertive, risky though it may be.”

The moment those words were out of his mouth, the pain in her arm sharpened as he pressed down harder with his foot, but still she stayed strong. It was the only thing she could do. Feeling the strength draining from her body, though, she knew she couldn’t last much longer.

“Ah, I must stop, else you won’t survive the ceremony, and I really ought to keep you alive. Unless...” Suddenly, Albert broke into a smirk. “I know. How about you beg for your life? If you do, I’ll free you from all this pain. I shall still kill you, of course, but it will be a little more bearable for you.”

For a moment, Aina was tempted, but then she gritted her teeth once more. Denying him the satisfaction was all she could do to resist now.

“You won’t? How disappointing. Are you perhaps hoping that somebody is on

their way to save you? You do realize that life is rarely so kind, don't you?"

Somebody to save me. For an instant, a certain face appeared in Aina's mind, but she quickly dismissed the thought.

If she thought too hard about him now, her heart would surely break. Besides, she already knew he wasn't coming. He had nothing to gain from rescuing her.

He may be coming to rescue his sister, but he wouldn't be coming for Aina. Real life wasn't kind; the world was a cruel place. Aina had learned that long ago.

She had already been saved once in her life, and that happening again was unlikely.

"Hmph. Very well. I won't stop now until I get a scream out of you. Would you do that for me? Just one tiny, little scream of despair?"

"This is getting tiresome. If you are so desperate to hear some sort of scream, why not emit one yourself?"

All at once, the weight was lifted from Aina's arm. An instant later, a roar echoed through the room, but Aina was distracted by the person who now stood before her.

"I apologize for being late. Lina was in a slightly graver condition, so I stopped to help her out first."



“Is that you, Soma?”

“Were you expecting somebody else?”

“No...”

“Exactly. Now, despite my tardiness, I am here to save you, as promised.”

He’s here. A single tear rolled down Aina’s cheek.

Chapter 33

Soma looked down at Aina, lying wounded on the floor. He narrowed his eyes as anger and frustration seethed within him.

If only I had been here sooner, he thought, but he quickly shook away the self-doubt.

“The first thing we must do is to tend to these wounds of yours. Have you ever used healing magic before?” he asked.

“No,” Aina croaked.

Soma frowned thoughtfully as he looked Aina up and down, but she didn’t seem to have any major external injuries. Although her arm was bruised from being stepped on, that wasn’t going to be fatal. Internal wounds, however, were a different story; Soma could tell at a glance that Aina was in critical condition. There was no doubt that bones throughout her body were broken and had punctured her organs. She likely didn’t have more than an hour left, and being too quick to move her could be fatal. The village was the closest area with human life, but it was too far away.

Soma sighed. He hadn’t entertained those ideas with much hope in the first place, but in the end there was only one option.

“There’s no other option,” he murmured.

“I... I knew it. Don’t worry about me. Just... help Lina. Thanks, though... Thanks for coming to save me... That’s more than enough...”

“I beg your pardon? You may thank me later. Just lie still for the moment. We wouldn’t want your joints to become disfigured.”

“Huh? What—”

Aina’s question was sharply cut off as Soma swung the stick in his grip down onto her body.

Sword Theory. The Dragon’s Divine Protection. Assured Slash. The Ability of

Discernment: Individual Style. Copycat. Secret Sword: The Longsword of Love.

No sooner had he used his technique than Soma felt all his strength leave his body. His breathing was ragged as he struggled to remain on his feet.

“Twice in a row... is certainly difficult,” he said, panting a bit. “However, if exhaustion is all it takes, then it is a small price to pay. Now, tell me how you are feeling. You should be completely healed.”

There was a pause.

“What?” Aina asked, staring at Soma blankly.

He frowned back at her. *Did I somehow make a mistake?* He never had much opportunity to use this skill, after all, and he only really had experience with external wounds. The bruises on Aina’s arm were gone, but Soma worried whether she was patched up on the inside.

She should be okay, right?

“Huh? I feel... fine.”

“Looks like it was a success.”

Soma breathed a sigh of relief, watching Aina as she carefully stood up and prodded at herself in astonishment. Just when Soma was ready to relax, Aina glared at him.

“What did you do?” she demanded.

“Well, it was just what it looked like,” Soma replied.

“It ‘looked like’ you were trying to cut me in half with your stupid stick!”

“Oh.” Soma paused. “That makes sense. It is a swordsmanship skill, after all.”

Secret Sword: The Longsword of Love was a technique taught by an ancient school which healed rather than harmed. Soma didn’t really understand how it worked, though. He only deduced how to use it when somebody else used it on him.

He heard that it transferred some of your life force to heal the person you used it on, but that was the extent of his knowledge. As such, it was a serious drain on the user.

“Ugh, why are you always like this? Stop staring at me like that! I’m not the weirdo here!” Aina sighed. “Anyway, thanks. Now I—”

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“Lina!” Aina gasped. “What about Lina? She was seriously hurt!”

“Ah. I already healed her.”

“Huh?”

Soma had mentioned earlier that Lina was much worse off, so he’d stopped to heal her first. That was why he was only able to reach Aina after Albert had attacked her.

“Oh... I’m glad she’s okay.”

“Are you?” Soma blinked. “I am not.”

“Why?”

“Because I had to leave you. I apologize for allowing this to happen to you.”

“Wh-What are you apologizing for?! Of course you had to help Lina first!” Aina insisted. “Besides, um, you still saved me in the end. You did more than enough for me.”

“Perhaps you are satisfied with that, but I—”

“Seriously?! Anyway, we gotta get outta here! It’s disgusting!” Aina made a face.

“Much as I agree with you, I am afraid that shan’t be possible quite yet.”

“What? Why not?”

The question was barely out of Aina’s mouth before the answer made itself clear.

Sword Theory. God Slayer. Dragon Slayer. The Dragon’s Divine Protection. Assured Slash. Pandemonium’s Sword. The Ability of Discernment: Individual Style. Copycat. Demon-Slaying Longsword.

Soma had already swung his stick, dispersing the flames that flew toward them.

“There is little more irritating than one who doesn’t know when to give up,” Soma remarked with a sigh.

“How you see me is no concern of mine,” Albert growled, on his feet again amid the scattered flames. “What *I* find irritating is your attempt to take her away from here. She is our sacrifice for the Demon King, you know.”

“No way,” Aina whispered. “You’re not even hurt?”

“No,” Soma cut in. “He should have been hurt, based on my attack. It seems he just recovered.”

“Exactly. I was so caught up in enjoying your pain that it seems I let my guard down,” said Albert. “I do apologize for that unseemly display.”

Slowly, Albert stepped out of the large hole in the wall and approached the pair. It was clear, both from the dark glint in his eye and the force of his attack, that he wasn’t planning to let them leave with their lives. Sarcasm dripped through the courtesy coating his words. He was obviously angry.

“You really are one of the most tiresome beings I have ever met,” Soma muttered. “Perhaps if you stayed down, I would have let you live.”

“Let me live?” Albert’s lip curled. “Who do you think you are, some sort of hero?!”

As Albert suddenly raised his voice, flames sprang up around Soma. Soma merely swept his gaze over them without so much as a wince.

“Look out, Soma!” Aina called out to him.

“Ugh. This is why I can’t stand children. They think they know everything, when in reality, they know absolutely nothing.” Albert sighed. “I bet you’re feeling rather foolish now, not that it’ll matter, since you’ll be de—”

Sword Theory. God Slayer. Dragon Slayer. The Dragon’s Divine Protection. Assured Slash. Pandemonium’s Sword. The Ability of Discernment: Individual Style. Copycat. Demon-Slaying Longsword. Version Two.

Just as suddenly as they had appeared, the flames were dissipated.

“What?! Impossible! How could you break down my strongest wordless spell with a single technique?!”

“I know nothing, do I?” Soma said. “I am afraid that is not quite true. In fact, I believe you are the one who is ignorant. You seem to be unaware of just how much stronger I am than you.”

Albert let out a series of nonsensical gasps.

“Since I am feeling generous, allow me to give you a demonstration, though I fear it shall be a wasted effort, as you shan’t be alive much longer.”

“You cretin! You think you’re stronger than me?! Avoiding that spell was just luck!” Albert spat.

“I would say you are the lucky one here,” Soma replied plainly. “Lucky to still be alive, that is.”

Glaring down at the man before him, Soma suddenly spotted something out of the corner of his eye. In one swift movement, he crouched down and gripped the long, iron rod in his hand. Naturally, he didn’t need it; he could easily make do with his stick, and, as far as he was concerned, that was all the man in front of him deserved. He didn’t like using more force than was necessary against a weaker opponent, but he had already given this man a chance to back down, and he hadn’t taken it. Soma no longer had any patience for him.

He had completely lost his temper.

This man had hurt his sister and his friend. Soma wasn’t about to forgive him for that.

“I shall give you the chance to regret and drown in despair,” Soma declared. “Only after that will I allow you to die. Prepare yourself.”

“Why you... Very well! I’ll show you what it means to disrespect the name of Albert the Deathbringer, fourth member of Hell’s Commanders! I’ll make you regret this right until your dying breath!”

The two shared no more words. Soma could feel the contempt for his opponent coursing through his veins as he gripped his weapon. He kicked off the ground, taking a giant leap toward Albert.

Chapter 34

A man hid in a corner of the gloomy room, trying hard to conceal his breathing, waiting for his chance to attack. He didn't know how many of his allies were still alive, but as long as just one of them survived, they could bring the ceremony to completion, and claim victory.

What baffled him more than anything else was why they had been attacked today of all days, but he quickly put that down to a test from God. Once they passed this test, the world would be theirs for the taking. The very idea of it filled the man with determination, but his thoughts were quickly interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. He tensed up as they stopped right beside him.

"It's been a while since I've seen any. Maybe I got them all already... I think there were eight of them. I wonder what they were doing here. Well, I guess it doesn't matter anymore. Hmm... Should I keep searching, or should I just go back home?"

At that, the person turned on their heel and started walking away. The man broke into a relieved smile. If they had been even a fraction closer, they would've noticed him for sure. It looked like God really was on his side.

He heard the figure take a single step. His lip curled as he watched it walk away from him, its back completely defenseless. Everything was coming together now.

The man knew this person—this woman. He met her in the war over ten years ago. The way things had gone back then was the same as now. Back then, he had been forced to run away, but now, he had the chance to kill her.

At last, he would have his revenge. Afterward, he could set to work reviving the King. *It really is a blessed day!*

The man sprang at her, his heart dancing with joy all the while. He thrust his dagger toward her, giving her no room to dodge.

“Die, Ashen—”

“Fool. Did you really think I wouldn’t sense all that bloodlust?”

At first, the man didn’t know what had happened.

“Huh...?”

He lost all feeling in the lower half of his body. At the same time, he saw the woman in front of him turn upside-down. She had turned to face him, and it was only when her cold gaze pierced through him that he realized she had cut him in half.



“D-Damn you... Ashen... Valk...yrie...”

He glared at the woman right up until his final breath. The last thing he felt was pain running all the way down what was left of his body, before his consciousness was lost forever to the darkness.

†††

Camilla sighed as the man’s bisected body collapsed before her, his crimson blood pooling out over the ground. In reality, the man had already been dead before her final strike, but the moment he used that old nickname of hers, something inside Camilla snapped.

“I should really learn to keep my cool,” she mumbled with another sigh.

“Ashen Valkyrie.” It was more than ten years ago now that the demons had dubbed Camilla as such during the war. It was probably due to her dark hair and her favorite silver armor.

It was common for fighters like her to be given nicknames. On top of being a way to identify someone whose name was unknown, it could serve as a warning of someone’s capabilities.

The easiest way to create a nickname was to pick out somebody’s physical features, commonly hair color, since it was all you needed to know how talented your opponent was. It tended to correlate strongly with somebody’s talents, and dark hair was seen as exceptional, indicating one was good at everything. It was thoroughly researched, and Camilla herself was no exception to the dark-haired rule. It would take at least an hour to list and describe all the skills that she possessed and the skills she was able to learn.

That was why Camilla had such high hopes not just for her own future, but also for Soma’s. Aside from his behavior and manner of speaking, it was his dark hair which led everyone to treat him like a genius. That had completely backfired in the end, of course.

If his hair had been any other color, maybe things wouldn’t have been this bad. Soma’s current circumstances were ultimately a result of the high expectations that had been placed on him, on top of the fact that he had turned out skill-less.

Camilla never wanted to hear that nickname of hers again. It brought back a lot of unpleasant memories from when she was young and inexperienced, so she had felt compelled to get rid of that man as fast as possible.

“I wonder if he really was the last one,” she murmured to herself.

The man had fallen for her bluff when she’d said there wasn’t anyone else around, but now, she really couldn’t sense anybody else. Considering where they were, she was incredibly curious about their plans, but finding that out could wait. After all, hopefully they wouldn’t be able to carry them out if they were dead, not to mention there was other business to attend to.

Her priority now was to reunite with Soma, who had rushed off to find the girls.

“Quite the ‘distraction’ I was...”

Camilla’s job had been to distract as many people as possible while Soma used that opportunity to rescue his sister and friend. Originally, she was just going to leave once she caused enough fuss, but she’d ended up killing everyone she saw. Also, she now felt overwhelming waves of power coming from where Soma had gone, and she wasn’t about to bail and leave him alone with whatever was causing them. The fact that she could feel them despite the distance told her just what kind of opponent he was up against. None of the goons she dealt with here could hold a candle to what Soma was facing.

“I wonder how he’s doing.”

Though Camilla had no doubt in Soma’s abilities, what she felt now was just like another time, when she had caught a glimpse of a fight with Hell’s Commanders. They had been defeated then, and she trusted that Soma would manage to do the same. However, it couldn’t hurt to make sure.

“I guess I’ll just have to see for myself. Maybe I could even lend him a hand!”

Steeling her resolve, which had been faltering under the waves of power, Camilla hurried on ahead.

Chapter 35

Why? The plan was supposed to be perfect. With my talent and their help, the resurrection was supposed to be a total success. Finally, we would exact our revenge against those who treated us like filth and forced us to bow to them. It was supposed to be perfect.

“You... You...!”

“You are starting to get on my nerves. I would appreciate it if you could stop whining, and if you must speak, at least say something of value. Otherwise, why should I let you live?”

“Why, I—”

Albert stopped short. Up until now, he hadn’t yet shown his full strength, since doing so would present unnecessary hassle, but he didn’t care about that anymore. Releasing himself from the limiter restricting his powers, he unleashed as much magic power as he could. There was enough energy built up within him to obliterate an entire army.

“Die!”

He thrust that intense energy out in front of him, but in an instant, it was gone without a trace.

“What?! That can’t be!”

It’s gone? That’s impossible! The idea of such a small child surviving that attack was unthinkable.

“How?!”

With a scream, Albert released every last drop of power in his body for one final attack.

†††

Aina could do nothing but stare blankly as a sight beyond her wildest dreams unfolded before her. Perhaps this was a dream, the sort people saw on the

verge of death. There was no other explanation for this miracle.

Soma had come for her, and he was now about to defeat one of Hell's Commanders.

On some level, Aina knew this wasn't a miracle; it was just Soma being Soma.

"It can't be! It can't be! There's no way! Why?! Preposterous! You're supposed to be dead!" Albert growled, words tumbling out of his mouth one after the other.

"Why? I am afraid I am not quite sure myself. I do not even know what you people are doing here." Soma paused. "However, I do know that you have brought harm to my sister, as well as my friend and tutor in magic. That is more than enough reason for me to rid you of your life."

Tutor in magic. Aina found herself smiling slightly, despite the situation. Some tutor she was, considering she hadn't taught him anything. If anything, she was the one who had learned through this experience that she trusted Soma. No matter how impossible the situation in front of her seemed, she believed that he would make it happen.

If she didn't, she would never have thought to use magic just before she passed out, nor would she have tried to keep it going all this time.

Considering the person in question was Soma, what she was witnessing now wasn't so far-fetched after all.

She continued to watch; there was nothing else she could do, after all. She just needed to watch and wait for him to finish this.

†††

Camilla recalled something that had happened in the final moments of the fight against Hell's Commanders over ten years ago. Although she had been part of the advance guard, she had been able to do nothing but watch from behind. As long as she lived, she would never forget what she had seen in the moment, when her spirit truly broke. She'd realized that, no matter how hard she tried, she would never have made a difference.

That realization led her to give up and change her path and become a skill

appraiser. She ran away from her future, and she'd been running ever since. That sight so many years ago had left a deep scar on her heart, leaving her with a deep-seated sense of inferiority.

"Preposterous! Impossible! How could a little brat like you—a worthless brat like you—defeat one of Hell's Commanders?!"

"Keep it up, if you would like. That kind of talk has no power to change the facts."

Camilla stopped and watched in awe. The sight before her was even more powerful than what she'd witnessed in that battle.

Fire and ice, wind and lightning; every kind of element flew in from every side, all centered on a single small child. To an observer, it would seem like his fate was sealed—all he held was a stick and an iron bar.

Yet there was not a single crack in his resolve.

All at once, the energy streaming toward him stopped as though it had hit an invisible wall. A barrier had appeared, drawn by a stick. With a flash of light from the weapon in the child's hand, the attack was halted in its tracks, a feat that should have been impossible.

Not only that, but the attacker was now being slashed up and fading away. No matter how hard he tried, it was all in vain. His body was disappearing piece by piece. The difference in power was just too great.

The man's face darkened as it flickered through emotion after emotion.

"Do you feel the pangs of regret yet? How about despair? The moment you do, it shan't be long until you're gone from this world. Of course, if you would rather do the deed yourself, I would be willing to let you."

"Stop mocking me!" his opponent screamed.

"I am not doing this for my own amusement. I am showing you a small mercy. Although I planned to kill you without it, your death is proving to be pitiful enough for me to give you the chance to be done with it yourself."

"You... You shall regret that!"

Standing where she was by the stairs behind Soma and the girls, Camilla

immediately realized what was about to happen. There were two girls behind Soma, protected only by his body. One was Lina, collapsed on the ground, and the other was someone Camilla didn't recognize, who she guessed must be Aina. No sooner had she assessed the situation than a spear of earth came shooting out from the ground, right in Soma's blind spot.

"No!"

No matter what Camilla did, she wouldn't make it in time; she was too far away. Even so, she stretched out her hand as the attacker spoke again.

"I won't be the only one dying here! I'm taking her—"

He was cut off by an exasperated sigh, which echoed through the ruins, cutting through the sounds of battle. The spear of rock crumbled seconds before it could reach Aina.

"What?! There's no way you could've noticed that!"

"You are simply digging your own grave at this point. In fact, I am almost impressed at how stubborn you are. I have, however, lost all of my patience now," said Soma.

"No... Dammit! Damn you!"

His face twisted with rage, the man launched himself at Soma in one last-ditch effort. The flames swirled around him as he lunged, glowing even brighter than before.

"Slash."

That quiet voice resounded through the room, signaling the end of the fight.

The flames vanished into thin air. The two halves of what remained of the man's body, cut cleanly down the middle, flew past either side of Soma. Before they could hit the ground, Soma diced them into pieces so small that not even an eyelash remained.



“I cannot allow even a single cell from your body to remain on this earth. Be sure to spend the rest of eternity burning among your regrets. Even then, I shan’t forgive you,” Soma muttered darkly.

Sighing once more, he turned around.

Camilla was still frozen mid-step from when she’d tried to reach Aina. Coughing, she quickly righted herself.

“I knew you could do it, Soma,” she said awkwardly. “I came just in case... but it looks like you didn’t need me after all.”

“He was nothing special,” Soma told her with a shrug.

If that was “nothing special” for Soma, Camilla shuddered to think what he deemed a worthy opponent. Camilla didn’t think she would’ve lasted more than a few seconds if she were in Soma’s place.

“Nothing special?” Aina spoke up. “Um, were you listening to him? He was one of Hell’s Commanders!”

“Real men don’t blather such nonsense as he did,” Soma pointed out.

“I guess not...”

Camilla swept her gaze over the battleground before her. She could still barely believe her eyes. The space behind Soma was in an absurd state of destruction, and if she didn’t know, she wouldn’t be able to fathom what had happened. It looked like there had been more cells over there, but the only reason Camilla could deduce as such was because of the ones still standing unharmed on Soma’s side. Beyond the few intact cells, the ceiling had collapsed, which gave her some idea of how intense the fight must have been. It made the intact side of the room look strange by comparison, not to mention what it said about Soma. In some ways it was almost frightening, but Aina didn’t look scared of him at all, nor did Camilla.

She had witnessed the defeat of one of Hell’s Commanders herself in the past, but that wasn’t nearly as one-sided a fight as this. Not only that, but Soma was completely skill-less.

Just who is this child? Camilla smiled wryly to herself. She knew by now just

how amazing he was, and yet he still managed to surprise her.

“In the end, you are the one who carves your own path. Skills or no skills.”

Those were the words spoken by Camilla’s former master. It was her firm belief in those words that drove her toward the Seven Heavenly Kings. Her resolve was ultimately killed by the people she ended up meeting, but she wondered whether she would have felt the same had she met Soma much earlier in her life—not that he had even been born yet at that point.

“No use thinking about that now.” There was no changing the past; Camilla’s spirit was already crushed.

Snapping out of her speculation, she turned her gaze back to Soma and the others.

All’s well that ends well.

They would certainly have some explaining to do once they returned to the estate, but they could worry about that later.

“I do believe we have finished all our business here,” Soma announced.

“Mm-hmm. All that’s left is—”

“I shall leave the rest to you.”

“Huh?”

She was going to say “All that’s left is to go home,” but Soma cut her off.

Camilla was surprised at Soma’s sudden words, but she quickly figured out what he meant as he started to stagger. The next moment, he collapsed.

“Oh no! Soma!” Aina’s cry echoed against the stone walls.

Chapter 36

Sophia sighed as she looked up from the report in her hand at a complete loss. She couldn't blame Camilla for what she had done, but that didn't mean she liked it. She looked back down at the document in her hand, a report on Lina's abduction.

She sighed again. She had already read it through, and she doubted that reading it again would bring anything new to light.

The fact that it was Camilla had officially written it all down made things even more complicated. Sophia wished Camilla just told her what happened, since the report was evidence that they had been in the demons' territory. Things could have ended very, very poorly for her friend.

"I'm glad they returned safely, at least."

The good news was that the demons weren't trying to provoke a war with their actions. As for the bad news, it was all there in the report: The demons wanted the old King back.

It was likely that the plotters were sinistrists, too—followers of the evil god—meaning they fully believed in what they were doing. What they wished for was the earth's destruction. These were the true enemies of humankind. On top of everything else, Hell's Commanders were involved in the plot.

The new "fourth" member was likely the one who had replaced the Commander Sophia had killed. Camilla had been incredibly lucky to come back alive.

"It can't just be coincidence. It would be best to assume that the sinistrists have deeply ingrained themselves within Hell's Commanders."

The Commanders were the ones who chose their new members, and religious beliefs no doubt played a part in that. Perhaps the old falsehood was coming true, and the demons really were about to become humanity's worst enemy. Right now, though, that was still just conjecture.

Although Sophia felt it safer to share her concerns, she didn't feel the need to go any further than that. If the Commander had lived, things would have been different, but luckily, he was dead.

"If I forward the report on like this, it'll look like Camilla was the one who defeated him."

Sophia gave a small chuckle. It wasn't that she doubted Camilla had the ability to do such a thing—she wholeheartedly believed that Camilla would be more than capable, even beyond any bias toward a good friend. She believed it as one of the Seven Heavenly Kings; it was precisely because of her abilities that Sophia had invited Camilla to come and work for her in the first place. On some level, Sophia valued Camilla more for her fighting skills than her appraisal skills.

Camilla, however, seemed to have given up on her dreams. Because of that, the report read somewhat strangely to Sophia. Knowing Camilla, Sophia suspected that someone else had defeated the Commander. At the same time, though, she knew Camilla wasn't the type to try and steal the glory, but the woman also likely had some reason to want her to *think* she had done it.

Maybe I'm reading too much into it, Sophia thought.

In any case, if Camilla hadn't killed the Commander, then it meant there was someone else involved in the rescue effort who wasn't mentioned in the report. Even if she knew Camilla could defeat a Commander, she also knew that it wasn't a certain victory by any means.

So who had really done it?

Sophia realized there was one other person it could've been. Maybe she hadn't been wrong about him, after all. She shouldn't be surprised, though, considering he was her son.

"Camilla, what have you seen in him that I haven't?" she murmured to herself. "I broke him, but you fixed him up. It's sort of ironic."

She read the final addition to the report with sadness in her eyes. Once she finished reading a third and final time, she crumpled the paper in her fist. Flames burst forth in her palm, burning the paper to a crisp. She opened up her hand, the ashes scattering into the air before dispersing.

It was all over, like it had never happened.

Lina had been kidnapped because she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the kidnappers had been dealt with. There was no need to keep a record of these events anymore. If knowledge got out, then it would only heighten tensions with the demons, something that most people would prefer to avoid. The destruction of the evidence was a sort of protest against those who would want those tensions, but there was more to it than that: It would make sure no war came of this incident.

Even though she had destroyed the report, Sophia was grateful to have seen the information. She particularly appreciated the final addition she'd read. It was news to her, after all, that someone from the estate would be leaving them. Officially, the person leaving had never existed in the first place, so it shouldn't have made a difference, but it did to her.

"This place was far too small-minded for you. Go and see the big, wide world with your own eyes. Go and learn. Learn that the world is really a place where you can shine."

She had always known this day would come. It was just a matter of when.

Sophia closed her eyes.

While she couldn't guarantee that her son would have a safe journey, she at least hoped that he would find a little happiness at the end of it.

It would be a while before Sophia realized that he wasn't the only one.

†††

"Shall we depart?" Soma asked over his shoulder, hoisting up the bag he carried on it.

They were on the edge of the Dark Woods, facing toward human territory. The girl he was speaking to was carrying her own bag, filled with clothes and other necessities.

Aina looked at him nervously, worried about more than just their upcoming journey. "Are you really sure about this?"

Soma sighed. She'd asked him this so many times already, and his answer

never changed.

“Having come this far, do you really think I would turn around now? I even bid farewell to my tutor. How could I face her not half a day later?”

“I-I know, but... you haven’t said goodbye to Lina, right? What about her?”

“I must admit that bothered me at first, but it seems that there is no longer any need.”

“What?”

Soma didn’t tell her that he hadn’t been able to bring himself to convince the small girl hiding behind them to stay behind. He knew full well that whatever he did, she would be coming with them.

He sighed again. *She really is like me, is she not?*

“Never mind. If I *were* to say I was not sure about this, what would you do?” he asked Aina curiously.

“Um, I dunno,” she admitted. “I guess I’d work something out, just like I did a year ago.”

“Back then, you were in familiar territory. Now, you are not,” Soma pointed out.

“I know. But you’re in the same position as me, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps, but I have come a long way. That is why, as unfamiliar as the lands beyond here are, I shall be fine. How about you? What do you know about the other races of humanity?”

“Uh...”

Nothing, apparently. Soma wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry at her stubbornness, but it didn’t matter, since she would come along with him either way.

“Besides, I couldn’t just wander around here forever. If people found out what I was, I’d be in trouble.”

“True enough. I suppose if you wanted to go anywhere, there is nowhere for you but here, after all. Unless you wanted to go back to where you came from,

and I doubt that is the case.”

“Yeah.”

She truly is stubborn, Soma noted with a wry smile.

It had been no more than a single night since Aina and Lina were rescued, and Aina and Soma were about to embark on a journey through humanity’s territory. Aina had decided to leave the village behind her as a precaution against being kidnapped again and making the village a target. In some ways, she felt guilty about going back, but she kept changing her reasoning.

During the night, she had gone to the village to collect everything she needed for the journey, leaving a note for the elderly couple rather than waking them up. Soma had no reason to question her version of events, despite the fact that she had taken quite some time and had come back red-eyed.

“What about you?” She turned to him. “I mean... you only just collapsed, you know. Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“I am in a bit of pain,” Soma admitted, “but nothing that would prevent me from traveling. I doubt it will be too dangerous, so I should heal up eventually.”

He had collapsed from exhaustion after losing himself to rage during his fight with Albert. Though he had grown a lot over this past year, the fight had been too much for his body to bear. He wasn’t bedridden this time, at least, so he figured he was good to go. He’d needed his companions to support him on the way back to the estate, but he was already able to stand on his own again. Muscle pain like this wasn’t so bad.

Traveling was something he’d been considering ever since Camilla had brought it up during one of their lessons. He had realized that leaving the estate behind was something he wanted, after all. He was taking Aina with him not only because there was strength in numbers, but also because he worried about leaving her alone. Though he would have gone either way, it was reassuring that Camilla had approved of his plans.

After saying goodbye to her, he’d gathered as little as he possibly could, and he’d come out here to wait for Aina.

“I have a suggestion.” Soma suddenly spoke up.

“What?”

“How about you take your journey by yourself?”

There was a pause. “What?”

Aina frowned slightly, apparently not expecting his question. Soma’s lip curled.

“I shall take my journey by myself. If we just so happen to end up going the same way... well, we shall just have to accept that.”

“Um... isn’t that just the same as going together?” Aina asked.

“All I am saying is that I am going no matter what you say. Why are you so against it, anyway? You agreed at first, and you seemed to understand that going together would be safer than alone.”

“Because... Well, I...”

“Yes?” Soma prompted.

“If people find out what I am, you’ll get in a whole lotta trouble.”

All Soma could do was sigh in exasperation. “Let’s go,” he said, not bothering to respond to her concerns. He grabbed her hand and started walking.

“Hey! What are you doing?!”

“I am asking you to come with me, so forget any concerns you have about causing me trouble. Besides, I took far too long to come to your rescue before. This time, I swear that I shall protect you to the extent that I shan’t need to save you.”

Aina was speechless, and all she could do was nod bashfully. She slightly moved her hand in his before holding on to it just a little more firmly. Soma sighed again, this time too quietly for his companion to hear.



I was reincarnated into another world and spent an entire year dragging my feet instead of seizing this opportunity.

Not that he really had a choice; he'd ended up having a lot more to focus on than just learning magic. In theory, he could just throw everything else away and focus purely on magic, but if he did that, he'd never forgive himself. There were more important things to him now, and that didn't bother him in the least.

Soma found himself gazing at the sky.

That bright blue expanse above him was no different from the one he'd seen in the final moments of his previous life. This time, though, he had friends with him, rather than enemies. This wasn't like his last life at all.

He didn't even know where he was going, but that was okay. He had a shot at another life, so what was the point if it was just going to be the same? Soma was grateful for this chance.

"Everything is going to be all right," he murmured to himself.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Nothing. I just realized that I am quite looking forward to this journey."

"Oh." Aina paused before breaking into a smile. "Yeah! Me too!"

Soma returned her smile, partly because of the third person who was following them from behind.

Chapter 37

As Soma was about to set off on his journey, something was happening at the ruins they had left the previous day. It should have been completely lifeless after the battle, but there was someone there regardless.

“Ugh. I’ve woken up now, but what am I supposed to do? I guess it’s better than having too much, but still, this isn’t a great look. What? That shouldn’t concern me anymore? Well, I guess you’re right, but I’m still allowed to have my opinions, aren’t I? That’s exactly why I came back here, after all.”

To an outside observer, it looked like the small figure was just muttering to herself. At her height, anyone would assume she was a child. She looked around the ruins, a sigh escaping her lips.

“They did a real number on this place, huh? I guess I’m not surprised. Shame about our little present, though. What? Of course I was going to hand it over to him! Maybe not immediately, but... Huh? He wouldn’t want it anyway? Well, I can’t argue with that, I guess.”

She sighed again, her shoulders drooping. Perhaps she had expected something by coming here, but in the end it had just been a waste of energy.

“Don’t be so harsh. I have off days sometimes too, you know. I guess. I don’t know myself that well, though, so... I don’t even know why I’m here, when I wasn’t to start with.”

She spoke as if none of this concerned her, but she couldn’t be sure. She continued to ponder her situation as she surveyed the room again.

“Now that I know it was pointless coming all this way, I guess we should head back. We don’t want to be late, after all. Hm? Yeah, I know it doesn’t really matter, but I still feel that we should be on time if we can. Oh, I can’t wait to wake up again.”

A full smile rose to her lips, despite her deep-seated dread at waking up.

“What? No, I swear I’m looking forward to it! I might even be able to speak to

him next time! Yes, even if there is a risk that he'll kill me... I'm excited to see whether he'll be able to do it."

She was lying again. Nevertheless, she categorized the idea under "something exciting" in her mind. She started walking, a smile still plastered on her face.

"I wonder what will happen next. Hopefully I won't be involved then, either."

This time, she was being truthful, even though she knew it was wrong to feel that way.

"Yes, I know. It's all for the sake of the world, that's exactly why I was born. I know! Next time, I'll fulfill my duties like I'm supposed to."

She left a self-important pause before opening her mouth again.

"After all, I'm Humanity's Arbitrator."

†††

A certain throne in a certain kingdom. The sun had long since set, and the room was already bathed in darkness. It should have been deserted, but there were two figures there.

"Hmm... So you are saying we should take that opportunity to invade—or rather, to take back our rightful territory?"

"That's right."

"Do you think it's possible?"

"I don't know."

"Seriously?"

The man on the throne frowned at his companion's unhelpful response, but his companion just shrugged. Most would have shrunk back before such a terrifying gaze, but perhaps they simply couldn't see the man's face under his hood.

"It's impossible to say. We will do what we can, but we have no choice but to leave the rest to you."

"I suppose that's true, though you could have explained that sooner. You needn't worry about us, though; there's no way they could beat us."

“Then why haven’t we invaded already?”

The man gnashed his teeth, but still the cynical companion didn’t flinch, letting out a sigh.

“It’s true, though.”

“I know! You don’t have to point it out! It’s just that one of them is a huge problem!”

“True, but getting angry isn’t going to solve it. I don’t think they’ll be moving their operation anytime soon, either. It’s too important to their country’s defenses.”

“I know! Didn’t you say you were going to deal with it, anyway?”

“There’s no need to get so angry. It’s not like we’re doing this for you, anyway. We have our own objective to fulfill, and we don’t care for anything else.”

“Right... You want that old what’s-his-face resurrected. Just sounds like a bunch of nonsense, if you ask me.”

“Doesn’t matter what you think. Just wait for us to do our thing, and then launch your invasion.”

“Fine. Just tell me one thing: Can you swear that this King of yours won’t just turn around and attack us once he’s back?”

“How many times do I have to say it? I swear on the entire demon race. The King has much more important things to deal with when He’s back than worry about you.”

“Is that so?” the man replied dubiously.

He was justified in his distrust, considering his companion was part of a group that conducted all their operations in complete secrecy.

“I suppose it matters not. I can always destroy you should the need arise.”

“Likewise,” his companion retorted, causing them both to snort.

With that settled, the visitor turned and seemingly melted away into the darkness, leaving the man by himself in the silent room. He peered into the

darkness for a while before snorting again.

“Hmph. I wouldn’t expect anything more from the demons than to believe in that sort of fairytale nonsense. They speak of raising the dead, not to mention one that was crushed so long ago. At least they’ll make a good distraction, whether they succeed with this plan of theirs or not. Then, it will be ours for the taking—no, the reclaiming. Both the territory and its ignorant people.”

The thirteenth king of Veritas smiled to himself as he imagined the possibilities.

Side Story: The First Spark of Longing

Lina was dreaming.

She must have been because of the sight that lay before her eyes.

The dream she saw was of the estate where they lived. Everything seemed so much bigger than usual, and her body didn't move like she was used to.

She instantly knew what dream it was that she was seeing. Right in front of her, she could see her brother's back. There was only one reason why she would have this dream, and everything that happened going forward was exactly as she expected.

Soma didn't so much as turn to glance her way as he continued on, eventually leaving the estate itself.

His stride was confident, as though he did this often. Lina had never picked up on that side of him before. It didn't even occur to her that it was strange for no one to try and stop him.

She hesitated, knowing that her mother had strictly confined her to the house, and that chasing Soma would be breaking that rule, but in the end she did it anyway. She was overcome with the same curiosity that had led her to follow after him before, but this time something was different; he almost seemed excited about something.

Lina followed him, wondering just what was causing that covert excitement of his.

She was even more aware of it the moment he stepped outside. He had some kind of exciting secret, and perhaps it was something that he shared with their mother.

Her resolve strengthened, Lina followed him right out of the estate.

As Soma headed toward the back garden, Lina's footsteps faltered. She had heard tales of the fearsome creatures that lived in the forest beyond that

garden. Part of her desperately wanted to turn back, but stubbornness won out, and she carried on.

The trees seemed to swallow him up as he entered the forest. Lina hesitated for only a moment before she resumed following him, taking her first steps into the forest that had been forbidden to her.

“Wow...” she breathed.

She had only ever heard bad things about this dangerous forest, but she was greeted by a scene that did nothing to suggest the presence of evil. Sunlight filtered through the trees, bathing the forest floor in a splendid, dappled light. Lina had seen her share of beautiful things as the child of a duchess—although she didn’t know about her position at the time—but nothing she’d seen was as wonderful and breathtaking as the scene before her that day.

Lina’s reaction was likely a result of her guilty excitement about leaving the house combined with her curiosity about the outside world, but none of that came to her mind now, as she stood overwhelmed by the beauty of it all. She had also forgotten what brought her out here in the first place, as well as how scared she had been.

Thinking back, she had to admit that it was reckless of her to hop around from place to place, taking in the sights and whistling to herself. After all, wasn’t she supposed to be keeping a low profile? Even if she were trying to be stealthy, though, she knew now that Soma had probably been aware of her presence since before they left the house.

In the moment, though, all she felt was fascination at the scenery around her as she followed Soma through the trees. She could sense that something big was about to happen, a feeling that was confirmed a moment later as her brother stopped in his tracks. Lina stopped moving as well, noticing that they had arrived at a large clearing.

If she took another step, he would spot her right away.

At that realization, she remembered she was supposed to be hiding. She quickly slipped behind the trunk of a tree, poking her head out to watch her brother.

“Huh? He’s gone.”

“Who’s gone?”

“Eek!”

Lina jumped at the sudden question that came from behind her.

She was instantly reminded of the terrifying tales of the beasts who roamed these woods as fear took over. She was so scared that she failed to realize that the voice was one she was very familiar with. Lina trembled with tears in her eyes, curling herself up into a ball and holding her head.

“I-I promise I taste really yucky! S-So I don’t think you should... W-Wait! D-Did you eat my brother, too?! No, please! Please! I want my brother back!”

“O-Oh... I must apologize, Lina. I failed to realize I would frighten you so badly, although that hardly counts for an excuse. In any case, I am sorry. Also, I am happy to say that I have certainly not been eaten.”

“Huh?”

Slowly raising her head, Lina looked over her shoulder, and saw that it had been Soma all along. Her mouth hung open in surprise.

“Brother?”

“Yes. I noticed that you were tailing me, so I decided to pull a practical joke. However, it seems that it has backfired, so please accept my apologies.”

It was only after his third apology that Lina finally realized what was going on. Her face crumpled into a frown.

“That wasn’t very nice of you!”

“Indeed, I have no excuse. I am sorry. However, I would like to ask why you were following me in the first place, Lina.”

It seemed like a shameless way to change the subject to her, but she suddenly remembered why she had come out here. She clapped her hands together eagerly.

“You looked like you were really excited about something, so I followed you to see what it was!”

“Is that so?”

“Huh? Am I wrong?”

“I was merely doing what I felt I had to... although I suppose that, yes, it is something exciting. In fact, now that I think about it, I can see how exciting it really is.”

Soma smiled to himself in satisfaction, but Lina’s glare intensified.

“So what were you doing, and how come you hid it from me?! Isn’t Mother with you?”

“She is not. In fact, she is unaware that I am here.”

“Really?”

Lina barely believed it. No one could hide anything from their mother. Whenever *she* tried, Sophia always sniffed her out.

“Wow! You must be super sneaky if you can hide from Mother!”

“I agree, she is sharp. However, she is far too doting. Once you learn how to take advantage of that, you shall be able to leave the estate without being caught as well.”

“Really? Okay! I’ll do my best!” Suddenly, she realized that Soma had managed to distract her yet again. “Wait! What are you doing out here?”

“I suppose I can show you. If I really had an aversion to your finding out, I could have stopped you earlier. Just stand there and be still. If you get too close, you might get hurt.”

“Hurt? Um, okay. I’ll be nice and still!”

She squatted down and stared at Soma intently. He chuckled slightly before returning to where he’d been standing before. Surveying the area, he soon spotted what he was looking for and went to pick it up. Returning to the center of the clearing, he lifted his arms slowly, holding something in front of him.

“Is that... a stick? What’s he—”

Her words were cut off by Soma’s movements. First, he stepped forward. Then, he swung his arms down. He lifted his arms again without a single wasted

movement, already twisting the upper half of his body. He then slashed the stick down diagonally, following through his body's momentum.

The whole series of movements was over in a matter of seconds, but Lina had been able to follow every single one perfectly.

Swordsmanship Specialist: Perception.

All Lina could do was continue watching her brother's movements, so entranced that she wasn't sure if she was blinking or even breathing properly. That moment ended up being the earliest memory Lina had. No matter how hard she would try to make herself hate Soma, this one memory would always linger and give her pause. Their sparring sessions where Soma would praise her performance were important to her, too, of course, but that one memory was the one she treasured the most.

Eventually, though, that precious dream had to end.

"Hngh?"

Lina opened her eyes, as slipped away from her memory like a dewdrop falling from a leaf. In a second, all traces of it were gone, leaving behind nothing but a faint happiness.

"Oh... I feel like I was having a wonderful dream." Lina mumbled to herself. Not a second later, though, she snapped back to reality. "I have to get ready quickly, or I'll be left behind!"

She was out in the wilderness, secretly following behind Soma and Aina on their journey.

She had first learned of Soma's plan to leave while Camilla was carrying Lina on her back, as Lina secretly listened to their conversation. Her memories of the entire event were still hazy, though; she remembered some kind of confrontation with somebody called Al-something, but then she had ended up somewhere else with no memory of what had happened until then. Before long, though, she had lost consciousness again.

None of that mattered now, though. *I have to get ready!*

She had decided to leave a note, not outright telling anyone she was leaving,

since she knew that anyone she told would try to stop her. Apart from that, she should be fine. If Lina really put her mind to it, it'd be no problem to sneak out of the estate without being detected, something she had done plenty of times before. She knew there was no reason for her mother to be on guard right now, anyway.

"Mother used to catch me all the time when I tried to hide something from her, but that's been happening less lately. I wonder why?"

Deciding it didn't matter, Lina shrugged that thought off. She had her sword already. What else did she need? She'd spent lots of time mulling over what she needed to bring with her, but ultimately she decided that anything else she could work out once she got going. It was more important that she actually get on her way.

Packing up anything that looked like it might be useful, she set her bag on her back, before turning her attention to leaving a note.

"I'm going after my brother. Please do not worry. I'll be fine."

Her note written, she was finally ready. Grabbing her sword, she prepared to set off.

"Don't even think about leaving me behind!"

With that, Lina stepped out to follow her brother.

Epilogue: The Pair's Way Back

"Huh?"

Aina stopped dead in her tracks. The view before her was not what she expected. There were supposed to be three people here, but the only one was Soma, leaning against a tree and looking her way.

"I see you have finally returned. You took a long time gathering your things," Soma said.

She averted her gaze as she felt herself blush. The way Soma said that made her realize he knew exactly what she was doing. She wasn't surprised, considering she had taken far too long for someone who had just been "packing" as she claimed to be.

"Shut up. Girls have more to pack than boys do."

He had told her before that he didn't mind her taking her time to say goodbye, but she had insisted that she was only planning to leave a note. At least, that had been her original plan, which made it all the more awkward for him to immediately see through her like this.

"I see. You must have been making sure that everything was sorted neatly before you left, then." His voice was gentle.

"Yeah."

When she realized he wasn't teasing her, Aina felt her cheeks heating up even more. It wasn't fair for him to keep talking about it. Not feeling like putting up any walls this time, Aina merely nodded.

"Yeah. Everything's sorted out."

She had done everything necessary to prepare for this journey, and to leave this place behind.

Soma nodded in satisfaction.

"I am pleased to hear it."

“Thanks.”

“What for?” he asked. “I do not believe I said anything worthy of thanks.”

Aina was sure he knew why she’d thanked him, and he was just playing dumb. She still answered his question, since she felt it needed to be said out loud.

“I just felt like thanking you. Besides, I think there was someone else who also wanted to thank you.”

“Is that right?”

The smile on Soma’s face told her he knew who she was talking about. Aina was glad she’d spoken up, even if it may not have been necessary.

“We ought to get going. It would not be right to worry Camilla and Lina.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Suddenly, Aina remembered what she wanted to ask earlier. “Where are they? How come you were waiting here by yourself?”

“They have already gone back,” Soma explained. “Lina was still completely unconscious.”

“What?! By themselves?!”

Aina thought that sounded somewhat reckless, but she also realized that it would probably be best for Camilla to get Lina home as soon as possible. Besides, there weren’t supposed to be any monsters around here, and even if there were, Soma would get rid of them in a flash.

She trusted in his strength, despite how much effort it had taken to get him back here.

In any case, Aina was the very reason they weren’t back already, so she couldn’t really talk. That didn’t stop her, though.

“You mean they just left you here alone?” she pressed.

“It was my idea. I suspected you might take a while, so I suggested that they go home without us.”

Soma knew about this all along and didn’t tell me? Aina felt indignation rising up within her, that Soma’s perceptive kindness should make her even slightly as happy as it did.

“Fine. Are you okay walking by yourself now, though?”

“Please. I shall be fine, as long as we proceed at a snail’s pace.”

“That sounds like a ‘no’ to me!”

“Perhaps.”

“Ugh!”

Aina sighed in exasperation. She hated the way he tried to avoid showing weakness like that, but she knew full well she was guilty of it herself. Approaching Soma, she offered him her hand.

“Here.”

“A handshake?” He blinked at her. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m gonna help you walk!”

Ducking down under Soma’s body, she carefully helped him away from the tree trunk he was leaning against. The next moment, she gasped as a profound weight pressed down on her shoulder.

“Thank you, I appreciate it. Are you all right, though? I don’t believe you’re as strong as Camilla.”

“I-I’m... fine!” Aina lied. She wasn’t about to give up at the first hurdle.

“Camilla was fine with me on her shoulder *and* Lina on her back, but she is fairly powerful despite her stature. You realize that you needn’t push yourself, yes?”

Aina could only imagine just how strong Camilla must be, now that she was experiencing Soma’s weight for herself. She wasn’t much bigger than Aina herself, though, so where was she hiding all that muscle? Lina and Soma must have been just as powerful, too.

Suddenly, Aina realized that she was the only weak one among them. Sometimes, though, stubbornness won out over that weakness.

“Goodness gracious. There is no shame in admitting you have made a mistake, you know.”

“Quiet!” Aina snapped.

It was rare for Soma to show weakness in front of others, so it must have been hard for him to accept Aina's help like this. It wasn't a simple matter of her helping him because he was hurt, considering Soma blamed himself for collapsing at the ruins like he had. According to him, he pushed himself a bit too far. Aina could believe that, but if she turned her thinking around, that meant that Soma pushed himself more than he needed to.

Why did he do that? He'd done it for Aina and Lina, so it was all Aina could do to lend him a hand here.

"I know they shall worry if we take too long, but I do not see why we cannot leave them waiting a little longer. Let us take it slow for now."

"Huh?"

As Soma spoke, the weight from Aina's shoulder lessened slightly. It seemed like he was able to support his own weight just a bit as long as they moved slowly. After what he'd gone through, it couldn't have been easy for him to walk at all; he was doing this for her.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

"I beg your pardon?

"Never mind."

Even if she thanked him, he would pretend to have no idea what she was talking about, so she just kept walking toward the Dark Woods. Taking a leisurely pace would get them through the forest in about thirty minutes, but at Soma's speed it would likely take them an hour or so.

Aina found herself smiling fondly, thinking of another instance from a year ago.

"This reminds me of when you helped me get back to the estate a year ago," Soma remarked. "Although we are moving much faster now."

"Yeah..."

Aina's smile widened. It seemed they had both been thinking the exact same thing.

"I still remember it. I heard this horrible noise, and then I ran over to find you

collapsed next to a fallen tree. You were complaining about not being able to move!”

“I am still incredibly grateful to you. For this, too.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Soma had done so much more for her than she could for him, but he probably didn’t think so. *Why did I help him back then?* At the time, she had no reason to help him out at all. Even now, she wasn’t quite sure what had driven her to do it. Maybe she was simply happy to have someone depend on her. All she knew was that if she hadn’t, she wouldn’t be here now.

“Maybe my decision back then was kinda dumb, though,” she admitted, “considering what happened in the end. I dunno.”

“Albert is the ‘dumb’ one, as you put it,” Soma pointed out. “Perhaps it would still have happened had you never met me, but who can say?”

“Ugh. Y’know, I wish I could be as positive as you about life sometimes.”

“You think too highly of me. In any case, I am glad you acted as you did, or else we would never have formed this relationship.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Suddenly realizing how close Soma’s face was to her own, Aina looked away. She was likely the only one bothered by his choice of words, which was probably as innocent as ever. Aina quickly tried to focus her mind on something else.

Where would she be right now, she wondered, if she hadn’t rescued Soma last year?

She wouldn’t be able to use magic, that’s for sure. She wouldn’t be able to smile or get mad like she did now. Maybe, if Albert had still kidnapped her, she may well just have chosen to die. Even if just because it let her avoid that outcome, she was glad that she rescued Soma. He could be a pain in the neck at times, but that single decision had allowed her to experience so much over the last year. Most of those “experiences” were just conversations, but they were still extremely important to her. She was able to use magic; she had met Lina;

she had learned of Albert's betrayal, as well as been kidnapped by him, and was only still alive now because of Soma.

Aina carried on walking, Soma still leaning on her for support.

"Hey, Soma..."

"Mm?"

"Once we get back, you're gonna get ready to go on an adventure, right? With me?"

That had already been decided on their walk back. Even though he had told her why, and that Camilla was on his side, she still had doubts.

"That is my intention, yes. Why? Have you changed your mind?"

Aina was ready to retort with a hard "No!" but stopped herself. She didn't want to overreact, after all. She didn't want to get too deep into the discussion about whether she had a choice in the matter, either.

"I-It's not that," she replied. "I just... don't see why you'd wanna take me with you."

"Have you not heard that there is strength in numbers?" he pressed.

"I-I know, but..."

Aina knew what it was like to travel alone, and she was well aware of how difficult it could be. Not just because you could take turns keeping watch at night; the simple knowledge that you weren't alone could be reassuring in itself. What worried her was the two of them, specifically, traveling together.

"I shan't do anything to you, if that's what you're concerned about. Although you shall have to take my word for it."

"Th-That's not what I'm worried about!" For some reason, she found that clarification annoying. "L-Look. I'll feel safer having you around, but... it's not like you need me, is it?"

Even if there was strength in numbers, it shouldn't make that much difference to someone as strong as Soma, who might even find Aina to be a burden.

"I believe you are overestimating my abilities, although I admit I could easily

make this journey alone. However, I do believe it is still prudent to bring you with me. There is much that I struggle with, and...” Soma paused. “Perhaps I ought to put it in simpler terms: I need you.”

Aina gasped. It wasn’t fair of him to say that. She glared at him, but his expression was no different than normal.

“You’re such a pain,” Aina grumbled.

“Regardless, I would be grateful if you would accompany me on my travels.”

If he’s gonna put it like that, how can I refuse? Even if she tried, he would surely just argue her around to it anyway. Aina couldn’t bring herself to just accept it, though, so she responded by just carrying on forward.

With the conversation cut short, the only sounds that remained were their footsteps and labored breaths. It wasn’t awkward in the least. With every step, Soma’s warmth seeped through Aina’s shoulder, and she couldn’t help but be overly conscious of it.

Her mind drifted to the journey ahead. With just the two of them, wouldn’t she likely end up supporting Soma like this again down the road? That thought also made her realize that there would be many more days just like this one, and the ones they already shared.

A smile rose to her lips as they continued on in amicable silence.

Afterword

Hello! My name is Shin Kouduki.

Whether you are new to my work, or have been following me since I was publishing online, I cannot thank you enough for picking up this book! Nothing beats the feeling that I might have brought even just a little enjoyment into somebody's life through my story. It still feels strange to think that my story was published in the first place, let alone that I'm writing the afterword right now!

As you may already know, I majored in psychology in college, but now here I am, doing something totally unrelated to my major! There are several reasons why I decided to change paths, but the biggest was probably because I just couldn't see myself pursuing a career in psychology. I enjoyed studying it, but when the time came to seriously think about my future, it just didn't feel right. That was probably the moment I truly gave up on psychology, even though it felt a bit weird to do nothing with those years of study.

I then had to think long and hard about what I did want to do, but in the end I decided to carry on that path. Along the way, though, I did consider trying to become an author. I already knew I liked writing and coming up with stories. I had actually already written something, though I don't think you'd call it a "novel." Ultimately, it was just a hobby, and there was nothing more I could really do with it. I lacked confidence, so I decided to stick to psychology.

I kept writing, though, purely to satisfy myself, and it was then I learned about *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, a website where you could publish your stories online. At first, I spent all my time just reading other people's works, but eventually, I felt like I should post my own stories. That was around the same time I learned the site ran a competition for webnovels.

I decided to enter, and failed spectacularly!

I tried again, having learned from my previous experience, and this time I won! I don't know if I can say that I achieved my dream, but I'm still so grateful

and happy that I went for it and succeeded.

I'd also like to thank MICRO MAGAZINE for picking up my work for publication. It was thanks to them and the efforts of so many others that I was finally able to release this book.

I'd like to thank my editor, "I," who taught me so much and took good care of me.

Thank you too to my wonderful illustrator, necömi, whose illustrations are just so cute, cool, and packed with malice, where appropriate! Thanks for putting up with my strict direction.

Thank you to the proofreaders, designers, and everyone at the publishing house. Without you, this book would never have seen the light of day.

And, most of all, thank you to everyone who's supported me and purchased a copy. I am sincerely grateful to each and every one of you.

I hope to see you all when the second volume gets released, and I hope you will keep supporting me in the future.

Thank you!


I Surrendered
My Sword
for a
New Life
as a
Mage
1
Shin Kouduki
Art:
necömi
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PRESS