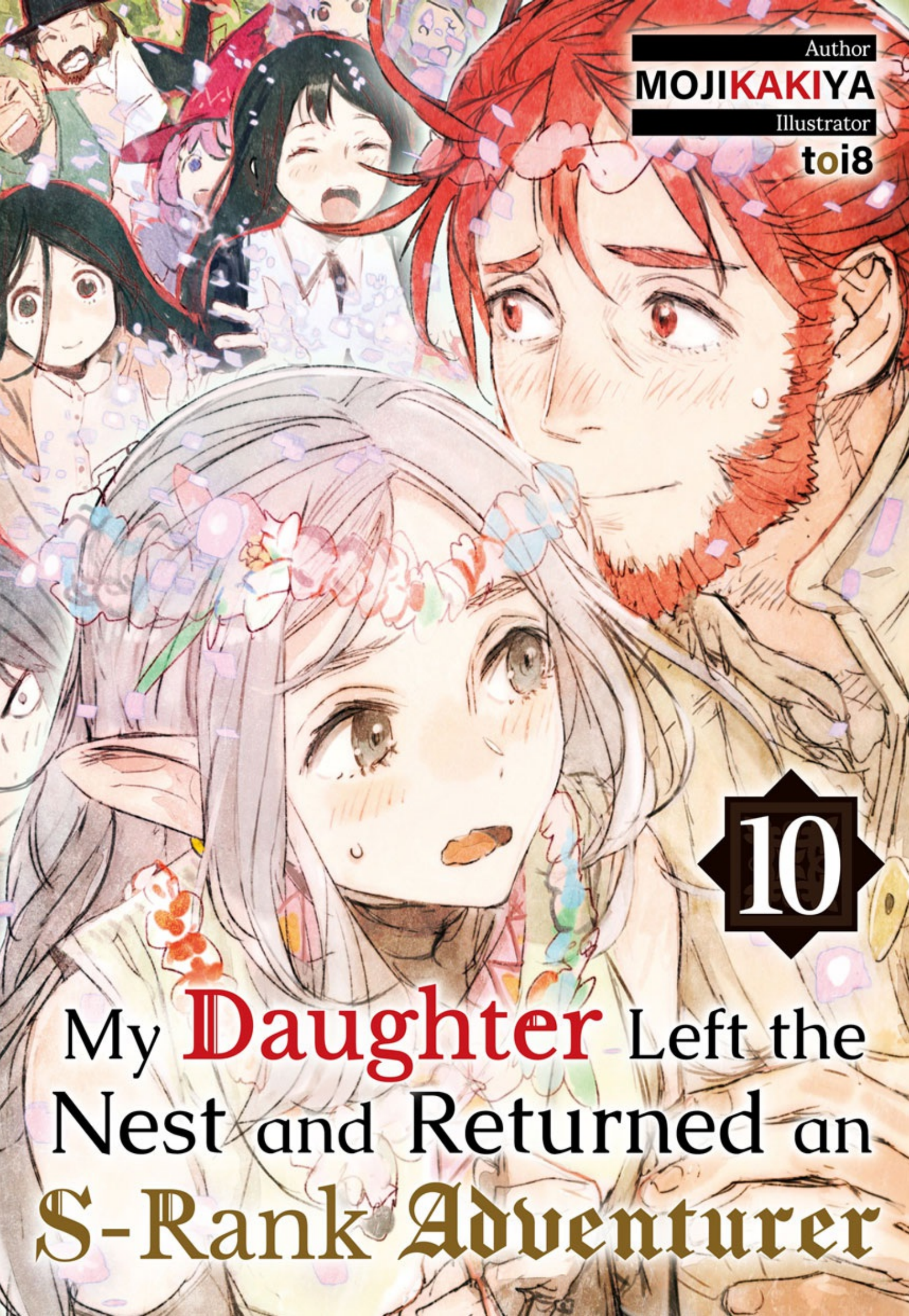
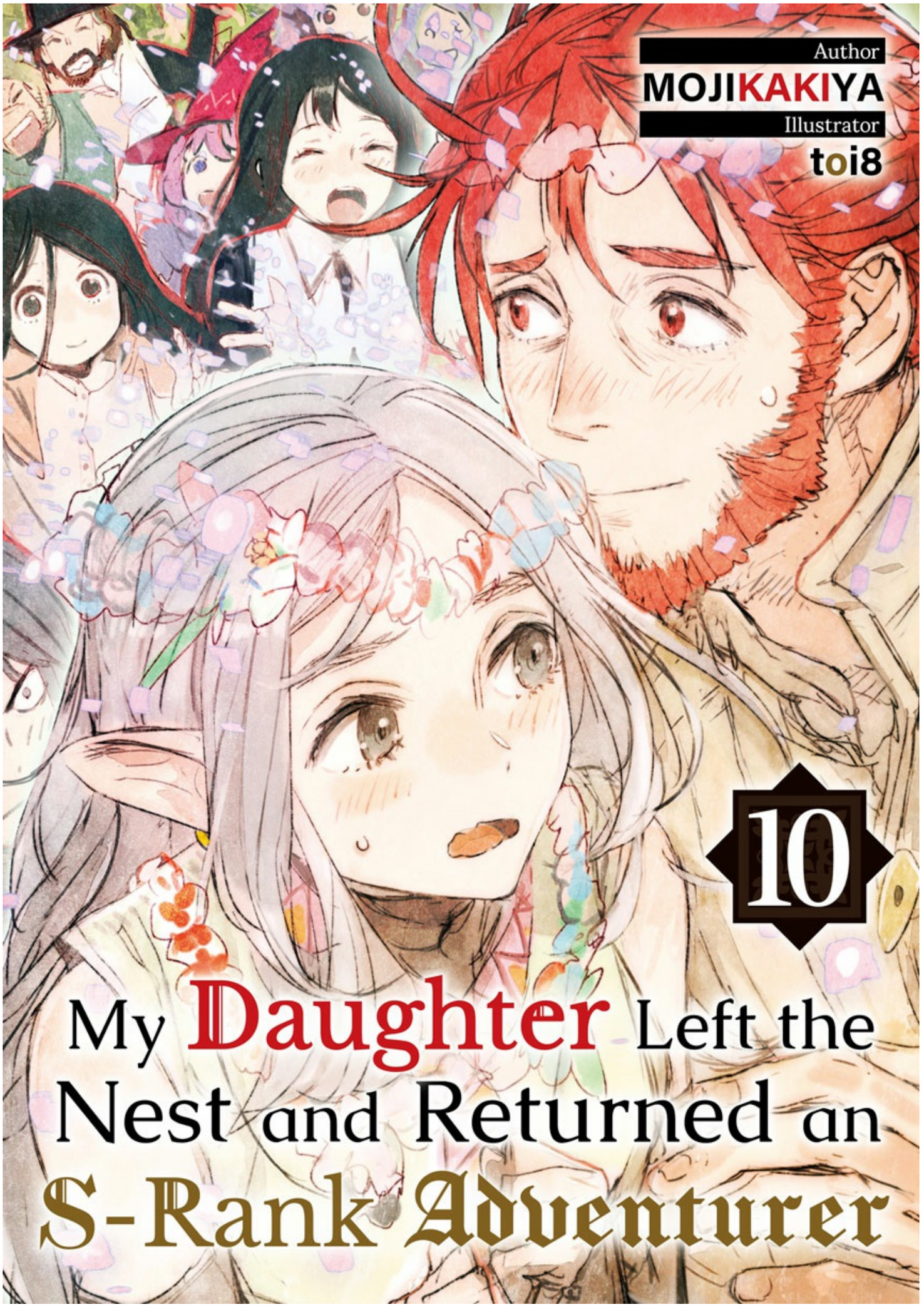
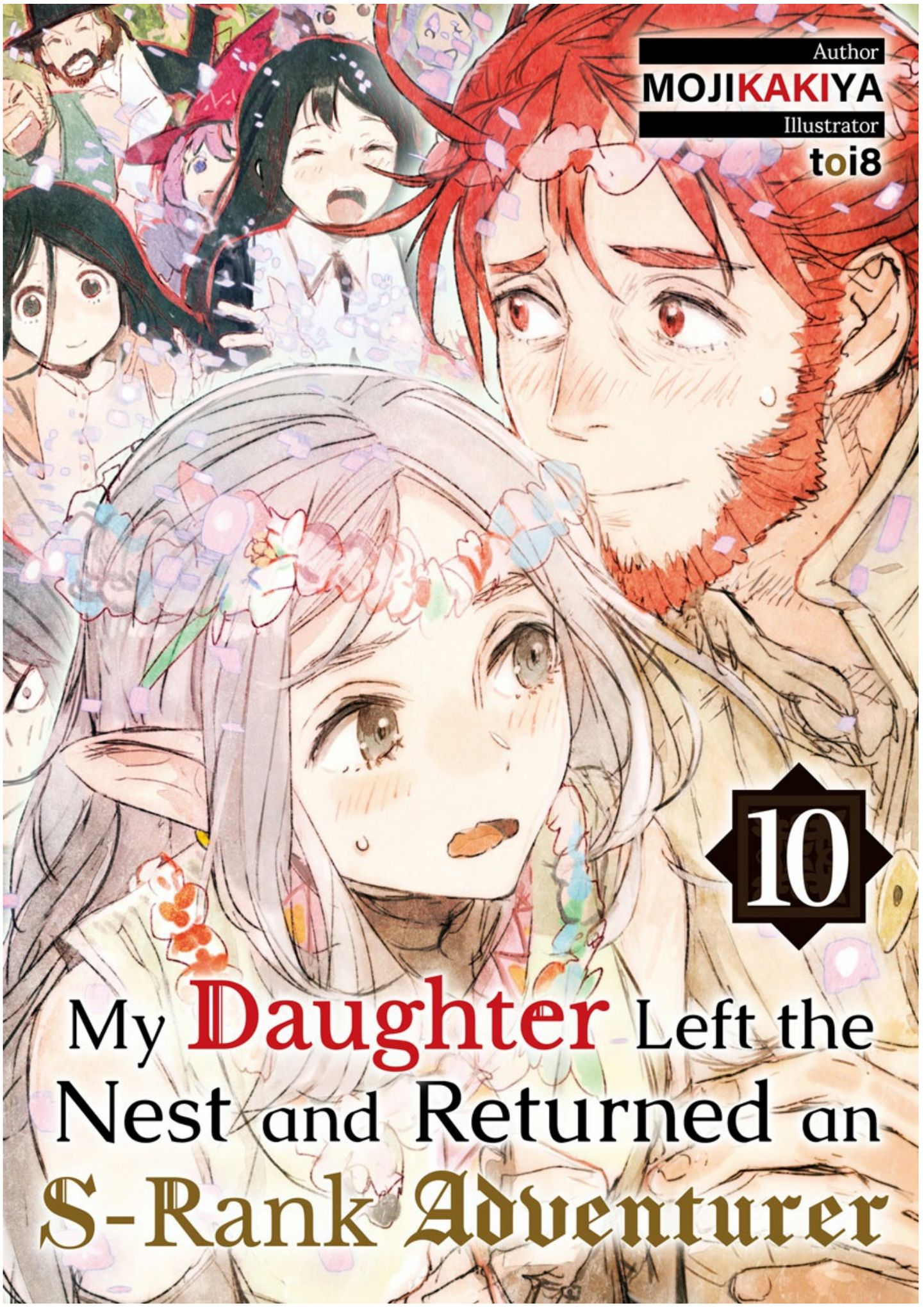

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Chapter 125: The Scarce Leaves That Remained

The scarce leaves that remained on the withered trees rustled in the breeze, but not for long before losing the battle against gravity. They all snapped off their branches and fluttered to the ground. The sepia-colored light that filled the space had grown faded and dim. There were cracks spreading across the ground, while the house had completely caved in on itself.

Crunch, crunch. There was a loud sound as his boots treaded over the parched earth. The man in the white robe came to a stop in the middle of the devastated front yard and scanned his surroundings.

“The contract should have ended...” he muttered.

He wandered about unhurriedly, inspecting everything he came across. Gazing at the vegetable garden—or rather, its withered, crumbled remains—he delivered a light kick to the wooden fencing. It seemed that the boards had rotted through at the base, and they snapped with only the slightest amount of force.

The man continued to wander around as though he was looking for something; his search shifted from the yard to the ruins of the house, and finally to the back of it. There was a withered forest at the end of the backyard, and in front of it, a stone like a grave marker had been placed. The man stood there looking down at the stone for a moment.

“Hmph... Such naivete.”

He waved his hand above the monument. Briefly, his palm flashed with the faint glow of mana, and the next moment, the stone crumbled away. The ground beneath it began to rumble, until eventually, several broken tree fragments erupted from the ground towards his hand.

The man caught the fragments and inspected them closely. They seemed to belong to an apple tree, but it had been broken into so many pieces it hardly retained any vestige of its original form.

“Incredible. Just this remnant holds enough power to maintain this space.”

Wrapping both his hands around the bundle of splinters, the man closed his eyes and began to chant under his breath. It was a very long spell. Developments in the field of magic had managed to shorten incantations by a good deal and omit many unnecessary portions. Longer chants such as this were rare in this day and age—and so, it was presumably a spell of a bygone era.

The glimmering light around the man’s hands grew conspicuously brighter as the fragments formed around one another until they comprised a single, slender bough. It grew between his fingers, splitting off into two small branches which sprouted buds and unfurled into a luscious green bundle of leaves.

“She must have thought it was destroyed.”

From base to end, it was only about the length of his forearm, and it felt like a baton as he held it in his hand. As he swung it, he felt a slight vibration in the space around him.

“It seems I’ll need to replenish its power...”

After he had tucked the branch into his breast pocket, the man’s figure shimmered and faded. The sepia space he left behind twisted out of shape before melting away, crumbling into pitch-black nothingness.

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The world outside was still shrouded in a layer of white snow, but though the scenery was clouded by the flakes that still fell, the air itself no longer held a freezing chill. It was a winter morning that carried a sort of gentle warmth to it.

Belgrieve returned from his morning patrol, brushing the snow from his coat before entering the house. By then, everyone who’d still been sleeping when they left was now wide awake, and the house was filled with energy. “I’m home.”

“Welcome back.” Satie smiled from the hearth, where she was stirring the pot over the flames. Even now, it was quite a strange feeling to see her there.

Angeline hung her cloak up on the wall before delightedly running over to

Satie. “It was cold again... Stew?”

“That’s right. You two really are something, working so early every morning.” Satie giggled as she covered the pot with its lid.

“How about you go with us next time, mom?” Angeline asked, proudly puffing out her chest.

“Well, why not? If I do, I guess I’ll have to count on you for breakfast,” Satied said, looking at Belgrieve. He shrugged.

Over the course of their long journey to the capital and back again, construction on the new house had been almost entirely completed. According to Graham, the carpenters did their best to finish up whatever they could before winter. But that wasn’t all—they had even made some additions that weren’t in the initial plan. There was now more than enough space to house this large, growing family. The spaciousness of the renovations was a relief to Belgrieve, considering how lively his home was now.

There was a table set on the dirt floor around the hearth, and that was where meals were cooked and served. Charlotte—whose hair had grown out while he wasn’t looking—kneaded bread dough with the help of Mit, who was now as tall as Charlotte.

A fur rug was spread over the raised wooden floor, and there were cushions, which had been bought from a peddler who visited during the fall festival, strewn about. That was where Percival sat across from Yakumo with a chess board between them. Kasim, Lucille, and Marguerite watched from the sidelines, teasing one or the other of the two with every move the players made. Graham sat nearby, watching over the twins Hal and Mal as they ceaselessly pestered Byaku. Anessa and Miriam watched the fire burn, occasionally adding kindling, or brushing ash off the iron plate.

“It’s gotten a lot busier here...” Belgrieve mused.

Yakumo, Lucille, and Duncan had managed to make it back with the mana crystal of the á bao a qu before winter touched down in Turnera. They settled down to wait out the frost until spring, with Yakumo and Lucille lodging in Belgrieve’s house, and Duncan in Hannah’s.

A month had passed since the rest of the group had returned to Turnera from their grand adventure in the capital. They had since grown rather accustomed to their boisterous lifestyle here—so much so, that some of them couldn't fathom living any other way now.

Tending to the fire and cooking meals had been a job Belgrieve was used to handling on his own, but now there were plenty of eager volunteers to do it, and Belgrieve would often find himself with nothing to do. He sat in his chair, feeling that something was subtly different as he watched Charlotte and Mit knead the dough. It had been only half a year since he last saw them, but they both had a bit more of a grown-up look to their faces, and were a little taller too. He would have expected it from Mit, who had always grown incredibly fast, but Charlotte was certainly a surprise. *You can't underestimate how fast the kids grow up...*

Charlotte, noticing his attention, looked up. "What's wrong, dad?"

"No, it's nothing. I was just thinking you're doing a good job."

"Hee hee, you think so...? But mom's a good cook too. She's completely different from what I imagined from your stories."

"Yeah, I was surprised too. To think she's the same Satie I knew... Back then, she hardly knew how to prepare *any* dishes."

"Hey now! Don't you go spreading that information around... Good grief," Satie groused, pouting at him.

As Charlotte said, Satie's cooking skills had improved remarkably. The first time she offered to cook dinner, Percival and Kasim had teased her: "Can you really?" But the outcome was a proper stew. Reluctant to back down, the two men called it a random hodgepodge of ingredients, but it was still good enough that they both asked for seconds.

In the meals that followed, she also managed to throw together grilled foods and stuffed bread along with a variety of other delicacies. Now it was her turn to tease them. "Not half bad, right? How does it feel to be proven utterly wrong?"

Satie had become a good cook—that alone was a testament to the passage of

time. The four members of the party had all passed the years in their own ways, and every little thing he learned about them filled Belgrieve with joy that they had come together once more.

After a lively breakfast, the plates were tidied up. The kids enthusiastically helped out, and as expected, Belgrieve was left with nothing to do. He knew intruding on their work would accomplish nothing, and so he kept his distance took out his yarn-spinning tools. Spinning yarn was one of his customary winter chores.

With her chess match finished, Yakumo came over and sat down beside Belgrieve. “The spring is soon upon us. Mr. Bell, doesn’t your body feel heavy after holing up in this house for so long?”

“For what it’s worth, I make sure to exercise every morning. But then, fighting is not my main occupation.”

“Even now, I have a hard time believing that... But seeing you spinning yarn like that does make it easier to imagine.”

Yakumo leaned back in her chair and watched Belgrieve’s hands at work. The spindle turned and turned, and each time Belgrieve pinched the wool, a length of yarn seemed to come into being.

“Do you want to try it?”

“No, such intricate work just isn’t for me,” Yakumo said with a wry smile before letting out a long yawn. “Still, it’s gotten rather lively... It’s terrifying to think we could take down dragons and demons with just the members of this household.”

“Is it that surprising? I mean, at the Earth Navel...”

“That’s just the sort of place the Earth Navel is. It’s not normal to have four S-Ranks here on the northern outskirts, without even a dungeon nearby.”

“I see... You may be right.” Come to think of it, he did agree it was certainly strange. But one of them was his daughter, while the other three were his friends. Sure, they were high-ranking adventurers, but outside of combat, they laughed, felt sorrow, and lived life just like any other people. Their dazzling public image wasn’t all there was to them.

Percival rolled his neck, groaning. “Staying cooped up in here just ain’t for me. I feel stiff.”

“Says the guy who hid himself in the Earth Navel for years,” Marguerite taunted.

“Who says I was hiding, stupid?”

“No, you totally were. Right, Lucille?” Marguerite asked.

Lucille nodded. “Mister was scared of going outside.”

“All right, I get it now... You’re trying to pick a fight. Well, you’ve got one—let’s take this outside.”

“You’re on! I was just in the mood to cut loose!” Marguerite boasted.

“‘*Born to be wild*,’ baby!”

Percival, Marguerite, Lucille, and Kasim all went outside. The excitement caused Hal and Mal to begin acting up, tugging at Byaku and Graham’s clothes.

“Everyone’s going away!”

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Bucky, grampa, go!”

“Now, when it’s this damn cold...? Hey, stop pulling. Fine—I just have to go with you, right? Will that make you happy?” Byaku, with displeasure evident on his face, put on his coat and donned a winter hat.

Mit joined them and put on his winter clothes too. “Me too.”

Satie chuckled. “Looks like the big brother’s super popular.”

“Who are you calling a big brother... What about you?” Byaku growled, his eyes turning to Charlotte.

“Umm, I guess I’ll go. I’m done helping out, and all...” she said, fidgeting and stealing a glance at Belgrieve.

Belgrieve nodded. “Of course. Have fun,” he urged her with a smile.

“Hee hee... Okay, I’ll be back soon!” She enthusiastically put on her hat and coat.

“I already said I’m going, so stop pulling already. Hey, wear that properly or

you'll regret it. Quit squirming." Byaku forcefully dressed the giddy twins in winter gear before turning to Graham. "We're leaving, gramps."

Graham nodded and joined Byaku and the twins, with Mit and Charlotte following along.

Mit and Charlotte have grown remarkably, but Byaku's also mellowed out quite a bit, Belgrieve thought. He was still abrasive, and he didn't mince words, but he did do a good job of looking after the kids, and cared for others without a second thought. He a little clumsy around Satie, perhaps out of bashfulness, but that would surely fade in time.

"What are you going to do, Ange?" Miriam whispered in Angeline's ear. "Bucky's starting to look like the eldest sibling."

"Grr... Umm... I still have a chance to recover. Dad, I'm off!"

"Got it, I'll watch the house. Look after the kids like a good big sister, okay?"

"Leave it to me! Anne, Merry, let's go."

"Huh? Us too?"

"Well, I mean... I guess I could go check up on the traps I set yesterday."

The three of them put on their coats and dashed out the door. And just like that, everyone was gone, and the house was suddenly quiet. Satie, having finished tidying up the table, reached for a kettle.

"Good grief, and now it's quiet. Do you want some tea?"

"Yeah, I'll take you up on that. How about you, Yakumo?"

Yakumo stretched and stood. "No, I think I should get some exercise. And I wouldn't want to get between you newlyweds."

"That's not really..."

"No need to be tactful. With such a large family, there aren't many opportunities for you two lovebirds to be alone together," Yakumo said with a smile before taking her leave.

Belgrieve and Satie looked at one another, now alone in the vast house.

"What's up with them?"

“Yeah...”

Belgrieve twisted his beard with a wry smile. Thinking it would let him relax a bit, he climbed up to the elevated floor and sat on one of the cushions. Satie chuckled as she poured the tea and took a seat beside him.

“A married couple, huh... It still seems unreal.”

“I guess so.”

If there was some kind of standard courtship process, they had skipped over most of it. Both of them had just sort of fallen into their positions, so there was naturally a lot that Belgrieve did not understand. Though, as he saw it, they’d gone through far more steps to get here than if they had instead been in an arranged marriage.

Taking a sip of tea, Satie snuggled herself up against him, resting her head on his shoulder. “I don’t really get it either, but speaking for myself, this all feels comfortable to me.”

“Yeah.” Belgrieve gently placed a hand on Satie’s head. Her hair had been dirty and disheveled when they had first reunited, but now it was as soft as silk. He combed through it with his fingers without snagging.

Satie stirred ticklishly, puffing her cheeks out with slight discontent. “You’re kinda doing it like you do with Ange, Bell.”

“Huh? A-Am I?”

“You immediately turn into a father... Oh, that’s right.” Suddenly, Satie pulled him closer.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Belgrieve relented, allowing her to lay his head down on her thighs. Her slender fingers worked through his coarse red hair.



“Mm... Hee hee, it’s a lap pillow. How does that feel, Bell? What’s it like to be

pampered?”

“It’s... How should I put it...? A bit embarrassing.”

“Oh, how cute,” Satie smirked as she continued massaging his scalp.

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched at his cheek. “Is that fun?”

“Yes, very. Heh heh... You don’t look like you’re used to this.”

“Well, in my defense, I’m usually the one doing it...”

“I knew it. Considering Ange, I can tell you’re far better at pampering people than being pampered.”

“Is that really something you can be better at?” Belgrieve let out a deep yawn, and soon Satie was looking down at him with an amused look on her face.

“You can sleep if you want to.”

“No, I don’t think so. It would be embarrassing if someone came back.”

“I guess you have a point. But the other villagers have stopped popping in, so it should be fine.” The moment they arrived in Turnera, the word immediately spread across the small town that Belgrieve had returned with an elven bride. The villagers, hoping to catch a glimpse of his rumored wife, would stop by with gifts whenever they could spare a moment. They’d interrogated him about this and that, and teasingly asked if he’d gone on that whole journey just to find a woman. Belgrieve found these visits exhausting, but it wasn’t as though he really hated it either. And considering the outcome of his journey, they weren’t exactly wrong. Frankly, it was more of a relief that the villagers took to Satie and the twins so quickly. If weathering a bit of gossip and banter helped to facilitate this, then so be it.

He made to get up, figuring it was about time, only for Satie to hold him down.

“There’s no need to be in such a rush. How about I clean out your ears? Right—lay down on your side. Go on.”

“No, wait...”

“Heh heh heh... Resign yourself,” she cackled as she brandished an ear-

cleaning stick.

Now that it had come to this, Belgrieve was in no position to refuse. Belgrieve obediently laid his head back down in Satie's lap, his eyes squinting from the ticklishness he felt in his inner ear.

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Anessa tightened her grip on her bow, her breath coming out in white puffs. "I'll be heading off to the forest then."

"Hmm, me too. I'm worried about leaving you alone, Anessa."

"Ha, ha... Very funny, Merry. How about you, Ange?"

"I'm going to look after the kids... Because I'm the big sister."

They giggled at the sight of Ange puffing out her chest and headed off on their own.

Angeline looked around. It was snowing, albeit lightly—more like a calm smattering to herald the imminence of spring. Still, it softly piled on the ground, and though they had shoveled the pathway just that morning, there was already enough for her boots to leave distinct footprints.

The other village kids were already running around the town square by the time they got there, and it looked like they were putting all their energy into enjoying a winter day outside—after all, it was usually too cold and snowy to do so. *Did I used to run around like that too?* Angeline wondered. She watched them, feeling a little peculiar.

Percival folded his arms and sighed as he looked over all the faces that had followed when he headed out. "Why'd everyone tag along anyways...? Well, I have a vague idea why..."

Kasim laughed. "Hey, what's the harm in it? We've got to give those two some alone time now and then."

"'*You make me feel like a natural woman*,'" Lucille sang, strumming at her six strings.

"What does that mean?"

“That Satie *is* a woman around Bell.”

“Well, whatever. Now come at me, Maggie. I’ll take you on one-handed.” Percival twirled his wooden sword in Marguerite’s direction.

Marguerite scoffed and glared back at him. “Now you’re just mocking me, bastard. Don’t cry when you lose!”

She closed the distance as though she was skating along the ground, taking a sharp swing at him with her wooden sword. The dry sound of wood smacking wood resounded through the air as Percival blocked the strike with a look of composure.

“Looks like they’re really going at it... So what do you think, gramps? Has your grandniece gotten any better?” Kasim asked.

“She’s gotten more prudent, but...”

“Heh heh heh... Harsh. Her sword arm’s pretty good, though. I mean, she’s holding her own against Percy.”

“If she can’t win against Angeline, it’s too soon for her to take on Percival. He’s holding back quite a bit,” Graham observed.

“Well, you’re just about the only person Percy would have to fight seriously against. So, how’s he look to you anyways? How would you rate his strength?” Kasim asked.

Graham narrowed his eyes. “I wouldn’t be able to hold back against him. If he were my enemy, I would avoid direct confrontation.”

Kasim laughed. “Heh heh heh... He must be amazing if the Paladin has *that* to say about him!”

Angeline quietly joined them and tugged at Kasim’s sleeve. “Mr. Kasim...”

“Hmm? What?”

“So, umm...” Angeline made a request, which Kasim obliged. Waving his finger around, he formed the snow into rectangular lumps and piled them up all around into a short wall.

“Will that do it?”

Angeline nodded. The children behind her began to shout for joy.

“Thanks, Mr. Kasim!”

“It’s a fort!”

“Wow!”

The kids ran around, and tested the solidity of the snow wall by tossing snowballs at it. It seemed a no-holds-barred snowball fight was in the works.

“*Twist and shake*, baby!” Before anyone noticed, Lucille had climbed the wall and danced atop it on nimble feet as she strummed at her instrument. The children laughed and chucked snowballs at her, but Lucille easily dodged them all.

Puffing up his chest like Angeline, Mit instructed the children. “Everyone gather up. We’ll decide on teams by rock-paper-scissors. Anyone who gets hit, go over there.”

“Hit how? An arm or a leg wouldn’t kill you.”

“Then anyone who gets hit three times in the head or body, go there.”

The children seemed to have devised the rules in their own way. Angeline was circling them conspicuously, trying to show off her place as the eldest, but she missed the chance to speak up and ended up observing in silence. Soon, the snowball fight had begun, and she gave up and watched from a distance, deciding to keep an eye out and make sure no one got injured. But they had Kasim’s snow wall, and the snowballs were soft. Aside from Angeline, Graham and Kasim were there too, so she wasn’t sure she was even needed.

Yakumo sidled up beside her. Her breath streamed away as a white fog as she shivered in the wintry air. “*Huff*... It sure is cold. But the kids look like they’re having fun.”

“I’ve lost my place here... Where’s my dignity as the big sister...?”

“Dignity? That sort of thing just comes on its own whether you want it to or not. You’re an S-Rank adventurer, aren’t you?”

“Not like that. I mean, this sort of... That’s just not it.” Angeline stumbled over her words as she watched the twins and a few little boys cling to Byaku. When

they were playing such games, children seemed to generally turn to the oldest boy.

It's fine. I'll let Bucky take on the good parts. I am a very generous big sister, Angeline thought, as though to convince herself. After all, letting her little brother enjoy the limelight was undoubtedly proof that she was a capable older sister.

With that in mind, she deliberately restrained herself and watched from a distance. It suddenly occurred to her that watching over the fun like this was a bit like what Belgrieve had always done. *And isn't* that *the coolest position to be in?* Angeline felt elated. Even if she couldn't show off her strength in the snowball fight, surely there were some children who felt relieved to know she was watching over them. After all, she had always felt at peace whenever her father was watching over her—this was no different. *I'm so damn cool!*

Angeline nodded in self-satisfaction. "I get it now..."

Yakumo looked at her curiously. "What are you thinking about?"

"I really am dad's daughter..."

"I've known you for a while... But I still don't get what your deal is." Yakumo had given up on that front. She reached into her breast pocket and took out her pipe, only to recall she had run out of herb to smoke with it. She returned it to her pocket, her brow furrowed sorrowfully.

The kids, meanwhile, had finished their battle and had come together to renew discussions—no war was won in a single battle, after all.

All right, time to watch over them again... Angeline folded her arms, when a snowball suddenly came flying at her and struck her in the head. The snow exploded in all directions and coated her hair in powder.

Yakumo blinked, startled. "I was sure you would dodge that."

"It wasn't worth dodging. I am *cool*." It wasn't as though she had really let her guard down, since the snowball was so weak and lacked any malice or intensity behind it. Meanwhile, the children broke out into gleeful shouting over the attack.

“I did it! Direct hit!”

“How’s that, Bucky boy?!”

“That’s the spirit. Keep it up and cover her in snow.”

Byaku stood in the midst of the children, a thin smile on his face. Evidently, he had shifted their focus to targeting Angeline. Even Mit was enthusiastically clutching a snowball in hand.



“En garde sis—take this!” On Mit’s command, a number of small snowballs

flew her way.

“Hey now!” Yakumo objected as she deflected the snowballs with the sleeves of her eastern robe. Angeline narrowly dodged and glared at the children peevishly.

“Cuse you, little brothers and sister... Big sis will have to *educate* you.” Angeline swiftly stooped down to scoop up a handful of snow and compressed it into a ball. With just a slight motion, she sent it careening through the air, landing a direct hit on Byaku’s head.

“Bwah?!”

Mit turned to him anxiously. “Bucky, are you okay?”

After shaking the snow off of his face, Byaku turned on Angeline with rage. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Hmph, that’s what you get for underestimating your big sister...”

“Big sister? Please. I’ll knock you right off your high horse!” Byaku made his own snowball and threw it. His shot prompted another volley of fire from the children

“This is bad! Everyone, we have to help sis!”

On seeing Angeline’s dire straits, Charlotte rushed in with a squadron of the village’s little girls to assist her. Then came Marguerite, who had finished her sparring match with Percival, and the snowball fight’s absurd second round was well underway. Percival, Kasim, and Yakumo watched the fray with wide grins on their faces. Even Graham was softly smiling. The strumming of Lucille’s instrument faded merrily into the fields of white snow.

Chapter 126: The Snow Had Frozen Solid

The snow had frozen solid, but a bit of digging would reveal much softer layers closer to the dirt. Judging by the small sprouts of green already emerging from the revealed soil, it was clear that spring was just around the corner.

Belgrieve had the same sense when he walked through the forest. The bleak, snow-covered tree branches revealed, on closer inspection, fresh buds swelling at their tips and all along their length. Eventually, the dark winter clouds would be carried away and the snow would melt. When the sun shone down in full again, the forest would turn green in the blink of an eye. Once that happened, Turnera would be a very busy village indeed.

As more sunlight crept into the day, the air would soon be filled with the sounds of maintenance being done on the farming tools. The fields were regularly shoveled, so the snow buildup was relatively light. Once it melted, the farmers would swiftly break soil with their hoes. Seed potatoes, which had been preserved in their houses, would be inspected and sorted, and the beans and vegetable seeds would be checked for any signs of pests.

It was still cold, but the presence of spring made itself known in the brisk air. Soon enough, Turnera's villagers would be raring to start working. In a sense, it could be said that spring came early to Turnera. It was still too early for Belgrieve to start tending to his own crops, though. He could perhaps help out in someone else's field, but his vegetable patch was still covered in snow, and the remains of the previous year's harvest hadn't been taken care of. In any case, there was some time before he would be able to plant anything here, so there was no need to hurry.

However, that didn't mean that Belgrieve had a lot of free time. There was much to do. His work mainly consisted of entering the forest and mountain, hunting and foraging for various things. The pre-spring forest provided a different bounty from the autumnal woods. The growing buds on the snow-covered trees were soft and delicious when steamed or fried in oil. They could be minced and used as a garnish in porridge or soup too. Although they were a bit bitter and somewhat of an acquired taste, they were good for working out

all the stiffness that the body develops over the winter months.

As for the plants buried under the snow, some of the rootstalks were edible. He would inspect the sprouts barely poking their heads out before digging them up. These could be boiled or baked, and once heated, developed a fluffy consistency that was quite a joy to eat.

At times, he would find small tubers like potatoes, which the mice and other animals would bury beneath the earth to preserve. He didn't know if the mice had forgotten to retrieve them, or if they intended to come back for them later. Whenever he discovered such a cache, Belgrieve would take a few tubers in exchange for some bits of bread he had brought along for lunch.

The beasts waking from hibernation would be gaunt, so no big game was hunted in this season. But some of the birds that migrated from the south had ample meat on their bones which had a splendid texture. These were his main targets.

The forest, which was still too frosted over to be called green yet, played host today to a pack of children, who squinted from the light filtering through the trees and reflecting off the snow. Belgrieve took up the rearguard, while Mit led the group. For some reason, Lucille had mixed herself into the group. The snow crunched beneath her boots as she walked along with an inquisitive look on her face.

Lucille's nose perked up. "Smells like spring."

"Hmm?"

"As the people of the past would say, '*Spring doesn't start anytime in particular, but you know it when it's all around you.*' This is the smell right here."

"Ha ha... I guess so." Belgrieve smiled and nodded. Despite all the snow, those buds on the branches were more indication than anything that spring was dawning.

The children's footsteps fell a little nervously and fretfully as to avoid the sticks and stones underneath the sheets of white, but that did nothing to abate their excitement over the uncommon opportunity to explore the snowy forest.

“I’ve never seen the forest like this before.”

“Hey, watch where you’re going.”

“It’s slippery there.”

“Eep!”

“Oh, that’s dangerous...” Lucille reached down and helped up a child that had slipped and fallen. The snow had acted as a cushion, so the fall hadn’t hurt too much, but all the slipping and sliding meant they weren’t making much progress.

Each of them held a tree branch and used it as a walking stick. Wherever the snow was dense enough to trip up their feet, it was helpful to have some other support. Even so, the children without a good sense of balance would still topple over at times.

Mit turned back. “Dad, we’re not going to the mountain, are we?”

“No, we’re not. It’s dangerous this time of year. I’m worried about an avalanche, so let’s not go too far.”

The snow fell incessantly around the mountain during the winter, but eventually, a temperature difference would form between the warming foothills and the upper peaks that were surrounded by cold air all year round. The moisture in the lower parts would slowly evaporate, only for the vapor to freeze again as it reached higher altitudes. Gradually, the snowpack would loosen up, becoming softer and more slippery even as the snow in the mountains would become dense and heavy. With even more snow piling on top of it, at some point it would all come crashing down.

Anyone who lived in Turnera was familiar with the great booming sounds that would sometimes come from the mountain which usually heralded an avalanche. It never reached as far as the village, but it was loud enough that the villagers would feel it in the pits of their stomachs, and that was more than enough to make the blood run cold. Thus, the mere mention of the word “avalanche” turned the children pale.

Belgrieve chuckled. “We’ll be fine around here. But you’ve got to make sure to listen to me, okay?”

The children raised their hands as they energetically answered, “Okay!”

The snow that could cause such massive avalanches on the mountain wasn’t so dangerous in the forest or lowlands. As the lower snow softened, smaller animals could easily navigate it and the spring vegetables could start to sprout through. Protected by this cushion of snow, these buds simply awaited spring’s advent. When Belgrieve thought of it that way, he felt a bit bad for digging them up, but whether or not a human harvested the sprouts, they would often be devoured by field mice or other small animals. Nevertheless, they endured, growing again and again, year after year. Everything did its best to live; even if mankind had to work a little harder at it, that didn’t mean all these fresh sprouts would be forever lost if some of it were to be harvested early. It was simply part of nature’s abundance in the land around Turnera.

Once they’d gone some distance into the forest, Belgrieve picked a spot where the trees were scarce and had the children dig up the snow. As long as the top crust was removed, the hard patches would grow softer and softer the farther they dug down. Eventually, they would find the dirt below where they hoped to spot new growth just barely peeking out, which they would then dig up by the roots. This work was like a treasure hunt to them, and they would become entranced in digging. Here and there, jubilant voices would call out, “I found one,” or “I did it,” which would drown out the sound of small shovels digging through snow and dirt. Gradually, their gloves became nothing but a hindrance, and some of the children would grasp at rootstalks and buds with fingers reddened from the frost.

Mit tossed some of these excavated treasures, still covered in dirt, into a basket he carried on his back.

“I got a big one,” Mit said.

“Yeah, let’s get a bit more and then go home.”

“Okay.” The boy enthusiastically strengthened his grip on his shovel. From his neck dangled a red pendant that Graham had fashioned from a mana crystal. Belgrieve didn’t know the details, but it would apparently help in controlling the mana that swirled within Mit’s body.

Suddenly, Lucille’s nose perked up, and she tugged at Belgrieve’s sleeve.

“Something’s here.”

“Hmm?” Belgrieve narrowed his eyes and tried to sense anything nearby. It was faint, but without a doubt, he could tell something was on the move. Not a fiend, though—a fiend would have a far more sinister presence.

After focusing his attention on this for a while, Belgrieve called the children near. He made sure they were all present and quietly placed a finger to his lips. Their expressions tensed up nervously as they timidly looked around.

“What’s wrong, Uncle Bell?”

“Is it something scary...?”

“Hush... Look, over there.”

The children looked warily in the direction he pointed. Two black ears were poking out of the snow beyond a distant clump of trees.

Mit gripped Belgrieve’s hand. “Dad, what’s that?”

“A bear. It must have woken from hibernation. It’s still a bit early, but I guess some just don’t have the patience.” Seeing a bear awake was yet another sign of the changing season. The bear slowly emerged from the snow, crawling and stretching as though it was still drowsy.

The forest did have its share of fiends, but wild animals were far more common. They hid away from the world in the winter, but they too would pick up the first hints of spring and open their eyes. They had presumably done this since time immemorial.

“Let’s head back. We’ll have lunch when we’re a safe distance away.” Belgrieve quietly urged the children to return the way they had come. He would need to inform the lumberjacks that the bears were waking up. Even so, he was happy that he had gotten to show these children the winter sights. *Come to think of it, I remember something similar happening with Ange. She was really excited then too...* Belgrieve smiled as he watched the children soon regain the merriness to their steps.

The winds were still cold, but the light of the sun already gave off a warmth evocative of spring. This was when every household would devote their time to laundry, and mounds of cloth tended to pile up at the end of the yard.

Satie hummed a tune as she smoothed the wrinkles out of a shirt with a sharp snapping motion, and then hung it up on the clothesline. Hal and Mal handed her one article of clothing after another until, in no time at all, the rope was fully laden.

“My, it’s a perfect day for drying,” she mused.

Anessa smiled wryly as she held up the laundry basket. “It’s quite a hassle when we have this many people.”

“Still, it’s going to be spring soon. It’s been a long time since I experienced spring in the north.”

“Oh, right. You’ve been in the capital for a while, right?”

“And it wasn’t really a situation where I could enjoy the weather either... Ah, this is bliss.”

Satie chuckled as she stacked up the empty baskets for the twins to carry, one at a time, back into the house. After they finished this chore, they impatiently paced around Satie with eyes locked on her.

“Can we go play?”

“We finished helping out, right?”

“Yeah, go ahead. Oh—but not on your own. You need to take someone with you.” Satie glanced inside the house and spotted Byaku fiddling around with something by the fireplace. “Hey, big guy, can you watch over the little ones for a bit?”

“Who are you calling big guy?”

“Oh, you didn’t like that?”

“I didn’t say that... Give me a minute.”

“What are you doing?” Anessa asked, setting her basket down and peeking curiously at his handiwork. Without answering, Byaku showed her a cooking pot

—evidently, he had been scraping the burnt residue off of the bottom. *So he noticed it when the others didn't, and went off to silently take care of it on his own*, Anessa thought. For some reason, this made her smile. "You're a hard worker, Byaku."

"Huh? Are you making fun of me or something?"

"Bucky, Bucky, let's play!"

"Let's go out and make snowmen!"

"I told you to wait, for crying out loud. Don't touch it, you'll get grime all over you," Byaku chided, grimacing as he lifted the cookware out of reach of the small hands that had latched onto him.

Angeline happened to return home at that moment. Her sleeves were rolled up, and she was using the back of her hand to wipe the sweat from her brow. "I'm home."

"Welcome back. You look beat," Satie observed.

"How can shoveling snow be this tiring...?" Miriam grumbled, as she staggered through the door after Angeline. Her hair was tied back and she wore a light tunic instead of her usual heavy robes. Apparently, the two of them had been out clearing the pathways.

They weren't the only ones who were keeping busy—everyone had gone off to do their own thing today. Belgrieve had taken Mit, Lucille, and the village children into the forest, while Marguerite and Yakumo had gone fishing in the river. Alongside Angeline and Miriam, Percival and Kasim had been helping to shovel the snow. And Charlotte had said she wanted to learn how to care for sheep, so she was helping out at Kerry's house.

"What about Percy and Kasim? Weren't they with you?" Satie asked, tilting her head to the side inquisitively.

"Well, they said it was a contest to see if brute strength was faster than magic. They began clearing the snow all over the village at an incredible pace... The villagers have all gone to spectate."

"Mr. Kasim's amazing, but Mr. Percy's also pretty incredible for challenging

him with nothing but a shovel," Miriam said, giggling, as she poured herself a cup of water from a jug.

Satie placed a weary hand to her brow. "Those boys... What do they think they're doing at their age...?"

"Well, it's good that they're getting along. It's not like they're troubling anyone."

"Yeah, and they were both in a slump for a long time, so it's a good change of pace... But it would be nice if they could mellow out like Bell," said Satie.

"Quit gushing about that guy..." Byaku muttered.

Satie snapped up, defiantly waving her hands. "I-I'm not gushing! I mean it's true!"

"Admittedly so," Anessa said.

"But when you say it, Satie, well, you know..." Miriam teased.

"Hey!" Satie protested.

"Hee hee hee... Mom is cute," Angeline smiled as she hugged Satie from behind.

"Urgh, curses... Hey, why are you rubbing my chest?"

"Why did I not inherit these? Strange..." Angeline probed Satie's chest with utter seriousness on her face. Satie usually wore loose clothes that concealed the contours of her body, so her curves weren't ordinarily very conspicuous, but she was actually rather blessed—perhaps even more so than Helvetica or Miriam. Angeline rested her chin on Satie's shoulder, a discontented pout on her face. "She's my real mother, and yet... How frustrating... Such soft...motherliness..."

"Oh, stop it. Even if your chest is small, you're still cute, Ange. Don't let such paltry things get you down." Satie awkwardly smiled as she patted Angeline on the head.

"You're actually taking this well," Anessa murmured under her breath with a note of admiration.

Suddenly, Byaku irritably shot to his feet. “You’ve got no delicacy, the lot of you! C’mon, brats.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

Byaku left with the twins in tow. The four women left behind looked at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter.

Satie rolled up her sleeves. “All right, we’ll have to prepare lunch, then. Do you think Char will eat at Kerry’s place?”

“Yeah, probably...” Angeline answered.

“All right. Bell and the forest team have packed lunches...” Satie reasoned.

“Do you think Maggie and Ms. Yakumo will catch anything?” Miriam asked.

“I’m not so sure. Well, I think they’ll be back for lunch, at least,” Anessa suggested.

“For now, can you roll up some bread dough for me?” Satie asked Miriam.

“Okay! Dough, dough—whoa?!” Miriam cried out in alarm, drawing everybody’s attention to Graham, who was sitting on the wooden floor. He had probably been there the entire time without any of them being the wiser. The old elf was poring over an old map that was spread out before him. “You were here, mister...?”

“He completely erased his presence...”

Graham glanced up at them but immediately returned his focus to the map. Lately, whenever he had a free moment, he could be found looking over it.

Regaining her composure, Angeline began rolling up the dough as she looked at Graham. Graham was sitting cross-legged, staring at the map spread across the floor, and occasionally tracing along parts of it with his fingers. It was like he was planning out a travel route.

“Grampa...” Angeline called to him. Graham looked up at her. “You’re always looking at that map...”

“I did plan on discussing it with everyone.”

“Are you returning to elven territory when Dad and the others get back?”

Graham shook his head. “Not to elven territory, no. Though I will be away for some time.”

“Is this about Mit?” Satie asked.

Graham nodded.

“Mit?” Miriam cocked her head. “In regards to his mana? But didn’t that pendant solve it?”

“That alone will only contain it temporarily. The mana stored in the mana crystal must be exhausted somehow or another.”

“How so...?” Angeline wondered.

Graham stood and took a small box from the shelf which was covered in symbols that seemed to be magical in nature. He opened it to reveal a red gemstone processed into a nicely rounded sphere about the size of an unshelled chestnut.

“That’s...the same crystal as Mit’s pendant, right?”

“Indeed. A fragment processed from the very same crystal.”

According to Graham, Mit’s pendant would absorb the boy’s mana to prevent it from ever building up beyond a certain threshold, but by doing so, the pendant would quickly reach its full capacity. To prevent this, the mana that passed through the pendant would be transferred to this stone, which had been carved with a spell sequence to increase the amount it could contain—one to absorb it, and the other to contain it.

“So in short, that orb there holds Mit’s mana?” asked Miriam.

Graham nodded. “It is like a mana storehouse. Still, it will inevitably reach its limit. It will be fine for a while, but once it fills to capacity, this magic orb will be unable to contain it any longer.”

“Well, it’s the mana of a real demon, not filtered through a human body. I guess Solomon’s homunculi really are extraordinary.”

“Hmm...”

“But what’s that got to do with your journey, Mr. Graham?” Anessa asked him.

“I have done a bit of thinking. I considered using this orb to strengthen Turnera’s barrier, or to embed it in my sword and use it like that.”

“It won’t work?”

“It won’t. The nature of Mit’s mana is very close to that of a demon’s. If we use it for the barrier, it will only draw even more fiends, and it has a terrible affinity with my sword.”

Certainly, Graham’s greatsword was filled with such pure mana it was known as a holy blade. Mit himself held no malice, but the mana emitted by a demon would be at odds with it, to say the least. Moreover, the sword itself would detest it—this was something Angeline had come to understand as she traveled alongside the enchanted weapon.

But what can be done, then? Angeline folded her arms and mulled it over. At this rate, Mit would once again bring about a calamity he didn’t ask for and never would have wanted.

Seeming to realize something, Satie smiled. “I see, so you’re going to take advantage of *that.*”

“So you’ve realized... Yes, that’s right. So I must find an adequate location.”

“Advantage? Oh, I get it...” Anessa seemed to notice too.

Angeline and Miriam exchanged a look.

“Merry, do you know what they’re talking about...?”

“Not a clue... What’s going on?”

“Well, you know... In short, that orb attracts fiends, right? So it’s pretty much the same as a dungeon core.”

Miriam nodded, now understanding what they had been alluding to before. “Oh, I see. If we can regulate the amount of mana it outputs, we’ll have a nice dungeon on our hands!”

Angeline seemed impressed. “Hmm... So we make a dungeon core... And have

adventurers defeat the fiends that are either drawn to it or emerge from it?”

“Indeed. To adventurers, dungeons are the same as mining operations. If I can place it somewhere with good yield and ease of access, it should be sufficiently profitable.”

“And you’re trying to think of the location, then. Then around Orphen or Bordeaux would probably be best,” Anessa mused, taking a peek at the map.

“I think so too!” Miriam chimed in from behind her.

New dungeons were almost always a natural occurrence. In fact, they’d never heard of one that was deliberately created, and with careful consideration of its placement, no less. But if it was possible to do, and if the guild was alerted to its existence in advance, that would result in a safer dungeon for adventurers, especially if they continued to monitor it for any changes. Placing it nearer to Orphen would make it a lot easier to travel to—to their own delight no less than that of other adventurers.

Dungeons were always the most efficient place to gather materials from fiends and forage for medicinal herbs. In fact, the herbs that grew in the dungeon under the influence of its mana had a higher effectiveness compared to what grew in the wild. This was precisely why the profession of adventuring existed, and why many still flocked to that life.

Angeline was elated at the prospect. *How wonderful—a dungeon made from the mana of my own little brother*. The sort of dungeon that would appear depended on where the orb was placed. Dungeons could form in forests and caves, and occasionally fortresses and abandoned villages too. Whatever it turned out to be, she was excited just thinking about it.

“A new dungeon... I’d love to challenge it.”

“H-Hey, now—wait until you’ve finished kneading the dough first!” Satie frantically called out as the three girls began pointing at the map with bits of dough still stuck to their fingers.

Chapter 127: The Spring Festival was Drawing Near

The spring festival was drawing near. The snow in the wheat fields was thinner on the ground as it began to thaw and the proportion of sunny days steadily increased. Farming implements that had been sharpened and mended over the winter months broke the soil as wheat that had just begun to sprout was threshed underfoot. The rivers grew murky as water flooded in from the snowmelt, even as some ice still clung to the riverbanks.

The potato fields were tilled, covered in fertilizer, then tilled again. The planting was a little farther down the line, but the manure would need some time to settle into the soil, or it would do more harm than good.

Anessa, carrying an empty manure basket, heaved a long sigh.

“What’s got you huffing like that?” Miriam peered into her face, holding a similar basked under her arm.

“Well, I was just thinking about how we’ll be returning to Orphen soon. We’ve been away for quite a long while now.”

“Ah, yeah, you have a point... Right, Ange?”

Angeline nodded. The year before, they’d left Turnera around the start of summer, and though they’d stopped by once along their travels, they hadn’t been back since. Sure, the guild did honor Angeline’s freedom, but it didn’t feel right to stay away for too long. Not to mention that Angeline and her friends did miss their days of working in Orphen. When she was in the city, Angeline longed for Turnera, but that was because this was her hometown. Their calling as high-ranking adventurers could only be fulfilled there, in the big city. They couldn’t take it easy here in the countryside forever.

Angeline rested her weight against her hoe. “After the spring festival, let’s hitch a ride with one of the peddlers.”

“Sounds like a plan. Mr. Graham’s also heading out to negotiate the dungeon

placement with Bordeaux, so it works out for all of us.”

After some discussion, and in consideration of their connections to the feudal lord and guild master, they had concluded that the best place to set up the new dungeon would be around Bordeaux. Angeline had argued it would be better if it were closer to Orphen, but high-quality dungeons could become a pillar of a region’s economy, and Orphen already managed several dungeons. Letting House Bordeaux profit from it would ultimately be more to Turnera’s benefit as well.

Lately, Graham had been keeping a close watch over Mit, training him in the art of meditation. Since Mit’s mana would become the dungeon’s core, then there was no harm in learning to control his mana more skillfully, or so Graham suggested.

Mit was initially displeased that he could no longer play with the other kids or help around the house as he usually did, but after a scolding by Belgrieve and Graham—both of whom he greatly admired—he devoted himself to training in earnest.

Miriam stretched out and groaned. “Ah, now that it’s over, it felt like all that time went by in a flash. Hee hee, it was fun, wasn’t it?”

Now that Angeline reflected on it, it had certainly been a grand adventure. They’d passed through Tyldes to the Earth Navel where they met Percival, they they found Satie in the capital and got wrapped up in affairs that concerned the very heart of the Rhodesian Empire. And somehow they’d made it out all right, and Angeline had returned to Turnera with a mother to boot. She managed to spend some peaceful days back home.

Even so, there was still one last thing she wanted to do in Turnera. Angeline gazed up at the snow-capped mountains and imagined them dyed in reds and yellows instead. The image elicited a sigh from her.

“Oh, this time Ange’s sighing.”

“You don’t want to leave?”

“That’s not it...” Angeline shook her head. She pursed her lips like she was sucking on something very sour. “I wanted to enter the mountain in fall and eat

fresh cowberries... They're sweet and sour, and they're loaded with juice... Once you start eating them, you can't stop. But they're only in season in autumn..."

Indeed, she had still yet to come by the fresh cowberries she had so yearned for. It was spring, now, and try as she might, she would never be able to reap the fall harvest.

Anessa giggled. "Looks like we'll have to come back in the fall, then..."

"They're going to work on the road, right?" said Miriam. "I want to try them too."

"All right. We'll aim for the fall festival, heh heh..."

They hadn't even celebrated the coming of spring, but they were already thinking about the fall. Angeline found this a bit funny, but there was no way around it—there were some things she simply couldn't help but look forward to.

"Life is fun... What a blessed life..." Angeline murmured as she gazed at Belgrieve swinging a hoe off in the distance.

Anessa and Miriam looked at one another and laughed.

"You're sounding like an old lady, Ange."

"Sure, we had a fine adventure, but there's still plenty of fun things to come. This is no time to get sentimental."

"Yeah..." Angeline agreed, and looked around. The tilling was done, and the manure had been spread. After bidding the other two to follow, she walked down to Belgrieve's end of the field.

"Dad, we're done on our end."

"Oh, that was fast. Thanks for the help. Are you tired?"

"No, we've still got some in us. Right?"

When Angeline looked back, the other two smiled wryly and shrugged.

"No, I'm a bit..."

"I'm all tuckered out."

Inevitably, there was a gap between the monstrous stamina of a frontline fighter like Angeline and her backline supporters.

Belgrieve chuckled and patted her on the head. “As energetic as ever, Ange. But the sun’s starting to dip. We should start putting things away. Can you collect the tools?”

“Okay.”

The sun had fallen a good deal from its zenith, and it was growing dark as the long shadows of the western mountain enveloped them. When they tidied up the tools and returned to the house, Satie and Charlotte were preparing dinner. A pleasant aroma wafted in the air as Satie turned towards them with a ladle in hand. “Oh, welcome back. It will be done soon.”

Angeline was so happy to be welcomed home that she smiled from ear to ear as she raced towards the fireplace. “That’s the smell of jarlberries... Are we having mutton?”

“Yeah, Kerry shared a bit of lamb meat with us. As a thanks for helping out,” Charlotte explained.

Angeline patted her on the head. “Good work, Char... Hee hee, nicely done!”

“I know you like it, sis. Oh, and dad too!”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to have a taste,” said Belgrieve.

“The rest depends on the fishing team’s catch... Ange, can you look after the fire for me? Char, pass the small—” Satie was interrupted as Marguerite burst through the door. She entered with Yakumo and Lucille, as well as Byaku, Hal, and Mal.

“It’s a huge catch! We’re gonna have a feast tonight!” Marguerite proudly proclaimed, lowering a basket filled with fish on the ground. Evidently, nearly everyone had gone to the river to fish. The twins were squealing joyously and running around.

“I caught some too, Dad.”

“But it was pulling really hard, so Bucky helped.”

Belgrieve patted their heads, before cocking his head to the side. “Graham

and Mit aside... Did Percy and Kasim not go with you?”

“No,” said Marguerite. “I don’t know where they went. Right?”

“Indeed,” Yakumo went on. “I haven’t seen them since lunch.”

“As the people of the past once said, ‘*those that don’t work don’t eat.*’ But how many extra servings do the workers get?”

“Pipe down, you,” Yakumo chided.

Kasim had stamina and potent mana, but no muscle when he wielding farm implements. Meanwhile, Percival broke his hoe with just one swing. Thus, the both of them had given up on field work quite early. Like Belgrieve, Angeline had been sure they’d gone to fish with the others, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Did they go to the forest, then...?”

“Perhaps. They could be gathering wild plants...”

By now, the fish were already gutted, and with a sprinkling of salt, they were about to be set to grill over the embers when they heard a knocking at the door. At first, they thought that Percival and Kasim had returned, but a voice that didn’t belong to them called out, “Mr. Bell, Mr. Bell.”

Belgrieve, who had been skewering the fish, sent Angeline a troubled look. “Sorry, Ange. Could you answer it?”

When Angeline opened the door, she was faced with a young man from the village. They’d played together when she was still a child, and he was not a stranger to her. But perhaps he’d sprinted there, as he was out of breath.

“Huh? Ange? Where’s Mr. Bell?”

“He’s cooking... Dad?”

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” Belgrieve wiped his hands clean and traded places with Angeline. The man passed on a few words to him, which Belgrieve answered with an apparently surprised nod.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, he said there was going to be a meeting, so I ought to head to the

church. We had one not too long ago."

At that time, the meeting had been about the plans for the community fields, manure allotments, grazing times for goats and sheep, and the order that the horses and donkeys would plow the fields. The rummel patch they'd started the year before also needed to be tended to. This was the season when Turnera was busiest with its farmwork. The only other point of concern he could think of was the spring festival, but perhaps something had happened.

Belgrieve stroked his chin, his concern evident. "Well, I'm sure it'll work out, but... Satie, sorry. I'm heading out for a bit."

"Oh dear, when dinner's almost served. But so be it. Watch your step."

"Dad... Can I go too?"

"To a town meeting?"

"Yeah."

"I don't mind, but you might be bored."

Certainly, the town meetings she'd attended with her father as a child consisted of nothing but adults talking about this and that with nothing to entertain her. But now, Angeline had grown up. Perhaps she'd finally understand all those things she didn't understand before. She wanted to see if that really was the case.

So she donned her coat and left with Belgrieve for the church. There, Barnes and Rita, along with a sizable number of the village youths were stood opposed to the village chief Hoffman, Kerry, and most of the central pillars of the village. Somewhat surprisingly, Duncan was there too, along with Percival, Kasim, Graham, and even Mit.

Angeline's eyes widened. "Huh? What's everyone doing here...?"

"Oh, glad you could make it, Bell. And Ange too? That works out nicely," said Hoffman who turned to them with a strangely ceremonious look on his face.

Belgrieve looked around the church suspiciously. His brow furrowed as he picked up on the strange tension in the air. "Looks like this isn't going to be an easygoing discussion. What happened?"

“Well, truth be told, the young folks are making some noise—they’re demanding that Graham’s new dungeon be set up near Turnera,” Kerry explained, folding his arms.

Belgrieve looked at the youths with surprise. “Why’s that?”

“Well, a dungeon’s got an economic effect, right? We’ve learned a good bit under you guys, and we’ve done our training, so we know how to fight. Instead of having everyone working the fields, I thought it would be good to have a different industry here.”

Barnes’ words had the youths nod in agreement. They evidently saw this as the perfect opportunity to make use of all their training. Now and then, Belgrieve had caught glimpses of the admiration they had towards Angeline’s achievements, and it wasn’t hard to imagine that the tales of her heroics in the capital had been the final straw.

“That explains this lineup.”

Belgrieve took another look around, convinced. No wonder all the people who would be knowledgeable in that field had gathered.

A dungeon in Turnera.

When Graham brought up the new dungeon, the thought had crossed his mind for the briefest of moments. But to Belgrieve, Turnera was his homeland; it was a world cut off from the dangers of adventuring, and he immediately erased that notion from his mind. Now that it was brought up again, perhaps it didn’t seem so bad after all.

“What do you think, chief?”

“I don’t think it’s a *bad* idea. But Turnera’s rarely ever had to deal with fiends before. There are a lot of folks who don’t want that to suddenly become a fact of life for us.”

“I don’t doubt it...” Setting aside the passionate youths with stars in their eyes, the rest were adults who had grown fully accustomed to the life they’d always known, of tilling the land and relying on the blessings of nature.

“But... It’s not like the villagers would all have to fight, right?” Angeline

hazarded.

Barnes nodded. “Of course not. But they’re going on about how they’re worried, and how it’s dangerous.”

“That’s obvious for any parent, fool. It doesn’t matter how old you grow, I’m gonna call it as I see it,” Kerry scolded.

With a pout, Barnes protested, “I’m not just gonna charge it like an idiot, idiot. Mr. Bell’s taught us all about that stuff!”

“It’s hard, being a parent...” Duncan muttered with a wry smile.

Percival’s eyes were closed in thought. As a child, he rebelled against his parents and became an adventurer. In his eyes, the children of Turnera were good kids—far too good, in fact.

Hoffman turned to Belgrieve with a sigh. “So how is it, really? I heard from Mr. Graham and the others, but will it really be all right if we make a dungeon in Turnera?”

When Belgrieve looked at Graham, the old elf nodded.

“If Graham says it’ll be all right, I don’t doubt it.”

“That’s right, Mr. Graham said it was fine! And so did Mr. Kasim and Mr. Percy, and even Mr. Duncan! They all agree,” one of the youths raised his voice, and the others chimed in as well.

As Angeline’s eyes met with Kasim’s, Kasim winked at her. *If he’s acting like that, then is there any need to worry?* Angeline wondered.

Kerry shook his head. “That’s not the point. Look, I know I shouldn’t be the one to say it, but Mr. Graham and everyone you brought up? They’re genuine adventurers. First-rate ones at that. Sure, to them, a measly dungeon is nothing. But that’s precisely why I doubt they can see it from the perspective of weaklings like us.”

Angeline’s heart skipped a beat at his words, and she was at a loss to answer. Sure enough, the adventurers here were all hailed as the best of the best, and they had slain countless fiends, each of which could have potentially brought massive calamity if left unchecked. But the majority of people would struggle to

even survive an encounter with even an E-Rank fiend. To such people, the economic benefits were irrelevant. A den of such fiends was only cause for concern.

The village youth insisted they weren't that weak, while the adults argued that their presumptions would lead them to an early grave.

"Bell didn't train you to go wild in a dungeon on a lark!"

"This isn't a game to us either!"

"You're being too hasty! Think about it rationally."

"We did! This is the rational decision!"

"You could die..."

"We've made our peace with that much at least."

"If you're calling it 'that much,' then you clearly don't get it!"

It wasn't that the adults were protesting out of stubbornness, but the youths were eager for something new, and would not concede a single step. It seemed like they would never reach mutual understanding, but gradually, it was the elders who began to give way. They had all once been young ones themselves, and not a single one of them could claim they hadn't once longed for adventure.

"In any case, we can't stop you from going into the dungeon. You've got the strongest teachers you could ever ask for, and you should be fine if you listen to them."

"Then..."

"But everyone else is anxious."

"Yeah, most of the people here don't want to even think about fighting fiends. We just want to live quietly, tending to our crops. Are you really just going to ignore those concerns?"

The youths struggled to answer that.

With this lull in the debate, Hoffman turned to Belgrieve for his opinion. "Bell, you know about life here, and about life as an adventurer. If there was a

dungeon near the village... Would it be dangerous for those who just want to go on with their normal lives? Will the fiends begin to flood out from it, or draw something dangerous in from the outside?”

When that happens, we’ll handle it—Angeline was about to say this, only to hold her tongue. As someone whose base of operations was in Orphen, she felt it best not to say something so impertinent. Not to mention, anything she did say would be from the perspective of the strong.

Belgrieve twisted at his beard as he thought over these concerns. Percival, Graham, and Kasim watched over it in silence, apparently entrusting the decision to him.

“First... I should start by explaining how dungeons are managed. A dungeon left to its own devices is dangerous. Fiends are drawn to or birthed by the mana produced by the core or the mana emitted by the boss of the dungeon. In order to stop them from getting out of hand, guilds all over the lands will keep a dungeon maintained, periodically culling the fiends within. As long as their numbers don’t grow too numerous, the fiends will not leave the dungeon, and there is oftentimes a barrier erected around the site just in case.”

This was something Belgrieve had read in a heavy tome he’d bought when he was a much younger man. Angeline remembered reading it too before she had first set off for Orphen.

“Then will it be fine as long as it’s properly managed?”

“Generally speaking, yes. Each time a report comes in from an adventurer who enters to survey it, the data for each dungeon is updated. This information is used as a basis to determine what rank of adventurer should get the job of thinning the numbers—this is one of the duties of an adventurers’ guild. The point is, we will have to constantly keep watch over the dungeon, but as long as we do that, it’s far less dangerous than you might think. In any case, I’ll continue to patrol as I always have. That should take care of the greater part of it.”

The faces of the youths lit up as they turned to each other and whispered among themselves.

Hoffman heaved a deep sigh and stared at Belgrieve. “I see. Hearing that from

you is a relief... So, Bell—are *you* onboard with this idea? Or are you against it?”

The question got the attention of the hitherto excited young men and women who were now staring nervously at Belgrieve. After all, given the mood, it was plausible that his word could be the deciding factor on whether the project went ahead or not.

Belgrieve closed his eyes. “It’s possible, is what I’ll say. We need to discuss it further before I can wholeheartedly endorse it, but as long as we can lay some appropriate groundwork, I think it would be fine. Moreover...”

“What is it?”

Belgrieve chuckled. “It would be far more troublesome if all these boys and girls turned rebellious and said they wanted to leave to be adventurers out in the world instead.”

Kerry burst into laughter, holding his rotund stomach.

“That settles it!” he said. “This is going to be a huge enterprise!”

“Good grief, it’s going to get busy around here... And we’re already at that busy time of year...” Hoffman scratched his head with a crooked smile.

Though the other village elders looked similarly conflicted, they were starting to come around. “Well, we can’t stop them,” one of them said, which seemed to be the emerging consensus. The village youths, for their part, cheered exuberantly.

This meeting turned out to be something incredible, Angeline mused. Her thoughts were still scattered, so she contented herself to take Belgrieve’s hand for the time being.

Amidst the celebratory ruckus of the youths, Percival and the others joined Belgrieve. According to Percival, it would have only complicated things if an outsider like him butted into the discussion. Angeline nodded. *No wonder they kept so quiet...*

Kasim cackled and patted Belgrieve’s shoulder. “Ha ha! Looks like you got the final say, Bell. It really sounds a lot more convincing coming from you.”

“Well, I understand their concerns, to be honest... This is truly a peaceful

place," Percival admitted, scratching his head.

Duncan nodded. "But the energy of the younger generation isn't something you can contain even if you wanted to. Still, Bell, it is going to get hectic from here on. We will need a proper organization to manage a dungeon."

"If the roads are maintained, then word of the new dungeon will spread and other adventurers will catch wind. We'll need to handle them somehow. Based on how it turns out, we might even need to build an inn."

"Sounds like business is going to be booming! We might get some cute young potential wives coming through."

"Like elves, perchance?"

Suddenly, the chapel was filled with laughter. Belgrieve looked around, troubled.

"Heh heh heh... You'll need to consider how you're going to sell materials and pay for the hunts too. If there's no money going around, it's not going to do jack for the economy," Kasim reasoned.

Belgrieve nodded. "Right. A source of funding, and... We'll need some good intel, a proper grasp of our dungeon's danger level. We'll essentially be doing the job of a guild. Someone will have to get all the moving parts up and running..."

Percival scoffed. "You'll do it."

"Huh...?"

"Yep, Bell's the right man for the job. Don't you think so, Kerry?" Kasim asked.

Kerry nodded through his laughter. "Right on. If this goes through, I was discussing with Percy and Kasim here about how you're the man we need to organize things around here. Well, good luck, Bell."

"Huh? Well, umm..."

"Dad! You're going to be a guild master?!"

Angeline excitedly tugged at Belgrieve's arm, knocking him out of his stupor. He shook his head. "H-Hey, wait, I've got nothing against pitching in, but I'm not

fit to be at the top of an organization like that.”

“If it were an adventurer party, sure, you’d be number two. But it’s not right to put a warrior like me at the top of a guild. There’s also your popularity in Turnera to consider. There’s no one more suited. Just give up.”

“N-No, but... G-Graham, you say something. Aren’t you a better fit?”

Graham, who had been standing silently, gave a rare mischievous grin. With a shrug, he said, “You gave the decisive argument, and now you want to shirk responsibility? That’s not like you at all...”

“What?!”

With a face of theatrical feigned anger, Hoffman patted Belgrieve on the shoulder. “Hey now, Bell. We practically made this decision because of you. I won’t let you run away now!”

“Th-This is not fair! Putting it like that is...not fair!”

As Belgrieve’s resistance faltered, his old friends laughed and prodded at him. This development had come as a complete surprise, but it was interesting too—and for Angeline, a delightful turn of events indeed.

My dad is becoming a guild master! Isn’t that wonderful?! she gushed as she latched onto his back. “You’re amazing, dad!”

“Ange...”

“Dad, I’ll help.”

“Even you, Mit...? Aww, hang it all.” Ultimately, Belgrieve let out a resigned sigh, twisting at his beard with a wry smile. “Fine, have it your way. But don’t just make me do all the work.”

“That goes without saying. I’ll handle the sale of all materials. You can count on me to negotiate with the merchants,” Kerry said with a laugh.

Kerry had undoubtedly become the wealthiest man in Turnera through his own business acumen, so he was the right man for that job. Belgrieve would instead need to decide on how other jobs were divvied up, and he would have to keep his eyes on the bigger picture.

That's the job dad is best at, Angeline thought, her chest puffed out as though she was the one receiving such a promotion.

Chapter 128: The Flower Buds That Covered

The flower buds that covered the hills and valleys bloomed all at once, arousing in everyone the drive to put their backs into their field work. After all, it wouldn't be long before they celebrated the start of spring.

The snow lingered in mottled patterns on the ground, but the leaves of the wheat in the field grew taller and taller as the crops bathed in the sun's abundant light. The snowmelt formed several brooks which flowed across the plain, contributing their swirls of murky water when they eventually flowed into the river.

Belgrieve and Duncan walked through the fields of sprouting young grass outside the village. Despite the heavy clouds looming in the west, the rest of the sky was clear and blue.

"We wouldn't want it too close to the village."

"Right... But it'll be hard to manage if it's too far away. If we want it a safe distance, we'll have to set up a surveillance post nearby."

"Hmm... Who would have thought that a dungeon was something that could be made? It never even occurred to me."

"Same here. Well, I won't really say we're *making* it. We're just using that orb to emit mana, and that *should* change the surrounding environment. It's more like we're creating an artificial mana coalescence, or like we're laying bait and waiting for something to fall for it. I doubt we'll be able to fine-tune it—whatever we get is what we get."

Dungeons formed naturally wherever mana was dense. If an agglomeration of mana formed for whatever reason, the environment would begin to change around it, distorting space and causing fiends to either be spawned or attracted—and thus, a dungeon would form.

Sometimes the center was a natural pool of mana. Other times, it was a fiend that possessed powerful mana. When the dungeon had a boss, it was usually the latter, and in those cases, defeating the boss would disperse the mana, and

the dungeon would cease to be.

Most of the dungeons that had existed since long ago—the ones that adventurers still explored—lacked bosses. The cores of such dungeons were periodically inspected, while herbs and ores influenced by the mana were harvested and fiends culled to ensure they didn't leave the dungeon's confines. From these fiends, one could collect pelts, bones, meat, claws, and fangs, among other resources.

There was a time when dungeons were a hell beyond human understanding and feared as nothing but a menace. But that time was long past. Through research, humanity had learned how to deal with them, and with the labor of many skilled adventurers, dungeons and their fiends had gone from a threat to a natural resource that produced resources as long as there was sufficient mana.

Still, until now, adventurers had always had to wait for natural dungeons to form. Naturally, many magicians—all excellent in their fields—had studied to devise a means of producing dungeons artificially. The big issue to overcome was that dungeons were fueled and maintained by mana, and there had been no means of providing a source of this mana. A researcher had once tried to crystalize dragons and other high-ranking fiends to serve as a dungeon core, but the result was far from stable.

Now Turnera had a mana generator known as Mit. Not that Mit needed to reside in the dungeons' innermost depths—the orb Graham fashioned would serve as the core, and the pendant Mit wore would transmit his mana to it. In a sense, it was as though the dungeon's boss was outside the dungeon managing it—a bit of an absurd notion.

Belgrieve twisted his beard hairs as he mulled this over. *It's nothing but one surprise after another, good grief...* Even just a few years ago, he couldn't have imagined any of this in his wildest dreams.

The village was suddenly bustling with energy. The lumberjacks, expecting that new construction was soon to come, enthusiastically set out for the forest, and the sounds of their chopping echoed from dawn to dusk. The carpenters dreamily pondered the blueprints for these new buildings. One wanted to try

his hand at a pub; another, an inn.

It seemed the prospect of a dungeon was being taken mostly favorably. The village youths were all in high spirits, and most of the village's leaders did want to see Turnera develop. The generation that came before them—the village elders—did admittedly have sour looks on their faces, as they had only known Turnera all their lives, and as much as they might have once yearned for the outside world, they were also fearful of it. The balance of aspiration and reticence tended to shift with age.

It was understandable that many were anxious that the lifestyle they had kept up for decades was suddenly going to change. The incident from the year before with the ancient forest made some of them far more fearful of fiends than they otherwise would have been. And, of course, there were those who frowned upon the adventurer lifestyle in its own right, which was unstable and dangerous. Even so, no one was strongly opposed to the project. Perhaps this was because even the most anxious members were still curious about what the outside world would bring.

"Even if things have to change... It would be better to do it slowly," Belgrieve muttered.

Turnera was inevitably going to change, but if that change came about too quickly, many folks would be left behind. The more adaptable ones would be fine, but others would easily find themselves cast aside, and that was something Belgrieve couldn't countenance. He kicked at a pebble, which made a dull clinking sound as it bounced off his peg leg.

Honestly, Belgrieve was still hesitant. He had given his approval back then, but now that they were at the stage where he actually had to consider the logistics of setting up the dungeon, he couldn't help but feel anxious. The words "a pillar of the economy" certainly had a nice ring to them, but dungeons were places where lives were at stake. Even if every measure was taken to ensure safety, there were no absolutes. Light injuries could heal, but what could he do about death? Even short of that, some injuries could be so severe that even returning to a life of farming might not be possible. Self-sufficiency was key in Turnera, and debilitating injuries were a huge blow to one's livelihood. Although Belgrieve had overcome his handicap, he had personally experienced

a very harsh time. It was presumptuous to think that everyone else would fare as well just because he had managed to overcome his injuries.

“It was because I had Ange...” Belgrieve mused. He heaved a deep sigh and shook his head.

Regardless of his thoughts on the matter, the gears had been set in motion. If he wanted to dwell on dark possibilities, he could go on for days, but he knew that wasn’t all there was to it. New things were always a mix of worry and hope.

The villagers’ joyous chatter about the dungeon fired up their imaginations and ideals; it would take a lot of work to turn some of their ideas into reality. But without ideals, reality would not be changed. Most of their time not spent on farming was whiled away on discussing what was and wasn’t possible, both out of serious consideration of logistics and just for the sheer fun of indulging their imaginations. It certainly added a bit of color to life in the countryside as he knew it, and the days just seemed to slip by.

Nothing else could begin without choosing the location of the dungeon though, and this wasn’t as straightforward as it seemed. Some insisted it had to be as far away as possible, both as a practical countermeasure against the unexpected and to alleviate the fears of the villagers. Others argued that ease of access was more important if the dungeon was to be of any value to their economy. Both arguments had their merits, and so Belgrieve was giving serious thought to the matter as he surveyed the land, walking circles around the village with Duncan by his side.

“We’ll have to discuss it with Helvetica before we really move forward too.”

“Helvetica... She’s the current feudal lord, isn’t she?”

“Yes. She is a wise woman. If a dungeon does appear, then Turnera—which has always been a remote region—may become a key economic center. If that is to happen, then it makes sense to consult the countess.”

“Indeed, that makes sense. It would be a hassle if some unexpected complication emerged after the fact, and she might be able to offer some advice in the meantime.”

“The snow has melted, so we may be heading off to Bordeaux when we have

the opportunity.”

Their discussion went on as they walked, and soon they had returned to the village’s entrance. The road construction that had started the year before was still incomplete, but the path extending out from the front gate was smooth and level for some ways.

They worked fast while we were away, Belgrieve mused, before spotting a wagon coming down that very path. It was a two-horse carriage with a tarp roof. The woman holding the reins waved her hand. “Mr. Belgrieve!”

He squinted until he recognized the blue-haired peddler he had encountered a good number of times before. She had an affable smile on her face. He waited there for the wagon to reach him, wondering what tidings she might bear.

The peddler leaped out of her seat as though she couldn’t wait long enough for the wagon to stop and grabbed Belgrieve’s hand. “You’re already back, I see. I was sure your journey would take years... Did you manage to reunite with your friends?”

“I did. I managed to settle a lot of things with your help. I’m glad you look well,” Belgrieve said with a laugh as he glanced at the wagon. The large, two-horse wagon was loaded with cargo. From within, a man and a woman peered out curiously—probably the adventurers hired for security. “Have you come to peddle your wares? You’re early.”

“Yes, that’s the thing. Despite everything, I’ve taken quite a liking to Turnera. The spring festival is coming soon, right? I think I’ll set up shop and take it easy until then.”

That’s good to know, Belgrieve thought, stroking his beard.

The peddler smiled at Duncan too. “It’s been a while since I saw you too, Mr. Duncan.”

“Ha ha ha! You were a big help.”

“I’m glad you look healthy. Is Ms. Angeline here too, by chance?”

“Yes, and all her party members too. Even Maggie’s here.”

“Wow, how lively! Heh heh heh... I’ve brought a great haul with me this time.

I'll need to let them all have a good look... Oh, that's right. I have a message from Countess Bordeaux—it's addressed to the village chief, but it should be all right to tell you, right?"

"Yes, I can pass it on... From Helvetica?"

"Right, yep. She said she was going to drop by soon."

"Speak of the devil..." Belgrieve narrowed his eyes suspiciously. *What peculiarly perfect timing...* But it worked out in their favor—this would be a good chance to include Helvetica in the dungeon discussions.

The peddler chuckled before adjusting her cap and climbing back into the driver's seat of the wagon. "I'll be in the town square. By all means, don't hesitate to stop by. I'll throw in some freebies."

"That's what I like to hear. I'll be dropping by later."

The wagon began on its way once more, entering the village. Sharp-eyed children quickly began to make a ruckus, crying out, "A peddler! A peddler!"

From the wagon, Belgrieve heard a voice. "Who was that man?"

"That's Mr. Belgrieve. Maybe you'll understand if I call him the Red Ogre?"

"Huh... You mean the Black-haired Valkyrie's—"

"That's the one. It looks like Ms. Angeline is back too, so I think you'll be able to see her."

"Wh-What do we do? I mean, I thought she was on a journey... I'm so nervous..."

They were probably adventurers from Bordeaux or Orphen, and they were clearly flustered to be in the presence of a big name they'd been told was gone. Certainly, no one could have predicted that Belgrieve and company would have warped directly to Turnera via teleportation magic. *When Ange returns to Orphen, I'll need her to tell the guild we got back*, Belgrieve thought, scratching his head.

"Why Bell, you've become a celebrity," Duncan teased, looking rather amused.

“Ha ha ha...” Belgrieve smiled wryly as he realized he was growing somewhat accustomed to the Red Ogre moniker. “We should get going too,” he said as he adjusted the sword on his belt.

“Right. I need to stop by the lumberjacks.”

“The demand for wood’s increased... Is it busy there?”

“Ha ha ha! Better than wasting time doing nothing. It’s a fulfilling life.”

Belgrieve parted ways with Duncan and returned home where he found Angeline drying clothes in the front yard. Anessa and Marguerite were working by the well, rinsing baskets and vines and sharpening knives. Everyone else seemed to be out.

“Ah, welcome back, dad.”

“Yeah, glad to be back.”

Holding a laundry basket, Satie looked up. “Welcome back. How was it? Did you find a good spot?”

“Couldn’t really say. Well, even if we do choose a place, there’s still a lot of work to be done after that.”

“I thought I’d have an easy life in the countryside, but to think adventurer work is chasing us all the way out here...” Satie mused quietly.

Angeline tilted her head curiously. “You don’t want it, mom...?”

“Well, I’m not at that age where I yearn for adventure anymore. Oh, but if we *do* end up running a guild, you’ll need someone to run the desk. Maybe I’ll end up doing that?”

“I get the feeling the village girls will want to try a hand at that too, but... It might be best if you do it initially, since you already understand the process.”

Anessa chuckled from over near the well. “An elf receptionist... That alone will cause rumors to spread in no time.”

“Mom would definitely be popular...”

“That’s troublesome. Bell is going to be jealous.”

Mother and daughter giggled together.

Belgrieve scratched his head. “Oh, by the way—the usual peddler is here.”

“The blue haired one? Oh, that’s big—I need to go see her.” Peddlers did not stop by Turnera in the winter, so the villagers all looked forward to the ones that arrived in spring. Angeline was no different, and even now it gave her a different sense of thrill than when she was shopping in the big city. “Can I...?”

“Yeah, we’re mostly done here. Go get ’em.”

“Ah! Wait! I’m coming too!” Marguerite called out as she got up, having finished honing her knife. Anessa was dragged along too, and the girls left in a hurry, leaving Belgrieve and Satie behind. They exchanged glances.

“Those young ones sure are energetic.”

“I guess so.”

“Bell, can you help out a bit?”

“Yeah, of course... Right, I need to put up supports for the beams. Are you free after this?”

“Sure am. Let’s get Byaku to help out too.”

“Sounds like a plan. Are the kids inside the house?”

“They started cleaning up around the fireplace on their own. They sure are hard workers, our kids,” Satie said, giggling.

Belgrieve laughed too. It hadn’t even been half a year since this new chapter of his life had begun, and yet for some reason, it felt as though it had always been like this.

○

Yakumo smoked her pipe, looking utterly blissful. The smoke she had been missing so dearly trailed off wispily into the sky before wavering and dissipating along the way. She breathed out a puff of smoke similar to a longing sigh. “Ah... What a delicacy.”

“Heh heh heh... You’ve been kept waiting a while, huh?”

“My thoughts exactly. Then again, thanks to that, the flavor is even more vivid than I remembered now. It’s far more delicious than when I smoked it out of

habit.”

“Good to know.”

“Do you want a puff, Kasim?”

“I’m fine. How about you, Percy?”

Percival, who had been sampling the dried meats, turned. “What?”

“Tobacco.”

“Hey now... Are you really asking me that? You know about my breathing problems, right?”

“Now that you mention it... You haven’t been coughing lately, so I almost forgot about that.”

“That’s quite a selective memory you’ve got, good grief... Well, sure enough, I’ve been doing pretty well lately. Must be all this fresh air,” Percival joked.

Even in the gaps between exhausting field work, the young men and women wanted to train with swords and magic. As Belgrieve was busy doing all kinds of work before spring began, Percival and Kasim took up the task of instructing them. They had been in the middle of one of these lessons in the village square when the peddler rolled in, putting everything on hold. Yakumo, Lucille, and Miriam had been with them to watch the training.

The youths who had never left Turnera underwent their training without a second thought, but had this been anywhere else but Turnera, there would have been folks who would have paid exorbitant fees for even the chance of becoming an apprentice to either of these masters. Frankly, most would have felt too shy and insignificant to even dare ask. To those in the business, S-Rank adventurers were rather difficult to approach. But the youths here showed no such timidity. Rather than seeing them as incredible adventurers, the people of Turnera were more prone to seeing these two simply as Belgrieve’s old friends.

Percival added some dried fruits to his purchase of meats and took a seat with Kasim some distance away. “Looks like everything changes completely once the snow melts.”

“Sounds about right. I came here around this time last year. Soon enough, the

mountains and the fields are going to turn green all at once.”

“That’s good. My eyes have been growing tired of all the blinding whiteness.”

“So... How long do you plan to stay in Turnera, Percy?”

“I haven’t decided yet. But there’s another journey ahead of me. I still need to hunt down that shadowy fiend.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“Well, I’ll help out with the dungeon for a while before I go... Do you want to join me?”

“What to do, what to do...? In any case, I don’t plan on staying in Turnera forever.”

“Ha ha... You have a girlfriend in Mansa, right?”

“Pretty much. After watching Bell and Satie, I’ve gotten an urge to see Sierra.”

“It’s your life. You do what you want... But Bell and Satie are no fun. They just take everything in stride. Hey, Yakumo, you think so too, right?”

Yakumo, who had come beside them before they knew it, puffed out some smoke and said, “Well, perhaps. It would be rather uncanny if Mr. Bell and Ms. Satie began flirting... But is it not because there are so many of us lodging in his house?”

“This and that are different things.”

Kasim clapped his hands together. “The spring festival is coming up, but how about we have a wedding while we’re at it? Keep it a secret from those two. If we make them the center of attention, I’m sure we’ll finally get a reaction.”

“That’ll be a riot. Let’s get Ange in on it too.”

Angeline suddenly appeared as though her name had summoned her, with Marguerite and Anessa training behind her. “Oh, it’s lively here.”

“Hey, save some for me!” Marguerite cried out as she rushed straight for the stall and dove into the crowd.

“Hey, no cutting in line!” they heard Miriam say.

Angeline, who had perhaps figured it would be a hassle if she went in after the two of them, opted not to head for the peddler's stall and instead joined Percival and Kasim. Anessa stared amusedly at all the hustle and bustle before joining in herself.

"What? So you came after all," Percival said, tossing a dried fruit into his mouth.

"You already bought something, Mr. Percy...?"

"Want some?"

"Sure." Angeline sat down between Percival and Kasim and nibbled on the dried fruit.

"Where's Bell?" Kasim asked, donning his cap.

"At home. The married couple, alone together..."

"That's good. But you know, they're not seeing any progress. So Percy and me, we were discussing dropping a wedding on them at the spring festival."

"Tell me more," Angeline answered, eagerly jumping on the suggestion like a cat with its favorite treat set out before it.

"Oh, you latched on fast," Kasim cackled. "Nice—we'll keep it a secret from those two while we get everyone else onboard, and come the festival, we'll have them proclaim their love in front of the priest. Sounds interesting, right?"

"Very. I'm sure dad and mom will be delighted."

"Right? So could you help pass the word on in secret? It would be quicker if you did the talking."

"Got it... A secret plan, heh heh... It will be a surprise."

"Well, personally speaking, I just want to see them all red-faced and bashful. As they are now, there's no worth in teasing them," Percival declared.



“Percy... Aren’t your motives a bit too impure?” Kasim teased.

“Hey, don’t act like you’re the good guy here. You were thinking the same thing.”

Kasim answered with a shrug and smiled. Angeline could feel the corners of her lips turning up in a grin. “You’re a troublemaker, Mr. Percy.”

“I am. I always used to tease Bell, along with this guy here.”

“Satie was onboard too. But Bell generally forgave us with a smile.”

“Still, it was fun to watch him react. You should have seen how high he jumped when we put that cricket in his bed at the inn. He was in a cold sweat and everything!”

“We were all holding our sides with Satie. We laughed so loud the folks in the next room gave us an earful.”

“Wait...” Angeline blinked. “The four of you were in the same room?”

“Just one time. Back when we were first starting out, we stayed in those communal rooms when our requests took us a long way from home, but Satie’s an elf, right? There were loads of people who picked on her. So, once we had enough, we decided even if it cost a bit of money, we’d rent out a private room. We decided who got the bed by drawing lots, and everyone else had to use our camping gear... Or at least, that was the plan.”

Yakumo’s eyes narrowed. “You may have all been in the same party, but teenage boys and girls staying in one room... There weren’t any mishaps, were there?”

“Well, hear me out to the end. Anyways, we calmed down the guy next door, and that really got us all awake, so we decided to share some drinks between us, and Satie fell asleep first. Thanks to the alcohol, her skin had turned pink, her clothes were a bit disheveled, and she was strangely sexy... There was a strange mood in the air.”

“Oh...?”

Seeing Angeline’s cheeks blush as she held her breath, Percival smirked. “What are you hoping for, idiot?”

“N-Nothing...” Angeline stammered, fidgeting.

Percival cackled, only to grimace as something got caught in the back of his throat. He pulled out his sachet and pressed it to his mouth.

He went on, “I’m sorry if you got your hopes up, but nothing happened. Our heads were a bit woozy from the alcohol, but it just felt, well...really awkward. So us three men, we left Satie behind and ran away to sleep in the communal room. Right?”

“Yep, pretty much. So, the next morning came around, and the innkeeper pressed us to pay for using the communal room. We desperately negotiated, saying we’d already paid more than that for the private room, but that didn’t change the fact we’d used the communal room, and we ultimately had to shell out for it.”

“What, that’s it? How idiotic. Wimps, the lot of you,” Yakumo teased.

“Seriously, it was nothing but idiotic things with us.” Kasim sighed. “Maybe that’s why we were always penniless.”

“I don’t know, that was interesting in and of itself. It was a restrictive life, but it was also fun to wrack our brains trying to work out what we could do with what little we had. I don’t really get to do that, nowadays.” Percival put his sachet away as his gaze became distant. If he wanted to earn money now, he could earn as much as he wanted. As an adventurer, he was known across the lands, so there was hardly any opportunity for him to rely on ingenuity or planning to get by. Sometimes, he would think back to when he first started out with meager savings and he would go around to the cheapest shops possible and haggle his heart out, knowing one extra coin wasted could be the end of him.

Angeline gave an understanding nod.

“That’s rich, coming from an S-Rank...” Yakumo said, breathing out a cloud of smoke. “I like it best when it’s easy.”

“Sure, easy is nice, but... I can’t say which is better.”

“It’s a luxury that you can even talk about it, heh heh heh.”

“Well, that aside, where were we... Right, it’s boring if they stay the same blockheads they were back then. As the leader, that’s one thing I won’t

forgive.”

That was when Marguerite joined them in high spirits, a bottle of liquor in her hand.

“Ange! She said she’d give me a lift to Orphen again! Anne and Merry too! How about you, Ange?”

“Oh, right... That would be quickest.”

They’d all come to know the blue-haired peddler, and they would be at ease hitching a ride on her wagon. *But will she be able to take this many people?* Angeline wondered for a moment. She’d have to speak with the peddler to verify for sure.

“Hey, what did you buy there?” Kasim asked.

“The strong stuff. It’s been a while since I last drank my fill.”

Percival beckoned her over. “Hey, come drink over here. You become an accomplice too.”

“Huh? What is it? What are you plotting?”

Marguerite darted over to Percival’s side and was soon fired up over their schemes for the festival. Evidently, she loved these sorts of things.

Having gotten a good look at all the wares on display, Anessa, Miriam, and Lucille joined the rest of them and were soon similarly invested in plotting. Out of sight of Belgrieve’s watchful eyes, the vile schemes of his old friends were gradually taking shape.

Chapter 129: The Once-Frosted Ground

The once-frosted ground was now host to a sea of green grass. Whenever the wind swept over the plains, the blades of grass would catch the light of the sun like bright, shimmering waves.

After the treading of the seedlings late last year, the wheat stalks were emerging from the soil and reaching for the sky. Under the weight of the winter snow, they had spread their roots for the spring, in time for their second treading under the farmers' feet. This would encourage their roots to grow firmer and, ultimately, yield a more bountiful harvest.

With the last vestiges of winter gone, the only white dotting the plains now were the sheep which were finally unleashed onto the world to gorge themselves on the fresh foliage. After subsisting through the winter on dried hay, this was a greater feast than anything for the livestock.

With only a day left before the spring festival, the wheat fields were ready, the seed potatoes were buried, and now most of the village was solely focused solely on preparations for the big event. Unlike the fall festival, the spring festival was mostly for the villagers themselves. Still, they did get some outside visitors. There would always be a certain number of peddlers with goods to sell in northern lands as soon as the snow melted, so the square was already lined with a handful of their stalls.

Amidst this bustle of activity, prep-work for the festival food was underway. Large pots were dragged out, and gathered root vegetables and wild herbs were rinsed of dirt and then peeled. Households with good cooks kneaded dough and folded in dried fruit to make sweet breads. Some of the older goats and sheep were slaughtered, and the barrels of apple cider were brought out of storage. While the adults were occupied with these preparations, the village youths and children were fishing from the river.

This was a celebration of thanksgiving, of gratitude for having safely overcome the long winter. Food stores were not nearly as plentiful as they had been last fall, but there was enough to put together a feast nonetheless. Eating

and drinking their fill would give the villagers the strength to begin all the laborious work that followed winter's repose.

The village's young men were quite enthusiastic about tackling all the jobs that depended on physical strength, so Belgrieve and Satie mingled with the village girls and missuses in the village square, peeling the skin from the root vegetables. Many of the potatoes that had been stored all winter had gone bad, so these had to be carefully picked out. Angeline and her comrades had gone to forage for wild greens near the mountain, while Percival and Kasim seemed to be off on their own doing something elsewhere. Yakumo had gone fishing, while Lucille was having fun matching her tunes with some of the village's better musicians. Lastly, Graham was looking after the children.

"Stew and wheat porridge, right?" Satie asked while peeling a potato.

"Yeah. Then fish, grilled meat, and sweet bread."

"Sounds nice. And to finish it off... Well, I'm sure the traveling peddlers will bring in a few things."

Distilled liquor, pork from the nearby village of Rodina, salt-cured sea fish—peddlers would bring various goods that were otherwise never seen in Turnera. Belgrieve had once been thoroughly put off by one such import—even now he still found it difficult to use ingredients that had, like those salt-cured sardines, been brined for too long in his cooking. At most, he would use them essentially as a seasoning to make soup stock.

Putting aside that particular memory, Belgrieve was rather fascinated by the sight of Satie so masterfully doing prep work, given that she had once been such a terrible cook. Belgrieve idly watched her at work, humming a tune to herself, until she seemed to notice his attention.

Satie's eyes turned to him "What?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"Nothing... I was just thinking that you really did learn how to cook."

"Seriously, you're still on about that? How many times have you eaten my cooking already?"

"Ha ha ha—sorry, my bad. You just left quite a strong impression back then."

“Yeah, yeah...” Satie grumbled. “Let’s finish up quickly, shall we?”

The village girls working nearby immediately began to giggle amongst themselves at that comment.

“Right, let’s hurry and free up these two.”

“It’s interesting to watch Mr. Bell fawning like that.”

“Seriously, to think Bell of all people would get married. I still can’t believe it!”

“You got yourself a good man, Satie.”

“Uh-huh, I know, right? He’s my lovely hubby.” Satie grinned mischievously and winked at Belgrieve, whose cheeks reddened a bit as he awkwardly scratched at his head. It seemed nothing had changed—he was still weak to her.

About the time Belgrieve’s group had nearly finished peeling all of the potatoes, Angeline and her party members returned to town with a heaping harvest of fresh sprouts, root stalks, flower buds, mushrooms, and more. The mountain contained many treasures if one only knew where to look. “I’m back!” Angeline called out.

“Welcome back. Wow, you really gave it your all, didn’t you?” Satie observed.

“Hee hee... It’s for the feast...” Angeline explained, giggling.

“Huh? Where’s Maggie?” Belgrieve asked.

“Still in the forest... She said she’d definitely find some morel mushrooms no matter what.”

“Hmm... Well, I guess there’s no need to worry about her.”

It was impossible for an elf to become lost in the forest, and with Marguerite’s skills, she would be able to fend off any fiend that came for her. The most Belgrieve could do was pray she found some delicious mushrooms.

“What’s next? We should rinse them, right?” Anessa asked, holding up her basket.

Belgrieve nodded. “That’s right. Wash them—and how about we use a bit for today’s lunch?”

“Then for starters,” said Miriam, “Maybe we should just wash everything, then divvy it all up. Let’s go, Anne.”

“Yeah, we’ll be back soon.”

Anessa and Miriam took their baskets to the well, but Angeline seemed more keen on helping out here, so she stayed behind and joined the ring of village girls and ladies. Her hands busily worked even as she partook in the meandering discussions among the women. The sight of one forty-year-old bearded man among them was rather strange.

With all of the village’s women gathered there, the work was done quickly, though the sheer quantity of tubers made it a daunting task even with so many helping hands. The work had started in the early morning but was still ongoing even at noon. Once they were finished, the meat and vegetables would be slowly simmered overnight, to be enjoyed throughout the next day’s festivities.

By the time the prep-work was completed, the cooking pots were all filled with ingredients, and the flames beneath them were blazing, the village square was filled with the sound of footsteps and wheels beating upon the ground. Belgrieve glanced over at the commotion to see the arrival of a carriage bearing the insignia of House Bordeaux. “It’s the countess! Lady Bordeaux is here!”

“Sir Belgrieve!” Helvetica leapt from the carriage before it had even come to a stop.

“Hey! Wait!” Seren exclaimed as she leaned out from inside the carriage in a panic. The unexpected exit of the two sisters caused the driver to hurriedly pull the carriage to a stop; Helvetica, completely unfazed by the chaos she had caused, ran up to Belgrieve and grabbed his hand.

“I didn’t think I’d find you here! Weren’t you out on a journey?”

“Yes, well, I managed to achieve my goal sooner than expected. You look well, Helvetica.”

“Thank you. Oh, Angeline. It seems that everyone’s here.”

“Helvetica, it’s been a while... You haven’t changed.” Angeline greeted her with a handshake and a serene smile.

“Sis, please don’t do anything crazy,” Seren pleaded with a weary look on her face as she joined them.

But Helvetica was undeterred, turning to her sister with a beaming smile. “I mean, I wasn’t expecting I’d be able to see him. Aren’t you happy too, Seren?”

“I am. But you should think twice before jumping out of a moving carriage!”

“Oh, you say that, but I remember *someone* jumping off of a moving horse.”

“Ugh...” Seren’s face flushed red in embarrassment.

Does tomboyishness run in the Bordeaux blood? Belgrieve wondered as he greeted her with a smile. “You look well too, Seren.”

“Urgh... Yes, well, I am still being dragged around, same as usual.” Seren fidgeted, rubbing her fingertips together.

Angeline, chuckling, threw her arm around the girl’s shoulders. “I’m glad you’re getting along... Where’s Sasha?”

“Sash is patrolling somewhere else. Things tend to be hectic early in the spring, so we usually split up to cover more ground.”

“And even when we do that, it’s still hard to visit every town and village. We couldn’t come here last year, so I knew I just had to come this time around!” Helvetica said as she grabbed Belgrieve by the arm.

The winters were harsh in the north, and it wasn’t unheard of for some villages’ stores to not hold out until winter’s end, leaving them to suffer the torments of starvation. To alleviate this, the lords of many territories routinely visited as many places as they could come springtime to check up on each village and enact relief efforts where appropriate. That said, it was unusual for a lord to do so personally. The fact that the countess *did* visit many of the villages herself was a factor in Helvetica’s immense popularity within the Bordeaux territory.

Helvetica took in the village square with a beaming smile on her face, before her eyes beheld Satie. “Oh my, is this elf related to the Paladin?”

Belgrieve began to answer. “No, her name is Satie, and—”

“She’s my mother,” Angeline cut in.

Helvetica tilted her head to the side as she processed this. “Huh... then that means...”

“Yes... She is my wife as well,” Belgrieve explained bashfully.

Helvetica looked at him with a blank expression, while Seren, though seemingly surprised as well, soon lit up animatedly at the news. “Sir Belgrieve, you got married? Congratulations!”

“Much appreciated. Honestly, it still hasn’t really set in for me...” Belgrieve said, when he felt a sudden weight on his arm. Belgrieve looked down to see Helvetica wrapped around his arm with all her might. She looked up at him through teary eyes, her face red and cheeks angrily puffed out, almost like a child mid-tantrum.



“That’s cheating! When I was so busy working, you went and found yourself

someone new?!”

“N-Not at all...”

“Hmm... You’ve wooed yourself quite a young girl here, Bell. What a charmer,” Satie crooned, smiling as she prodded him in the back. Her strange composure only made her seem more eerie.

Belgrieve turned to her in a panic. “You have it all wrong—I’ve never thought of her like that!”

“You even kissed me! Was that just a joke to you?!” Helvetica cried, incensed.

“H-Hey, Helvetica?! That was just on the cheek!” Belgrieve protested frantically.

Angeline and Satie simply looked on at the drama, smiling sweetly, while the rest of the village’s women laughed uproariously. Just before things got any more out of hand, Seren grabbed Helvetica by the nape of her neck. “Give it a rest already!”

“I mean...” Helvetica sulkily pouted.

This weak protest earned a frustrated sigh from Seren. “No, not even if you make that face. He was never taking you seriously to begin with.”

Helvetica held her face in her hands. “Urgh... It was my mistake to take it easy because I was sure I had no competition... *Grr*...”

Angeline put a comforting hand on Helvetica’s shoulder. “Mom is one of dad’s old comrades,” she explained. “You’ve heard about his former party before, right? The game was rigged from the start, heh heh...”

“Really... They must’ve been devoted to one another for a long time, then.”

“It’s all right... I’m sure you’ll find a good man in no time.”

“Why are you so happy about this, Angeline... Ah, for crying out loud...” Helvetica heaved a final sigh and shook her head resignedly. “Indeed, whining about it won’t get me anywhere... Belgrieve, Satie, congratulations. You have my blessing.”

“It’s an honor.” Belgrieve bowed his head, relieved.

Satie chuckled, “Heh heh... Thank you. You must have good taste if Bell caught your attention, madam countess.”

“Yes, I do pride myself on being a good judge of character.”

“But I’m not giving him to you.”

“No, of course not. I don’t need for him to be given to me.”

“Oh, how stubborn.”

“Ha... I consider myself a very sore loser.”

Helvetica seemed to have regained her composure, and Satie was as unflappable as usual amidst this rather ominous conversation. Belgrieve was beginning to look pale when Kasim and Percival suddenly returned.

“Hey, it’s lively in here. How’s the food coming along?”

Relief washed over Belgrieve. *I’m saved!* “We’re making it now. What were you two doing?”

“That’s a secret,” Percival said evasively.

“You’ll see, heh heh heh... Oh, if it isn’t the countess.”

“Kasim, was it? It has been a while.”

“What? The countess? This little girl?” Percival seemed skeptical as he was introduced to the sisters. Belgrieve explained to him that they would have eventually met to discuss the dungeon.

Percival nodded. “I see. I heard about you before, but you really are young.”

Helvetica smiled and curtsied elegantly. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Yeah, a pleasure. I hate nobles, but from what I’ve heard, you don’t sound like a bad person.”

Satie stared holes into Percival. “Percy, you’re being rude. You’re like a cranky old man.”

“Oh, shut it.”

Helvetica and Seren giggled.

“I don’t mind,” Helvetica said. “I appreciate his honesty.”

“Heh heh heh... Looks like that little girl’s a lot more mature than you,” Kasim teased.

“That’s rich coming from you. So do you have time for a discussion?”

“Why of course. But what’s this about a dungeon? Was there a new one discovered in the area?”

“We’ll have to start by explaining that, but it would be best to include the village chief... Ange, sorry, but could you go find Graham? Tell him we’ll be at the chief’s house.”

“Got it.”

“What about you, Satie?”

“I’m not that interested. I’ll stay here to cook and finish up lunch. Hurry back before the meal gets cold, okay?”

“I see. I’ll try to make it quick.”

In any case, there was little point in dawdling around the square. Leaving the sisters’ baggage with their attendants and guards, Belgrieve and the others led Helvetica and Seren to the house of Hoffman, the village chief. Hoffman was in the yard, bathing a horse. As soon as Hoffman spotted Helvetica, he frantically wiped his hands clean and bowed his head.

“Well, if it isn’t our gracious countess...”

“It has been a while, chief.”

In contrast to Helvetica’s affable smile, Hoffman continued to reverently bow. Though the blue-haired peddler had warned of the countess’s arrival some time ago, he was always nervous in her presence.

As had become his custom, he brought a table and some chairs out into the yard for everyone. Beautiful flowers were in bloom on the hedge surrounding the yard, rustling gently in the spring breeze. Before the preparations for this meeting were complete, Angeline had arrived with Graham, and Mit as well.

Even among children with no connection to the adventurer lifestyle, the

illustrious stories of the Paladin were well-known as faerie tales or bedtime stories. Helvetica initially stiffened at the sight of the legend himself dressed not unlike a housewife with children all around him, before she burst out in laughter. Graham, stoic as ever, ignored her laughter and lightly bowed his head, still holding a baby in his arms.

“It is an honor to meet you... I am Graham.”

“Hee hee... The honor is all mine. My name is Helvetica Bordeaux.”

“Long time no see, Graham.” Seren bowed her head, still laughing.

“I apologize for appearing like this... The children simply refuse to leave me.”

“Oh no, it’s quite all right.”

Amidst this lighthearted mood, the assembled group took their tea and made small talk until the topic turned to the dungeon. At this point, Mit’s identity could no longer be kept under wraps. But Helvetica was trustworthy, so they opened up to her about the boy’s circumstances. The sisters were clearly surprised, naturally, but they trusted Belgrieve and Angeline implicitly—not to mention Graham’s sterling reputation—so they did not pursue the matter.

The explanation continued on to the details of the mana crystal Belgrieve and company had obtained in the course of their journeys, and how Graham had crafted a special tool out of it. Helvetic, her hand held to her mouth, gazed at Mit appraisingly. For his part, Mit simply looked back at her blankly.

“Then...you mean to use little Mit’s mana to create a dungeon?”

“That is the desired result. There is no precedent for this, so we cannot speak with any certainty.”

“I am not surprised. I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“So, how about it?” asked Kasim. “A new dungeon shouldn’t be a bad deal for Bordeaux.”

Helvetica smiled. “Honestly... It’s troublesome.”

Her answer elicited wide-eyed reactions all around. “Helvetica... Are you that frustrated that dad rejected you?” Angeline asked, leaning closer to her over the table.

“H-Hey! Don’t make it sound like I’m just being spiteful”

“You’re not...?”

“Absolutely not! Ahem...” After clearing her throat, Helvetica looked around the table before explaining herself. “First, if this object really is as convenient as you say, then quite honestly, I would prefer it be used somewhere closer to Bordeaux. After all, it’s safe to assume that you can adjust the danger level of the resulting dungeon based on Mit’s mana output. On the off chance that something *does* happen though, it would be easier to deal with if it was nearer to one of the larger guilds.”

“Understandable. That’s what we were thinking at first,” Belgrieve acknowledged.

“Huh?”

Belgrieve told her how their initial plan had been to set it up near Bordeaux, and that Graham had been preparing to go and speak with her about it.

“But our youths here made it clear they wanted a dungeon in Turnera. It will certainly be an economic boon for us... But more than that, we felt it would be better placed here to provide them with a reason to stay in Turnera rather than seeking adventure out in the wider world.”

“Ah ha... I see. It seems their admiration for you and Angeline has really grown.”

Belgrieve smiled wryly. “I can’t deny that... But that’s the main reason. Of course, there are some who aren’t so keen on having a dungeon near the village, but none are openly opposing it now.”

“That’s the scary part, Belgrieve.” Helvetica looked at him with perfect seriousness. “Discontentment tends to build itself up over time. Even if resentment isn’t out in the open, the human heart is liable to blow up without warning. There hasn’t been a real issue yet, so things are still quiet. But consider this—a dungeon’s a place for people to come and go, right? If you want it to bolster your economy, it’s inevitable that somebody other than your young villagers are going to want to challenge it. Realistically, you cannot avoid adventurers coming in from the outside.”

“Well, of course. But what’s the problem with that?” asked Percival.

“Let’s say Turnera was always a trade hub—then it probably wouldn’t be an issue. But Turnera is a *farming village*. It’s so small, even *I* didn’t know it existed until I heard the rumors of sir Belgrieve.”

Angeline appeared puzzled. “Um... What are you getting at?”

“The fact is that, until now, very few people have ever come to visit Turnera, and the new influx of traffic *will* produce a reaction—rejection of outsiders. A farming village’s culture is attuned to peace and stability—that is fundamentally at odds with the drive of adventurers to seek change and stimulation. I have no doubt in my mind that this clash of values will cause problems.”

“Please wait a second. Turnera isn’t that exclusionary,” said Kasim. “We’re outsiders ourselves, but they kindly accepted us.”

“I imagine that is owed to your connection to Belgrieve. Kasim, Percival—you came here as Belgrieve’s old comrades. I assume *all* of the outsiders currently residing in Turnera—each and every one of them—had Belgrieve to endorse them.” Helvetica turned to Hoffman.

The old chief closed his eyes and scratched his cheek. “That’s true... It’s not just Kasim, Percy, and Satie. Graham and Duncan also fit the pattern, with Belgrieve to mediate for them... But no—it was mostly because they were good people that we embraced them.”

“Naturally. But if you make a dungeon and if you come to manage a guild, it’s quite possible that you’ll get adventurers with absolutely no relation to your village coming in—real scoundrels, some of them. It’s practically a certainty. So for all of the villagers who *don’t* see the dungeon in a positive light, even trivial issues will cause their discontentment to grow. Even if no real trouble ensues, some might be disgruntled just by the way the atmosphere around the village changes. But that’s not all. If outsiders come in with the express purpose of taking advantage of their ignorance, there will be little that can be done to salvage the damage that will cause. The village could eventually fall apart.”

“Are Graham and I not enough to keep them in line?” Percival sullenly asked.

But Helvetica was unwavering. “You are very reliable fighters. But this isn’t an

issue that can be resolved by cutting a couple thugs down to size. Even if it were—are you going to be on your toes every hour of every day?”

Percival silently closed his eyes. As a seasoned adventurer, he wasn’t so hotheaded as to stubbornly insist he could do the impossible.

“H-Hold on, Helvetica!” Angeline frantically interjected. “I understand what you’re saying and why those would be major problems... But all of that is still just conjecture. If all of those problems really are a given, no one would ever be able to do anything new... And there won’t be *that* many bad people, and if *they* do show up, we have dad and gramps—”

“It was that sort of negligence that paved the way for Count Malta’s plot to overthrow Bordeaux.”

Angeline and Belgrieve were rendered speechless. They knew Helvetica wasn’t being malicious—from her own bitter experience, she was trying to consider what was in Turnera’s best interest. So it was difficult for them to come out too strongly against her, given their part in that affair.

Helvetica, seeing the troubled looks on everybody’s faces as they turned to each other, giggled and clapped her hands together. “Now that you understand the potential problems, shall we now approach the topic more constructively?”

“Huh...?”

Everybody stared at Helvetica wide-eyed again, but for a different reason than before.

“Helvetica...” Angeline murmured timidly. “Weren’t you against it?”

“I said it would be troublesome—I *didn’t* say I was against it,” Helvetica clarified with a mischievous smirk.

Kasim held up both hands in surrender. “Well, you’ve got me there. That’s a countess for you.”

“When it comes to dungeon management... It just goes to show that politics trumps swordsmanship. I tip my hat,” Percival said with a bitter smile.

Angeline pouted, staring at Helvetica, then at Seren. “Did you see this coming?”

Seren nodded, giggling. “Sis’s eyes were sparkling, you see. I was certain she was onboard.”

So that’s why she stayed quiet the whole time... Belgrieve scratched his head. This time, the sisters had got one over on them.

Graham—who, like Seren, had a vague grasp of the situation and had remained silent—finally spoke up. “Do you fear that the discontentment of the villagers will be directed at Bell and those around him?”

“Hee hee... You got me. It might be a bad way to put it, but although the chief and the village youth would also be implicated, all this dungeon talk is centered around the outsiders. If a problem does arise, those outsiders would make for a convenient scapegoat upon which to vent some frustration.”

“No, we... Well, I can’t exactly deny that possibility,” Hoffman said, deciding to hold his tongue. The fact that Belgrieve had once been treated rather coldheartedly made him hesitant to speak in any absolutes as to how anybody would or wouldn’t behave.

Belgrieve patted him on the shoulder. “It’s nothing you have to worry about, chief.”

“Despite everything I said,” said Helvetica, “I do think there is something a bit different about Turnera from other villages. So maybe—just maybe—my fears are completely unfounded. Still, you can never be too sure.”

Belgrieve nodded. “It’s only natural to be concerned. That is your duty as countess.”

“She’s right about Turnera being different. I mean, back when Mit disappeared, each and every one of them wanted to rescue him, right? I’m sure it will work out,” Kasim said, chuckling.

“So, countess...” Percival began, leaning towards her. “What do you think we should do, specifically?”

“Right now, you’ve already agreed on the dungeon at a village meeting, right? That means whoever brought up the topic will end up taking responsibility. The fact that it was Belgrieve makes me a bit anxious.”

“Percy was the one who initially suggested it, though...” Angeline chimed in. Percival averted his eyes.

Helvetica chuckled. “Anyways—sir Belgrieve is the one in a position of responsibility. If he had someone standing above him... For instance, if he was under House Bordeaux’s direct command...”

Belgrieve gave an understanding nod. “I see... Rather than being a village initiative, it would be framed as being under House Bordeaux’s direct management.”

“That’s right. It will be difficult to completely mitigate any resentment, but still...” Helvetica trailed off before taking a sip of tea, and Seren took over.

“It sounds presumptuous to say, but the authority of House Bordeaux is not to be taken lightly. I think that might be enough to stop any burgeoning discontent from spiraling into a major issue.”

For better or worse, Turnera was set in its ways. The villagers had the dignity of being the descendants of pioneers, but they also viewed themselves as country bumpkins, obedient to the countess and other nobles. It would be far easier for them to accept a direct decree from House Bordeaux. In Bordeaux, a strong cooperative relationship had already been established between the countess and the adventurers’ guild. It wouldn’t be so difficult to extend that relationship over to Turnera.

“But if you do that...won’t you need to send someone from Bordeaux over here?” Belgrieve asked.

It seemed as though Helvetica had been waiting for this question the entire time. “Why of course,” she said, theatrically laying a hand over her puffed-up chest. “That’s why I will personally change my base of operations to Turnera.”

“What are you saying, sis?!”

“You think I can’t? We *do* have Ashe to manage things back home.”

“Of course you can’t! There will be all sorts of problems if the countess is absent from the central domain. You’ll have to appoint someone else!”

“I see. Then you do it, Seren.”

“Huh?!”

“I’ve long thought it was time you got some experience managing a town or village. If it’s Turnera, you’ll have Belgrieve and everyone else to support you, so I’d be leaving you in good hands.”

“Y-You can’t just spring this on me so suddenly...”

“We’ll welcome Seren with open arms!” Angeline happily exclaimed, wrapping an arm around Seren’s shoulders.

Seren was fidgeting. “That’s... Well, of course, I always thought the time would come... But Turnera has Hoffman as their current chief, so to have a young lady like me step in would be...”

“Worry not. If someone as dignified as lady Seren were to come here, then someone like me would just step aside...”

“B-But...”

Belgrieve mulled the situation over before offering a suggestion. “Why don’t we keep Hoffman as the chief for now, and instate Seren as his aide?”

“Right, that should prevent rocking the boat. Seren, do you have any objections to this?” Helvetica asked.

“No, not exactly...”

“Then it all works out. It’s not like I’m telling you to stay in Turnera forever—they’re grasping for a new normal here, so lend them a hand with that. It should be a good experience for you.”

Seren closed her eyes and sighed. “Understood... But not immediately. I need to prepare a few things.”

“That goes without saying. It’s not like the dungeon will be operational right away either. Right, Belgrieve?”

Belgrieve smiled wryly and nodded. “We’re amateurs in that field... We’ll have to lay a bit more groundwork before we activate it.”

“See? It’s all right. I’ll drop by now and then to see how things are going.”

“Are you sure that isn’t your main objective, Helvetica?” Angeline asked

warily.

The countess answered by peevishly sticking out her tongue at Angeline.

“Things are starting to look up,” Percival said, laughing. “It’s more reassuring than just having all us adventurers and former adventurers taking care of it.”

“Well, there’s no need to rush things now. Pleasure doing business with you, Seren.” Kasim grinned as he twirled his cap on one finger.

Hoffman looked relieved. “Then we can say the matter is settled for now. Lady Helvetica, tomorrow is our village’s spring festival—please feel free to attend.”

“Thank you—I’ll gladly take you up on that.”

It’s one surprise after another... Belgrieve mused as he took a sip of the now-cold tea. Graham smiled, satisfied at the outcome of the negotiations, while Mit curiously gazed at everyone else. The conversation had largely gone over the boy’s head.

Angeline, smiling from ear to ear, embraced Belgrieve’s arm. “Seren’s going to be the chief! That’s amazing!”

“It is.” Their connection stemmed back all the way to when Angeline had saved Seren from bandits. *For it to have led all the way to this...* Belgrieve smiled. *Now then, it’s time for lunch.* Thus, he led everyone back to the village square.

The sun was high in the sky, and it was fine weather indeed.

Chapter 130: The Morning Sun Shone Down on the Plains

The morning sun shone down on the plains, and the glistening, dew-tipped grass thoroughly soaked Belgrieve's boots and the cuffs of his trousers. He let out a deep breath, which lingered in the air for a moment as a white puff before slowly dissipating.

Belgrieve was out on his usual patrol. It was the morning of the spring festival, but he wasn't about to miss out on his morning ritual. It wasn't so much a sense of duty that drove him as it was a matter of routine to him; he would feel quite unsettled if he didn't get it done.

"Dad..." Angeline came up from behind him and grabbed his hand. "The weather's nice."

"It is. I'm glad we've got clear skies this year."

The air around here was hazy and gray, but the sky was becoming strikingly blue and clear as the sun rose higher. The villagers all did their best to put together as good a feast as possible come the start of spring, but after spending all winter sheltering against the cloudy winter skies, perhaps the ceaseless warmth of the sun was the greatest feast of all.

Angeline yawned beside him.

Belgrieve smiled. "You're leaving tomorrow, right, Ange?"

"That depends on the peddler, but... I think so."

They'd already talked it over with the blue-haired peddler—once the spring festival was over, she would hitch a ride back to Orphen. Presumably, all the peddlers that had come to Turnera this time—around ten carriages in all—would band together into a large caravan for the journey south.

Angeline hugged Belgrieve's arm. "So... You know, I think I'll work during the summer...and come back for the fall festival."

"Ha ha... Didn't you say the same thing last time?"

“Last time, I couldn’t come home because I was summoned to Estogal. This time I’ll be back for sure. Then, we’ll all pick cowberries together...” At this point, missing out on that seemed to be the only regret Angeline was leaving behind in Turnera.

Belgrieve chuckled and patted her on the head. “Yes, let’s do that... By then, I think all this talk of dungeons will have settled down.”

“Hee hee! I can’t wait.”

The youths of Turnera had gotten a bit more worked up over the dungeon than was good for them, but Helvetica voice of realism had cooled their ardor, for better or worse. Although the adventurers currently in Turnera boasted peerless strength against fiends, managing a guild was a different story, and might in combat wouldn’t get them far with that.

It’s a good thing the countess is understanding and cooperative... Belgrieve mused as he stroked his beard.

“I’ll head back first...” said Angeline, as though she’d just recalled something. And with that, she was jogging her way down the hill.

Belgrieve saw her off before taking a deep breath, and smiled wryly. Angeline was plotting something—he could tell, more or less. It was also clear that Percival and Kasim were in cahoots with her. Given the members of this conspiracy, he knew nothing good would come of it, but it was a little cute to see his daughter acting so unsubtly and suspiciously. *Well, I guess I’ll keep my peace and let her pull one over on me...*

Pure white mist rose off of the plains under the sun’s warmth. The wind, as though to blow it away, began to pick up, and ruffled Belgrieve’s hair and mantle. He thought back to the morning of the day he left Turnera, when he was a younger man, and remembered climbing this very same hill. Though it had been autumn at the time, the sun had shone through the morning mist just as it was doing now, and he remembered the sight of the damp grass glistening like stars.

He could see smoke trailing from chimneys over the village, and knew it wouldn’t be long before the church held its service. Belgrieve tapped his peg leg against the ground twice before slowly making his way back down.

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A new barrel of apple cider was cracked open, and the sweet aroma of alcohol filled the air. Opening up cider casks that had been filled in the fall and left to mature through the winter was one of spring's delights. Even though they were all made mostly the same way, each years' vintage had a subtly different flavor, and the barrels could change it as well. Some would turn out to have a high-class taste, while others would be sour, and still others would have just a hint of bitterness—but for those who had braved the long winter, every vintage tasted like celebration.

Once the church service was over and Belgrieve went to the village square, the feast was already afoot. The harvest had been stable in recent years, so it wasn't that difficult to survive through winter anymore—but that hadn't always been the case. Old tales of pioneers passed down from the village elders told of those who had perished for lack of food stores, and others who had frozen for want of fuel for their fires. Back then, the coming of spring and its warmth was truly an occasion for gratitude.

Perhaps their thanksgiving now was incomparable to that of their forebears, but it was nonetheless a joyous event. After all, it was still the season of beginnings, and beginnings were always what set the heart astir. The villagers exchanged glasses of cider while unreservedly offering thanks to Vienna, the spirits, and the souls of their ancestors.

"Yes, it turned out quite nicely this year."

"Better than that stuff I sampled before. It's nice and strong now."

"Have some of this, Lady Helvetica."

"Thank you."

Naturally, the countess and her sister were in attendance, drinking when the sun was still high in the sky.

As the fine smell of meat and fish cooking in the fire wafted over everyone, the village's talented musicians (accompanied by Lucille) began to play a tune. The ensemble of string instruments, flutes, and drums kept a joyful rhythm as children leaped around to the tune. Byaku—who had long since been accepted

as everyone's older brother—was reluctantly dragged around by the younger children into their dance, a long-suffering look on his face.

Amidst this folk orchestra, Lucille's voice and six strings could be clearly heard, standing out from the rest. The carefree rhythm of the south blended with the customary northern tunes, resulting in a rather fresh performance of classic material.

"Shake, shake, baby... Yakky, c'mon."

"Hmm? Oh... You want a trick from me. Yes, very well..." Yakumo set-down her half-empty cup of cider and arose, taking her spear in hand. She walked around a bit until she spotted a small ball the children were playing with and picked it up. Then, she tossed it up in the air and skillfully balanced it on the butt of the spear.

"Now, everyone stand, one and all. I may be an adventurer by trade, but I have some skills from a bygone time. Come, watch the dance of spear and ball—see how they meet and how they part."

With this eloquent introduction, she tilted her spear shaft and let the ball roll down it. Just as it seemed like the ball would topple to the ground, Yakumo skillfully turned the spear, and it was as though the ball had naturally fastened itself to the shaft. A light tap sent the ball flying through the air, where she caught it once more. It spiraled down the length of the spear before rolling down her arm and shoulders, behind her neck, and then all the way to the opposite side. With her spear slung across her shoulders, the ball returned to the shaft again and was soon airborne once more.

With her feet, she kicked it up, then kicked it again, and a third time, after which it came to rest atop her head. She launched it up and caught it on the tip of the spear's butt end again. With immaculate balance, though the ball swayed this way and that, it never seemed in danger of falling. The ball's seemingly lifelike movements and Yakumo's elegant, dancing maneuvers elicited loud cheers from her audience.

With her routine completed, Yakumo bowed her head and tossed the ball over to a nearby child. Immediately, the other children flocked around to inspect it, loudly trying to discern if she really had enchanted it with the breath

of life.

“Amazing! You’re pretty skillful, Yakumo...” Angeline enthused, clapping her hands as Yakumo took a seat beside her.

“What? That much is nothing.”

“No, that was really incredible,” Anessa chimed in. “Were you a street performer?”

Yakumo set her pipe between her lips before answering, “Something like that. That was when I was just starting out, before I got any decent work. I’d sometimes do it even after I’d climbed the ranks just for a change of pace, and to earn a bit of pocket change. That’s how I met that pup over there.”

“Oh!” Miriam laughed. “I see, so that’s what brought you two together!”

Come to think of it, with one coming from the far east and the other from the south, they really were quite a disjointed pairing. Angeline had never found the right timing to ask why they’d become a team, so it was a surprise to find out it had been because of street performing.

Yakumo breathed out a cloud of smoke, then gently leaned in close to Angeline. “So what became of all your vile scheming?”

“It’s not vile... And it’s going to start soon.”

“Hmm? Well, I don’t know the first thing about marriage ceremonies. What does it entail, exactly?”

“Mr. Percy and Mr. Kasim said we have to get them to kiss in front of everyone...”

“Those old men are beyond saving.” Yakumo sighed and tapped the ashes from her pipe.

Naturally, Angeline and her fellow conspirators did genuinely want to celebrate Belgrieve and Satie’s marriage. But they wanted just as much to see the otherwise levelheaded couple rendered speechless and bashful.

It wasn’t as if their plan went to any great lengths. Once they saw the opportunity, they’d drag those two to the front, and have the villagers cheer up a storm—that’s all there was to it. But in order to achieve this, they had secretly

gone around to nearly every resident of Turnera before today. Whether this was earnest or foolish was still yet to be seen, but in any case, they would use the pretext of the lively festivities to tease the two of them and ultimately bring them closer together. All told, it was a rather simple and haphazard plan.

Angeline sampled some apple cider while she absentmindedly looked about the square. Satie was watching over the twins and Mit, who were jumping around to the music, while Belgrieve was talking about something with Percival, Kasim, Kerry, and the other older men.

Of all the times for them to be apart... Angeline puffed out her cheeks, annoyed.

Meanwhile, Seren came over to join her. “Angeline, is this seat taken?”

“No, go ahead...”

Seren looked relieved as she sat across from her. Miriam held out a jug of apple cider invitingly; Seren, in turn, held out her cup to be filled.

“Must be hard, being the new chief in town,” said Miriam.

“Oh, don’t tease me like that... It came as a complete surprise to me. I’m still a bit befuddled.”

“It’s not like it’s happening right away. Do you really have to worry about it that much?” Anessa asked.

Seren smiled awkwardly. “On the contrary—it might have actually been easier if I was appointed here and now. I might have been carried along by momentum, if nothing else. Now that I have time to prepare, I’ll end up overthinking things...”

“It’s good that you’re taking it seriously. There, there.” Angeline reached out and patted Seren’s head. Seren writhed ticklishly, though she didn’t seem all that dissatisfied.

“Wait, where’s Helvetica?” Anessa asked, looking around.

Snapping to, Seren quickly did likewise. “She was just over... Ah.”

They could see that Helvetica had snuggled up next to Belgrieve and was offering to pour some cider for him. Though his smile was strained, Belgrieve

did not turn down the offer, to the amusement of Percival and the other men around them.

“Sis!” Seren cried out in a panic, racing over to intervene.

Yakumo chuckled. “She fully intends to steal him away, even when she has no hope of victory... What a gutsy lass.”

“Curse you, Helvetica! Just because dad is kind... I won’t forgive you!”

Angeline was about to shoot up to give vent to her fury, but was held down by Anessa and Miriam.

“Even if you ‘don’t forgive her,’ what exactly are you going to do? Just sit down.”

“Yeah, leave it to Seren. It’ll just get complicated if you go out there, Ange. Hold your horses.”

“I mean...” Angeline groused.

Yakumo laughed at Angeline’s evident discontent. “No need to be so prickly. And sometimes, love burns brighter when you have a rival.”

“Oh, sounds like someone’s speaking from experience!” Miriam teased with a grin.

Yakumo blinked, taken aback, before looking away. “Forget you heard that.”

“Oh, what’s this? Did I hit the mark?”

“Did you have a bittersweet episode in your life?”

“I want to hear it...”

As the three girls closed in on her, Yakumo made a bitter face and blew a puff of smoke. They waved their hands to clear it away.

“Quit bothering me, you hecklers... Anyways, you’re all far younger than me—surely you must have a tale or two among you, huh?”

The three exchanged looks.

“Nope.”

“Yeah, no...”

“I’ve got nothing...”

“Oh...”

All three girls seemed a bit sad at the end of that exchange. *I guess they’re at least aware of their situation*, Yakumo thought. She wasn’t quite sure whether it was okay to laugh at them. She had a conflicted look on her face as she emptied her pipe again.

It was then that Marguerite, holding three skewers in each hand, joined the group. She cocked her head to the side, perplexed. “What’s going on over here?”

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Despite Seren’s attempts to pull her away, Helvetica was still resolutely parked near Belgrieve and refused to back down a single step. “It’s not like I’m going to take him, so what’s the harm? Now Belgrieve, another cup.”

“Uh, sure...”

“Sis, you shouldn’t act so thoughtlessly.”

“Oh, is pouring a drink for someone considered thoughtless now?”

“Uh, Helvetica... No matter how strongly you come on to me, I’m already...”

“Come on to you? Heavens no. Is it so bothersome for me to express my feelings of affection?” she asked with a radiant smile.

When she put it that way, Belgrieve couldn’t bring himself to push her away. He was all the more hesitant given it was Helvetica he was dealing with.

Belgrieve glanced over to Satie some distance away, where she was looking after the children with Graham. She wasn’t even looking in his direction; in fact, she seemed perfectly calm and collected. He felt the strange suspicion that she might have been testing him somehow.

Kasim waved around his empty cup, chuckling. “You’re one shameless miss, you know that? Heh heh heh... How about you pour me one too?”

“Yes, with pleasure. How about you, Sir Percival?”

“It’s not every day you get a drink poured for you by a countess. Still, you’ve

got nerves of steel there. You'd make a fine warrior—it's almost a waste you were raised as a noble lady."

"Hee hee! My father often told me that. But from the bottom of my heart, I'm grateful that I'm a woman," Helvetica said, winking cheekily at Belgrieve.

Belgrieve scratched his head awkwardly. The most he could do was to laugh it off. It felt like this tiny woman was running circles around him.

"My goodness... I never thought I'd see Bell in this situation," Kerry mused.

"Popular guys have it rough," Kasim added.

"What are you saying? Good grief..." Belgrieve stole a glance at Helvetica. She met his gaze with a radiant smile.

Belgrieve put a hand on his brow. *If only I could be stern at a time like this...* Even when he resolved himself to speaking his mind, he found himself hesitating as soon as he looked her in the eyes. He knew it had to be done, but he was loath to make anyone unhappy with his words. He had managed to fend Helvetica off easily enough when she had come to recruit him into government service, but it was like she had transformed in the time since. Back then, she had the demeanor of a young girl; now, it was like she had found the determination to wield her own innocent aura like it was a formidable weapon. He was no longer dealing with a child, but the sort of person Belgrieve was terrible at handling.

That didn't mean he had any intentions of being swayed by her though. He was positively disposed towards Helvetica, but as a friend; it had absolutely nothing to do with romance. He wanted to put his foot down, but he couldn't. Feeling quite vexed, Belgrieve polished off his cider only for Helvetica to immediately pour him another one. He didn't even know how many it had been by now. Perhaps the drink was getting to him, as he felt himself growing a bit numb in the back of his mind.

"Hee hee... You handle your drinks well. Now, another..."

"Sis, give it a rest already. You need to mingle with everyone else too, not just Belgrieve."

"Ahh! Hey, Seren—I get it, I get it, so quit pulling me!"

Seren had finally run out of patience and promptly began leading Helvetica away.

Relieved by this salvation, Belgrieve caught his breath before turning a glare on his grinning friends. “Why am I even friends with you people...”

“Don’t put this on *us.* This is something for *you* to overcome,” said Percival. “You’ve got a wife, so why are you fawning over a young girl, huh?”

“I wasn’t... Is that how it looked?”

“Why of course,” said Kasim. “Your face is bright red.”

Percival grinned and stroked his chin. “The Red Ogre is getting all red.”

“No, that’s from the alcohol... Ah, whatever.” Belgrieve sighed before chugging another cider. He hadn’t had anything else to drink for a while now, which only made him thirstier.

Kerry examined the cider as it swirled in his glass, his eyes narrowed. “Well, you’ve always been a gentle soul, you have... But you know, you need to settle these things cleanly, and quickly, or you’ll just make it worse for Helvetica. Don’t let her harbor any undue expectations.”

“I know... I’m hopeless...” Belgrieve’s throat felt dry as he drained yet another cup.

“And why are you always so quick to put yourself down? How about you take a page out of Duncan and Hannah’s book?” Percival patted Belgrieve on the back right as Belgrieve was pouring himself another drink, causing him to splash a bit.

Belgrieve licked the spilled beverage off his hand and glanced over at Duncan and Hannah in the ring of dancers. Duncan didn’t seem very accustomed to the dance and fumbled around with peculiar steps as Hannah led him by the hand. “I’m glad it worked out for them.”

“Don’t act like it’s got nothing to do with you, Bell. You should dance with Satie.”

“No, I don’t really dance...”

Kerry laughed. “What are you talking about? Doesn’t Ange drag you along all

the time?”

Belgrieve scratched his head. His throat was parched—surely the alcohol’s fault. Or perhaps he was feeling too tense and impatient. *Impatient? About what?* It was no use, his head was growing hazy. He’d drunk far more than he was used to.

Time flew by with more drinking, eating, and teasing. Gradually, the sun reached its zenith and began its trek back down and the sky reddened little by little.

Belgrieve, driven to overindulge in cider by his thirst, felt more inebriated than he had been in quite some time—not so much as to result in a stupor or dozing off on the spot, but he did feel a bit hazy, almost like he was floating just above the ground.

“Kasim...water...”

“What, it’s rare to see you like this.” Kasim seemed a bit taken aback as he poured water into Belgrieve’s cup. The man was a heavy drinker himself, and his complexion was no different from usual. Percival, who could more than match Kasim’s pace at drinking, had a look of amusement on his face.

“But this is a good opportunity. Hey, Bell. Come with me for a second. Kasim, get Satie.”

“All right, here we go.”

“Huh... What?” Belgrieve cocked his head curiously as Percival urged him to his feet.

Belgrieve’s mind, even dulled by cider, began to turn this over. *Come to think of it, these two were plotting something with Ange...* He hadn’t known any of the details of their scheme, but he had a terrible feeling about this.

As Percival dragged him along, the surrounding villagers seemed excited about something or another. He heard someone say, “I’ve been waiting for this!” and to his surprise, he realized that almost everyone seemed to be in on it.

Without any idea of what his friends had done, he was pushed before the

crowd to join Satie, who had also been brought there and was looking around nervously.

“Satie...”

“Ah, Bell. What’s this? What’s going on here?”

“I don’t really know either.”

They shared a moment of confusion until Hal, Mal, and Mit appeared, led forth by Charlotte.

“Satie, bend down.”

“Hurry, hurry.”

“Huh?” Satie murmured, but did as she was commanded. A large necklace of flowers was placed around her neck, and she was crowned with a floral wreath. The vibrant color of the spring flowers complimented her features. The children gave a satisfied nod at their handiwork.

“Cute!”

“It suits you.”

“We made it together, right?”

“We split up to gather flowers! Mom, you look lovely.”

“Ha ha, thanks...” A faint, maidenly blush graced Satie’s cheeks as she placed a hand on her floral crown.

Belgrieve looked at her, stunned, until Percival patted him on the back. “So, what are your thoughts?”

“Huh? Oh, well, I think it suits her very well.”



“I see. That’s great. Hey, priest! It’s up to you now.”

Father Maurice came out with a peculiar look on his face, taking Belgrieve by surprise.

“Ahem... Bell, Satie, congratulations. May you have the blessings of Almighty Vienna.”

“Yes... Th-Thank you... What is this?”

“Well, Percy and Ange said that you two ought to have a proper wedding ceremony, and they did have a point.”

So that’s what they were doing, Belgrieve thought, smacking his forehead.

Satie gave a troubled laugh. “A b-bit late for that, aha ha... This is a little embarrassing...”

“Oh? It’s rare to see Satie blush like that. Heh heh heh...” Kasim teased, clearly trying to rile her up.

Satie pouted. “You little... You’ll always be children.”

“Mom, give it a rest...and accept your blessings.” Angeline had stealthily appeared by Satie’s side and took her hand.

“Even you, Ange...? Okay, fine. Are you okay with this, Bell?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Though they were calling it a ceremony, there wasn’t much to it. In most cases, a couple would head to the church, proclaim their love before Vienna, and receive her blessing. The main point was the oath shared between a married couple, and the finer processes and details were not set in stone. Thus, the couple resigned themselves to it and stood before the priest.

“Umm... So Bell’s my husband... Right?”

“Yeah... And that makes you my wife.”

Father Maurice cleared his throat. “Very well, then do you recognize one another as husband and wife? Do you swear your love to Almighty Vienna?”

“Yes...”

“I swear it.”

“Really?” A cold voice cut through the noise. Belgrieve looked over to see Helvetica standing there boldly.

Angeline frowned. “Helvetica...”

“You’re still at it, sis...”

But Helvetica resolutely pushed both Angeline and Seren out of the way as she stormed up to Satie. “No, this is something I have to say! Just by looking at the two of you, I can tell that you both get along. I think you’re a good fit for one another. However—how can I be expected to just back down when I keep seeing this strange sense of distance between you?”

Satie blinked. “Uh... Sorry? Huh? Are you angry at us?”

“Yes, I am livid! At least make it so I can give up! I can’t accept it if you act like you’re only together because you went with the flow! I’m going to steal him if it’s going to be like this! Honestly!”

Things were starting to get interesting, and the surrounding crowd began to whisper excitedly amongst themselves. Percival and Kasim looked at each other as if to say, “This was completely unexpected.” Meanwhile, Angeline and her party members fidgeted without any idea of what they should do.

Belgrieve closed his eyes, spending a moment in thought. Finally, he said. “Sure enough... You might be right, Helvetica. I just went with the flow.”

“Huh... D-Dad?” Angeline looked at him anxiously, the question of whether her parents actually loved each other causing her heartbeat to spike. She found herself anxiously clutching her chest.

Belgrieve locked eyes with his wife. “Satie, I love you. No... I’ve probably loved you for a long time. Ever since we first met. I’m a blockhead, and I’m a dullard when it comes to the feelings of others, as well as my own... But I know I definitely love you. It’s not just because of Hal and Mal, or because of Ange... I want you by my side because of *you*. Would you become my wife?” With that, Belgrieve gently held out his hand.

“Ah, umm...” Satie fumbled over her words, her pale skin flushing red even to the tips of her ears. Finally, she gave a small nod and took his outstretched hand. “I...love you too... Bell... I want to be with you...”

The village square was silent. Everybody was looking on with bated breath.

The tension was broken by Lucille strumming her instrument. “Congrats, baby!” she called out In a sing-song voice—and the villagers broke out into loud cheers.

“Hey! Bell! I didn’t know you could be so passionate!”

“We’re drinking tonight!”

“You’re already drunk.”

“Congratulations, Bell!”

“Good for you, Satie!”

“Congrats to both of you!”

“Congratulations!”

“Be happy, dammit!”

Belgrieve smiled awkwardly as his friends and neighbors clung fast to him. Satie cracked up into laughter, still red from ear to ear. The village children tossed flowers into the air as the band struck up yet another lively performance.

Helvetica looked on at the celebration with a soft smile before turning on her heels to leave—calmly at first, but her steps gradually hastened. The further she got from the crowd, the more her smile crumbled, and she could no longer hold back her tears from falling.

“Agh... I lost...” she murmured, sniffling.

“Oh, my lady, are you all right?”

“Heh heh... Looks like you got shot down. That’s a shame.”

She had stumbled upon Percival and Kasim, who had likewise fled from the crowd, looking somewhere between slightly amused and above it all.

Helvetica blew her nose and brushed away her tears with her fingertips. “There wasn’t much I could do. Belgrieve and Satie have a strong bond—their past.”

“You have my gratitude, though,” said Percival. “It’s thanks to you that Bell finally got over it.”

“But it kinda feels like we’re the losers in all this. Dunno why, but it just feels like he outdid us.”

“Well, not much we can do. That just goes to show that Bell was more of a man than we thought.”

“Helvetica!” Somebody called out loudly. Suddenly, Angeline and Seren were racing towards them.

“Umm...uh...” Angeline said, lost for words.

Helvetica smiled graciously. “Don’t worry. It’s quite all right, Angeline. I wouldn’t have been able to come to terms with it otherwise.” Helvetica had always been able to obtain anything she ever wanted—that was simply a reflection of the power of her family, and of the wit she had been blessed with. It was precisely because of this that she was all the more devastated when things didn’t go her way.

“Sis...”

“Come now, Seren. Don’t make that face. I may be a fool, but it’s the fool’s part to smile to the end.”

“You’re a strong lassie. Well—go on, drink up. It’s at times like these that the strong stuff works wonders.”

Helvetica accepted a small cup filled to the brim with distilled liquor and downed it in one gulp, choking a little. Then she stumbled forward and captured both Kasim and Percival’s arms.

“Uh... What?”

“This is a celebratory drink... I am not drinking away my sorrows!”

“Hello? Helvetica? Can you hear me?” Kasim waved his hand in front of her face. Helvetica glared at him with glassy eyes.

“You’re sticking with me today, mark my words. It’s because of your foul plot that I ended up with a broken heart!”

“So you *are* drinking away your sorrows.”

“Pardon?”

“I-It’s nothing...”

The glare of the young countess had managed to strike the two middle-aged S-Rank adventurers silent. Helvetica scoffed before turning to Angeline. “Angeline! You’re coming along too, of course! Seren, bring a cup.”

“S-Sis, calm down...”

“Don’t worry about it! Drink—that’s an order. Angeline! The bottle!”

Angeline chuckled and picked up the liquor bottle. “I’ll happily accompany you, countess...”

“Very good! What are you all grumbling for?! Percival, Kasim, drink, I say! Can you not hear what I’m saying?!”

“Y-Yes ma’am...”

“I’ll have some.”

The two older men reservedly held out their glasses.

“Huh? Something’s going on over there!”

“Just when I thought everyone had disappeared somewhere.”

“What are you doing? Let us in on the fun!”

They were joined by the sharp-eyed Marguerite, with Miriam and Anessa in tow. Their little party was quickly getting lively. Meanwhile, the rest of the village, egged on by the passion of the wedding, still had many hours of festivities ahead.

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The sun was about to set even as the feast continued in the village square. Although the large pots of stew and wheat porridge were nearly drained, the villagers kept a firm hold of the festival’s tail and were unwilling to let it go. It seemed like nobody wanted to head home just yet.

And yet, Belgrieve had stealthily snuck away from the merrymaking, and out

of the village entirely. Even though spring had come, the wind was still chilly around sunset, and he had raised the collar of his cloak to protect his nape from the cool breeze.

There was a soft sound as the wind rustled through the young grass. *Is it the wind or the grass that's making sound?* He wasn't quite sure. The sun had concealed itself beyond the high western mountains, which now cast their shadows over Turnera. The ridge line had become a clear dividing line of light and dark, the blue mountain surface becoming little more than a silhouette that loomed above them.

Belgrieve climbed all the way to the top of the hill, where he sat down and took a deep breath. The cool breeze was pleasant against his inebriated face. He felt it had been a rather hectic day, all told.

"I wasn't in my right mind..."

It felt as though he'd said some terribly embarrassing things, and Belgrieve was red in the face at the memory of them. Though the drink had played a part, he was still amazed that he'd said such things at his age, and in front of such a crowd. He felt a tightening in the pit of his stomach, which was partly why he had fled from the festivities.

The quiet of dusk was broken by the sudden sound of another pair of feet trampling the grass.

"Heh heh... What are you doing alone?"

There she was—Satie, her silver hair trailing in the wind. She had already removed the necklace of flowers from around her neck.

Belgrieve quickly pasted on a smile. "I just wanted to sober up a bit."

"You did drink a lot, ha ha... There we go." She lowered herself down beside him. Her silver hair and white garments looked almost iridescent in the twilight. Satie hugged her knees to her chest and rested her chin atop them, her body curling up. "Looks like it's still cold when the sun sets."

"That's because the wind passes straight through here. It makes it even colder." Belgrieve exhaled and sat up straighter. "Once upon a time, back when I first left for Orphen, I climbed to the top of this hill. You can get a good view of

the whole village from here.”

“I see... It is a nice sight.”

They could see that somebody had started to light the bonfires down in the square, and smoke was soon billowing up into the sky.

“This...really is a good town,” Satie said.

Belgrieve smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“It’s your homeland, so I was never worried about that... I was a little scared at first. I thought they might not accept me. But everyone was incredibly kind. They opened up in no time...”

“That’s because you wanted to accept them all in return. They could tell.”

“You think so? But Graham’s here too, and so is Maggie. Maybe they’ve just become used to elves.”

“That too.”

“Heh heh...” she giggled while looking at him.

Belgrieve stared back, curiously. “What is it?”

“Well, I was just thinking... I’ve received quite a passionate confession, haven’t I?”

Belgrieve blushed bright red all at once, and he reflexively buried his face in his hands.

Satie laughed as she ruffled up his hair. “What’s done is done. No need to be embarrassed about it now.”

“I know, but... Why did I...?” Belgrieve murmured from behind his hands,

Satie pouted slightly. “Then...you regret saying it? Or did you say it without any thought?”

“Of course not... Well, I admit the cider helped. It’s embarrassing because it was all true... And in front of so many people... Ugh...”

“It’s coming back to me now... Yeah, that was embarrassing,” Satie mumbled faintly, before gently snuggling up against Belgrieve.

“Yeah...”

They were both silent for some time after that.

Satie settled her body against Belgrieve’s side. He could feel her warmth on his shoulder and arm. Slowly, he moved his arm and wrapped it around her shoulder. She was quivering from the cold, or from something else. Belgrieve pulled her closer. Her face turned towards his. Even in the dim light, he could clearly perceive her pale skin blushing shyly.

Their faces drew nearer, and then came the softness of her lips, and a sweet scent. Belgrieve saw himself reflected in Satie’s emerald eyes.

She laughed sheepishly. “Heh heh, you reek of alcohol...”

“You too...”

The distant sound of the festival reached them faintly on the breeze. Their hands wrapped around one another’s backs.

The darkness descended; their two silhouettes became one.



Chapter 131: The Wagon Caravan

The wagon caravan traveled through the hills and valleys now brimming with the signs of spring. The caravan was led by a carriage bearing the crest of House Bordeaux, followed by the wagons of peddlers. Mounted soldiers were arrayed protectively around the wagon train, though for some reason, the most closely guarded happened to be a peddler's wagon near the center of the procession.

As a matter of fact, the Bordeaux carriage at the front was currently empty, while this particular peddler's wagon was livelier than it had ever been. Angeline's party (and Marguerite) had been joined by Helvetica and Seren—hence the added security on top of the two adventurers that the peddler had initially hired to guard her wares. By hiding the Bordeaux sisters in with the peddlers, nobody would suspect that this carriage was anything other than part of the merchant's caravan.

Angeline idly shifted about and sat up straight as the wagon clattered along. From the wagon behind hers, she could hear the strumming of an instrument. Because this wagon was full, Yakumo and Lucille had to ride in another one.

With the reins in hand, the blue-haired lady peddler spurred on the horses, which were struggling against the steep uphill incline. "I guess this is a bit too much weight..."

"I'm sorry for insisting on it," Seren said, apologetically lowering her head.

"Oh, n-no, not at all."

"But it is a bit packed in here. I mean, we've got plenty of wagons, right?" Marguerite pointed out.

"Then do you want to go somewhere else, Maggie?" Miriam asked with a mischievous smirk.

"Hey, quit trying to kick me out of the group!" Marguerite puffed out her cheeks and leaned back against the wagon's wall as if to insist she wasn't going to move an inch.

Angeline stretched out languidly, then glanced out at the scenery they were

passing by. “A fine spring day... It’s getting warmer.”

“Traveling outdoors is much easier. I adore this season,” Seren gushed, eliciting nods from everyone else. There wasn’t a single soul in the north who disliked the spring.

Two days had passed since the spring festival. After helping with the cleanup and talking things over among themselves, Angeline and her party had set off from Turnera. The busy spring days had come again, but she could almost still catch a hint of the festival’s aroma lingering in the breeze. As reluctant as was to leave, she also felt that she had been away from Orphen for far too long. Thus, she had settled on returning here in the coming fall.

The matter of the dungeon seemed like it would take some more time. Seren was going to be serving as the chief’s aide—or rather, his proxy. Figuring out the specifics of the dungeon would have to wait until she was officially installed. Hence, the village was abustle once more as construction began on her new house in the village. The carpenters knew they couldn’t display any shoddy craftsmanship for the home of their acting administrator, the sister of the countess. They were motivated by equal parts tension and giddiness as they worked out the blueprints and calculated out the number of raw materials. Work on the highway had resumed as well. It seemed like all sorts of things were going to change—but that didn’t feel like a bad thing. Angeline’s anxiety about the future was outweighed by her expectations. She grinned as her mind turned over what may come of it all.

Helvetica giggled. “You’re an open book, Ange.”

“That’s my selling point.” Angeline said. She bashfully averted her eyes, unable to keep up the boastful pretense.

For some reason or another, Angeline had always been blunt and cold towards the countess, but Angeline had opened up to her when Helvetica had attempted to drown her sorrows, and they had since warmed up to one another. Before then, they hadn’t been close enough to share a drink, but Helvetica proved to be a rather hyperactive drunk, and she was soon a bit too much for Percival and Kasim to handle.

Perhaps this episode was what Helvetica had needed to vent some of her

emotions, as she was restored to her usual cheerful self the next day and interacted with Belgrieve and Satie as though nothing was amiss. Everyone had been taken aback by that.

Helvetica leaned against the side of the wagon and gazed out at the sights with a dignified look on her face. She didn't seem to be put off by simple wagon's lack of soft cushions, which were customary to the carriage of a noble. She reached her arms out to stretch, her eyes contentedly closed. "Ah, it really is fine weather."

"Hey, Helvetica," said Marguerite.

Helvetica cocked her head. "What is it?"

"You're pretty cheerful for someone who got dumped. I guess the booze helped?"

"Whoa. Maggie boldly goes directly for it, huh..." Miriam remarked with a weary laugh.

Helvetica giggled too. "Well, there's that. But the point is, I think I was like a child who didn't get the toy she wanted... I was sad at the time, but... Looking back on it now, I guess it wasn't that big of a deal after all."

"Huh? Is that how it works? Like you've lost interest?"

"Hmm... Well, it's not like I've come to dislike Belgrieve or anything... How should I put this? Perhaps it's more that I like myself for loving someone like him? Well, I guess there was a bit of that... Somewhere in my heart, I knew I was never really going to win."

"Well... He did turn you down more than once," Seren noted.

Helvetica smiled bitterly. "Belgrieve is about the only person who could so obstinately decline an invitation from me. That's why I wanted him so badly, I'm sure. You know, the harder it is to obtain something, the more appealing it is, right?"

Angeline pouted. "My dad isn't a piece of merchandise..."

Helvetica laughed and closed her eyes again. "Yes, precisely. Just like that, I had completely failed to see Belgrieve for himself."

“Isn’t that...a huge mistake for a countess to make?” Anessa asked.

“Perhaps. But as a woman... Well, you know.”

“What, so you are depressed after all? That’s a relief.” Marguerite guffawed, folding her hands behind her head.

Helvetica pursed her lips. “What’s a relief?”

“I’m just saying, you don’t need to put on a good face in front of us. We’re friends, right?”

Helvetica blinked her eyes, taken aback. Then, she burst into laughter. “Hee hee! Oh Maggie, you sure are honest.”

“I’m not sure I could describe Marguerite as impudent... I mean, she is technically a princess,” Anessa chuckled, prodding at Marguerite.

“Huh? What? Did I say something strange? Hey!”

“You’re asking me? No, I think you said something nice,” the blue-haired merchant answered, a bit nervous at getting dragged into the discussion.

Helvetica heaved a deep sigh and sat up a little straighter. “Right... I’m surrounded by pleasant, reliable friends. This is a blessing.”

“I suppose that’s your popularity at work, huh, Helvetica?” Miriam teased.

Helvetica smiled fearlessly. “I sure hope so. As for Belgrieve... To look at it from a different angle, we now have two excellent instructors taking up permanent residence within our territory, not to mention his connections to several other prominent figures... Eventually, Turnera will become the northernmost stronghold, and the talents that it fosters will bring prosperity to all of Bordeaux. It’s an investment in our future, in other words. My broken heart? That’s nothing in comparison.” Helvetica’s sudden chatterbox turn caught everyone by surprise.

“R-Right... I see,” Angeline nodded, then held out both her hands to Helvetica. “Lady Helvetica, you are resolute... But you don’t need to act tough. Here, I’ll lend you my chest... Now cry into my voluminous bosom.”

All eyes fell upon Angeline’s “voluminous bosom” area. No one said a thing.

“Why are none of you saying anything?”

“How long until Rodina again?”

“At this speed, we’ll make it within the day... We’ll be there around evening.”

“Hey, why are you changing the topic...?”

“Ange, can you pass the mint water?”

Angeline, looking rather dissatisfied, fished around in her bag for a bottle of mint water and tossed it over to Miriam.

“*Ahh*...” Marguerite yawned. “Ha, now I feel like taking a nap.”

“It’s good napping weather, after all. Ah, Seren, do you want some mint water?” Miriam asked.

“I just had some... How about you?” Helvetica asked, offering the bottle to the two adventurers who had been hired to guard the wagon. They reservedly shook their heads.

“N-No, we’re fine.”

Marguerite pouted. “Don’t be so tense. We’re all adventurers here.”

“Well, we are, but...”

“We’re with the S-Rank Black-Haired Valkyrie’s party and...the granddaughter of the Paladin. It would be hard *not* to be nervous... We’re still only C-Rank.”

“She’s not his granddaughter. She’s his grandniece.”

“A key detail, that... Well, we even have Countess Helvetica here. I guess I don’t blame them,” Anessa conceded. With an awkward smile, she took out her bow and started doing some maintenance. But with the wagon shaking, her hands weren’t very steady. “It keeps shaking... I guess it’ll shake less once the roads are done,” she said, frowning.

“I should hope so. There’s the dungeon to consider, so it would be nice if they could finish up quickly.”

“Heh heh... That’ll make it easier to go home. How wonderful...”

Turnera was in the middle of nowhere and the roads were poor, so traveling

there was no easy task. Furthermore, it was essentially the end of the line—there was nowhere to go beyond the small village. The travelers and peddlers who did come their way stayed in the neighboring town of Rodina. However, if a dungeon appeared and the roads were maintained, it was possible that there would be more people coming and going—which would make Angeline's journey home a lot easier too. That was the part that really mattered to her.

In any case, her long vacation was at an end, and her days of adventure in Orphen were about to resume. Granted, this vacation entailed fighting many battles along the journey, but as far as Angeline was concerned, these were trivial nuisances at best compared to the delight she felt whenever she was with her father. A lot of things had happened, but now that it was all over, it was nothing but good memories to her. As she continued to work in Orphen, her feelings of nostalgia would be nurtured, and then autumn would come, and it would be time to go home again. She was resolved to go out and pick fresh cowberries from the mountain next time.

"Every day, I have the blues!"

"Shut up!"

For a while now, the wagon behind them had been terribly noisy, capped off by Lucille's last, conspicuously louder verse. Then came an angry yell from Yakumo, and all was silent.

"What are they doing over there...?"

"Lucille's rocking on..."

"She's always having fun, isn't she?"

Marguerite leaned out of the wagon and looked back. "Hey, you all right?"

"No need to worry. Our puppy just got a bit excited," Yakumo called back with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Angeline giggled before leaning back against the side of the wagon. The rhythm the wheels made as they trundled over the ground reverberated up through the wooden panel and through her body in turn. Across from her, Seren was yawning, and soon so was everyone else. A rather drowsy atmosphere settled over them all.

The gentle rocking of the wagon soon caused Angeline's eyelids to grow heavy. From outside, she could hear hooves rhythmically clopping amidst various voices calling back and forth between the wagons.

One of the soldiers from Bordeaux rode up next to the wagon. "Lady Helvetica, it's almost time for lunch. I think we should take a short break soon, ma'am."

"Hmm... I guess you're right. Please see to it."

The soldiers saluted and urged his horse onward. As soon as she was sure the soldier was out of earshot, Helvetica let out the yawn she had been forced to stifle at the last second when he had suddenly appeared. Angeline burst into laughter for her trouble.

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With all the rowdy girls gone, Belgrieve felt that the house seemed a tad empty. The reality was that the new house had never been this quiet until now. As Belgrieve busied himself with tidying up, he wondered if it had always been such a spacious place. The house had been full ever since he had moved back in, but now that so many people had left, he couldn't help noticing how large and empty it seemed. Even the young children were out on for a walk with Graham outside of the village. The weather had been nice since the break of dawn, so it was a perfect day for a stroll.

Belgrieve leaned his weight against his broom and sighed. "It was pretty lively, huh..." At this juncture, it finally felt like his long journey had come to an end. Still, even though he'd been back home for a while now, it had just been one event after the next until now even with the dungeon negotiations still pending. He felt spent.

Kasim, who had been reclining on the floor, rolled over to look at Belgrieve. "What are you moping for? Are you that lonely now that Ange's gone?"

"There's that too. I just feel a bit tired now that it's all over."

"Heh heh heh... It was like a festival the whole time, after all."

"Yeah. It was fine when I was in the middle of the storm... But now that it's past, I'm exhausted."

“You’re sounding like an old man.”

Belgrieve turned to see that Percival had come in, both arms fully laden with firewood. “You’re not tired?”

“My body definitely isn’t. It does feel a bit quieter, though.” Percival placed the wood down by the fireplace and started stacking it neatly.

“So I’ve been thinking, Bell...” Percival began.

“Hmm?”

“How about you and Satie move back to the old house? It’s hard for you two lovebirds to flirt when you’ve got some outsiders and an old elf around the house, right?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. That’s pretty considerate of you, Percy,” Kasim teased.

“You just don’t have enough respect for your leader.”

Belgrieve placed a weary hand on his forehead. “I appreciate the consideration... but I’ll bet the kids would prefer staying here. So it’s all the same.”

“Well, as long as old Graham’s... Well, maybe not.”

Setting aside the oldest of the young kids, Mit and Charlotte, the twins would still cling to Satie as they slept. None of the children were as attached to Percival or Kasim.

Kasim twisted his beard. “Right, I didn’t consider that... Still, I really do think it’s an idea to have a space just for you two The kids... Well, we can think about that later.”

“That’s right. While you’re at it, how about you give Ange another brother or sister?”

“Hey,” somebody spoke up. Belgrieve glanced over to see Satie had come in with a pail of water. Her smile didn’t seem to reach her eyes. “Oh Percy, oh Kasim... Why are you two always so insensitive?”

“What part of that was insensitive?” Kasim asked.

“He’s got a point there. We’re just praying for your happiness here.”

“Happiness? Please. You two grew up to be dirty old men... You’d best look forward to today’s dinner.”

“Hey, that’s got to be against the rules!”

“Really? You’re going to poison us?”

“I’m not going to go that far!”

“Okay, then do your worst,” Kasim teased.

“Kasim... Don’t you feel at least a little threatened?”

“So long as Satie’s cooking is merely inedible, it’ll just feel like we went back to old times. It’s not gonna kill us, heh heh heh...”

“It didn’t used to be that bad either!” Belgrieve protested.

“That’s right, Kasim. Don’t be mean. It wasn’t bad, it just wasn’t tasty,” Percival said.

“What’s the difference?”

“Does it matter? Anyways, you newlyweds, go move to the other house. I don’t want my sleep to get interrupted by the sound of your bed creaking.”

“Pervy old man,” Satie chided.

“What?” Percival protested, brow furrowed.

“Lecher!” Satie stuck out her tongue.

The mood was broken when Percival’s frown cracked into a smile and he burst into laughter. He was soon joined by Kasim and Belgrieve, and even Satie covered her mouth to stifle her giggles, her shoulders quaking.

Percival wiped away his tears. “Ha, aha ha ha... To think we’d be together again, blathering about stupid things.”

“Oh, enough of that!” said Kasim. “I hate it when things get all mushy.”

“This might be the first time since we met up that it’s just been the four of us together...” said Satie.

It was true; they had always been with Angeline or the others until now, and

this was maybe the first time the four old friends had gotten the chance to talk on their own.

Belgrieve remembered how things used to be when they were all still in their teens and they'd sit around a table prattling on over drinks. Percival and Satie would often argue while Kasim egged them on. Meanwhile, Belgrieve would just look on, thoroughly fed up with their shenanigans. Belgrieve could feel himself start to get misty-eyed over the reminiscence.

"Aw, Bell's crying..." Satie grinned cheekily as she poked Belgrieve in the shoulder.

He answered her provocation with a wry smile as he rubbed his eyes. "It must be my age... My eyes have started to leak."

"Right, we'll just say it's because of age," Percival said.

Kasim laughed. "Weren't you just complaining about him sounding like an old man?"

"Do you have to nitpick every little detail?" Percival deftly snatched away Kasim's cap and tossed it away like a discus.

Without missing a beat, Kasim extended his arm, and his mana chased after the hat. It froze in place before floating back to his hand. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Ha ha! Good reflexes," Percival said, not the least bit sorry as he went back to stacking firewood again.

Satie transferred the water from her wooden pail to a jug and made her way out the door again. Belgrieve put the broom away and headed out after her.

It was almost noon, and the world was doused in spring's light. Sunlight reflected off young sprouting plants, which almost seemed to glow. The gentle breeze was still a bit nippy as it caressed Belgrieve's skin, but it had already lost winter's biting edge. The weather was perfect, and it was a good day for traveling. Belgrieve's thoughts turned to Angeline on her journey. "Have they already made it through the mountain pass?"

The sound of a squeaking pulley nearby drew his attention to the well, where

Satie had gone to draw more water, and was now hoisting up the full wooden pail. Belgrieve walked over to her. “Do you want me to carry it?”

“It’s fine, this much is nothing. I hope Graham gets home with the kids soon; it’s almost lunchtime.”

“Did they go to the forest again? I should go have a look...”

“I doubt we have to worry, but, well, why don’t you go for a stroll yourself?”

“Right. I’ll be careful not to miss them.”

“Wait, before that...” Satie set her bucket down and beckoned him over as though she wanted to whisper something to him.

“Huh?” Belgrieve leaned in close to her to listen. Suddenly, he felt her soft lips brush against his for a brief moment, then the sensation was gone.

Her emerald eyes glinted mischievously. “Have fun.”

“I’ll...be back soon,” Belgrieve mumbled, bashfully scratching his head. Satisfied, Satie chuckled and went back into the house with a skip in her step.

Belgrieve stood there for a moment, stunned, but he came to when he noticed something. “Satie, the water,” he called out.

“Ah, I forgot.” She zipped back out, grabbed the pail, and swiftly retreated back into the house again—but not before Belgrieve could see the slight redness gracing the tips of her long ears.

Belgrieve stood there smiling for a moment before he decided he should head off. When he turned around to leave, he was horrified to see Graham and the children standing there staring at him. Graham seemed as stoic as ever, but Belgrieve could sense the air of amusement about him. Charlotte, blushing luminescently, was smiling at Belgrieve.

“H-How long have you been there?”

“We just arrived.”

“Hee hee... Both of you are adorable.”

Looks like they saw everything... Belgrieve covered his face with his hands. The twins ran up to him and latched onto his back and legs.

“Daaad, what were you talking about with mom?”

“Your faces were so close. It must have been a big secret.”

“Y-Yeah... Uh-huh. It was about lunch. It’s almost lunchtime, you know.”

“Food!”

“Yay!”

“Let’s go, both of you. Come on.” Mit, like a big brother, took the twins by the hands and led them into the house.

Graham rubbed his chin. “It is good to get along. It is nothing to be worried about.”

“Th-That’s not the issue...”

“You don’t need to be afraid of what others think of you, Bell. This is your house. We are merely freeloaders.”

“When you say that, I really can’t tell if you’re joking or not...”

Graham quietly chuckled before following behind the children.

“It’s okay, dad,” Charlotte whispered. “I’ll keep it a secret from Kasim and Percy.”

“Yeah, th-thanks... Have you gotten used to tending to the sheep yet?”

“Yes, the little lambs are very cute. Hee hee! Next time, let’s go there together.”

“Of course...” Belgrieve paused for a moment before turning to the last member of the group. “Byaku...?”

Byaku looked at him silently with a sour expression on his face, then turned to go into the house.

“B-Byaku, please say something.”

“Do you really want me to?”

Belgrieve considered that for a moment. “Sorry... Never mind.”

Byaku scoffed and disappeared through the doorway.

The children are being tactful around me. I really need to get my act together... Belgrieve smiled awkwardly and let Charlotte tug him back inside.

Chapter 132: It Was Time to Sow the Spring Wheat

It was time to sow the spring wheat, so the farmers were hunched over as they worked their way back and forth across their fields of tilled soil. Though the grain would fall a bit short of the recent yield in terms of flavor, this crop would be ready for harvest come autumn, which made it an indispensable resource to help the villagers survive the winter.

The wheat seeds were planted in furrows in the soil made with sticks. The seeds would scatter if dropped from too high up, so they had to be spread from close to the ground—hence why everyone was crossing the field hunched over.

Staple foods like wheat were grown as a collaborative effort among the villagers. Belgrieve would often go to help at one field or another; today, he was tasked with sowing wheat.

The fields on the western side of the village, which had been devastated by the invasion of the living forest a year ago, had finally been renewed. Half of those fields were now filled with young wheat seedlings swaying in the breeze, fresh and green. Half of the land had been set aside for today, when the villagers would work from the crack of dawn to sow the spring wheat. It was quiet out, the silence only broken by the distant braying of a donkey.

After he had sown the last of the seeds in his hand, Belgrieve stood up to stretch out his back. He leaned his weight onto his left leg while he bent his torso backward. He could feel his back loosening up with every cracking sound it made.

“Phew...” He took a moment to catch his breath before taking another handful of wheat from the pouch on his hip. It was when he was doing farmwork like this that it truly came home to him that he had returned to Turnera.

A little over a week had passed since Angeline and her friends had left for Orphen. The strange sense of isolation he had felt after the exuberance of their

presence was gone had since faded somewhat. As he pushed onward with his daily work, his mind steadily returned to its regular rhythm.

The critical difference was the presence of his comrades. Their memory had once been a thorn wedged into his heart, but now they were here with him, residing under the same roof and eating at his table. It was quite a strange and peculiar change for him, considering the long years he'd spent living alone ever since Angeline had first left home for the big city.

He turned to see Percival lugging a basket on his back while the twins dangled from his arms. They were no burden to him; it could just as easily have been five children without breaking a sweat. Even having two hanging off of each arm wouldn't have slowed him down much. The kids would clamber all over him for their own amusement, climbing onto his shoulders and enjoying the ride. With the children aboard, Percival might spin in circles, or juggle one of them in the air.

Unlike the stoic Graham, who was too concerned for the children's safety to spin them around or throw them like that, Percival wasn't above a little roughhousing. Some of the children enjoyed this though, and Percival was becoming especially popular with the boys lately. That said, most of the kids were currently busy helping out in the fields.

Belgrieve chuckled. *If only the Percy of a year ago could see himself now...*

"Mr. Bell? What are you smiling about?" Barnes asked. He had been sowing nearby and was now looking at him curiously.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking that Percy's really grown up."

"He has? Well, we never knew how he was before now..."

"He's childish and cute, in a good way," Rita said, laughing softly.

Belgrieve smiled. "That part of him hasn't changed. He's the same age as me... But he seems more like a big brother to the children than an uncle."

"Sure enough. Mr. Percy's like a big brother. That makes you the dad, by the way, Mr. Bell."

"You have Ange, after all."

“And right now, you have Mit and Char too. And Hal, and Mal... And even a wife,” Barnes said with a cheeky grin. Belgrieve smiled wryly and kneaded his beard.

The villagers of Turnera, young and old alike, all enjoyed teasing Belgrieve. Though Belgrieve was embarrassed, he knew their teasing came from a place of love, and he didn’t dislike it. Their chitchat had given him a chance to get some rest, in any case, and now it was time to get back to work.

Graham and Kasim had gone off with the smaller children to fish, and Satie was tending to their own household garden. It was lively when he was working, and lively when he returned home. The days he had spent in quiet solitude, thinking of Angeline off in Orphen, were only a nostalgic memory now. It wasn’t a bad thing; it would simply take him a bit of getting used to all the changes in his life.

Eventually the afternoon rolled around; Belgrieve finished with his allotted portion of the fieldwork and returned to his own home. He found Charlotte in the yard, wearing a straw hat as she peeled potatoes. Her cheeks were ruddy, and her dirty fingers were covered with small scratches. She was a hard worker and could usually be found going hither and thither to do various chores. It might have been hard to believe that this was the daughter of a Lucrecian cardinal, but the girl herself apparently preferred things this way.

Charlotte put a peeled potato into a pot filled with water before looking up from her work. “Oh, welcome back, dad.”

“Glad to be back, Char.” Belgrieve drew some water from the well to wash his hands as he looked around the yard.

“Are you alone?”

“Mom is in the field out back with Byaku.”

“I see, yeah. Are you preparing lunch?”

“Yes. We’ll boil these potatoes... The rest depends on grampa and uncle Kasim.” Charlotte giggled. Whether their meal turned out to be extravagant would depend on the catch of the day. Belgrieve smiled and patted Charlotte’s hat before going inside.

The house was a little dark right now. The light that poured in through the window illuminated the dust drifting through the air, which only emphasized the dim lighting. When he was on his own like this, the house seemed just a bit too large. His reverie was broken by a slight growling sound. He glanced over to see Graham's sword, which was propped against the wall, continuing to growl discontentedly.

"Are you bored?" Belgrieve asked as though he was talking to himself.

He heard the blade make a sharp yelping noise, which he took as a "yes." It then ceased its growling, and the room was left silent.

Over the course of his journey, the holy blade had exhibited a great deal of power, but ever since it had returned to Turnera, it was left with nothing to do. Perhaps it was sulking—but without any fiends or bandits to deal with, it was commonsense that a sword served no purpose. It wasn't like they could use it as a kitchen knife. The journey Graham had originally planned to go on to scout out a location for the new dungeon had been suspended, which was only further cause for the sword to become sullen. If Graham had gone on that journey, that would have been its big chance to let loose.

"Eventually the dungeon will be established and you'll have plenty of chances to shine," Belgrieve said in an attempt to console it. But the sword gave no answer; he imagined it was pouting.

Belgrieve shrugged before checking the fire in the hearth. He added some wood to help with the cooking and poured some water into the cooking pot. Just as it was starting to boil, Charlotte came in with all the peeled potatoes. Byaku was not far behind, bringing in a basket full of rapeseed buds.

"Oh, you got that many of them?"

The greens in the field that had been buried beneath the snow all winter had apparently sprung up all at once. Before they bloomed, they could be simmered or fried up into a delicious meal. They had a slightly bitter taste but were flavorful enough. Besides, the bitterness of spring greens was good for helping them loosen up their bodies that had grown stiff during the cold of winter—that was what Belgrieve had always believed at least.

Satie returned a short while later. She blinked in surprise at seeing Belgrieve.

“Oh, back so soon, Bell?”

“I finished up early. Are we having fish and potatoes?”

“That’s what I thought, but who knows when our fishermen will return... Just because they’re adventurers with monikers doesn’t mean they’re good at fishing.”

“Yeah... Well, they didn’t bring any food with them, so they should come back soon either way.”

Maybe I’ll fry the fish in a bit of extra oil, and use the same oil to sauté the buds. Then I’ll need some onions and aromatic herbs... Or I could sprinkle some salt over them and cover them with herbs before throwing them into the steamer. I could mince them for soup too.

As Belgrieve worked out the lunch menu in his head, he tended the fire. He’d been leaving the cooking to Satie, so he was having a bit of fun turning his mind towards cooking once again. It felt far more worthwhile when he was cooking for everyone and not just himself. Whatever else he was going to do, he needed to soften up the potatoes first. He had just got them simmering when Kasim and Graham returned with Mit.

“We’re home.”

“Welcome back. Catch anything?”

“It’s a decent haul.”

It was indeed—one large fish, and four midsized ones. The fishermen had already handled gutting their catch.

“I’ll steam the large one, and fry the rest in the pan.”

“Sounds nice. Then you should throw in the buds, and some onions too.”

“I’ll help out,” Mit offered.

“I see. Then can you help Char?”

“Over here, Mit. We’ll mash the potatoes and mix them with goat’s milk.”

The children took the mashed potatoes and mixed them with salt, goat milk, and melted butter. The resulting smooth paste was a well-known dish

throughout the empire, though it was more common to use cow's milk outside of Turnera. The children worked on the dish side-by-side. Belgrieve didn't know when it had happened, but it looked like Mit had grown a little taller. Nearby, Byaku silently minced up an onion.

With the aroma of the steamed and fried fish filling the house, Percival returned with the twins. The twins jumped down from his shoulders and huddled around the fireplace.

"It's fish."

"Good fish."

"The oil will jump at you. Come over here..." Graham lifted the twins up. They squirmed and kicked at first, but once he'd carried them off and opened a book for them, they settled down. The book, which had been purchased from a peddler during the festival, had become a favorite of theirs.

It seemed they still couldn't understand the letters, but seeing how their eyes would sparkle whenever Graham would read it out for them, it would make Belgrieve recall how he used to read to Angeline like that. Bit by bit, she would remember the words, and gradually, she learned to read on her own.

With some finishing touches, their lunch was ready, and everyone gathered around the table for a lively meal. Though there were fewer gathered there now, they were still quite boisterous.

"It was all young girls up until just the other day. Now, it's nothing but old men. That's a heck of a downgrade," Kasim said as he plucked a bit of potato from his beard.

Percival laughed. "Well, they're gone. What are you going to do about it? I'd wager they're already in Orphen by now."

"I'm not so sure. Maybe they decided to take some time off to kick back in Bordeaux."

They had, after all, gone with the countess and her sister. If they met Sasha, then naturally, they'd stay to talk for a bit; perhaps they might even have stayed over for some time on Lady Bordeaux's invitation. Although Angeline was always in a rush to return to Turnera as quickly as possible without any

detours, she would probably be much more easygoing on the way back to Orphen.

They continued to chat throughout their lunch, and then during cleanup too. When the work was done, Charlotte and Mit took the twins off to play, and Byaku was dragged along. The adults were left behind to take it easy for a bit, resting after that filling meal.

"I'd like to discuss something," Graham said, breaking the quiet lull.

"Hmm?" Belgrieve turned away from the pot of tea he had started brewing.

"What is it?"

"It's about Mit."

"About Mit? What's on your mind?" Percival asked.

Graham stroked his chin. "The purpose of creating the dungeon was originally to expend Mit's mana in the most efficient way. I said this, yes?"

"Yeah."

"If the plan hadn't changed, I would have already set off for Bordeaux with Mit by now. A fair bit of mana has already been stored in the crystal, after all."

"Then what is it? Do we need to expend it on something besides a dungeon right now?" Kasim asked.

Graham nodded. "Yes. If we don't deplete it soon, the orb will not last. If we simply release the mana, the surrounding environment will warp into a dungeon. But if we construct an appropriate spell sequence and exercise the utmost caution, we can make the mana take on the form of a fiend instead. Then we would simply have to defeat it."

"And it'll be erased along with the mana, huh? That makes things nice and easy. But is there even a need to make a dungeon in the first place if so?"

"The method to summon a fiend is dangerous. We cannot specify the type of fiend that will result, and if even the slightest mistake is made with the spell sequence or its invocation, the orb itself could break."

*We'd have to head back to the E*arth *N*avel *to defeat another á bao a qu if*

that happened, Belgrieve thought with a sardonic smile. He doubted he'd be able to pull off another journey like that again.

Percival folded his arms, his eyes wandering in thought. "Hmm... No matter what fiend it is, it shouldn't be a problem for either of us," he told Graham. "Oh, and Kasim's here too."

"Yes. So that's why I thought I'd discuss this method this time. However, it is certainly not ideal. This method is only possible when people like us are around. Like when the forest attacked, this fiend may end up summoning forth a great number of foes and potentially cause casualties. Were that to happen, the process would be a failure even if we ultimately defeated them all. It would be hard to call this a stable method. That is why I didn't want to use it."

"Hmm... It would have been better to do this before Ange's party left. If we had a higher headcount, we'd have an easier time against an army," Kasim said.

But Graham closed his eyes. "I'm sorry... I thought the talks about the dungeon would conclude far sooner than they did, so I did not prepare for this contingency. This is my responsibility."

The greatsword growled from the wall, seemingly upset about something. Graham frowned, seemingly troubled—but Percival only laughed.

"She says, 'Who cares about the little girl—she'll tear down any fiend that comes at her.' That's a holy sword for you. Looks like she can't stand how wishy-washy you're being, Graham."

Belgrieve's gaze pivoted from the sword to Percival. "Huh... Percy, you can hear the sword's voice?"

"Huh? Bell... You mean you *can't* hear her? Haven't you been wielding her this whole time?"

Belgrieve scratched his head. "I get the feeling I've never heard her properly. Apparently, Ange could hear her too, but... I see, so you can too..."

Perhaps the sword's voice could only reach those of a certain skill level—geniuses, or at least those acclaimed as such. Its wielder, Graham, went without saying, and then there was Angeline, Marguerite, and Percival—only those who were generally regarded as extraordinary. *We've survived a few battlefields*

together, but I guess I never reached that level, Belgrieve thought. He scratched his head, feeling a little lost.

Noticing his friend's dejection, Percival shrugged. "Well, not that it matters. So what do we do? Our best bet would be to head somewhere far from the village before the summoning, right?"

"Indeed. Percival, I would like you to come with me to deal with whatever fiend might appear. Kasim, I ask for your assistance in controlling the mana output on-site. It would be very helpful if you could assist in constructing the spell sequence as well."

"You got it. Heh heh heh... It's been a while since I dabbled in this stuff. I've done nothing but fight for a while now, and I never practiced any sequence constructions all the while."

"I've been growing dull too. This works out nicely."

"In that case, we should first surround the area with a barrier. Then, even if our foes are numerous, we can prevent them from scattering about," said Satie.

Graham nodded. "Correct... We'll need to lay the groundwork."

"Looks like it's going to get busy. Bell, what about you?"

"There's not much I can do against an S-Rank fiend. And I'm sure that sword would be happier in Graham's hands."

"No need to sulk. Even if you don't fight, don't you at least want to come and watch?" Kasim cajoled. "It'll be a team-up of the Paladin, the Exalted Blade, and the Aether Buster. The minstrels would have a field day with this one."

"Sounds nice. I'd love to join in," Satie said, a touch enviously.

Percival scoffed. "Not you. *You* lost to the Executioner. Stay put with your hubby over there."

"Right, right, you've got the kids to look after," Kasim teased.

Satie's frown suddenly shifted into a fearless smile as she swung her arm. Percival's smile became strained as his eyes shifted downwards. It felt as though a blade was pressed against his throat. Both Belgrieve and Kasim were wide-eyed at the palpable danger in the air. Satie lowered her arm with a

cheerful smile, and the dangerous feeling dissipated. Percival rubbed his neck as he looked at Satie questioningly.

“You...”

“My good sir, lest you forget—in the capital, my powers were restricted by my contract with the old god. If you’d like, we could put an end to our long streak of draws, Percy.”

Percival was stunned for a moment, but it wasn’t long before he was laughing his head off.

“Looks like you’ve got one up on me! You did a splendid job hiding your claws, Satie. It’s good to know my rival’s still in good health.”

Satie snorted. “Now that you know that, you’d better get off your high horse, Percy. You’re not the only one who improved their skills.”

“Ha ha! But if we clashed head-on, you would lose.”

“I would most certainly not! But the kids will imitate it, so no fighting.”

“What’s with that?”

“Heh heh, I get it. You’re scared.”

“How could I possibly be scared? Cheeky Kasim.”

“Hmph, if you can only win with a surprise attack, that’s not your fighting strength.”

“The moment you fall for a surprise attack, it means you’re weaker than your opponent!”

“Say what?!”

“Now, now, you just said it yourself. No fighting.”

Percival argued with Satie, Kasim fanned the flames, and Belgrieve stepped in to stop them—it was a familiar scenario that had played out countless times before. But unlike all of those previous times, somebody broke into a loud belly laugh at their antics. Belgrieve’s gaze turned to Graham to find that, for once, his expression had softened and he was laughing aloud.

The four old friends suddenly felt embarrassed. They shut their mouths and

didn’t seem to know where to look.

“A fine set of comrades... It’s like I can see how you once were,” Graham said gently, still smiling.

Belgrieve awkwardly pulled at his beard. For some reason, hearing that from Graham made him feel even more embarrassed.

“You have it all wrong! There’s a difference between fighting words and getting even...” Satie stammered while fidgeting.

Percival roughly scratched his head and turned on his heels. “Ah, for Vienna’s sake... Anyways, we’re going to be hunting fiends soon, right?”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll watch over the kids,” he said and left the house.

Kasim chuckled. “He ran.”

“That part of him has never changed,” Belgrieve said with a shrug.

“Argh, that big baby!” Satie exclaimed with puffed cheeks.

Graham continued to laugh.

○

When Angeline entered the pub, the regulars looked at her with surprise. Then, they boisterously raised their glasses.

“You’re back!”

“It’s been a long time!”

“What sort of journey was it? You’ve gotta tell me all about it!”

It was a noisy but warm welcome. “Later, okay?” Angeline said, waving at everyone. She took her usual seat at the counter and watched as the same old unsociable barkeep wiped down a glass.

“You look well,” he told her.

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Are you alone?”

“They’ll be here... I’m waiting.”

“You’re not with your old man?”

“Dad is in Turnera...my hometown. We had fun.”

Angeline placed her elbows on the table and casually propped up her head as she put in an order for sauteed duck and chilled wine.

Whenever she came to this dim pub and became immersed in its bouquet of aromas, she would always feel a sort of calmness wash over her. The city of Orphen had become like a second home to her. It was very different from Turnera, but it had its own sense of stability—like she had returned to her everyday life.

On the journey back, Angeline had spent a night at the Bordeaux estate where she apologized to Sasha for not keeping in touch. When the matter of the dungeon in Turnera came up in their conversation, Sasha was overjoyed and declared she needed to go congratulate the town at once. Early the next morning, she set off on a horse, racing in the opposite direction from Angeline, who had almost got drawn along with her until her comrades hurriedly pulled her back.

A week after that, she was finally back in Orphen. The snow was completely melted by now, replaced by the warmth of springtime sunshine. The city was full of activity as travelers and peddlers began passing through again after the cold winter season.

To begin with, Angeline and the others all returned to their respective places, agreeing to father again that night at the usual pub after they got a bit of rest in. After bathing and tidying up, Angeline found she was evidently the first to arrive. Her eyes were on the oil rolling off the duck as it crisped in the pan, but her mind was on the long journey that had ended in her hometown. It was one adventure after another, but Belgrieve had been by her side, and she had never felt lonely or anxious.

No—she had been anxious for a time, but there had always been someone to cling to, so it didn’t feel like such a burden. She’d encountered Percival, and had met her mother Satie too. The sight of her father rejoicing in his reunion with his own friends had been a joyous one—almost like his reunions were hers as

well.

Angeline reminisced on those calm, peaceful days, the old stories of her father and his friends, and the marriage at the spring festival. Even just thinking about them caused her expression to soften. She was savoring her wine and gazing off into the distance when she noticed someone sit down in the seat beside her.

“Did you already place an order?” Anessa asked, peering into her face.

Angeline nodded. “The usual...”

“You sure like your duck,” Marguerite teased. She was still chuckling when she ordered some spirits. Miriam let out a great yawn as she rested her chin against the bar top.

“I’m pooped. It kinda feels like the exhaustion hit me as soon as I was back home.”

“It was a long journey, after all. When do you want to start working again?”

“Hmm... I haven’t decided yet. For starters, we should drop by the guild tomorrow... And then, it just depends on the situation.”

“Hey, hey, do you think they’ll promote me right to the top if I tell them about my battle record at the Earth Navel?” Marguerite wondered excitedly.

Anessa’s eyes trailed upwards as she pondered the matter. “Well, I’m pretty sure you exceeded the skill level of the lower ranks ages ago, Maggie...”

“I know, right? And it’s not a bad thing for the guild if they have another high ranker,” Miriam reasoned.

“Yeah! And you know what? If I rise in the ranks, I can join your party, can’t I?” Marguerite said, smacking her hand against the table excitably.

Angeline raised her glass and swished the wine around as she considered this. “That’s true... You’re experienced, and I doubt dad or grampa would be against it.”

“Right! Heh heh... I can’t wait.”

“Well, you’ll have to talk to the guild master first.”

“He’ll probably welcome it though,” said Miriam. “Having two front-line fighters would help us out a lot.”

Angeline nodded. It would be quite a bit easier to navigate the battlefield if she was out on the front lines with Marguerite. *Like dad and Percy*, she thought. But then she recalled his old stories. *Wait, the ones on the front were Satie and Percy, right?* She cocked her head as she worked this out. “Since she’s the magician, Merry is obviously Kasim, and...”

“Huh? Me? Mr. Kasim? Hmm...”

Angeline ignored Miriam’s bemusement as she looked at Anessa, frowning.

Anessa stared back at her. “What?”

“Anne... Become a swordsman, starting tomorrow. I’ll teach you.”

“Huh?”

“Then you can take the vanguard with Maggie. I’ll observe from the back and provide help where it’s most needed...”

“The hell are you on about?”

“I mean, if we don’t do that, I can’t get into the dad role...”

“By dad role, you mean...”

“Are you going to give out orders like Mr. Bell?”

“Aha ha ha! Ange could never do what Bell does, it’s impossible!” Marguerite teased, laughing cheerfully as she tipped back her third glass of spirits.

Angeline pouted. “It’s not impossible... I am my father’s daughter after all.”

“Didn’t Mr. Kasim tell you that your personality is way too different...?”

“Grr...” Angeline angrily chugged her wine and pushed her glass toward the barkeep, her wordless request to be topped off duly obliged.

Miriam laughed and prodded her shoulder. “You don’t have to do that. An Ange can be an Ange—and what’s wrong with that?”

“She’s right. You’ll just cause trouble for us if you do things you’re not used to.”

“I’m not going to give up...” Angeline stuffed her mouth with the succulent, oily duck meat, and closed her eyes as savored it.

After Marguerite finished off her liquor, she seemed to come to a sudden realization. “Maybe it’s just me, but come to think of it... Back in Turnera, you didn’t get pampered by Bell nearly as much as I thought you would.”

“Really?” *That wasn’t my intention*... Angeline reflected on that curiously. Now that it had been pointed out to her, she couldn’t deny it. Perhaps she was unconsciously giving Satie and Belgrieve some space, but the fact that she had already been with Belgrieve all that time before they returned home may have helped to contain her strong yearnings to be doted on. “It must be because I already had a sufficient dad supply.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“But I’ll be running on empty by autumn. So I’ll go back then, and we’ll pick cowberries, and *then* I’ll have him dote on me a lot more... Heh heh heh...”

Indeed, that was what she was looking forward to. She’d fill an entire basket with those fresh tart cowberries... And then, she’d have Belgrieve feed them to her. *Maybe I can get mom to do it too.*

Seeing Angeline grinning, the three girls looked at each other before bursting into laughter.

“Oh, here you are.”

“I’m starved, baby.”

Yakumo and Lucille arrived, and their party became all the more cheerful. Apparently, the duo planned to earn a bit of money in Orphen for a while.

With the steady flow of drinks loosening their inhibitions, the other regulars and adventurers soon ran out of patience and came over to their group, thirsty for tales of adventure. The wine had put Angeline in a more talkative mood by then too. The night was still young, and it wasn’t such a bad deal for her to tell tales and bask in the memories.

Angeline asked for another cup of wine.

Chapter 133: Once She Was Back in the Noisy Guild

Once she was back in the noisy guild, Angeline finally felt like she had returned to her normal life. The rough-hewn stone floor and the once-white walls, now faded to gray, were just as she remembered them. However, it did seem a bit livelier than it used to be, and she couldn't shake the feeling that there were more people coming and going.

"Huh?! Then there's gonna be one in Turnera?" Sola exclaimed, her blonde ponytail swinging back and forth as though to punctuate her surprise.

Angeline nodded proudly. "Yes. And so, my dad will become a guild master."

"Seriously...? Mr. Belgrieve's amazing." Jake let out a sigh of admiration and leaned back in his chair.

Kain's eyes were darting around in surprise. "It will be amazing if you actually manage to implement it... The Paladin, the Exalted Blade, and the Aether Buster, and with the Red Ogre as the guild master... Won't the quality of the adventurers there exceed Orphen and Bordeaux?"

"Yeah. I'm sure it will be amazing, heh heh..."

"I did exactly as Mr. Belgrieve told me, and used a spearman's thrust as reference. My swordsmanship's gotten a whole lot sharper! I even went up a rank because of it!" Sola gushed.

"It feels like my maneuvering has gotten better too... The fundamentals are important, after all," Jake said.

"I've done my share of studies... That battle in the forest was a good experience," Kain chimed in.

These three had once been to Turnera while guarding a merchant's wagon and ended up participating in the fight against the ancient forest. It seemed all of them had ruminated over the lessons of their experiences in Turnera and put them to good use.

Angeline nodded conceitedly as if she had been the one to teach them. “You should come to Turnera again sometime,” she suggested.

“Wow, I didn’t think the Black-Haired Valkyrie herself would personally invite us. It’s a real honor.”

“What about you, Ms. Angeline? Aren’t you going to settle down in Turnera one of these days?” Jake asked, a hint of yearning in his voice.

Angeline chuckled. “That will probably be a long time from now... I’ll visit, of course, but I still want to see the world and go on more adventures.”

“Adventures, huh... That’s an S-Rank for you.”

From beyond the crowd, somebody called out for Jake’s party. “Ah, looks like they finished evaluating our haul,” Sola said, standing up. “I’ll go check!”

“Huh? Really? I thought they’d keep us waiting longer.”

“That was fast... Well then, Ms. Angeline, another time.”

“Yeah, another time.” After they three of them left, Angeline leaned into her chair and let out a deep sigh.

The business of buying monster parts and other materials had picked up at the Orphen guild recently. There seemed to be never-ending demand, and the more materials you brought in, the more money you would get. According to Sola, the guild had managed to secure a deal with a big-time company, and this had greatly expanded the scale of its sales routes.

A cut of the profits from each sale went to the guild. It was just a small amount per sale, but Orphen was a city of commerce with a sizable adventurer population, and it all added up to significant revenue. Since the earnings were good, even more adventurers were coming from afar, which was the reason the guild had become so busy.

I guess the guild master’s putting himself out there, Angeline mused. She had begun to daydream when Anessa finally joined her.

“Sorry, we’re late,” Anessa said.

“This place is just as lively as ever,” Miriam observed.

Marguerite prodded at Angeline's shoulder. "What's with the woolgathering?" she teased.

Angeline sat up, yawning. "I just got tired of waiting. Let's go."

The four of them headed to the counter where Yuri, the receptionist, greeted them with a bright smile. "Welcome back. I hope you had fun."

"It's good to be back, Ms. Yuri... Anything happen while we were gone?"

"Right, well... There haven't been any *major* incidents. Leo's half-dead from all the paperwork, though."

So nothing's changed after all... Angeline giggled. "I have something to talk about with the guild master..."

"With Leo? Hmm, around this time... It should be fine. Go ahead."

They were let through the door behind the reception area and walked down the corridor toward the guild master's office. Just as they were about to enter the room, a girl who appeared to be a secretary exited carrying a stack of papers. At the sight of Angeline, the girl's eyes widened and she smiled sunnily. "Ms. Angeline! I didn't know you were back!"

"Yes, we arrived yesterday... Is the guild master in?"

"He is. Guild master, it's Ms. Angeline."

They passed by the girl into the room to find Lionel standing behind an office desk stacked with a mountain of paperwork. The handful of other administrative workers all cheerfully greeted her.

Dortos glanced up from what appeared to be a letter and looked at her owlishly. "Oh, Ange, you're back."

"I am. You look busy, old man Silver."

"I'm used to it already."

"Let's take a short break," Lionel suggested, smiling wearily. "Here, I'll get some tea... Now, now, Ms. Ange. Go ahead, have a seat." He hurriedly cleaned off the guest table that had become a dumping ground for all sorts of miscellaneous articles and curios, roughly pushing aside the letters, documents,

and parcels.

“My, it’s been too long. You look like you’re doing well for yourself.”

“And you look as ragged as ever,” Marguerite taunted.

“Pretty much. Oh, but we are getting things up and running, one day at a time. Now that we have a deal with the Lennon Company, fundraising has become a lot easier... Not that the workload’s gone down at all. It’s increased, in fact.”

“I heard about that... You’ve been working hard. Nicely done, guild master.”

“Ha ha! That means a lot, coming from you, Ms. Ange... Is Mr. Belgrieve not with you?”

Angeline briefly caught him up on their journey to the Earth Navel and the battles they fought there, and about Percival and Satie, and everything that came after that. Lionel and the others were left stunned and blinking in surprise throughout the tale, enthralled from beginning to end.

“What can I say, except... You did well out there.”

“So he safely reunited with his old friends? What joyous news!”

“Still, a dungeon in Turnera, huh... And Mr. Belgrieve becoming a guild master? That sounds pretty nice. He’s got a good nature, he’s ridiculously popular, and he’s good at coordinating people... Maybe I should just retire and move over there myself.”

“Don’t talk nonsense.”

“Oh, what’s the harm? The guild’s back on its feet and all. Once it’s a bit more stable, we can just leave it to the young ones... I mean, you wanted to pay Turnera a visit too, right, Dortos? The Paladin’s supposed to be there.”

“Well... I would be lying if I said I was completely uninterested.”

“Come right on over. My granduncle will welcome you!” Marguerite said, reaching for a cup of freshly served tea.

“Hmm...” Dortos murmured, twisting at the white hairs of his beard as he mulled over the offer. Lionel, for his part, just laughed merrily. Perhaps because

he finally had a moment to relax, his original easy-going nature had begun to return to him

“So anyway,” Angeline leaned in. “Maggie was fighting Calamity-Class fiends at the Earth Navel. Is there any way we can get her promoted...?”

“Huh? You’re fine with promoting now? That would be a huge help. I know how skilled Ms. Marguerite is, so I have no objections. In fact, I thought she was dragging it out a bit too much. Now, I can send her out on some jobs with peace of mind,” Lionel said nonchalantly. He’d conceded it so easily that Angeline even felt a bit disappointed.

Miriam chuckled. “Isn’t that nice, Maggie? But if you do anything reckless, Mr. Bell and Mr. Graham will get mad at you.”

Marguerite pouted. “Oh, shut it. I know. I could say the same for all of you.”

Lionel picked up a cup of tea for himself, smiling pleasantly. “So, what are your plans, Ms. Ange? Are you going to make Orphen your base of operations again?”

Angeline nodded. “Yes. I’d like to go back to Turnera again at the start of fall... but I’ll be back once the autumn festival wraps up.”

Spending the winter there had been fun, but she felt like she had been away for a bit too long, and she didn’t want to cheapen the joy she felt whenever she returned home. She would do her work for now, go to Turnera before the festival, and leave with the peddlers after that. Going home was more when her homesickness had time to be nurtured first.

But there was more to it than that. There was one other thing Angeline wanted to do. Angeline fiddled with the cup in her hands before going on. “Also... While I’m working here, I’d like to go on a few more adventures,” she muttered.

“Adventures?”

“What? That’s the first I’m hearing of it,” Anessa said, wide-eyed.

Angeline nodded again. “It came to me last night... The realization that our journey was pretty fun.”

Indeed, Angeline had come to yearn for adventure. For a long time, she had been contained to Orphen and areas around it, but this long journey had stirred up her yearning for new lands. The tranquility of life in Turnera was charming, but her young heart burned for something more.

When she returned to her apartment in Orphen and lay alone in her bed for the first time in quite a while, her head was swimming with various thoughts, mostly memories of the road and of her hometown. Just the remembrance of them made her heart beat faster and a warmth come over her.

She'd had plenty of chances to reminisce until that moment, but it was only once she was alone with her thoughts that she suddenly began to question where all those fun feelings had come from.

Of course, she also loved the tranquility of life in Turnera with her parents and friends. But her most vivid recollections were of the times she had fought alongside Belgrieve in the Earth Navel and in the imperial capital, and of her first footsteps into lands she'd never been before. Now that she had traveled in far-flung lands, she thirsted to see new places and meet new people.

She tossed and turned in bed, her mind occupied with what route she would take if she set off again, and how she would interact with the guilds at the towns she would pass through. This was when she knew with perfect clarity—she was born to be an adventurer.

"'Adventure' doesn't really tell me much. Where do you want to go?" asked Lionel.

"I think the east might be nice. I'm curious about steelwood."

"Steel... Oh, that's what Granduncle's sword is made from."

"Yeah." Angeline was also interested in Lucrecia and Dadan, both of which were farther south than the imperial capital, but for now, her yearning for the east was stronger—a land even farther east than Tyldes. There was Kietai, where Touya and Maureen had previously worked, and Buryou, the land where Yakumo was born. Most of all, the blade that Belgrieve had wielded during their journey, Graham's living sword, had been forged from the fruits of the steelwood trees that only grew in the east. Her current weapon was made from imported eastern iron, but she couldn't deny her desire for a better blade. The

sensation of wielding that greatsword in Turnera's forest still made her swordswoman's spirit soar.

"If I could swing a sword like that—and one made just for me..."

Marguerite nodded. "I get it. *She's* stuck up and I can't stand her, but I'd love to have a sword just for me too, something sharp and slender... What sort of personality do you think it'll have? I don't think it takes after the wielder."

Sure enough, Graham's sword did not resemble the man himself in the slightest. She wondered if her own sword would have a will of its own, and whether it would be a masculine or feminine persona. Graham's sword gave off the impression of a beautiful, prim and proper woman, albeit a touch standoffish. *What will mine be like? I hope I can get along with it. What will I do if we get in a fight?* The more she pictured it, the more eagerly she looked forward to it.

"Steelwood fruits, huh? Do you think they can make a staff out of it too? That sound so interesting."

"I don't think it would be supple enough for a bow... And it would be a waste to use it for arrows..."

"I haven't seen anyone with one apart from grampa. I guess it must be hard to get your hands on one."

"I'd wager so. Having a will of its own means it has to choose its wielder, and Graham said you have to raise it properly even then..."

"Let's ask for some more details next time we're in Turnera." During the long winter nights, Graham would tell them tales of his travels, and of course, they had heard the story of how he had obtained his sword. But that had been told as no more than a bedtime story for them, not a detailed account.

Angeline did still remember the general details, though. Buryou was on the easternmost edge of the continent, but farther east beyond the sea, there were a smattering of islands, big and small. The steelwood trees apparently grew on one of these islands in particular—one that had formed when an undersea volcano erupted long ago. The steelwood trees would not grow anywhere except in that island's soil. A great many attempts had been made to cultivate it

in foreign lands, but there hadn't been a single instance of success.

In other words, Angeline would have to go there herself to see a steelwood tree with her own eyes. The Rhodesian empire encompassed the western side of the continent, while Buryou spanned the east—so it was no surprise that no one from these parts had ever gone there before. When Graham had made the journey, it wasn't long before he realized he was the only foreign traveler on those shores as far as his eyes could see. Then again, given Graham's age, that could have been nearly a hundred years ago. Since then, Yakumo had come from Buryou, and Touya and Maureen had come to the imperial capital from the east as well. Surely there were usable routes these days. Not the most well-traveled or comfortable routes, perhaps, but the journey was more fun when there was a hint of danger as far as she was concerned.

Still, even if she overcame the roads and reached her destination, there was little Angeline could do if the sword itself rejected her. Perhaps going to the east had become easier over the years, but she had never heard of anyone in the west ever possessing a living sword apart from Graham himself. This may have been proof that it was still difficult to handle a weapon forged from steelwood fruits. Back when Graham's blade was still a "young sword," as Graham put it, the blade wedged itself firmly into the ground and refused to be drawn hence. In a contest of wills, Graham had spent seven days and seven nights with his hands on its hilt to see which one of them yielded first.

Graham had also said that, even when the sword accepted a master, there were cases where a swordsman failed to "raise" his steelwood blade properly, and the sword would wither away. Depending on the uses it was put to, it might also become a cursed weapon that would attempt to control its user. In almost every possible way, a steelwood blade seemed to be different from a normal sword. But for all of these difficulties, there was no doubt in Angeline's mind that it was worth all the trouble—she knew so from her personal experience with Graham's blade.

When Graham won the test of endurance and finally obtained the sword, it came to despise the touch of any other, and it would frequently send others flying even if they meant no harm. The blade had even injured the craftsman who he'd tasked with sharpening it. It may have been docile in Graham's hands,

but the sword could be practically feral towards anyone else.

Given the fact that the holy sword had allowed Angeline and Belgrieve to wield her, it seemed that she had mellowed out quite a bit since then—perhaps as a result of surviving so many hellish battles with Graham. The sword seemed very much like a person, which was exactly what Angeline found so appealing about owning one. *If I had a sword like that, I'd never have to feel lonely...*

Angeline's journey to the east would entail having to ride a boat for part of the journey. Though she had seen a number of boats at Elvgren, the coastal city west of Orphen, she had never been aboard one herself. The thought of gliding over ocean's surface was fun and exciting to her. But that was a long time off still—and Angeline's top priority was still the cowberries from Turnera. As long as she could fulfill that craving first, she would be able to set off on her long journey with no lingering regrets. Therefore, she would need to work hard in Orphen to compensate for this next leave of absence.

"You'll be gone for a while again, if you're going that far," Lionel said, scratching his head and smiling wryly.

"Yeah... Is that a problem?"

"No, you're fine. It's good to have you around, Ms. Ange, but we can't rely on you for everything. Right, Dortos?"

"Indeed. If we can't handle ourselves without you, then the Orphen guild is done for. We should take this as a good opportunity to raise up the next generation of adventurers."

"But you're not going right away...are you?" Lionel asked, a bit meekly.

"Of course not. I'll be taking on jobs here for a while."

"I'm glad to hear it. That's all you had to say to put this old man at ease."

Angeline giggled, before holding his gaze. "Are there any urgent jobs you want to assign to us right now?"

"Hmm, well... There hasn't been a mass outbreak of Calamity-Class fiends since back then... Oh, but I think there was a dungeon where a mutated fiend variant was spotted. You should ask Yuri about that."

“Got it... I’ll be counting on you to handle Maggie’s promotion.”

“Yes, certainly. Give me some time though, I still have some work I need to take care of today...”

“That’s all right, it’s not urgent... What should we do today, then?” Angeline asked, turning to her friends.

Anessa’s eyes wandered as she mulled it over. “Right... For now, let’s talk to Ms. Yuri, and then we can get our equipment in order. We’ve been away for a long time, so a lot of my gear needs replacing.”

“Yeah, I guess so... Well then, guild master, old man Silver. Good luck your paperwork.” Angeline stood up to leave before she realized something. “Come to think of it, is the muscle general out?”

“His lower back is killing him. He’s stuck in bed.”

“Oh...”

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The flowers in the fields would soon be in full bloom, and the bees would be busy gathering their nectar and pollen as butterflies of all colors fluttered about. On the gentle mountain slopes above, countless small streams formed by the snowmelt wound their way down the grassy plains, forming trailbeds for mice and other small animals to scurry along. In the open sky above, a hawk traced lazy circles in the sky as it eyed its prey below. Hal and Mal sat amidst the blooms weaving circlets of flowers. They were never in want for materials even without getting up to move—there were more than enough flowers just within arm’s reach.

They could see sheep off in the distance that had been let out to graze, no more than white dots from where they sat. Winding their way past the milling beasts was Kasim, Charlotte, and Byaku, with Mit tagging along behind. All of them had left in the morning to set up the barrier Graham had said was necessary. Satie had stayed behind to clean up the house and take care of a few other chores before she could join them, while Graham and Percival were likewise occupied with other things to attend to. Thus, Kasim took charge of the matter, with Charlotte and Byaku assisting him.

For his part, Belgrieve was looking after the youngest children right now. He watched the twins at work for a while before asking, “What are you making?”

“A crown.”

“We’re making one for Percy, and Kasim too.”

“It’s done.”

The twins proudly held up a rather adorable circlet woven from red and white clover flowers for Belgrieve to see.

“Ha ha... You’re pretty good.”

“We are.”

“You can have one too, dad.”

“I’d love one.”

The finished ring was set aside while the two of them got to work plucking flowers again. Belgrieve thought back to when Angeline was their age, and how she would have fun making flower garlands just like this.

Did she get back to Orphen safely? he wondered, staring into the distance as his mind’s eyes was filled with memories of his daughter.

Without regard to his reverie, Hal was busy picking flowers and handing them to Mal. “One for dad... And one for grampa too.”

“Right?”

“That sounds good. I’m sure he’lll be delighted.”

The twins beamed at each other and continued their harvest.

“So many flowers. There’s enough for everyone.”

“I want to make one for mother too.”

Belgrieve, hearing their words, was at a loss to say anything. He knew whom they referred to when they said “mother”—not Satie, but the woman who had lost her life giving birth to them even in spite of Satie’s best efforts to save her. The twins still didn’t fully grasp the idea of death, and Belgrieve and the other adults couldn’t bring themselves to talk with them about it. None of them could

bear to be the cause of their sorrow when they inevitably learned the truth. Belgrieve had been told that their mother's grave had been maintained in the artificial space Satie had created. With the collapse of her spell, it was no longer possible for them to even pay their respects.

For lack of anything better to say, Belgrieve stooped down and gently placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "I'm sorry..."

They looked up at their red-bearded dad, perplexed.

"What's wrong? Does it hurt somewhere?"

"Are you crying? It's okay."

Neither of them seemed to really get it. "Pain, pain, go away," they chorused, ruffling up his hair.

Eventually, Belgrieve stood up and patted their heads, smiling. "Thank you..."

"Are you better now?"

"Hee hee... That's good."

And with that, they resumed their weaving.

What will they think when they realize the truth? Belgrieve wondered, eyes closed in pain. He knew it was no good to keep putting off this life lesson, but he kept putting off the issue whenever they joyfully hugged him. *I'm much weaker than I ever knew...*

Kasim soon approached them from the distant side of the meadow, with Charlotte, Byaku, and Mit in tow. Kasim was hauling around a slender stake carved with a pattern of sorts—a magical tool for erecting a barrier.

"Fine weather we're having, isn't it? Makes me want to take a nap... What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. So how is it? Everything working out?"

"It's going well. Char here did her best," Kasim said, patting the girl's head. "She's gotten pretty good at controlling her mana. She's got talent for sure."

"Y-You think so...?" Charlotte bashfully asked.

Even amidst her constant magic practice, she was never one to shirk her

chores around the house and village. Although Kasim and Graham had handled carving the spells into the stakes, it was Charlotte who poured in the necessary energy. She possessed an immense amount of mana and could supply enough to power even such a powerful magic.

Kasim tossed the remaining stake to the ground with a loud clattering noise. “We’re just about finished driving these stakes in. We’ll have to drive the sheep away first, though.”

Meaning, they’re in the way of the barrier, Belgrieve reasoned as he gazed out at all the sheep munching on grass. He could see the other stakes drawing a gentle curve around this area of the field where the sheep currently grazed. With the brilliant sunlight poured down over the plains, it was hard to imagine that this would soon become a battlefield.

“Are you already planning on summoning the fiend once the sheep are away?”

“Nah. We’ll need to adjust the strength of the barrier first. You can never be too sure, seeing as we don’t know what’s going to show up here... Heh heh... I’m really starting to sound like you now, huh?”

“Kasim, come over here.”

“Sit down.”

“Huh?”

At the twins’ beckoning, Kasim squatted down where he stood. It was low enough for the two to drape their wreathe of flowers over his customary hat. “You can have this one.”

“Oh, thank you. Does it look good on me?”

“Yeah, you’re really cute now!” the twins cheered, frolicking about him. Kasim adjusted his flower-adorned hat with a grin. “So I’m even more of a charmer now, heh heh heh...”

Charlotte giggled. “Oddly enough, it *does* work for you, uncle Kasim...” It was a little curious just how well it suited him, given his lazily unkempt hair and beard and the plain clothing he was accustomed to wearing.

“Mit, help us out. We’re making a lot more.”

“Okay. Will Char and Bucky get one too?”

“Yeah, you’ll see.”

“I don’t want one.”

“Huh?”

“Byaku, you can’t say that sort of thing. They’re working hard to make one for you,” Charlotte scolded.

“That’s right, kid. Char, grab him. Make sure he doesn’t get away,” Kasim ordered.

“On it!”

“What are you doing?! Stop! Hey, let go of me!”

“Make the cutest one you can.”

“Okay!”

“I’ll do my best!”

“Stop!”

“Give up, heh heh heh...”

Byaku squirmed between Charlotte and Kasim, who each held him by an arm. Their struggles were causing quite a loud racket when Percival and Graham suddenly joined them.

“What are you people doing?”

“Hey, I should be saying that to *you*. Where have you been, huh?” Kasim asked pointedly.

“We were having a light spar. If we’re going to fight together, it’d be a pain not to become familiar with each other’s swordsmanship. It’s not a bad thing to commit it to memory,” Percival explained, adjusting the sword on his hip.

Graham nodded. It had been quite some time since Belgrieve had seen him with the greatsword slung across his back.

“Is the barrier ready yet?” Percival asked, looking around the field.

“It is. You see where those stakes are around there? We’ll have to drive off the sheep first... And check the strength too. But yeah, we’re good.”

“I see... But, Kasim... You’ve gotten a lot *cuter* since I last saw you.”

Kasim chuckled. “Heh heh heh! It’s a gift from the kids.”

The twins looked up from their work proudly. “We’ll make one for Percy too!”

“Just wait a bit.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks...”

“So what about the sheep?” Byaku asked.

Belgrieve stroked his beard. “Right, for now, we just need to get them out of that circle, so let’s work together and...”

“No need to do something so troublesome.”

Percival brazenly walked out into the center of the ring of stakes. Then, building up his fighting spirit, he stomped his foot with all his might. The sheep, which had been obliviously eating grass, were alarmed by the display of force and were wasted no time running away from him with surprising speed. “That should do it.”

Charlotte’s cheeks puffed out in evident dissatisfaction. “That wasn’t very nice, Percy. Don’t you feel bad for the sheep?”

“Percy... If you scatter them like that, it’ll be a trial and a half to herd them up again later,” Belgrieve scolded.

Percival awkwardly scratched his head. “Well... Sorry.”

Kasim burst into laughter. “Ah, looks like you made him mad! The Exalted Blade is no match for old Bell!”

“Shut up,” Percival scowled.

Mit gently tugged at his cape. “It’s okay, Percy... Everyone makes mistakes.”

“Y-Yeah... You’re right.”

That was more than Belgrieve could take. Soon he was laughing too.

“It’s done! Bend down, Percy,” the twins demanded, and duly crowned him.

Even Byaku, who was customarily stoic, desperately tried to hide his face, but his quivering shoulders gave away his mirth.

Kasim looked like he would die laughing. “Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Agh, I’m done for! I’m not gonna make it! Fits you like a glove, Percy!”

“You wanna die?”

The twins looked up at Percival anxiously.

“Percy... You didn’t want it?”

“Is that why you’re mad?”

“N-No, that ain’t it. I’m happy for the flowers and stuff. Really, I am,” Percival said, desperately backpedaling. The others could only laugh harder at the sight even as the twins turned to each other, relieved.

“That’s good. We’re all matching now!”

“Yeah!”

That drew Belgrieve’s attention to Graham, who was now wearing a flower circlet of his own. Even Percival couldn’t help himself at that sight—and now everyone was laughing.

Graham’s sword began to growl and groan at their antics, as if to say, “Take things seriously!”

Chapter 134: The Barrier Covered a Space

The barrier covered a space about as large as the village square. It would be troublesome to maintain if it was too large, but since they would be fighting fiends, it couldn't be too small either. Graham and Percival entered its expanse to cautiously survey the area and find the most solid footing for combat. Kasim led Charlotte around as they gave each stake another good inspection.

"Okay... We should be good here. Can I activate it?" Charlotte asked.

"Go ahead," said Percival. Kasim nodded as well.

"All right, then." Charlotte closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. Then, she turned her palms upwards to concentrate her mana. The unseen power swirling around her made her white hair stand up as though she was submerged in a pool of water.

"Good, now direct it," Kasim said.

Charlotte opened her eyes just a crack and nervously held out her hands. As her mana passed down through one of the stakes, the symbols carved into it glowed a pale blue before a beam of light shot from the top of it, stretching all the way to the stake on the opposite side. One by one, the erected stakes began to emit the same light, sketching lines of luminous energy from one to the next. Eventually these spread out into a thin, transparent dome that separated everything inside the staked perimeter from the world outside.

"Nicely done, nicely done. That's enough, Char."

Char exhaled slowly and lowered her arms.

Mit ran up to her delightedly and grabbed her hands. "That was cool, Char. You're amazing!"

Charlotte laughed shyly. "Hee hee... You think so?" She hesitantly turned to Belgrieve. He had been watching the spellcrafting, enthralled, and was now looking at her proudly. Charlotte blushed, a wide smile spreading on her face.

Kasim squinted and stared into the barrier. "Now then, on to the strength

test. Percy, can you take care of it?”

“Yeah. Get back.” From inside the barrier, Percival drew his sword. Across from him, Graham drew his greatsword in kind. The holy blade seemed psyched up, finally having something to do after being idle for so long. Its powerful aura caused the air around it to shimmer. Belgrieve unconsciously gulped—this was incomparable to when he had held that same sword in his own hands.

But Percival was no slouch himself, and faced the fearsome spectacle head-on without backing down a single step. He even had a faint smile on his lips, though the flower crown did make it a bit of a peculiar sight.

“Are you ready, Graham?”

“I am.” Graham nodded, drawing his sword back. That motion alone sent tremors through the air.

For an interminable moment, they silently stared each other down, unmoving, before bursting into action. Belgrieve couldn’t tell who had made the first move. From where he stood, it appeared as though they had launched at each other simultaneously. Their blades clashed with an ear-rending battle cry of metal against metal, and an immense shock wave exploded around the two fighters at its center. The grass and flowers within the barrier were minced by the swirling whirlwind of concussive forces produced by the clashing weapons. The barrier flickered faintly while the earth rumbled under their feet. Their blades locked against one another for a brief moment before mana exploded from their point of contact.

“Ah, that’s not good...”

Kasim hurried forth with his hands stretched out, chanting. Not a moment later, the barrier fell apart with the sound of shattering glass. Belgrieve immediately pulled the twins to him and covered them with his mantle while positioning himself to cover Mit, Charlotte, and Byaku.

The rampaging gale that had been contained in the barrier immediately flooded outward like a violent hurricane drifting over the plains, carrying away not only the shredded vegetation but small pebbles and granules of dirt along with it. And yet, none of the debris seemed to fall upon them. Belgrieve chanced a look up to see that all the debris was being blocked by a sandy brown

magic circle above them.



“Byaku, weren’t you supposed to hold off on using magic?”

“Don’t worry. I don’t need the demon’s power to do this much.”

Belgrieve could see that the boy’s hair was still fully white. He placed a hand on his chest in relief, coming down from his momentary panic which had made the explosion seem like it had lasted much longer than the instant or so it actually encompassed. With the winds dying down, they were once more in a sunny and tranquil spring day.

“Phew...” Belgrieve lifted his head and set the twins back on the ground. “Is everyone okay?”

“I’m all right.”

“I’m fine.”

The children were a little surprised, but were otherwise unharmed. In fact, they seemed to be enjoying themselves. The twins and Mit looked at one another saying, “That was crazy!” and jumping around. Only Kasim seemed perturbed by the incident.

“Back to square one...” Kasim murmured, holding his head. “Look at this mess. The adventurers broke the barrier before the fiends could come out.”

“Hey, Kasim! What’s with this flimsy thing you put together? Are you even serious about this?!” Percival yelled.

“Shut up! Yeah, this is my mistake, I admit it—but did you have to go all out like that?!”

“Quit your yapping and just fix it already! We’ll be waiting a hundred years before we summon that damn fiend at this rate!”

“I know, dammit! Looks like I was a bit too naive... Okay, everyone. Let’s go retrieve those stakes.”

Kasim waved his hand around as he started walking, and Charlotte and Mit tagged along. Then the twins ran off to join them, curious about what was going on. Byaku soon sprinted after them, unable to leave them be.

Now then, what do we do about this? Belgrieve wondered. Percival and Graham soon joined him.

“What was up with that flimsy barrier? What was he gonna do if a dragon

showed up?”

“Percy... Did you do that on purpose?”

“Well... A little bit, yeah. I did have a vague sense that would happen if Graham and I went at it seriously.” Percival twirled around his drawn blade. It was a single-edged sword made of a blackish metal with a complicated wavy pattern running from its hilt to its tip. Despite its recent clash with Graham’s greatsword, there wasn’t so much as a chip along its edge. It was quite the sword indeed.

Percival glanced at Graham’s weapon. “Still, you were really trying to snap my sword there,” he said, seemingly speaking to the blade itself. “Show some mercy, would you?”

“Sorry...” Graham apologetically closed his eyes.

Percival laughed boisterously. “Well, you managed to keep it in check, so it’s fine. And my buddy here isn’t going to fold that easily. But it seems like that’s what caused the mana explosion that ruptured the barrier.”

The greatsword remained silent with nary a whimper. Belgrieve could have sworn it was sulking after its scolding. He couldn’t help but smile.

Belgrieve noticed someone running their way from the village. A moment later, he heard a spirited cry of, “Master!” which told him who it was without even having to look—it was Sasha Bordeaux racing towards them like the wind. She grabbed Belgrieve’s hands and swung them up and down, her eyes sparkling.

“It has been too long! I have come to congratulate you on your marriage and appointment as guild master!”

“Ha ha ha, thank you, Sasha. I’m not a guild master yet, but... I’m glad you look well.”

“Well, my health is all I have going for me! I heard everything from Ange, so I came as fast as I could! You look the same as ever, Sir Graham... Hmm? And who is that over there?” she asked, her eyes on Percival.

Percival looked back at her curiously. “Who’s the girl?”

“This is Sasha Bordeaux. You remember Helvetica and Seren from the other day? She’s the middle sister. Sasha, this is Percival... An old adventurer comrade of mine.”

Sasha’s cheeks flushed as she grabbed Percival’s hand. “I have heard the rumors. To think I’d be able to meet the renowned Exalted Blade... I, Sasha Bordeaux, am moved to tears!”

“You’re making an awful big deal about it...” Percival smiled wryly and turned to Belgrieve. “Quite a rowdy friend you’ve got here.” Sasha’s mere presence was enough to instantly lighten the mood. Perhaps she was just what they needed right now.

Graham smiled wearily. “I think calm discipline is a skill you must learn.”

“Ugh...” Sasha bashfully hung her head at the rebuke.

“Oh, what’s this now? Are you done already?” Another voice called out from the same direction Sasha had come from. It was Satie, with Duncan in tow. “You run way too fast, Sasha. You young‘uns sure have a lot of energy,” she said, toting woven baskets in each hand.

“Ha ha ha! You’re still quite young, Satie. I look like the oldest one here,” Duncan joked, hefting his battleaxe over his shoulder.

“Did you finish up what you had to?” Belgrieve asked.

“Yes, so I hurried to have a look at what was going on here, but I guess it’s over already. I ran over as soon as I felt that incredible gust of wind.”

“No, they were just stress-testing the barrier, and Percy and Graham ended up breaking it. They’re going to have to put it up again.”

Satie giggled. “Those two are more dangerous than an S-Rank fiend, I guess...” Graham awkwardly scratched his head while Percival grinned.

“So it will take some time, then?” Duncan asked, leaning on his battleaxe.

“That’s right. Kasim and the kids are fixing it right now.”

He glanced across the vast field to where Kasim was leading the children around, collecting the stakes. He would presumably need to revise the spell sequences carved into them.

Sasha seemed restless. “Umm, so... I heard from Dame Satie that...you were going to summon a high-ranking fiend and defeat it!”

As soon as Sasha had arrived in Turnera, she immediately headed for Belgrieve’s house, but Satie had been the only one there. After talking with Satie, she ended up accompanying the elf here.

“Yes, that’s why we’re putting up a barrier. Even with Graham and Percy, we can never be too sure.”

“That’s right, don’t let your guard down, no matter how much of an advantage you have... Very thought-provoking, as expected of my master.”

“N-No, I really didn’t say anything profound...”

“I thought we might spar if you had time, but it looks like you’re occupied...”

“You’re pretty interesting, Sasha. Anyways, are we just waiting until the barrier is reconstructed? How about lunch, then?” Satie said, holding up her baskets.

Belgrieve considered the position of the sun and found that it was perhaps a little early, and his stomach wasn’t really aching for it either. “I think I’m fine for now. The kids are probably hungrier than we are.”

“I guess you’re right. Well, let’s see what the problem is. I’ll go pitch in, and then we can have lunch once it’s done.”

“Please let me join you! I don’t come here often, and it would be such a waste if I just sat on the sidelines and watched!”

Thus, Satie and Sasha walked off to join Kasim’s party.

Percival shrugged. “Looks like the sisters from that house are all pretty...intense.”

“Yeah, well... Yeah.” Belgrieve smiled wryly as he tugged at his beard. Percival’s assessment of the sisters was accurate—all three of the Bordeaux Sisters certainly had their idiosyncrasies. In any case, they would all need to wait a little longer. With Kasim in charge, they probably wouldn’t be idle for too long, but it wasn’t just going to be done in the blink of an eye even so.

Belgrieve slowly lowered himself down to the gently sloping ground, where

he could feel the shaggy texture of the grass through his clothing. Even seated, he could still oversee the entire barrier site from his vantage point and watch everyone else hard at work.

"It's as peaceful as a picnic," Duncan chuckled as he sat beside him.

"Well, we've got lots of kids here," Belgrieve joked, laughing as well. "It's hard to believe that a high-ranking fiend is about to appear."

"I wonder—what are demons, exactly...? When I look at Mit, and those twins, I just don't know anymore."

Duncan's musings spurred Belgrieve to close his eyes and think about it as well. He was just as much at a loss to explain it. According to legend, the demons were artificial life-forms created by Solomon that went mad after their maker disappeared, causing chaos and destruction all throughout the world. Some even supposed it was the mana of demons that created the first fiends. But when he looked at the demon children walking around before his eyes, they were the epitome of innocence. There was Mit, of course, as well as Hal and Mal, and Byaku and even Angeline. Not a single one of them even remotely resembled the demons of legend. On the other hand, the demon Angeline had defeated in Orphen had been a fearsome being indeed, and he'd heard of the demons that Marguerite and Graham had slain across the land too. Something just wasn't adding up.

"Graham, how were the demons you fought before?"

"They were powerful foes... But it was like they were present in body, but not in spirit. The way they wielded their destructive might was not unlike a child crushing a bug without malice. In other words, they had no inhibitions, and they were dangerous. That was why I needed to put them down."

"Yeah, that's how I'd put it," Percival nodded. "They're creepy, yeah. But they would all moan about some place they wanted to go back to. No—maybe it was about *someone* they wanted to come back...? Yeah—like the pleading of an abandoned child. It was as if they thought if they did exactly as daddy told them, he'd come back someday... Anyways, there's definitely someone they want to see. Fighting them was just a miserable experience..."

That's right, Percy has spoken of demons he's slain too, Belgrieve thought,

twisting at his beard. “Children, huh? That might be exactly what they are... Did Solomon really make them just to be weapons?”

“I don’t know... But if he did, such emotions would just get in the way. Even if he wanted them to adore him as their master, they’re far too human,” Graham reasoned.

“Maybe he wanted a family or something...” Percival mused. Although there was a hint of amusement in his voice, Belgrieve had a feeling he’d hit the mark.

“When it comes to demons, we can’t just turn a blind eye to whatever’s going on,” he muttered.

Graham nodded. “We’ll have to look into it. To ensure these children can live without worry.”

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Anessa sat beside Miriam on the bench in front of the guild building, where they could get a bit of rest without having to go inside. Angeline had taken Marguerite to see Lionel, as there seemed to be some paperwork required to promote the elf princess to the higher adventurer ranks. Even if their whole party had gone in, it wasn’t like they had anything to do there, and crowding into the room would just cause more trouble than necessary—hence why the two of them were waiting out here. Their plan was to challenge a dungeon together once all the necessary procedures were handled.

It was a busy area, and all the traffic did kick up a bit of dust. The light streaming down from the sky clearly illuminated every dust particle. Winter was a long way off, but they were still quite comfortable sitting under the warmth of the sun. The air wasn’t as clear as it was in Turnera, but it wasn’t unpleasant either.

“Ahh, now I feel like taking a nap.”

“It’s nice and warm, after all,” Anessa agreed, stretching out her arms. She heard a slight cracking in her back, and it felt like her entire body was loosening up.

Upon returning to Orphen, everything had seemed strangely busy. With Marguerite freeloading, there were three people living at their house and just

as many things to deal with as one might imagine. It took a bit of time to clean up after such a long absence. The vegetables they failed to finish off before leaving had remained where they were left and were long since shriveled up and dried, so much so that it was hard to tell what some of them actually were. It felt nice to get rid of them in any case.

While they were tidying up the place, Anessa recalled her time in Belgrieve's home. *With almost all of their guests gone, I guess it's finally going to calm down there*, she thought as she absently shifted her eyes towards Miriam.

"Yes?" the girl in question asked.

"Well, I was just thinking about how our long vacation is finally over."

Miriam giggled. "I guess so. It really was quite an adventure."

When Anessa thought back on it all now and everything that had happened, it had been like she had been sprinting at full speed the entire time. It had all been things she would have never experienced had she not been on a team with Angeline—never mind that they wouldn't have even had the opportunity to meet Belgrieve and his old comrades, or have had cause to visit Turnera either.

"Back then..." Anessa murmured, "If the guild hadn't asked us to join Ange's party, we never would have met *anyone* in Turnera."

"We did find Ange pretty scary at first, after all. But I'm glad we accepted the offer."

She and Miriam had reached AAA-Rank at quite a young age, but they did feel strangely apprehensive around the young genius girl who had climbed even higher than that. At first, they had certainly interacted with her as gingerly as if she were made of porcelain. When they brought it up to her long after their friendship had solidified, Angeline had only said, "You did? I don't remember that." They all shared a hearty laugh at that one.

In any case, now that they had come home to Orphen, it was back to their quotidian lives. They'd take requests and leave the city to fight and collect materials, and inspect and maintain their gear in between. And then it would be on to the next job. *Is this kind of repetitive life...normal?* Anessa wondered.

Angeline said she wanted to go on another journey to the east, and of course, Anessa intended to tag along, but once that was over, they would be back to the same cycle again. Perhaps going on another journey to distant lands again after *that* would just become part of that cycle in time.

"How long is it going to continue? *Sigh*..."

Looks like I'm fretting again, Anessa thought as she planted her elbow on her knees and propped up her head in her hands. The end of one large adventure seemed like the end of a chapter of her life—a realization accompanied by a touch of melancholy. The fact of the matter was that she was starting to feel dispirited with her life.

Seeing Belgrieve and his old friends had made her reflect on her own party—on how they had met, and endured that period of awkwardness and how they gradually opened up to one another too, naturally enough. But Belgrieve's party was, in a sense, an image of what was in store for her. *Someday I'll be forty years old too, and what will I be doing then?* And so her thoughts rolled from past to future.

Not just forty either—I'll get older, and older still. Will I still be able to go on as an adventurer when my body is no longer as limber as it is now? Percival and Kasim were still healthy at their age, and they could still hold their own as active adventurers. She could easily picture those two fighting well into their sixties just like Maria, Dortos, and Cheborg. As for Satie, her real age hardly mattered as long as she didn't grow ill, and even Belgrieve could easily make a comeback as an adventurer if he really wanted to. Considering those four, Anessa wondered if her own party would be like that too someday.

By the same token, she was definitely feeling a bit of fatigue for this lifestyle of constant stimulation, the tension of battle a mere facet of her daily existence. Once danger became routine, it was like the color faded from most everything in her life. But when she was kicking back in Turnera, she would interact with the village girls who spent every day of their lives farming, with no connection to adventuring at all. Each time she talked to one of them, she would think, *This life doesn't sound so bad either.*

Her musings were interrupted by the sudden sound of somebody strumming

on a stringed instrument. She looked over just as Lucille was walking by with Yakumo.

“Ba-da-da-daaa-da, ba-da-da-daaa—*when I’m sixty-four*...”

“Hey, you two!” Miriam waved, and the two of them took notice.

“Oh, what are you doing here? Waiting for Ange?”

“That’s right.”

“They’re off doing the paperwork for Maggie’s promotion. She’s joining our party.”

Yakumo nodded as she tapped her pipe to knock out some ash. “You get along well enough. Good for you. With Ange and Maggie, you’ll have two frontline fighters. Then, an archer and magician on the back line. That is a solid formation.”

“That’s right. I think we’ll have an easier time fighting now.”

“And an easier time making money, I’d imagine. Color me envious.”

Marguerite’s skill with the sword had been recognized by the senior adventurers too. Perhaps owing to the gap in experience, she still fell a little short of Angeline, but she had a sharp swing worthy of a high-ranking adventurer. Her unrefined personality could be a bit endearing as well, and Anessa and Miriam liked her quite a lot. After bringing her into their own home and getting used to living with her, they were convinced they’d be able to do well as a party too.

But Marguerite was an elf. Her appearance probably wouldn’t change even if twenty years went by. It was easy to picture it, after meeting Satie. While the rest of them steadily aged, she might end up being the only one who could continue being an adventurer. Anessa wondered how the rest of them would feel when that happened. No one could possibly know the future, but the one thing that Anessa could be sure of was that this worry would haunt her for a long time to come. She sighed again.

Yakumo laughed as she stuffed fresh tobacco into her pipe. “What was that now? Back home, they say that happiness escapes you whenever you sigh.”

Miriam peered into Anessa's face curiously. "Anne, you've been acting strange for a while now. Are you getting sentimental?"

"Of course not... Well, maybe."

"Why? Did you want to stay in Turnera a little longer?"

"No, that's not it. I'm just a little distracted, or how to put it... I've been thinking about the future and that stuff a lot."

"The future?"

"Yeah. It's not like adventuring is a job you can hold on to forever. And, you know."

"Aww, you're sounding like an old lady."

"Shut it. I mean, it's true, right? It's fine for now, but there's no telling what's going to happen later."

"Hmmm. Then do you want to become a bow instructor at Turnera's guild in the future?" Miriam mischievously suggested.

Anessa chuckled. The fact that Miriam had mentioned Turnera at all made her friend's own true intentions clear—not that she minded that at all. "Heh heh... I guess so. That's not a bad plan... Then you'll be the magic instructor?"

"Hmm... I'm not good at teaching. If I do go, it'll be to do research, or maybe to craft enchanted items."

"Being a magician must be nice. You've got all sorts of options. Well, if you open up an item shop in Turnera, I can imagine the demand."

"If I retired right now, maybe. But I'm going to be an adventurer for some time yet..." Miriam's ears twitched back and forth beneath her hat as her eyes wandered. "Still, I'm the same. I don't know if I'm going to keep at it when I get too old. I might get tired of it someday, or I could get injured pretty badly somewhere along the way..."

"So you say, right after teasing *me* for sounding old."

"I mean, it's my duty to tease you, Anne."

Anessa pouted, then swiped Miriam's hat right off her head and pinched her

cat ears, flipping them inside out. She knew they would bounce back on their own before long, so she carefully adjusted them so they would be stuck like that. It was only after she saw that both of Miriam's ears stayed flipped that Anessa gave a satisfied nod.

"Okay, good."

"It's not good at all," Miriam said, puffing up her cheeks. She skillfully wiggled her ears until both of them popped back up

"You're quite close, you two," Yakumo said as she breathed a cloud of smoke. "Anyways, you shouldn't have such a narrow view when you're even younger than me."

"Ms. Yakumo, do you plan to be active for all your life?"

"Well, it's not in my nature to do anything else. Not like anyone's going to take me as a bride. Even if I do marry, all the cooking and cleaning would just drive me crazy."

"Really? When you're so pretty? That's a shame," Miriam crooned.

"What are you saying? Don't tease your elders."

"What about you, Lucille? Do you have anything in mind for the future?"

"I'm a rock and roller!"

"Pardon?"

"Tomorrow, I'll catch tomorrow's wind... *Blowin' in the wind...*" Leaving it at that, Lucille punctuated her words with a chord from her instrument. The other three didn't have a clue what she meant, and shrugged off the effort of interpreting her words.

"There you go again with your Southernese... Well, it's not like this is the first time she's said something incomprehensible."

"Well, it's Lucille-ish, I guess."

Lucille's hands froze. She stared at Anessa, then at Miriam.

"Are you two going to be lovely brides, then?"

"Huh?!"

Anessa and Miriam were completely taken aback by the unexpected question.

“Why are you talking about that?”

“The marriage ceremony in Turnera was lovely. Satie was pretty,” Lucille said simply, before returning to her strumming.

Anessa and Miriam exchanged a look.

“Well... I did think the whole thing seemed kind of nice.”

“But it’s not like either of us has anyone, anyways...”

“As the people of the past once said—*Good things come to those who wait.* But don’t wait too long.”

“Agh...” Miriam was at a loss for words. *Maybe I haven’t put any effort into finding anyone...*

Yakumo cackled. “It really is a shame, with you being so cute and all. Instead of hacking and slashing, it wouldn’t be so bad to rule the roost in a peaceful home of your own, you know.”

“Don’t you wait too long either, Yakky-baby.”

Yakumo silently bopped Lucille on the head, eliciting a yelp.

Their routine was interrupted by Angeline and Marguerite walking out of the guild, their business over and done with. Marguerite seemed to be in high spirits; she had a brand-new enchanted gold plate hanging from her belt—the sign of a high-ranking adventurer.

Angeline was a bit surprised to see Yakumo and Lucille there. “Oh, you came too?”

“To take some work, yes. By the look of things, you received quite a promotion.”

“You bet! I’m an AA-Rank!” Marguerite gushed, caressing her new plate.

Even with someone like Angeline mediating for her, it was quite incredible for anyone to soar up to AA-Rank in one promotion. But after all of the combat she had seen in the danger-ridden Earth Navel, anything lower than that would have been an unfair evaluation of her skill level. In fact, if she hadn’t been

starting from a lowly D-Rank, she may well have risen even higher. With the four of them working together now, it wouldn't be long before Marguerite was a AAA-Rank like Anessa and Miriam.

Yakumo dumped the ash from her pipe once again before stowing it away in her pocket. "Now then, we should be on our way. Another time."

"Next time, let's share a meal together."

After the duo disappeared through the doorway, Angeline stretched in the warm sunlight. "The weather's nice... Let's get going too."

"Right on. Are we all ready then?"

"Time to test out this new party, heh heh..."

"Okay! I'll do my best!" Marguerite was visibly raring to go.

The other three laughed as they picked up their bags.

Chapter 135: The Smoothly Drawn Blade

Sasha's smoothly drawn blade gleamed dazzlingly as it caught the light of the sun. Her upper body leaned forward slightly as she held her sword out, her immaculate posture imbued with a sense of dignity. Standing opposite her, Belgrieve let out a deep breath and let the tension drain from his body as he stared back at her.

The wind rustled his hair, which tickled his face and neck. He barely perceived the sound of her bounding feet before he saw Sasha coming straight for him.

Belgrieve held his sword out and parried her first strike. But Sasha had made sure not to overcommit, and she swiftly and effortlessly put some distance between them again, carefully watching to see how her opponent would pursue.

But Belgrieve was not so keen on pushing forward either. He matched her passive stance, shifting the tip of his blade back and forth ever so slightly to try and spur a reaction. After a long staring match, it was Sasha who initiated once again, but not in a straight line this time—she raced in an arcing path and assailed Belgrieve from his right side. After he blocked the strike, she soared over him with a great leap and raised her sword high as she landed behind him.

Belgrieve, propelling himself forcefully against the ground with his left foot, pivoted on his peg leg like he was a spinning top. With this agile move, he was facing Sasha again. Sasha had tried to swing on him from her high stance, but Belgrieve's rotating turn had led into a horizontal swing of his sword, forcing her to nimbly retreat. Once again, they were staring at one another out of range of each other's blades.

"That missy's got some nice moves," Percival muttered. He was watching their bout from nearby.

Kasim laughed as he sat down beside him. "She's apparently AAA-Rank. Although she's very faithful to the fundamentals, the way she manages to improvise now and then shows she's accustomed to battle. This might be a bit tough for Bell."

“But Bell won’t fall apart too easily when he’s on the defensive... Will he manage to hold out long enough, or will she break through his guard? That’s the question.”

“Hmm, you’ve got a pretty high opinion of him, for everything you say.”

“He might be the weakest out of the four of us, but as long as he focuses on defense, he’s capable of stalling opponents beyond his level for a fair amount of time. What’s more, he’s not shallow enough to get carried away and go on the offense. That’s why I can leave my back to him, dammit.”

“I get where you’re coming from,” Duncan said and nodded. “I also think it will be difficult to breach Sir Bell’s defenses.”

With that said, their appraisal of Belgrieve didn’t have much to go on when it came to how he’d fare in a one-on-one duel against a human opponent. That wasn’t to say Belgrieve didn’t sport an impregnable defense, but it could also be said that his offense was rather lacking. This wasn’t a problem when they all fought as a party; Belgrieve just had to keep his foe occupied until a more-skilled adventurer could come to his aid. But that strategy wasn’t in play in a situation like this. In short, Belgrieve’s strategy was like maintaining a siege. He could only exhibit his full might with the assistance of outside forces.

His irregular movements, made possible by his use of his peg leg, did allow him to catch opponents off guard when he was fighting them for the first time. Indeed, Sasha had been defeated by this before. However, Sasha had grown even stronger since their last bout, and this time she was armed with foreknowledge of Belgrieve’s fighting style. Thus, she was not recklessly advancing on him, and always withdrew before Belgrieve could riposte. Sasha, subduing her own natural inclinations, had refrained from rushing him recklessly—proof of Belgrieve’s influence over her.

Through each clash, the two combatants kept each other in check, until the moment when Belgrieve’s blade swung through empty air. Percival and Graham’s faces twitched as they saw it.

“There!”

Sasha, not letting the opportunity escape, swiftly turned her sword and smacked Belgrieve’s shoulder. He felt the impact all the way to his fingertips,

which forced him to drop his sword.

Sasha remained wary, taking distance to prepare for what he might do. But Belgrieve fell to his knees, patting his shoulder. He looked at Sasha and smiled. “This is my loss. Splendid work, Sasha.”

For a while, Sasha remained en garde, standing stock-still like a statue. Finally, the tip of her blade began quivering as joy spread through her whole body. “I did it!” she cried, leaping into the air. “Finally... I finally managed to land a hit on Master! Yippee!”

The twins, seeing her curious display, began hopping up and down beside her. Belgrieve laid down on the ground right where he had been standing, and Satie handed him a hand towel.

“Here you are. Good work.”

“Yeah, thanks... Good grief, that was some splendid swordsmanship.”

As he wiped his sweat, Sasha rushed over and firmly grabbed his hand. “Master, thank you for lowering yourself to my level! It is thanks to you, that I have taken another step forward!”

“It wasn’t anything so grand as that—you surpassed me long ago, Sasha.”

“What are you saying?! Thanks to you, master, I learned of my own immaturity and redoubled my devotion to studying the blade! How could I not be thankful?!” Sasha said, swinging his hand around with every word.

Belgrieve smiled awkwardly, declining to say anything else. He could hardly argue that any extenuating circumstance had led to his defeat. Mit walked over to him and tugged on his sleeve. “Dad... Did you lose?”

“Yeah. There are loads of people stronger than me, you know.”

“Hmm...” Mit looked a little discontented but didn’t say anything else.

Kasim yawned widely before getting up. “Now then, that’s enough of a prelude. We’ve rested and eaten, so it’s about time we got to the main event.” The barrier had been set up again just a little after noon, when they decided to break for lunch. That was when Sasha had suggested a spar with Belgrieve to help along their digestion.

The village youths who had finished up their morning work had started gathering around to see what would happen. Some of them had even come with their weapons for some reason.

Percival took a look around at the crowd, and loudly proclaimed, “You lot, what you’re about to see is, in a sense, an adventurer’s peak. Some of you may never see it again in your lifetimes, but that doesn’t matter. Anyways, just get it in your head that you might have to fight a monster like this someday.”

Then he walked with Graham into the zone surrounded by the stakes. The youths looked at one another and broke into boisterous chatter.

“Are you sure about that?” one of them asked.

“You’re making a real big deal about this,” said another.

Barnes came up to Belgrieve along with Rita. “Mr. Bell...”

“Oh, Barnes. What did you bring that bow of yours for?”

“Well... Just in case something happens.”

Belgrieve chuckled. “It’s good to be cautious. But you won’t have to put it to any use this time.”

“I know.”

“You’re going to protect *me*, right?” Rita teased. Barnes’ reply was mumbled as he scratched his head bashfully.

“I’m glad you two are getting along,” Satie said, cheerfully egging the couple on. “Barnes, you stay back. If something does happen, you’ll need to be *right* next to Rita to keep her safe.”

“Y-Yes ma’am.”

Barnes seemed a bit nervous, but Rita was grinning as she held on to his arm.

For their part, Sasha and Duncan also held their weapons at the ready, prepared for the million-to-one outcome. Their eyes were locked on the barrier.

Just as before, Charlotte poured her mana into the construct on Kasim’s orders. Her hair was tossed about like a whirlwind, and her lips were shut tightly in concentration. The spell had grown stronger, and the burden placed

on her seemed even higher than before.

After some time, a membrane of notably brighter light encapsulated the area, forming into something like a thick dome of glass.

Percival gently tested the barrier with the tip of his sword, and grinned in satisfaction. “Nicely done. You should have gone with this one from the start,” he said, before turning to Graham.

“Yes, this will suffice,” Graham concurred.

“All right, nicely done, Char. It’s dangerous there, so how about you run on over to Bell’s side?”

“Okay!” Charlotte, awash with relief, seemed to visibly relax as she ran over to stand with Belgrieve and the others. Kasim, meanwhile, hopped into the barrier and waved his hand around.

“All right, let’s get this over with, gramps.”

Graham nodded, then produced the orb from the folds of his jacket. It was now emanating crimson light, and there seemed to be dark clouds swirling within it. He held it in the palm of his outstretched hand while Kasim, standing across from him, waved both his hands over the orb and began chanting. A vortex of mana formed with the orb at its center. The black clouds suddenly began to ooze out from the orb like smoke. It raced around the barrier, caught in the vortex of energies.

“Urgh!” Belgrieve was suddenly beset by phantom pain in his missing leg. He grasped his right thigh grimacing. It wasn’t as intense as previous pangs, but it was hardly a gentle tickle either.

Satie anxiously placed a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay, Bell?”

“Yeah, I’m fine... Could you look after the kids?”

“Sure... But don’t push yourself.”

Mit clasped the pendant hanging from his chest. He gazed at the barrier, his face more serious than ever. The twins, who had been frolicking around until now, grasped each other’s hands as a sudden terror came over them. Satie pulled them to her side.

Something about this seems...familiar, Belgrieve mused, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at the black clouds. Some time ago, he remembered confronting something like this at the Bordeaux Estate. Glancing over, he saw that Charlotte was staring wide-eyed into the barrier.

The smoke that poured from the orb didn't seem to bleed any of its initial momentum as it continued to swirl. Eventually, it began to amass on a single nexus and began to take form. Several dark, childlike shadows bounded around the mass of sinister energy, and suddenly the air was filled with shrill laughter. There was no joy in it—it had the tone of sneering contempt.

The young villagers who had come to watch were bewildered, some of them turning pale. Though it lacked the fearsome majesty of a dragon, they were all struck by the sheer uncanniness of the shadowy forms.

Suddenly, the inside of the barrier was illuminated with what looked like a flash of lightning. Graham had swung the holy sword down, discharging a shockwave of mana from the blade. The energy was enough to disintegrate all of the shadowy figures, but they merely turned back into smoke and twisted off into the air once more, forming another figure elsewhere within the barrier. The eerie laughter was even louder now—but it wasn't long before these figures were sliced in two with a single stroke of Percival's blade, first bisecting one, and then another on the backswing. With another horizontal swipe, he felled three more of them in the time it took to exhale. The flurry of strikes was accompanied by a magical bombardment from Kasim.

The shadows were cut down again and again. Each time, they would dissolve into smoke and reform to assail them once more. There seemed to be no end to the onslaught.

"M-Mr. Bell... Are those three going to be all right...?" Barnes asked nervously.

Belgrieve, still holding his right thigh to contain the throbbing pain, smiled reassuringly. "Those three will be just fine. We won't be able to help with that in any case."

His words were undoubtedly true. Percival was racing around the barrier with deftness unthinkable of a middle-aged man, while Graham pulverized his foes

with small, efficient motions. Kasim was ceaselessly slinging spells all over the place, not letting a single enemy approach. The villagers couldn't hope to imitate that, and neither could Belgrieve, nor Duncan, nor even Sasha. As Percival said, perhaps this was an adventurer's peak. Belgrieve found it a bit humorous that he could easily picture Angeline fighting alongside them.

Although the battle seemed endless, the more shadows the three of them defeated, the more the black smoke seemed to diminish in volume.

"It's like the smoke itself is the mana supply," Satie observed.

Duncan nodded. "So it seems. Presumably, some mana is expended whenever it tangibly manifests itself. It is a slow process, but it is undoubtedly losing strength."

"Truly, this is incredible... This is what it's like when an S-Rank gets serious," Sasha's voice was a mix of awe and admiration.

As the smoke thinned out, Belgrieve's phantom pain also seemed to diminish. Belgrieve narrowed his eyes as he puzzled that out. He looked up from his prosthetic leg to the battlefield. "Is that a demon, then?" he muttered.

At last, the smoke had been cleared away. One last swing of Graham's sword erased all that remained. The dark laughter was silenced, and the cold, spine-tingling sensation was gone. After witnessing the scene with bated breath, the village youths loudly clamored once more. Belgrieve's phantom pain had vanished.

The barrier dissolved with a loud roaring sound of displaced wind. Within the boundary line where the barrier had only recently stood, the ground was a mess. It was like a storm had come through, but only over that circle of land. It had clearly been a fierce battle, but from where the spectators stood, it seemed none of the combatants had suffered any significant injuries.

"It's over," Satie said as she lifted the twins in her arm. Hal and Mal had been terrified, but they seemed to have relaxed as the mood among the rest of the spectators turned celebratory. They blinked owlishly, still holding on to Satie's clothes as they began to excitedly whisper to each other.

"That was amazing."

“Grampa and Percy are amazing.”

Barnes exhaled deeply. “I’ll be damned... I don’t think I can call myself an adventurer anymore.”

Belgrieve chuckled. “They’re special—you don’t meet folks like them every day... Well, in most cases.”

“Don’t scare me like that, Mr. Bell...”

Duncan laughed and relaxed his weight against his axe. “My word... In the end, there was no place for us in that arena. Well, it would have been bad if the situation really *had* called for our help.”

Sasha folded her arms, seemingly conflicted. “But I *did* still feel I wanted join the fight, a little... Hmm...”

While everyone else was celebrating the adventurers’ victory, Mit was alone in continuing to stare ahead with pursed lips. He gripped the pendant hanging from his neck so hard that his hand was turning white. As young as he was, the fact that those bizarre shadow creatures had been born from his own mana wasn’t lost on him.

Belgrieve gently placed a hand on his head and patted him. “It’s all right.”

“Yeah...” Mit looked up at Belgrieve and smiled softly. Then, he raced off to congratulate Graham. “Good job, Grandpa!” he shouted.

Team Angeline completed their first job with Marguerite aboard—but after traveling together and fighting alongside one another for as long as they had, it wasn't as though they had to spend much time working on teamwork. Even so, this was still the first time they were on their own without Belgrieve or Kasim, so that did make it feel a little bit novel.

Perhaps without Belgrieve around to restrain their impulsiveness, Angeline and Marguerite (who were about evenly matched and equally willful) would often end up competing against one another, even if unintentionally. They'd quarrel far more often, even over inconsequential things, and prod at one another in jest. Anessa, the party's usual mediator, was reminded of just how incredible Belgrieve was as she did her best to wrangle them.

In any case, their first job was done and it was on to the next one. But it wasn't like the board was always filled with requests of variant monsters or Calamity-Class threats. It really had been an irregular situation back when that demon had caused such a commotion. Thus, the plan this time was to enter a dungeon to see what materials they would be able to collect. Aside from the money the guild would pay them for completing this exploration request, they could also earn some extra by selling the various items found in the dungeon. Now that Orphen had become an independent guild and had partnered up with a trading company, they had a far stronger distribution network for materials. Anything brought in would generally sell regardless of what it was.

They went to the guild and borrowed a few documents on the dungeon in question. They spread the documents out across a table, and as they strategized over them, a large, familiar shadow crossed the lobby.

"Ugh," Miriam groaned.

"Ah, Granny Maria!" Angeline called out.

Maria looked back at her with her customarily standoffish look. "Oh, you're back... *Cough*!"

"It's been a while. Have you been well?"

"Do I look well to you? How idiotic. *Cough, hack-hack*! Tsk..."

"Sounds pretty harsh. Serves you right!" Miriam taunted, pointing and

laughing.

“Oh, shut it. You should appreciate your master a bit more!”

“Hmph! It’s your fault for brazenly coming out to a place like this when you’re feeling ill, stupid!” Miriam said, sticking out her tongue.

“Does this damn cat ever shut up...?” Maria muttered, brow furrowed irritably. “There’s no way I came here because I wanted to! I’m in a bad enough mood as it is!” Maria reached out and snatched the hat off of Miriam’s head.

Miriam hissed menacingly as she made to jump at her old teacher. “You violent, monster hag!”

“Stupid cat, biting the hand that feeds you!”

Anessa sighed wearily as the two of them grappled. “It’s like this whenever they lock eyes... Ah, seriously, give it a rest already—everyone’s watching! Ms. Maria, if you don’t calm down soon, your cough will...”

Marguerite leaned back in her chair, grinning. “Looks like they get along.”

Angeline giggled. “I know, right?”

Eventually, the two magicians were pulled apart from each other, and they stood there panting for breath. Maria held a sleeve against her mouth as she broke into a massive coughing fit.

“*Hack*! *Cough, cough*! *Hack*... Dammit, how irritating...”

“Grr... Why does the hag have to be so unnecessarily strong...” Miriam hastily combed her disheveled hair back into place before pulling her cap down firmly over her head. Anessa rubbed Maria’s back.

“What did you come for, granny? Do you have a request for the guild?” Angeline asked as she gathered the dungeon documents and tapped the edge against the table to straighten it all out.

“If it’s a difficult job, we’ll take it,” Marguerite offered.

But Maria scoffed and replied, “Unfortunately, I’m the one who received a request. I came with medicine for the musclehead’s back.”

“Muscle General...?”

They had heard from Dortos about Cheborg being bedridden after messing up his lower back, and had even gone to see him that very day. Just stirring a little bit had caused the mountain of a man to groan from his sick bed, and though he didn't have any visible injuries, he felt excruciating pain in his lower back even just from speaking in his usual booming voice. "Aha ha ha! That stings!" he had said, laughing in spite of himself.

"He seemed to be in good spirits... Is it really that bad?"

"How should I know? Whatever happens to him, it's no skin off my back."

"You say that, but you still brought medicine," said Marguerite.

"Shut up. Tsk... You young folks don't have any manners... *Cough*."

Angeline turned to her party members. "Hey, how about we see him one more time? He's probably bored."

"Yeah sure, why not."

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

Marguerite got up and made for the guild's infirmary, with Anessa and Miriam following behind smiling wryly. Angeline walked beside Maria, who was wearily sighing. "Has the demon research gotten anywhere...?" she whispered.

"Hmm...? Yeah, it's moving forward one step at a time. But I don't have enough material to work off of."

"I'm a demon."

"Excuse me?" Maria looked at her askance.

Angeline chuckled proudly. "I'm only saying it because I trust you, granny."

"What nonsense are you spewing, girl?"

"It's true. My mom's an elf, you see."

"*Hack*... Why are you human, then?"

"I don't know, but it's true."

"More nonsense..."

"Mom and dad can explain better than me... You should come over to

Turnera when you can.”

“So that’s your goal, brat... I told you I’ve got no intentions of becoming your mother.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. “No one said anything about that... I already have a mom. Mom is adorable, you know. She has emerald eyes, and she’s about the same height as me. If I cling to her, she pats my head and calls me a good girl. Just the other day, I held dad’s hand on one side and mom’s hand on the other and we all went for a walk...”

“What are you talking about, fool... *Cough hack*!”

By that point in their conversation, they were already at the infirmary. Cheborg was in the furthest bed, sitting up with his back against the wall. Instead of his usual threadbare uniform, he wore loose-fitting clothes and his lack of his usual hat put his shiny bald head on full display. But what surprised Angeline more was the fact that he was wearing glasses. He seemed to be reading a letter of sorts.

Marguerite, at the head of the procession, approached him, prompting the man to look up from his letter and remove his glasses. “Hey, what’s this?! You’re here again! Aha ha ha! Ooh, that smarts!”

“Still hurts, huh? You gotta keep it together, General.”

“Yeah, it’s pathetic, I know. But time’s a strong foe, and it looks like I’m on the ropes!”

Angeline popped her head out from behind Marguerite. “What were you reading, General? A letter?”

“Huh? What? You say something, Ange?” he asked loudly.

“What are you reading?” Angeline shouted.

Cheborg chuckled and waved the letter through the air. “Oh, that! My great-grandson sent a letter, see! He says, “Get well soon, gramps”! It’s so moving I’m blubbering over here!” But there wasn’t even a hint of tears in his eyes. Anessa and Miriam turned to each other and giggled.

“You look well.”

“Did you really hurt your back?”

“Yeah, it’s terrible! I don’t really get it myself, but it hurts!”

That was when Maria irritably pushed the girls aside and took their place by his bedside. “Quiet down a bit. Your hollering has got my ears ringing.”

“Huh? What? You say something, Maria?”

“Be silent, I say! If only you’d just kick the bucket this time... Here, take some medicine.”

“Oh, sorry about that, Maria—the guild’s elixirs just don’t do it for me!” Cheborg said as he popped open the vial she’d handed him.

Maria frantically stopped him before he could drink it. “That’s not a drink, you idiot! Rub it on your back! *Hack, hack*!”

“Oh, really? You shoulda said so earlier! Could you rub it on for me?”

“*Cough*... Don’t ask a pure maiden something like that. Do it yourself.”

“I’ll do it, General...” Angeline took a wet compress from the infirmary’s supplies and let the medicine seep into it. Then, after laying Cheborg face-down, she pressed it against his lower back. He let out a groan as the patch made contact.

“Nice and cool! This one feels like it’ll work wonders!”

“It won’t just *feel* like it—it *will*. Now stop making a ruckus and sleep.”

“Thanks, Maria! I hope your fake illness goes away soon too!”

“How many times do I have to tell you! You wanna die?! *Cough*, *hack hack*!”

Maria collapsed into another coughing fit, and Anessa began rubbing her back right away. Miriam cackled away with Marguerite, while Angeline corked the medicine vial shut and left it by the bedside.

“What kind of idiot is making so much noise in an infirmary?” somebody called out in a weary voice. They all turned to see Dortos had come in. “Good grief, it’s like a party in here. This isn’t a pub!”

“Ha ha! It’s always a good time whenever Maria comes around!”

“This has nothing to do with me!”

“Nah, this hag’s a lot noisier than she wants to admit,” said Miriam.

“Damn brat...”

“So it goes both ways...” Dortos disappointedly shook his head.

“Are you here to visit him too, Old Man Silver?” Angeline asked, giggling.

“Not just visiting—it’s lunchtime.” Dortos placed the basket he’d brought with him onto the bed—a lunch box, apparently. Cheborg wasn’t particularly injured aside from his back, so he wasn’t on any kind of special diet.

I guess it is lunchtime, huh... Angeline placed a hand on her stomach, realizing she was a little hungry. “We should go eat lunch too.”

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Miriam chimed in.

Angeline turned towards Cheborg. “We’ll be off, then. Take care, Muscle General... I’ll come back.”

“Come back whenever you want! I’m bored out of my skull!”

They parted with Cheborg, who really didn’t look sick at all, and left the guild behind. The warmth of the spring sun pouring down upon them made them feel uncomfortably aware of the dust getting kicked up from the road beneath their feet.

Chapter 136: The Sky was a Brilliant Blue

The sun was a brilliant blue—no matter which way the girl turned her head, she could not spot even a single tiny cloud. It was so intensely blue, in fact, that the sky itself and the ridgeline of the mountains supporting it from beneath seemed unreal.

The seven-year-old girl—Angeline—fidgeted on Belgrieve's back. "That's enough, dad. I can walk..."

"Hmm? Really?" Belgrieve gently squatted down and lowered Angeline off his back. She felt a bit unstable on her feet after being carried for so long, but the disorienting feeling was quashed by kicking at the air a couple times.

"Are you okay?" Belgrieve asked, stooping down and placing a hand on Angeline's forehead. Her eyes were slightly glassy and red, but her forehead wasn't hot, and she was steady on her feet as well.

The young grass swayed in the breeze. Even though all the village's sheep had been released to graze, it didn't seem like the luscious ground cover had diminished at all. Blue stones peeked out here and there amidst the grass, gleaming as they reflected the sun's rays.

Angeline held on to Belgrieve's hand—a large, rough hand equally accustomed to working with swords and shovels. Angeline liked his hands; it made her happy whenever they held hers or patted her on the head.

Angeline had been bedridden with a fever since yesterday, but when morning came around, the fever had subsided. She had pleaded with her father to get some fresh air, so Belgrieve had brought her outside.

Angeline planted her feet firmly, spread her arms wide, and took a deep breath. The spring air—still too early for summer—seemed to carry away all the unpleasant things clinging to her chest.

Her hair, which had grown long through the winter, was brushing softly against the back of her neck. Angeline laid down on the grass with her hands wrapped behind her head and gazed up at the azure sky above. It seemed to be

endless, with no beginning or end—and yet it was also as if someone had stretched a seamless blue membrane across it.

“What do you see?” Belgrieve softly asked from where he sat beside her.

Angeline leaned against her father and blinked. “Where does the sky...start from? How high?”

“That’s a good question.” Belgrieve looked up into the air and stroked his beard as he pondered it. “I guess the sky starts from where we are right now.”

“That...doesn’t sound right.”

“Then what about if you climbed a tree? You’d be quite high up, right?”

“I don’t think that’s it either.”

“Then do the birds fly through the sky? Is that the sky, then?”

“That’s... Hmm...”

Belgrieve scooped a stone off the ground and tossed it high. It drew a parabolic curve before falling into the distant grass.

“Did that stone manage to reach the sky?”

“I think so...”

“Meaning...it’s the sky as long as it’s off the ground, maybe.”

“Hmm... Maybe?”

“Hmm...”

For a while, Belgrieve looked at Angeline with an amused expression before getting up and suddenly hoisting her above his head.

“Huh?!”

“In that case, you’re in the sky right now, Ange. You’re flying!” Belgrieve said as he started to run. Angeline spread out her arms and squealed in delight.

But it wasn’t long before Belgrieve’s peg leg slid over a stone and he lost his balance on his right side. This was nothing he hadn’t experienced before, so he quickly held Angeline to his chest and turned to land on the ground back-first.

Angeline looked up at her father, startled. Belgrieve lay there on his back

staring up at the sky wordlessly until he looked at her with a bashful laugh.

“Ha ha... That was quite the fall!”

“Pfft!” Angeline couldn’t contain herself, and the two of them were soon rolling on the ground laughing. For as loud as they were being, it was like their voices were being absorbed into the blue sky.

Out of nowhere came a skylark’s shrill cry as it took flight from somewhere nearby. “Ah!” Angeline cried as she sat up, startled. The skylark was already a small black dot in the distance, and a moment later, she couldn’t even see it anymore. Angeline stared after it for a while, until she suddenly realized something. Her hands pressed against her belly—the hunger she hadn’t felt while she was lying in bed the day before was now insistently wringing at her stomach.

“I’m hungry!”

“Oh, you are? Let’s head home, then.”

“Yeah!”

The two stood and returned to the village holding hands, the sky still radiantly blue above.

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“Agh! Stop, stop! Don’t pull on me!”

Marguerite was running about trying to evade the merry pursuit of the children, especially the boys. They seemed to be having a good time all around, and weren’t shy about tickling her or tugging at her fur cardigan or the belt wrapped around her hips.

Marguerite couldn’t fight back too strongly—she *was* dealing with children, after all—and was at a bit of a loss. Her friends weren’t much help, content to stand back and giggle at her agitation.

“Break a leg, Maggie!”

“Come on, you need to keep running, or they’ll catch you!”

“You’re treating this all like it’s someone else’s business! Ahh, not that side!

That—agh!” Marguerite writhed in agony as her sides were mercilessly tickled.

The girls had mostly gathered around Miriam, their attention drawn by her cat ears.

“Merry, your ears are so nice...”

“They’re so fluffy. I never knew.”

“I know, right? You can touch them if you want,” Miriam said as she lowered her head. The girls all took turns reaching out with enthusiastic cooing.

But one of the girls was a bit mean-spirited, and only scoffed at the opportunity presented to her. “But aren’t cat ears just strange?” she insisted.

“Strange? How?”

“I mean, she has a human face, but her ears...”

“Hee hee... Well, they’re my precious ears. And look here, I can move them like this. Can you move your ears like that?” Miriam bragged as her cat ears twitched back and forth.

The girl’s eyes widened. Her hands fidgeted as though she was raring to touch them.

“I-I can’t, but...”

“Heh heh... You want to touch them, don’t you? Go ahead.”

“Ugh... W-Well, if you insist...” Blushing, the girl gave in, and was astonished at how soft they were. “They’re so fluffy!”

“Meow ha ha! But you know, everything else about me is the same as you. I’m a person too—I eat and I sleep, and I’ve got red blood flowing in my veins.”

“Yeah...” The girl fidgeted. “Sorry for calling you weird,” she quietly apologized, almost under her breath.

Angeline and Anessa looked on at their interaction warmly. In the past, Miriam would have never let the kids touch her ears; she was even reluctant to expose them. And if someone had called her weird for her ears, she would have been filled with a sense of dread.

“Merry’s changed.”

“Yeah... In a good way, I think.”

“Heh heh... It might be thanks to Mr. Bell and the people of Turnera.” Anessa had thought of Miriam as a little sister to her for a long time, so she was delighted by this sudden change in her outlook on other people.

They had come to the church orphanage. When they had first returned to Orphen, they had focused their energies on work for a while, but today was their day off. It had been some time since their last visit, in any case, so they came to the orphanage to help out with the early spring gardening. Their work had reached a good stopping point for the day, so they were now enjoying some leisure time—though it didn’t seem like Marguerite was getting much of a break at the moment.

“Hey now, don’t be so pushy! Look, big sis Ange brought some sweets for you! Gather up!” Sister Rosetta had appeared with a tray of snacks. The children cried out for joy as they abandoned Marguerite for Rosette.

“Whoa! Hey, don’t rush! Make sure you say thanks to these lovely ladies first!” Rosetta seemed quite used to this and she easily fended off all the hands reaching for her tray.

The children dutifully said, “Thank you, ma’am,” to Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam.

Now that she was finally free, Marguerite hobbled her way over to her friends, glaring balefully. “You’ve got some nerve abandoning me.”

“Your training was incomplete,” Angeline said solemnly.

“You’ve walked down a path all of us have had to tread,” Anessa added, unable to stifle a giggle.

With more energy than they knew what to do with, the children were starved for playmates that could keep up with them. This was a task well-suited to young adventurers, and Anessa and Miriam had also been chased by the children like that after they’d left the orphanage to seek their fortunes, as had Angeline. The bottomless energy of children was enough to lay low even a high-rank adventurer.

Marguerite took a deep breath. When she turned to watch Rosetta, it was

with a look of complete and utter respect for her ability to so easily handle those same kids.

“She’s incredible... Those little beasts were more troublesome than high-ranking fiends.”

Angeline nodded. “Well, you can’t defeat them, after all...”

“Don’t group children in with fiends,” Anessa chided.

Once she was done handing out the snacks, Rosetta came over to them. “Sorry about that, Maggie. That must have been tiring.”

“Yeah, I’d say so. You’re really something, Rosetta. How do you manage to do that?”

“It all comes with practice. You can’t be too forceful... And I like kids, after all.”

That’s ultimately the most important thing, Angeline realized. *Come to think of it, the kids had been all over Graham in Turnera, but he never seemed tired. In his case, his body was made of sterner stuff, but perhaps it didn’t bother him as much because he liked playing with kids.*

Rosetta donned the veil she had taken off. “Are Mr. Belgrieve and Char doing all right? Is Byaku as grouchy as ever?”

“Yeah. But Bucky has mellowed out... Right?”

“Right, right. He’s surprisingly good at housework.”

“People change, I guess... Have you stopped wearing your hat, Merry?” Rosetta asked, her tone suggesting that she had been itching to ask about it for a while now.

“That’s right,” Miriam replied as she twitched her ears. She had still worn her hat while walking about the city streets, but she removed it so it wouldn’t get in the way of her gardening work and hadn’t put it back on since.

“She kept her hat off the whole time she was in Turnera!” Anessa said jubilantly. “She even let the kids touch her ears a moment ago.”

“Huh? Really? Wow, we have to celebrate!”

Miriam rubbed her hands together nervously. “H-Hey, you’re making a big deal out of this...”

Rosetta was delighted. She’d known Miriam for a long time, and this was one of many worries that had been on her mind.

Soon, the group grew lively with stories of their time in Turnera, and of Belgrieve’s visit to Orphen. The tale felt farther off in the telling, and putting it all into words made them realize just how much had happened in that time. They then spoke of the dungeon in Turnera, and of Belgrieve becoming a guild master because of it. Rosetta was surprised, of course, but she seemed to accept it rather easily.

“Mr. Belgrieve, huh... But he sounds like a good fit. He’s certainly reliable.”

“Heh heh... Isn’t he just?” Angeline felt great satisfaction—just as she had hoped, her father’s reputation in the world had risen.

Rosetta giggled. “Turnera must be a nice place. Maybe I should have taken you up on your offer and become Mr. Belgrieve’s wife, Ange.”

“Uhh... B-But I already have a mom...”

“Why are you taking it so seriously? It’s just a joke.” Rosetta chuckled while poking at her.

“The whole marriage thing notwithstanding, you could still come to Turnera,” Miriam offered as she stretched.

“We’re returning again in the fall. Do you want to come...?”

“I’d love to, but this place is important to me, and I can’t leave the children alone.”

“Hey, don’t be such a stick in the mud. And wait, even if you’re not gonna take Bell, don’t you have any other love stories or something?” Marguerite asked, folding her hands behind her head.

Rosetta pouted. “What are you talking about? How silly... Forget about me, what about you? Don’t you have anything to say for yourself? You’re a lot younger than me, aren’t you?”

“Well, uh...” Marguerite stammered.

Angeline jumped in. “When I compare them to dad, every man just falls short...”

Rosetta wearily shrugged her shoulders. “That may be true. But if Ange does get a boyfriend, will she make him pamper her like Mr. Belgrieve does? On the contrary, I suspect she’s the sort of girl who’ll drag her boyfriend all over the place.”

“You think so... Hmm...?”

“Why are you looking at me?” Anessa asked, furrowing her brow.

With an amused look, Miriam began to flap her legs. “We’re talking about our taste in guys, right? Well, Ange already has Mr. Bell to pamper her. So she might have a thing for the sorts of guys that make you want to protect them.”

“So uncool. Do not want,” Angeline said, puffing out her cheeks.

Marguerite nodded. “I know, right? They at least have to be stronger than you!”

“That’s a really high hurdle you’re setting there.” It was quite impossible to ask for someone who could defeat an S-Rank adventurer.

“Oh come now,” Rosetta said. “You never know when it comes to those things. I can understand your heart skipping a beat over a strong man, but what do you think of a man that just tickles your motherly instincts?”

“M-Motherly?!” Angeline gulped. *Will I ever be like a mother?* she wondered, gently placed a hand over her modest chest. “So Motherliness has nothing to do with physical assets then, Ms. Rosetta?”

“What are you talking about?”

Rosetta stared at her blankly while the other three laughed, but Angeline was serious as could be. As a woman, she could not completely deny the possibility that she could become a mother someday. And, as she was the daughter of Belgrieve and Satie, she did have some vague expectation that she had it in her to be a great mother. She liked kids, and housework was one of her strong suits. And yet, she couldn’t shake the anxiety over the fact that her humble breasts simply refused to grow. It wasn’t that she particularly wanted a sensual body—

she just didn't know how she would manage if she ever had a baby. After all, a baby would suckle on the milk of its mother's breasts. Angeline grew up without a mother, so she had been raised on goats' milk, but she'd seen how all the other children in the village had been reared, so she knew how it worked. Goats' milk was all well and good, but she did think it would have been nice to have grown by the warmth of her mother's care.

But will these flat breasts of mine even produce anything? she wondered anxiously. She also feared that if a baby did suckle on them, they would go past totally flat to concave instead.

The long and short of it was that Angeline believed that larger chests were filled with more plentiful milk. "I guess there really is a physical component to it after all," Angeline muttered, patting her mournful chest.

"Seriously, what are you talking about?"

While Angeline seemed to have resigned herself to her limitations, Rosetta was just as confused as ever. Of course, chest size had absolutely nothing to do with lactation, but Angeline had never learned anything about that.

In any case, they passed the time in peace until the late afternoon. They left the orphanage as soon as they noticed their shadows getting longer.

"Ahh... I feel kinda sleepy," Angeline said, stretching as they walked.

"It was the perfect day for an afternoon nap," Miriam agreed.

The weather was perfect—neither too hot nor too cold. Once the sun set the temperature would drop, but the soft, warm light of day was nice and comforting. The market wasn't far from the orphanage, so they quickly got there during its most busy time of day, when all sorts of people patronized the various stalls. The thought of all of these different people all leading their lives here caused a rather peculiar feeling to come over Angeline.

"We should buy something for dinner," said Anessa. "Do you want to come over, Ange?"

"Hmm... No, I feel like tucking in early today, so I'm going after this."

"I see."

“Yeah, we always stay up late after we eat together, huh.”

“But I’ll buy something ready-made here, so I’ll stick around for a bit...”

“There’s a whole lotta shops here. Ah, something smells nice thataway!”

“Hey, Maggie! Don’t go off on your own! You’re definitely gonna get lost!”

Marguerite, habitually lost child that she was, slipped away into the crowd, and Anessa hurriedly chased after her, with Angeline and Miriam not far behind. They passed by all sorts of people until they reached a stall a little ways away from where they had started. There they found Marguerite loudly asking about a fried fish meal sold there. *That looks tasty—I think I’ll take some home*...

Angeline yawned, looking up at the sky. It was beginning to grow dark, but it was still glowing in orange and red on the horizon. *Are they looking up at the same sky in Turnera?* she wondered.

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Belgrieve and his comrades stood at the back of the congregation. In spite of the relatively numerous gathering of villagers, all were silent. Those who wore hats had taken them off and held them in their hands, and all had solemn looks on their faces. Up front, Father Maurice dutifully performed the funeral rites while everyone else clasped their hands together or held their hats to their chests.

Percival stood beside Belgrieve, looking a bit perturbed. “I’m not good with these kinds of things,” he whispered softly.

“Me neither,” Kasim agreed.

Belgrieve smiled wryly. “Endure it a bit longer,” he said softly.

Percival folded his arms and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Kasim stroked his beard. “But it’s not too bad.”

Percival nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.”

They were attending the funeral of one of Turnera’s elders who had recently passed. Though the man had been at that age where it could be called a nice

and peaceful death, his passing still left a hole in their lives, and that was reflected by the quiet atmosphere permeating the whole village. After the funeral rites were concluded at the church, they processed with the casket to the northern cemetery. The priest would lead another prayer, this time for the soul to go forth with the grace of Almighty Vienna—and then, the casket would be laid to rest in the earth.

Belgrieve looked around the cemetery. It was a sunny place that opened out to the south, and though it was lined with countless graves, a majority of them had been there for so long that no one even remembered who slumbered beneath the markers. But Turnera treasured the spirits of their ancestors, so the gravesites were always diligently cleaned and maintained in any case.

He had come here a number of times before. Belgrieve's own parents had been laid to rest here, and he would drop by several times a year to visit and clean their headstones. He'd brought Angeline here too when she was younger. He remembered how she had such a serious look on her face as she put her hands together and prayed for the grandparents she had never known in life.

The priest concluded his service, and the coffin was lowered into the bosom of the earth. Several young lads with shovels got to work shoveling dirt into the hole over the sounds of quiet sobbing of the close friends and family of the deceased.

With the grave filled, the villagers began returning to their homes in groups of twos and threes. When all was said and done, the tension seemed to dissipate and everyone's faces returned to normal—after all, neither accident nor illness had claimed the elder. Though the village would be a bit lonelier than before, it didn't seem like anyone would be overcome with grief over what was an otherwise gentle death.

Charlotte blinked and gripped Belgrieve's sleeve. "It's a bit...curious. It's a funeral, but it wasn't as sad and hopeless as I thought."

"It would have been sadder if he had been injured or ill when he died, but old Orca passed quietly."

"Would it be bad if I said I envied him?" Satie muttered with a dry laugh. Belgrieve patted her on the shoulder, smiling. They mingled with the other

villagers on their way back from the graveyard, talking about old Orca.

“So the day finally came, and old Orca was called up to Vienna. It’s always sad to see them go,” Kerry said, scratching his head.

“Well, he was full of vigor to the last minute, so it’s not so bad,” said Atla, the village apothecary. “His body was growing weak, but his heart was ever firm. I don’t think that old man would have wanted a soppy sendoff.”

Belgrieve stroked his beard. “You were looking after him, right? How was he, at the end?”

“Well, he said he wanted to go outside, so his son helped him walk and sit down in a chair at the end of their lawn. He took in the sights for a while, and then he drank one sip of apple cider. “This is good. I can go now,” he said. And then he really did go. It seemed like he knew exactly when his time was.”

“Yeah, that’s the sort of man old Orca was.”

“I remember how he’d scold me when I was a little kid. I stole some of his cider, and he gave me a good thrashing and said it was too early for a brat like me.”

“He was still scolding *me* even when I was a grown adult.”

“He was a scary old fart—always had a scowl on his face. But the kids liked him for some reason. I mean, I knew he would yell *my* ears off, but... I liked him quite a bit too.”

“He’s the one who taught me everything about farming, right down to holding a hoe the right way.”

“Yeah, he was really something when it came to tilling soil. His ridges were immaculate.”

“When he died, he looked as peaceful as could be. It was just like he was sleeping. Must have slipped away, just like that.”

“Say, how about we all get together for dinner later?”

“Sure.”

“Until then.”

As they reached the village, they all went off on their separate ways.

In most cases, the villagers would get together on the night of a funeral for dinner and wine to cheer on the deceased soul as they joined their ancestors and Vienna. All through the night, they'd share vivid tales of their memories with the deceased, eliciting laughter intermingled with tears—that was just the way of things in Turnera. Although the mood would tend to be more somber whenever it had been an unfortunate or untimely death, it was in a sense a cause for celebration whenever someone headed off to meet Vienna after a life well-lived.

While the adults mingled, the village's children kept themselves busy playing under Grahams's watchful eye.

Belgrieve joined the line in time to hear Percival laughing gently. "A peaceful death, huh? I know it's rude to say, but I like the sound of that."

"It may be a hard-won end for an adventurer."

"Yeah. It's nice to think of dying in our own beds, but most of us croak on the job—and suffering from poison and injury, more often than not."

Back when Percival was still living as a feral man, he had seen his fair share of hell, had witnessed countless scenes of deaths both ghastly and gruesome. As far as he was concerned, a peaceful death like this was enviable, yet something unrealistic to yearn for. Kasim and Satie nodded, seemingly sharing his sentiments.

Gazing up at the sky, Percival narrowed his eyes, "I've cut down plenty of human lives in my time. I could tell myself all of them had it coming, but standing here now, I'm not so sure... After such a comfortable funeral, it makes me think back to all of them. They must've had friends who would have told tales of them after their death too, right?"

"Same here. I've done my share of bad things," Kasim admitted.

"That's just how it works...for adventurers."

"Hey, Bell. You ever killed a human before?"

Belgrieve twisted his beard. "Yeah. That was a long time ago, though."

Long ago, a convict had escaped from custody somewhere around Bordeaux and had gone on a rampage in the village. Belgrieve had little choice but to strike him dead with his sword. That was back when he wasn't fully accustomed to maneuvering with his peg leg, and he didn't have the luxury of holding back —killing was his only option. Had he been as dexterous then as he was now, perhaps he would have been able to peacefully restrain him. He recalled how the sensation of cutting through human flesh and bone had reverberated through the blade into his hand. It was palpably different from slaying a fiend.

He knew that If he hadn't done it, he and the other villagers would have been in danger—and yet, a man who had been up and moving just moments before had fallen lifeless by the strength of his arm. He had felt something that day, something more terrifying than any fear he had felt in combat against a fiend. More than anything, he vividly remembered how his killing blow had been a diagonal strike from the shoulder downward, so the man didn't die immediately —and how, in the convict's last few moments, the man had tormented him with his eyes that were desperately clinging to life.

"Ange has told me she's hunted down bandits a few times before. But she feels sick when she kills people."

"That's normal. I've just gotten too used to it. There's nothing great about it." Percival sighed heavily. "Once you die, do you think there's really a kingdom of heaven up there? If there is, you think I've got any right to walk through those gates? I've been starting to wonder, you know."

"Well, I've never died before, so I couldn't tell you," said Belgrieve.

Percival laughed. "Of course not. Goodness, this just isn't like me."

"I understand how you feel. Back then, when we were so single-mindedly running towards the future, we didn't have any time to look back..." Satie reasoned. "But now, we've all got a lot to think about."

Kasim nodded. "As for that... It just goes to show we've grown older, all of us," he said, laughing.

I guess so, thought Belgrieve. Up until that point, the road ahead seemed so impossibly long, but now he could turn back to see that the path he had walked to get here today seemed even longer. Amidst these musings, he could hear

Mal talking with Byaku somewhere ahead of him.

“Why did he get buried?”

“He was buried because he died.”

“Died? What’s that?”

“Death is...well...”

Byaku looked deeply troubled by the question, but before he could find an answer, Hal poked Mal on the shoulder. “It’s the same as mother. He’s sleeping underground.”

“Oh. When is he going to get up then? Mother still hasn’t gotten up.”

“Everyone looked so sad.”

“Is it...sad to go to sleep? That’s funny.”

Belgrieve’s heart skipped a beat. Those children still didn’t know what exactly death was. They still thought their mother was only sleeping. He glanced over to Satie and that her lips were tightly pursed. It was hard to describe the look on her face. She knew she needed to explain it to them someday, but she was so caught up in their happiness that she hadn’t brought herself to do it. Instead of Byaku, who was still stumbling over his words, Graham opened his mouth.

“Death is to say goodbye to this world.”

He had said it so bluntly that Belgrieve and the others swallowed their breath, but the twins curiously cocked their heads.

“Goodbye?”

“Is death not like sleep?”

“You’ve caught a fish before, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“When we went to the river. You were there.”

“The fish you caught was cooked by Bell... by your dad and Satie, right? The moving fish would not move anymore. That is death. Those that die will never move again. That is why they are buried in the earth.”

The twins did not seem to understand the fundamental point, but their eyes did widen at a few words.

“Never again?”

“Then...you can’t meet them if they’re dead?”

“Is mother dead too? Is that why she was buried?”

“We can’t see her again...?”

Graham gently placed a hand on each of their anxious heads. “That’s not true. For instance, let’s say a single squirrel dies. You know what a squirrel is, yes?”

The twins nodded. When they entered the woods with Graham, they had seen many squirrels scampering among the treetops.

“The body of the squirrel will eventually rot away and become earth once more. That earth will raise a tree, the tree will grow big, and someday, many squirrels will play in its branches and raise up new young squirrels of their own.”

“The squirrel...becomes a tree?”

“That’s right. Then the tree will someday rot and return to the soil. Someone will burn parts of it as firewood and the smoke will dance through the air. The dirt will give way to new life, and as we breathe, the air will enter our bodies. So here, and there, and everywhere you look, the squirrels of days long past...all of the dead are all around us. Even if you can’t see them or hear their voices.”

“Mother too...?”

“Yes. She is always with you, by your side... So there is no need to be sad. Perhaps she has parted from you in that form, but all lives will change shape and live on.”

The twins held Graham’s hand and looked around.

“Is mother there?”

“Is she watching us?”

“Then that’s...amazing.” The twins suddenly turned around and raced off to Satie.

“Satie, he said that mother is here!”

“Even when I can’t see her! How strange!”

Satie embraced them in her arms and held her tight. There were tears pouring from her tightly shut eyes. “I’m sorry...for being such a weakling...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Why are you crying? Does your tummy hurt?”

The twins looked quite surprised as they patted her head and wiped away her falling tears with their fingers. Satie didn’t speak for some time, but when she turned her face to them again, she was smiling. “Sorry, sorry, it was just a little... You know. Now let’s hurry along,” she said as she turned them around and started walking with them.

Charlotte, Byaku, and Mit were waiting ahead of them, watching cautiously, and once they saw that everything was fine, they turned to continue on their way.



Belgrieve walked over to Graham, who still stood where they had left him.

“Sorry Graham. We should have been the ones to tell them...”

“There is no need for you to carry everything on your shoulders.” Graham smiled ever so slightly as he softly rapped Belgrieve on the back. “An old man has his old man duties too. Don’t leave me out of the loop.”

“Thank you...”

Graham closed his eyes and turned to go on his way.

Percival chuckled. “So all life changes shape and lives on, huh? That’s a nice one. I like that one a lot better than going to heaven.”

“Right, that’s better for me too,” Kasim chuckled as he shifted his hat.

Graham was probably right about that—all life would live on. The trees in the forest persisted atop the decayed husks of rotted trees of old. Even their own bodies moved by consuming other life. If they had a soup of venison, the deer would become a part of them, and if they ate potatoes, the tubers would be part of them too. But what had been deer and potatoes had been many forms of life up to that point, and these were merely what lay at the end of a chain of lives. Old life would rear new life as it faded away. But if it changed shape and persisted, that was surely not its end. The boundary between life and death was far less defined than he’d ever considered.

Belgrieve looked down at the palms of his hand. His body was made up of countless corpses. When he thought of it like that, their lives felt like nothing more than a continuation. The adults would polish their skills and continue that which they treasured as they connected it to the next generation. *From one generation to another. From myself to Angeline; from Angeline to the children that co*me *after her...*

Against the entire expanse of history, his life was nothing more than the blink of an eye—and yet, so much love had been crammed into that brief, cosmic moment.

Belgrieve slowly lifted his gaze. Through the strong afternoon light, he could see the brilliant blue sky above.

Extra: The Same Night, Only Once

The air over Orphen was dusty, and sunlight streamed diagonally through any opening between buildings it could find. These glistening beams of light were a beautiful sight to behold, but none of those passing by ever stopped to look at it, continuing busily on their way. Lately, Orphen had been even more crowded than usual. It seemed that the fiends around the city had grown in number, which attracted more adventurers to the city in turn.

Although fiends were fearsome enemies of mankind, they were also a valuable resource. Their bodies were rich with mana and there was always much demand for their body parts and the many uses they could be put to. Then there was the fact that they were dangerous, and that there was money to be made even just in slaying them. It wasn't explicitly in the job description, but it was no exaggeration to say that most adventurers made their living from fighting monsters.

"All right, you've now been officially promoted. Congratulations, Ms. Angeline," Lionel the guild master said, looking as laid-back as ever.

"Thanks," Angeline replied simply as she carefully scrutinized the golden metal plate that was handed to her.

"My word... You might be the first in history to reach S-Rank at your age... That's incredible!"

"Really?"

"That's right. This old man here, well I used to be an S-Rank, believe it or not. But I only got there in my twenties. You young ones are all so full of talent."

Angeline chuckled. "I don't think that's the case... But I am happy nonetheless."

S-Rank was the highest tier in the adventurer ranking system. Angeline had arrived in Orphen at the age of twelve to become an adventurer and had reached the very top in four years. She had advanced at an unprecedented rate —not that Angeline had seemed very interested in that. But now that she was

at the highest rank, she thought she could hold up her head proudly when next she met her father, and *that* was what made her happier than anything else. Angeline had set out to become an adventurer in the first place to follow in her father's footsteps. Her deep admiration for him had its roots in her time back in Turnera, the remote village in the dukedom's extreme northern region, and her memories of him wielding his sword against the fiends that appeared around those parts—and now she could stand side-by-side with him. She snorted proudly at the thought, and wondered if she might actually be able to land a hit on him if they sparred again, and then he would praise her for growing strong. She had never been a match for him when she was a child, but surely now the playing field would be somewhat leveled.

When she had first become an adventurer, Angeline had relentlessly dedicated herself to reaching the pinnacle of achievement she imagined Belgrieve might have reached if his career hadn't been cut short. But now that she stood at the summit, all she wanted was to see him—to return to Turnera and tell him about all the things that she'd done to his face, and for him to tell her she'd done well. It was fall now, so if she timed it right, perhaps she'd make it back just in time to eat cowberries. She imagined the joy of sitting in front of the hearth at the old house with Belgrieve, and regaling him with tales of the highs and lows of life in Orphen all through the night.

"Hey," said Angeline. "Can I have some time off?"

"Huh? Right now?"

"Yeah..."

Lionel smiled awkwardly, seemingly troubled. "Now's not the best time. I did explain it to you, right? High-ranking adventurers are obligated to serve the guild—to a certain extent, anyways. It would be a bit troublesome if you left right now."

"I know that, but..."

"Yes, of course, I'll accept your request for a vacation in the near future. But I've got to do some paperwork for it, so it's going to take a while."

"Well, fine... I'll hold you to it."

“Ha ha...” Lionel nervously laughed as he scratched his head.

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Angeline sighed. “And after all that, I didn’t get to go home for over a year...”

Marguerite laughed. “Yeah, I heard about that. You’re talking about that mass fiend outbreak, right? If only I was around back then!”

“Exactly. If you were here, I would have shoved everything onto you and gone back to Turnera.”

“No, no, I don’t think that would have worked. I mean, Lionel even had to drag Dortos and Cheborg back into active duty,” said Anessa.

They had gathered at their usual pub for a nice dinner. With the end of their long vacation which ended up taking them far to the south, and then with Marguerite’s subsequent promotion, they had spent some time completing a few requests before coming here to celebrate, filled with the sense of jubilation that always followed a job well done. They had already enjoyed a few rounds of drinks, and Miriam was resting her chin against the table, swaying drowsily from side to side.

It’s certainly different from the drinking parties we had in Turnera, thought Angeline. *But this isn’t bad either*. She finished off the dregs of wine in the bottom of her glass and exhaled deeply. “A lot of time has already passed since then... But it also feels like it happened just yesterday.”

“Well, it all went by in a flash. It’s been about a year since we met Maggie, right?” Anessa asked. counting on her fingers.

Marguerite cocked her head slightly as she gave it some thought. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure it was about that long. It was the start of winter when I came around, so longer than a year I think.”

Angeline recalled that she had been summoned to the estate of Archduke Estogal just before Marguerite had come to Orphen with Belgrieve. After spending winter together in Orphen, Angeline and her party members were off to Turnera—and then there was the attack of the ancient forest, which tried to spirit away Mit. After that, they traveled to the Earth Navel. Everything that happened during that journey was still fresh in her mind. She vividly

remembered seeing Tyldean horses at the Yobem checkpoint for the first time, and quarreling with Sierra while in Mansa. They fought bandits as they traveled south from there, traded with nomads, and eventually ran into Duncan and Ishmael in Istafar. And then came the Earth Navel, where she remembered facing off against the á bao a qu with Percival. After that was their adventure in the imperial capital, and meeting her mother Satie...

Angeline propped her head up and heaved a sigh. The span of just over a year had been astonishingly eventful. “That really was an adventure, wasn’t it?”

“I had a blast. And I get the feeling our journey east is gonna be a whole lot of fun too. I’m already excited about it,” Marguerite said simply, before ordering herself another bottle of wine, practically just for herself—just like the six other bottles she had already polished off. Her pale elven skin was slightly flushed, but she did not seem drunk at all.

The more Angeline’s thoughts lingered on the past, the farther and farther her memories seemed to go—a nostalgia trip fueled by wine. She glanced at Anessa, who was dabbing at the remaining sauce in her pan with a piece of bread until she became aware of the attention and looked back at her.

“What?”

“Back when we first formed our party... We went drinking together, didn’t we?”

Anessa smiled wryly. “Yeah... You just kept drinking and drinking like Maggie’s doing right now. It was honestly a little shocking.”

Marguerite’s eyes lit up with curiosity. “I see... Yeah, of course there was a time when you’d just formed your party too. I haven’t heard about any of that yet. How was it?”

Anessa laughed a little awkwardly. “Hmm, well... It’s a little embarrassing...”

Angeline smiled too. She was able to laugh about it now, but it had been quite a rough start back then.

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A short time had passed since Anessa and Miriam’s previous party had broken

up. Suddenly, the guild presented them with a new opportunity. “Do you want to form a party with the S-Rank Black-Haired Valkyrie?”

“Hmm? Me and Merry?”

“That’s right. You’re both highly accomplished AAA-Rankers, and you’re around the same age as her too. I thought you might be able to get along well... The two of you two still haven’t joined another party yet, right?”

Anessa was dazed by this bolt from the blue, and Miriam’s eyes were practically spinning. “Th-That’s true, but...”

Both of them had heard of the Black-Haired Valkyrie, but they didn’t know her personally, and Angeline likely didn’t even know they existed. And though it was true they were near in age, Angeline was younger than both of them. As a sixteen year old girl, she was a genius who had already climbed up to S-Rank in only four years. Anessa was aware of her whether she wanted to be or not.

“But, um... Ms. Angeline made it all the way to S-Rank alone, didn’t she? “Anessa reservedly pointed out. “Does she even want to form a party?”

The norm for adventurers was to work together as a party, with hardly any exceptions even among the higher-ranking adventurers. In fact, with more powerful fiends to contend with, it was all the more important for top-tier adventurers to have a proper division of roles. It took the combined force of many adventurers to defeat fiends that should generally never be fought alone. This was how Anessa and Miriam had managed to make it to AAA-Rank.

But rumor had it that Angeline had never formed a party before. Regardless of the fiend she was up against, she would apparently cut it down with nothing but a sword. Her abilities were extraordinary—and that was precisely why she had climbed so high in such a short period of time. Thus Anessa’s concerns—she didn’t even know if Angeline could work with a party. It would certainly be pointless if she treated her party members with contempt or they got in each other’s way.

“Yes, about that...” the receptionist began, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “Ms. Angeline is certainly very strong on her own... But there is a limit to what she can accomplish on her own. According to the guild master, the monsters that S-Rank adventurers are expected to take on are exponentially

more difficult to face without party members, so having rearguard support or another front-line fighter would greatly lessen the burden on her."

The guild master Lionel was a former S-Rank adventurer himself. His words carried a lot of weight.

"And powerful fiends have been appearing in greater numbers as of late..." the guild master, Lionel, added. "Regardless of how strong Ms. Angeline is, she will grow fatigued if she continues to fight for too long on her own. If you could support her, you would be doing a great service to the guild." The man was a former S-Rank adventurer himself, so his words carried a lot of weight.

The receptionist looked at Anessa and Miriam with pleading eyes as they turned to consult with each other.

"What do we do?" Anessa asked.

"Ugh... I can't just decide that on the spot..." Miriam groaned as she nervously pressed her fingertips together. She wasn't exactly shy, but she was leery of others learning she was a beastman, and was generally loath to show off the cat ears she kept hidden beneath her hat. But she knew it would be impossible to join a party if she couldn't relent on that point. That was why she couldn't help but be rather indecisive.

Anessa folded her arms as she mulled it all over. As the receptionist said, there were certainly an increasing number of difficult requests to hunt fiends around Orphen. Such hunting requests tended to be uncommon, and whenever they did turn up, the target was usually a lower-ranking fiend. But more recently, it seemed like all the high-ranking adventurers were stuck out in the field as one powerful fiend after another showed up. Anessa and Miriam had formed temporary teams with other adventurers and gone on a few of these hunts themselves, but the situation showed no signs of improvement, and if even more fiends appeared, perhaps the guild would be so short-staffed that the two of them would eventually be dispatched on their own—a real predicament for two rear-line fighters. And for her part, no matter how strong the Black-Haired Valkyrie of rumor really was, she had her limits.

Anessa and Miriam had both realized it was about time they found a new party. Anessa could temporarily fill a front-line role with her dagger skills, but it

could hardly be said they were making full use of their strengths like that. They *needed* a reliable vanguard. But now, with the prospect of dealing with an S-Rank adventurer, they were starting to get cold feet. There was no doubt about her skills, but whether she could work in a team was an unanswered question. Maybe they'd find their worries were unwarranted in the end, but right now, Anessa felt far more anxiety than expectation, and Miriam was probably on the same page.

"Um... Can we have a little time to think it over?"

"Yes, of course. Come to me whenever you're ready."

Thus the two of them left the guild. Anessa's arms were still folded, her head hung as she walked. Meanwhile, Miriam's gaze wandered dazedly.

"An S-Rank, huh..." Miriam muttered.

"What do you think? Should we turn her down?"

"Hmm..." Miriam chewed over her words. "She's...younger than us, right? She's slender and pretty too."

"Yeah. But you rarely see her talking to people."

They all worked at the same guild, so Anessa and Miriam had spotted Angeline several times before, a bit envious of how she had so quickly overtaken them in the rankings. Perhaps that envy still factored into their reticence, and for all the pride they had in their own abilities, they could not judge her entirely fairly. Their pride and sense of inferiority blended into quite the strange cocktail of dulled judgment.

Soon, they were standing in front of their house and neither had even realized when they'd reached there. The house that they'd rented ever since becoming high-ranking adventurers had become a comfortable, homey place to them.

Putting a kettle over the firestone stove, Anessa muttered, "What's she like, I wonder."

"I dunno. Maybe she's a buzzkill? A real fuddy-duddy?"

"Hmm... I'm not good at dealing with those sorts."

"Me neither."

S-Ranks were on a different level from other adventurers any way you sliced it—that was how those other adventurers saw it at least. Even these two were AAA-Rank, it felt like there was a tremendous gap between them and S-Rank. Sure, the guild master Lionel didn't really have that kind of "presence," but other S-Ranks certainly exuded a kind of aura—a sense of natural-born talent coupled with strict discipline and hard work. Since this line of work involved routinely walking the line between life and death, most adventurers sought refuge in a touch of stoicism—all the more so as they rose in the ranks. It was hard to say if either of them could pull off the effort and attitude required of the highest rank.

"I guess we say no, then?" Miriam suggested as she busied herself with preparing some herbal tea.

Anessa sighed as she placed some leftover pastries on a plate. "Well..."

She was definitely anxious. But at the same time, there was something about the situation that undeniably alluring. They were both young adventurers, and they had yet to lose their spirit for adventure. If they could team up with an S-Rank adventurer, perhaps they'd be able to see new, unknown horizons they wouldn't otherwise. It was a prospect that made her heart race.

They sat there in silence for some time, drinking tea and mulling it all over. *If we decline, then what?* Anessa wondered. Perhaps they would continue to take jobs—just the two of them—for a while longer as they searched for another front-line fighter. But they would probably be haunted by lingering doubts over their decision not to work with the Black-Haired Valkyrie—an S-Rank adventurer and the finest sword fighter around. As back-line fighters, they couldn't ask for anyone better.

Anessa silently looked at Miriam across the table. Miriam returned her gaze a bit anxiously, but she finally nodded slightly. They'd made their decision. Now, they just had to do their best. By now, the floral tea had gone tepid, and they finished it off with a gulp.

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"I'm...Angeline," the girl said, bowing her head slightly as she seated herself across from them.

“I-I’m Anessa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“And I’m Miriam...”

The duo were visibly nervous, and it seemed like their mood was contagious as Angeline noticeably stiffened as well. In fact, Angeline realized she had already been nervous the whole time as well, and their awkwardness only made her painfully conscious of it.

Lionel, for his part, smiled unflappably. “Now, now. No need to be so nervous. You’re going to be entrusting your lives to one another after all.”

Perhaps that was so, but Angeline had absolutely no idea what to do with people she’d never even spoken to before. She had never been good at socializing, and ever since she’d become an adventurer in Orphen, she’d devoted every day to her work, which only exacerbated things. In fact, the occasional letters she exchanged with her father Belgrieve was all she really looked forward to in life.

Of course, experienced adventurers would oftentimes strike up conversations with her out of curiosity. Among these were Cheborg the Destroyer and Dortos the Silverhead, two of Orphen’s retired veterans who had taken quite a liking to her. But because they were so much older than her, they doted on her like a granddaughter. Angeline could interact with them without feeling too overwhelmed, but now that she was dealing with people her own age—city girls raised in Orphen, no less—she simply didn’t know what to say.

Lionel’s attempts to mediate went nowhere—the three girls were all fidgeting, looking anywhere but at each other. He was starting to get frustrated until inspiration struck. “That’s right!” he said, clapping his hands. “For starters, why don’t you go out for dinner to get to know one another better? I can recommend a place!”

Angeline looked at Anessa and Miriam who seemed just as lost as she did as they alternated between wordlessly looking to each other and stealing occasional glances at Angeline.

“Then...we’ll do that. Let’s go.” Angeline got up to leave, soon joined by Anessa and Miriam.

“I’ve got work for you tomorrow!” Lionel frantically called out before they were completely out the door. “I’m counting on you three!”

When they left the guild, the evening sun was still shining in the sky. The meeting had taken place after Angeline had returned from a nearby fiend subjugation, and it was already rather late by then. The streets were now packed with the crowds out to do their evening shopping. The brisk sunset breeze kept it all from feeling stifling.

“Is there...anywhere...you wish to go?” Angeline said, sounding strangely stiff and formal.

“N-No, wherever you want is fine...” Anessa nervously replied. Miriam quietly nodded.

Angeline heaved a deep sigh. “This way, then,” she said simply, and walked off. *That might have been a bit standoffish*, she thought—but that was the extent of her people skills. It was a relief to her when they finally were at the usual pub, even if they were rather busy at this hour. She glanced back and saw Anessa and Miriam taking stock of the place. In spite of the crowd, they managed to find an empty table and sat down at it.

“Have you been here before?” Angeline asked.

“N-No, this is my first time here...” Anessa replied.

“It sure is busy,” Miriam observed as she looked around nervously.

Angeline turned to her. “Are you not going to take your hat off?”

“Ah, um, well...” Miriam stammered as she nervously gripped the brim of her hat.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to. I just thought it would be hard to eat like that.”

“I-I’m used to it, so I’m fine—totally fine!” Miriam insisted, as though she was trying to play it off as a joke, but she was clearly flustered.

Both sides seemed keen on waiting to see how the other would start the conversation, resulting in an air of unbearable awkwardness. Angeline raised her hand and shouted to the man behind the counter, “Sir! We’ll have wine—

three glasses... Also, sauteed duck, and cheese, pickles, and fries..” She turned to her companions. “Is there...anything you want to eat?”

“I... I’ll leave it to you.”

“I see... We’d also like some sausage with plenty of mustard.”

The wine was brought out first. It was poured out into wooden cups and handed to each of them.

“Here’s to working with you two...”

“Th-The pleasure’s all ours!”

“Cheers!”

Their glasses clinked together. Anessa and Miriam only sipped at theirs, still a little on edge, but Angeline downed hers all at once and immediately poured herself another. This one was also polished off in no time flat. The other two watched her with wide eyes.

“Do you like alcohol?”

“Well... Kinda.” Frankly, Angeline couldn’t stand the mood, so she was only drinking to distract herself. She also had the faint hope that she might open up a bit with enough wine in her. She also found herself more parched than she had thought, and that made the wine taste that much better somehow. After putting away several glasses of wine, Angeline’s cheeks began to flush a little. Soon their meal was brought out and the table was crowded. But the conversation was not rolling.

“This is my...first time in a party,” Angeline suddenly blurted out, after silently drinking for quite a while.

Anessa hurriedly replied, “Oh, I see... Um, have you always worked alone?”

“Yes... Do you two...often work together?”

“That’s right. We’ve been in a few other parties, but always together.”

“You get along well...”

“Ha ha... More like I just can’t get rid of her...”

“Well, help yourselves...” Angeline gestured to all the largely untouched

dishes around the table. Gradually at first, and then with greater gusto, Anessa and Miriam began sampling the dishes. They were hungry, and everything was delicious, so they spent some time eating and drinking while Angeline ordered her second bottle of wine.

"Tomorrow is our first job..."

"Th-That's right. Umm, we'll try not to slow you down," Anessa said nervously.

Angeline blinked, evidently startled. "You're not...confident?"

"Huh? No, that's not it at all. But..."

"Okay, then it's all good. I trust you," Angeline said simply, before draining another glass. She had already worked through half of her second bottle.

Anessa was a little taken aback by Angeline's confidence. Her uncertainty was reflected in her eyes as she looked up at Angeline through her eyelashes. "Umm...Is there anything specific in terms of support you want from us while fighting?"

"Well, actually... What support *can* you offer? I've never been in a party before, so I don't really know what would be good... I've always thought it might be nice, though."

Anessa, seeing Angeline get a little glassy-eyed, gulped. "I-I am an archer... Um, I keep a lookout for any enemies while I provide supporting fire from the back line."

"I see... That's very helpful. I'm not that good at...well, *any* of that."

"Huh? Then what did you do when you were alone?"

"When alone, I advance very slowly while keeping a sharp eye out for any other enemies around me... Since I don't have any support, I avoid taking on too many fiends at once. Luckily, the strong ones don't often travel in large packs, and I would never lose to any of them if it's one-on-one," Angeline blithely explained.

Anessa's lips twitched at this rather amazing claim, while listened in slack jawed awe.

Angeline polished off her current glass before pouring herself another. “But it’s tiring, doing it alone...” she muttered. “I’m happy to have you two onboard...”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, and...drinking together like we’re friends...is fun.”

Anessa’s expression softened a bit, and Miriam smiled bashfully.

The wine had certainly loosened Angeline’s tongue—but her vision was starting to spin. She remembered mumbling a few more things after that, but she eventually fell into darkness.

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Marguerite, currently nursing her twelfth glass of spirits, prodded at Angeline. “You were out from just *two* bottles of wine? Pull yourself together, Ange!”

“Don’t lump me in with you, Maggie... Anyways, I was drinking really fast at the time.”

Anessa laughed. “We were all pretty nervous back then. I thought Ange was angry or something, and it was kinda scary.”

Angeline giggled. “I mean, I had no idea what to do... And you and Merry weren’t saying anything.”

“Well, I didn’t want to say anything strange that would make things worse... In hindsight, I know it was a pointless concern.”

“You were losing your nerve over little Ange here? Ha ha! That’s lame!” Marguerite cackled away, and this got Anessa to pout.

“How about you? I hear you were crotchety with Mr. Bell when you first arrived in Turnera. Are you really one to talk?”

“Who said—Uh, let’s not talk about that! It’s embarrassing,” Marguerite’s cheeks flushed as she awkwardly nudged Anessa.

That was when Miriam suddenly sprung up from her nap. “Meow!”

“Huh?! What?” Anessa cried out, startled by her friend’s sudden move.

But Miriam simply looked around, confused. “Huh... Was I just asleep?”

“Okay, false alarm. Are you okay? Do you want to go home?”

Miriam mewled in protest as Anessa poked her cheeks. “Let’s drink more,” she said. “The night is still young.”

“Says the girl who passed out first...”

“Oh, you drinkin’ again? You want some of mine?” Marguerite offered her bottle of spirits to Miriam and poured some into her glass.

Miriam, expecting wine, started drinking it only to begin coughing. “*Cough, hack, choke*! It burns! What is this?!”

“Ha ha ha! Is there something wrong?” Marguerite laughed uproariously, then slugged back her glass like it was water. Miriam protested for a while before ending up flopped out on the table once again, softly snoring.

“She’s asleep again...”

“Good grief. What should we do with her?” Anessa grumbled as she fixed the girl’s hat that had been knocked askew.

Marguerite poured herself another glass as she turned to Angeline. “So, what happened after that?”

“About what?”

“You know, the story. You drank yourself under the table, collapsed, and then what?”

“Oh... Well, you see...”

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Anessa glanced at Angeline sprawled out on the bed, before turning to Miriam. “Was it really all right to bring her here?”

“Hmm... Well, we couldn’t just leave her...”

After Angeline had topped over from drinking too much at the pub, the other two girls had brought her to their place for the time being. Even if they wanted to take her back to her own home, they didn’t know where she lived, and seeing as they were going to be operating as a party henceforth, they couldn’t just abandon her either. Since Angeline seemed to be a regular at that pub,

perhaps it would have been all right to leave her after all—but that would have certainly lead to an uncomfortable reunion the next day when they would have to do a job together. Moreover, even though Angeline was a higher rank than them, she was still a girl, and she was still younger than them. It didn't matter how strong she was—it wouldn't have been right to leave her passed out amongst the other inebriates.



“But... She wasn’t that scary after all.”

“Yeah—though there are still a few things I don’t get about her,” Miriam said as she scrutinized Angeline.

Angeline was sound asleep, her eyes firmly shut. Her cheeks were red, and a few strands of her glossy black hair were draped over her face, along her nose and down to her chin. After they carried her home and put her to bed, she only turned over in her sleep once and not at all after that. The gentle rise and fall of her breasts was proof she was sleeping very deeply and not dead.

They had laid her down in Anessa’s bed, with her weapon, bag, and other belongings all bundled together and placed by the bedside. The girls left her behind as they went into the living room and sat down at their table.

“Was she nervous?” Miriam asked.

Anessa nodded. “Maybe. She was drinking fast enough to pass out... It was kind of cute when I put it that way.”

“Her sleeping face was cute too.”

They looked at each other and giggled.

“Anne, what are you going to do today? Do you want to sleep together in my bed like we used to?”

“No way. You’re a terrible bedfellow. I’ll take the sofa.”

The Black-Haired Valkyrie turned out to be a little different than what they had imagined her to be. Since she had the skills to climb to the top at her age, Anessa had suspected her to be pragmatic, or stiff, or even condescending. But as they drank together, she acted like a girl her age.

When she looked at her in this light, the envy she used to hold towards her strangely seemed to melt away. Of course, they had only known one another for a very short time, and they had not even been out in the field together—it was still too soon to completely trust her, naturally. They could only speak so casually about her because the girl herself wasn’t listening, but once they were face-to-face with her once more, Anessa didn’t feel like she would be able to bring any of it up. Tomorrow, they would tackle their first job together, and whatever happened then would most likely decide everything that followed.

With their upcoming job in mind, Anessa took out her bow for some maintenance. Miriam rubbed her hands together without much else to do, but eventually she closed her eyes and steadied her breath to meditate.

The original party they belonged to had two front-line fighters, and one more magician on the back line. With those members, they had managed to make AAA-Rank. Their success wasn't the result of any of their individual talents so much as the party as a whole. Even so, Anessa and Miriam boasted skills befitting high-ranking adventurers. This wasn't conceit—they were confident in their skills with good reason. So the one thing they weren't concerned about at this point was disappointing Angeline tomorrow.

Thusly occupied, the night drew on. The next morning, Angeline was the first one to rise. She was rather out of sorts when she woke up in an unfamiliar room. She gathered her things which had all been left by the bedside and went to the living room where she found Anessa sleeping on the sofa, and quickly worked out where she actually slept last night.

"I drank too much..." Angeline mumbled, tapping her temple. The unpleasant, dull feeling of a mild hangover lingered in her chest and her head. At this rate, it was going to hinder her performance, but the job this time involved hunting down a fiend that had appeared on the outskirts of a town a short distance away from Orphen. She believed, a tad optimistically, that she could recover on the way there.

Angeline wanted some water, but it was bad manners to rummage around someone else's house, so she stood there fidgeting helplessly—but not for long, as Anessa soon began to stir.

"Ugh," she mumbled, as she stretched her limbs and slowly propped herself up. Her hair was a curly mess and stuck up in places. She was a little worse for wear after a night on the uncomfortable sofa. Scratching her head, she looked around until her eyes stopped on Angeline. She froze in place, her heart skipping a beat.

"Morning..." Angeline said softly.

"Huh? Oh... Good morning," Anessa bowed her head before hastily attempting to pat down her bedhead.

“Thank you...for yesterday.”

“No, that much was nothing.”

Angeline took another good look around the living room. It wasn’t exactly tidy, but it wasn’t terribly messy either. It felt lived-in, like a normal house should. There was nothing strange about it at all, but it was still a new experience for Angeline—she had only ever been in somebody else’s house in Turnera, never in Orphen.

“Umm, what about the magician?”

“Merry? I mean, Miriam? I think she’s still asleep,” Anessa said, standing up to go rouse the girl before Angeline stopped her.

“That’s fine, I’m not in any hurry. Umm, may I have a glass of water... Ma’am?”

“Oh, sure.”

Angeline quietly watched Anessa draw some water before speaking her mind. “So... She’s called Merry?”

“Hmm? Yeah, that’s right. Just a nickname, though...”

“I see...”

She took the water and chugged it all at once. It was delicious, and felt like it was seeping into every part of her body. Angeline exhaled and mentally assessed her situation. She had her weapons and her supplies, and it was absolutely possible for her to head out for the job at this very moment. Therefore, there wasn’t any pressing need to swing by her own apartment right now. And judging by the position of the sun she could see through the window, it was still early morning.

“Should we head out right away once everyone’s prepared?”

“Right, we should take down that fiend before it does any damage to the town... Merry! Get up!” Anessa called out as she knocked on the door to Miriam’s room. She urged Angeline to sit in the meantime. After that wakeup call, Anessa joined Angeline at the table.

“So, we should, uh, go over our equipment,” Anessa mumbled.

“Sure... We’ll be taking on an armored earth dragon. I’ve heard that bombs and smoke screens are effective against them, but I don’t have anything like that... Do you?”

“I have some—and if all else fails, we can use Mer—I mean, Miriam’s magic instead.”

While the two girls talked logistics, Miriam lurched out of her room. Her naturally curly hair was even more of a bushy mess, so she had forcefully pinned it down with her hat.

“G-Good morning.”

“Morning... Thank you for yesterday.”

“It was nothing!”

Even if Miriam had said the girl’s sleeping face was cute last night, Angeline’s aloof expression was still a bit off-putting now that she was awake again. Miriam joined their strategizing, still feeling a bit nervous. It didn’t take them long to run through the equipment each of them had on hand, gather all of the gear they would need, and leave.

By the light of day, Orphen was just as crowded and noisy as ever, though the mood seemed less vibrant and cheerful ever since fiends had started to appear in greater numbers. There was a palpable sense of anxiety in the air as they began their journey.

Angeline looked each of her new companions in the eye. “We’ll do our best, okay?”

The other two earnestly nodded.

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The hour grew late, but even as the four of them left the pub, they hadn’t run out of old stories to share. Thus, Angeline ended up going with the others back to their place. Miriam was already drunk as could be, and she had to be carried by Marguerite, who still had more than enough energy to spare.

They turned on the living room light and tucked Miriam into her bed. Anessa placed a kettle over the stove while Marguerite plopped down on the sofa.

Yawning, Angeline pulled out a chair and sat down as well. “I think I was probably carried back like that...”

“I see. So, how did your first job go?” Marguerite asked.

Anessa smiled. “It was a success, but I wouldn’t say we did too well as a party, to be honest.”

“Agreed... Anne and Merry seemed to be having a hard time, and I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing...” Angeline explained as she thought back on it.

The armored earth dragon was a type of dragon with a characteristically sturdy carapace. Though it was incapable of flight, it would use its powerful limbs to tunnel through the earth and attack from below. Owing to these special traits, it was a challenging opponent for any swordsman, but with Angeline’s nimble movements, she was able to aim for the gaps in its armor and unleash a flurry of thrusts. The fight dragged on, but she eventually managed to take it down without much difficulty.

“Thinking back on it now... It would have all been over immediately if Merry had just fired off her magic...”

In spite of its strengths against swords, it wasn’t nearly as resistant to magic. Rather than Angeline getting in its face to fight a prolonged battle, Miriam could have defeated it in one shot with her Lightning Emperor spell—but she didn’t learn until afterward that she had been fighting too close to the dragon for Miriam to deploy it.

The look on Marguerite’s face was clearly one of amusement. “That’s strange. You didn’t have a strategy meeting? I thought Anne at least would have had a good handle on that.”

Anessa poured the hot water into a teapot before defending herself. “Well... If you’re guarding a caravan, or you have to suddenly coordinate with new members on a joint request, you’ll usually draft up a plan. But that time, we formed a party at the guild’s request, and we didn’t really know anything about Ange. I thought it would be bad if I came on too strongly, and I didn’t know how I’d show my face around the guild if I ended up ruining the party because of something like that...”

Every party Anessa and Miriam had been in before had a leader, but all the members had equal status, so everyone was able to speak freely without fear of overstepping boundaries. But Angeline was an S-Rank—a rarified stratum far above even their own AAA-rank. Hence why Anessa had been too reticent to assert leadership and propose a battleplan, apparently.

Angeline pouted as she recalled it. “I told you I’d never been in a party before, so I didn’t know anything...”

“I’m sorry, okay?” Anessa smiled wryly as she filled a few cups with tisanes. “I mean, *now* I know I was an idiot for worrying about that... But back then, I seriously didn’t know. I didn’t have any experience partying up with someone I’d never interacted with before. And *you* were totally unreadable. You hardly spoke, and you were higher-ranking despite being younger than us... Honestly, of all the people I’ve ever met before, I’ve never been so flummoxed about how to talk to them as I was with you, Ange.”

Angeline pouted again. “I was nervous too...”

“Yeah, I guess so. Once I figured that out, it made things a lot easier. We can laugh about it now, but back then I lost a lot of sleep over it.”

“Let’s just say it’s the guild master’s fault.”

“Lionel, huh? So he’s always been hopeless,” Marguerite said.

Angeline and Anessa both giggled at that.

As they drank their tea, a sense of clarity began to emerge out of their alcohol-addled heads. Though the seasons had turned to spring, the nights were still chilly. A warm drink was just what they needed.

Angeline was staring absentmindedly at the lamp dangling from the ceiling when Anessa spoke up. “Are you gonna stay over, Ange?” she asked.

“Yeah... I’ll just sleep wherever. We have tomorrow off.”

Times had changed; they were not being sent out to slay fiends every day. Without loading up their schedules, they could just take on jobs with big payouts whenever they wanted. *This* was the life of high-ranking adventurers.

Marguerite flopped back down on the sofa again. “Hey, from what I’d heard,

you guys were all disjointed. How did you end up getting on so well?”

Angeline turned to Anessa at the same moment the girl looked at her.

“Hmm... When was it? It’s easy to tell with Maggie but for us...”

“Yeah, with Maggie, she charged straight at Mit in the forest, and got beaten up, right? And then, Mr. Bell consoled her, and—”

“Hey, enough of that story!”

They giggled over Marguerite’s frantic deflection, the noise of it all rousing Miriam from her room in the back. Rubbing her sleepy eyes, she shambled towards them and collapsed onto the sofa. Marguerite cried out as Miriam fell over her.

“What’s with you?”

“When did we get back...? Huh...?”

Miriam had yet to sober up one bit, and with Marguerite serving as a body pillow, she once again drifted off. Soon, she was snoring. Marguerite stared at her wearily but quickly gave in and began to play with Miriam’s cat ears. They had a lovely texture and were pretty fun to mess with when the opportunity presented itself.

The sight of their play spurred on more of Angeline’s memories. “I remember now. It was really fun the first time I got to touch Merry’s ears...”

“Huh? Was it? Merry was scared stiff, though... But she really warmed up to you after that.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know the first thing about beastman discrimination... I just thought they were nice and cute.”

“Come to think of it, Mr. Bell reacted similarly back in Turnera. It looks like Merry’s loosened up quite a bit, thanks to that.”

“Oh, that? About her ears being cold, right?” Marguerite said as she tampered with Miriam’s ears, causing them to twitch back and forth.

“Right, that’s the one,” Anessa and Angelie shared a smile.

“That’s father and daughter for you, huh?”

“Precisely.”

“And wait, so there was a trigger for it, after all,” said Marguerite.

“No, we were actually getting along quite well before that too. Well, we saw each over every day, and we were all feeling optimistic about the party. If we actively disliked each other, we probably wouldn’t have been able to keep it up for that long.”

Though it had been the guild that proposed their team up, the three of them were never reluctant to actually form a party in the first place. They were undeniably feeling each other out for a while, but they never did any less than their best to get along with one another. Perhaps it would have taken a little longer to break the ice if there had not been a massive outbreak of fiends at the time. Although mundane conversations and going out to places together was important, there was no better mode of communication for adventurers than fighting side-by-side on the battlefield. Through endless combat, the two rearguard fighters came to understand Angeline, and Angeline was able to ascertain their roles and personalities. Once the day’s fighting was done, they would reflect on what happened together, and through these shared struggles, they deepened their friendship. Even so, it was a long time before Angeline was comfortable enough with the two to begin mentioning her beloved father and homeland in their conversations. In hindsight, she had that massive outbreak of fiends to thank for helping improve her interpersonal relationships. Perhaps that was glossing over a lot of details of events that she had felt very differently about at the time, but now she wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss them as a waste of her time.

Angeline took another sip of tea. “‘Que sera, sera,’ as they say...”

“You sounded like Bell just then,” said Marguerite.

Angeline perked up. “Like dad?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah.”

“I see... Heh heh...heh heh heh...” Angeline grinned from ear to ear and rested her chin on the table.

During the winter they had spent in Turnera, all of the stories Belgrieve and

his comrades told would help them while away the long nights. They would all huddle up by the fireplace and take turns telling old tales, finding an eager audience in Angeline and her party. Four years had passed since Angeline's party had formed, while Belgrieve's party had been together for only a year or two at most. Even so, there was no end to their stories. Occasionally, she was struck by the fear that they had gotten more out of that short time than she would in a lifetime.

She wondered what form her own stories would take if there would come a day when they were all as old as Belgrieve and his party now. Perhaps she would have bittersweet stories of her own to pass on. It was hard for Angeline to picture it—that day was still too far off.

Marguerite's yawn made Angeline acutely aware of how heavy her own eyelids were feeling.

"Let's sleep, then," Anessa said, standing up decisively. "We can't stay up late anymore like we were doing in Turnera."

"Yeah... Since we worked during the day...I feel really sleepy."

"All right, sleep it is. Hey, Merry, come on—get yourself together and sleep in your own bed." With that, they all got up and went off to wherever they were going to sleep that night.

There were plenty of moments when Angeline would think, *if only this time could go on forever*. But nothing ever lasted that long. If she really wanted to make memories that would shine for her in the distant future, perhaps she had to take care not to waste her days in idleness. If moments like these were already so dear to her, surely the memories that would eventually linger all the way into the future would be even better.

What should we do tomorrow? Should we go somewhere, all four of us?

Angeline lay sprawled out on the sofa, her thoughts jumbled and incoherent. There was no particular reason for her to anticipate comforting dreams tonight, but she knew they were coming all the same.

Dusk loomed over the city, the same as it did every other night. But this was a night she could only experience once.

Afterword

Afterwords are nothing but a pain to write, and they're nothing but a pain to read too—although I've heard that isn't always the case. When the author always writes so nonchalantly, it might be interesting to see what slipups they'll make while not bound by the events of the story. However, when it comes to me, Mojikakiya, I hardly ever write anything worthwhile in the first place, be it in the story or not. So I'll bet this is hardly interesting.

Anyway, we're on to volume ten. We've finally reached the double digits. Now that we're here, my rough calculations say I've written around one million words, and when I think about how I managed to string together so many characters, I think I've done quite a good job if I do say so myself. However, I'm even more impressed by the perseverance of you readers who managed to stick with it for this long. Thank you so much.

This author's shoddy writing is, as always, splendidly complemented by the brilliant illustrations of toi8-san, and I'd go as far as to say those illustrations help to cover up for most of the shortcomings. The cover conveys a truly happy mood, and since this book is supposed to be released in April, it's like spring is in full swing. It looks kinda auspicious in that sense. I'm the author who attempted to stab Belgrieve in the gut several times, but when I see him so filled with happiness, I guess I just have to throw in the towel—more's the pity.

Even so, it's been over three years since I started writing this story. I submitted it to the internet in the fall of 2017, and by that same time this year (2021), four years will have passed. After spending so much time together, it just feels like a natural part of my life now. What was I thinking when I first picked up my pen? I have to go back and check, or I'll completely forget. You strangely start to think about the past, whenever too much time passes—I've started to understand this by observing Belgrieve in this world.

As for this series, the next volume will be the last one. Their stories will wrap up one by one, and they'll apparently arrive at their destinations. Sure, it would be kinda funny if we got axed with just one volume to go, but since we're here, I think it's beautiful that we can see it through to the very end. We didn't have

any major drama in this volume. It was meant as a breather, and to show off the various normal and not-so-normal lives of all the characters you've come to know over the course of the story. Whether that's actually interesting or not—well, this author doesn't know, but I endeavored to depict the things they see and feel in detail. It would be a joy to me if the readers could picture themselves wandering around Turnera or Orphen.

With everything going on, the world has become a cramped place. But we're always free inside our hearts, so if this story could provide just a little stimulus, or if it helps expand your thoughts or imagination, that would be the greatest honor of all.

Just one more volume to go. I hope you will stick around with me to the end.

—Mojikakiya March 2021