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Seira
Fifth Squadron Member
Shortsword user
“I want everyone else to stand back, please. I will be the one to defeat him.”
“Now, shall we continue where we left off?”
Sodom
King of Sorcera


Alma

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Chapter 1: A Guard’s Daily Life

After being kicked out of my adventuring party, the Crimson Fangs, I had followed the recommendation of the local Adventurers’ Guild receptionist and ended up getting a job in the Royal Capital of Astaroth as a city guardsman.

In recognition of uncovering the fact that my supervisor Lambda had been in collusion with a group of bandits, I had then been appointed as Sergeant of the Fifth Squadron, who were all troublemakers in their own way.

Together, we had stood against my former comrade Nacht, who had fallen to the dark side; we had acted as guards to the Oracle of Light; and we had foiled a treasonous plot wrought by Sir Gregor, the Commander of the Knights, as he colluded with demons.

The Royal Capital was under constant threat of attack by those after the Orb of Light, in which the Demon King was sealed—and we just so happened to be on guard duty against such an attack at that very moment.

We, the Fifth Squadron, were running through a back alley just outside the center of the city—a place so dark and deserted it was as if the sun itself had forsaken it. We were keeping eyes on our target from a good distance away, staying just barely close enough not to lose track of it.

“Don’t let it get away—we need to stop this thing right here!”

“Got it!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood.”

After I shouted orders out to my Fifth Squadron comrades, they each split off; our plan was to encircle our target by forcing it down an alley.

This thing’s been giving us a really hard time—this has to end now.

As I was chasing the target to keep it in my sights, a figure appeared at the end of the alley. Waiting there, a wicked smirk plastered on her face, was Spinoza.

“Spinoza! It’s heading your way!”

“Right on! Don’t worry, I got this!” she responded feistily,

contorting her fingers like tentacles. “Give it up! Your little game of chase is oveeeer!”

She sprang at the target barreling toward her—however, at the last moment it darted off its original course and dodged straight through her arms, slipping playfully past her and continuing on.

“Wha…?! Why, you slippery little punk!”

“You can still catch it! After it!”

“I know, dammit! I’m not gonna let it get away, not while there’s still life in my body—ungh…?!”

“Spinoza! What’s wrong?”

Spinoza had come to a sudden halt. Her eyes went wide, and her throat twitched. Then, the next moment—she started vomiting profusely.

“*Huuurk…!*”

“What?! What happened?!”

“I— I don’t know… My head just started poundin’ crazy hard, and I froze up completely. Did that thing cast a spell on me or somethin’…?!”

“I’m pretty sure you’re just hungover. You had to have been drinking all night and into the morning—you smelled so much like booze earlier I thought my nose was going to fall off.”

The one who offered this bit of info was Fam. She was sprinting nimbly along the tops of the tall buildings that lined the alleyway, bouncing like a ball from rooftop to rooftop. “Besides, a mere pet dog isn’t going to be using magic.”

“Yeah, I guess not, huh,” Spinoza admitted.

The target we had been chasing for half the day already…was a dog.

It wasn’t some vicious man-eating demon dog, nor had it made off with any national secrets. It was just your average large dog that a loving citizen had been caring for. It had accidentally managed to get loose, and the Fifth Squadron had been tasked with recapturing it.

“You were insisting you wouldn’t let it get away while there’s still life in your body, Spinoza. Where did all that energy go?” I asked.

“*Huuurngh…*”

“Don’t bother. She’s dead weight now,” Fam said.

“Sure seems that way…” I agreed.

Leaving Spinoza behind to reap what she sowed, we chased

after the dog.

Fam giggled softly. “The problem was trusting Spinoza to handle this in the first place. Let me show you a truly glorious capture—and when I do, I would like plenty of head pats.”

With her ability to leap freely across the rooftops, Fam took the most direct route to reach our target. She dove off the roof and landed directly in the dog’s path, which put it running along a one-way street with Fam at the front and me closing in from behind.

“Checkmate.” Fam, sporting a triumphant grin, opened her arms and began whispering to the dog in a voice about as sweet as the Grim Reaper’s. “Now, come here. I promise it’ll only hurt for a moment, then it’ll all be over.”

The dog, seeming to realize it wasn’t going to be able to get past her, brought its scampering gait to a halt. As Fam slowly approached, it gave her a coquettish glance and started letting out a cute whining sound, which was strangely catlike for a dog.

Hweeen…

“Ugh… Don’t give me those puppy dog eyes—you can’t sway me with cuteness. My mission is to capture you, and there’s no room for leniency on that.”

Hweeen…

“Enough! Stop with the sad look on your face; it’s throwing me off my game! I’m not good at being confrontational when it comes to animals!”

Woof!

Having played the cutesy angle for a while, the dog reversed tactics again as soon as it sensed that Fam was losing her nerve. It bolted forward in an effort to zoom past her.

“*Hmph*. Your true colors are on full display now, aren’t they, you sly dog? Now that you’ve shown me how you operate, you’ll get no mercy from me—”

Fam could see every movement of the animal perfectly. Before it was able to slip by her, she grabbed it tightly with both arms.

“Nice! You got it!” I cheered.

Fam chuckled proudly. “A task like this is nothing to me—huh?!”

Mere moments after she had latched onto the dog, she ended up releasing her grip.

“Fam? What’s wrong?!”

That was when she erupted into a sneezing fit. They were cute little sneezes that sounded almost like a bird chirping—and they came out rapid-fire, with no pauses whatsoever in between.

"Heh. I had no idea something like this would happen. Who would've thought I was allergic to dogs? I've got a rash all over my body now, and it's not going away."

Fam laughed at her own misfortune. Her eyes had gone bloodshot, and mucus was dripping from her nose. Her normally calm, cool demeanor was gone, replaced with something more akin to a child who had caught a cold.

She wasn't kidding. Who would've thought Fam of all people would be allergic to dogs…?

"I never realized it before," she commented, "but you don't always have to be sad to be brought to tears, do you?"

"I don't think this is an appropriate situation in which to use that line," I replied.

That's more the kind of thing people say when they're crying tears of joy—not exactly a fitting platitude for someone with leaky eyes and snot all over their face.

"Do we need to get you to a hospital to be looked at?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine. It's not that severe; I should be fine in a few hours. But I don't think I'll be of much use for the rest of this mission, unfortunately."

"Don't worry. Leave the rest to us."

"I'll take you up on that offer," she responded, letting out a squeaky sneeze.

Leaving the sniffling, drippy-nosed Fam behind, I went back to chasing after the dog.

That sure was some adorable sneezing, though.

I had heard Spinoza sneeze once before; it was more of an explosive "*HECH-CHOO! GRAH!*" that assaulted the area around her—not a speck of cuteness to it whatsoever. It was exactly what you'd expect to hear from your stereotypical middle-aged guy, and I had instinctively chided myself to never end up like that.

Just before I could lose track completely, I managed to catch sight of the dog, by that point barely more than a speck in the distance.

Using its wiles like that to throw off our pursuit—that dog sure is a crafty creature. Does it really not want to go back to its owner that badly…?

Just as I was starting to have concerns about whether the pet truly was well-loved, someone came racing up to me from behind and started running alongside me—Seira.

"Sorry I'm so late, Sergeant Sieg!"

"Where have you been?"

"Well…I thought I would circle around ahead, but I ended up getting lost. I'm not particularly good at keeping my bearings straight, actually…" She smiled awkwardly; apparently she had no sense of direction.

"Since you're so lightly equipped, you've got better mobility than me. I'll be counting on you here."

"Right! Leave it to me, Sarge!"

We were sprinting down the alley, trying not to lose track of our target, when I noticed something: there were some children playing ball farther down the back alley in the direction the dog was heading.

When they heard the dog's footsteps approaching, the children whirled around. The moment its eyes met theirs, the dog must've decided they were weaker than it was; instead of acting all cutesy as it had with Fam, it took the exact opposite route, showing its feral side and baring its fangs in an effort to get the children to move.

"W-Watch out!" Seira shouted.

No, they'll be fine, really.

It would've been a smarter move to just ignore the children and run past them; the moment the dog started to direct hostility at them, its fate was sealed.

The reason being: I had a skill that would redirect all aggro to me instead.

"*Iron Target!*"

As soon as I activated the skill, it was as if an invisible hand had grabbed the dog's neck and pointed it toward me instead of the children. It came running in my direction, against its own will. Letting it bite onto my armored right arm, I grabbed hold of the dog's body.

"Finally got you. Now calm down."

Try as I might to pacify the dog, though, it just kept on growling, refusing to let go of its hostility. We couldn't just drag it away like that, and we'd get in trouble if we incapacitated it.

As I stood there mulling over what to do, Seira, who was standing next to me, locked eyes with the dog.

“That’s a *very bad* dog!” she scolded, treating it as if it were a disobedient child.

The dog froze and began trembling with fear.

Crouching near the animal and meeting its wide-eyed gaze, Seira put a hand to her chest and spoke her feelings. “We aren’t going to hurt you. We’re just going to return to your owner—she’s worried about you. Let’s head back together, okay?”

Spreading her arms to show that she was defenseless, she began walking toward the dog. It looked almost as if a halo of compassion were shining around her form.

Communicating via words, without a hint of violence; after the beast had shown such hostility toward us earlier, I wouldn’t have normally expected that plan to work. However…

Whimper…

The dog let out a feeble little cry, its ferocity having vanished completely. It stuck its tongue out and started panting, seeming to obey Seira’s suggestion.

“Heh. Good dog! There, there.” She began stroking its head, and the dog squinted in apparent enjoyment, wagging its tail and rubbing up against her legs.

It seemed to have really taken a liking to her; having watched the whole thing unfold, I was speechless. “Did you cast some kind of spell?” I asked.

“No, I don’t know how to use magic.”

“Then how did you get that thing to behave? It sure seemed to hate people a lot until you came along.”

“I guess my feelings must’ve gotten through to it.”

“Your feelings, huh… I’d understand that for a human, but for a dog?”

“Feelings can reach anything—even dogs!”

It sounded like Seira was just dreaming up something, but seeing how friendly the beast was being with her, I couldn’t dismiss it as complete nonsense either. It really seemed as though it had been able to sense her sincerity and kindness. That was one method of resolving things that was completely outside of my reach.

“Now, let’s go back to your master, okay?”

Watching her win over that dog made me think there may still have been some hidden potential lying somewhere deep within Seira.

The big dog made it back to its owner safely.

“Oh, my poor little Sergei, I was so worried about you! No more running off like that, okay? You worried me so much!”

The dog’s owner, a rotund woman, squeezed the pooch in her thick arms and, as if that wasn’t enough, continued to rub her plump cheek up against its face.

Whimper...

The dog, a dejected expression on its face, clearly looked displeased.

Now I get it. It may actually be possible to get feelings across without using words, after all. Unfortunately, we’re powerless to do anything about the sentiments being expressed by this dog.

We started making our way back from the mission.

“Sheesh... We got frickin’ medals for savin’ the kingdom from the brink of disaster. Now we’re stuck spendin’ the entire day chasin’ after someone’s pet dog?” Spinoza muttered in disgust.

“All you really did was vomit the entire time, though,” Fam countered.

“If you’re gonna go there, all you did was dribble tears and snot! You’re not just the size of a kid; I guess you’re about as smart as one too. What a joke.”

“Oh, what’s that, now? Who are you calling a kid?”

“Hm? You want some of this? It just so happens my hangover’s finally calmed down, and I’m in the mood to let off some steam. Nothin’ like a little pre-dinner exercise to get the stomach workin’ properly!”

“Will you two stop it, please?” Seira said, intervening before the potential impending fight could occur. “Fighting is *bad!* Okay?”

“Bah... Fine, whatever.”

“If Seira says so, I’ll back off for now.”

Faced with Seira’s child-scolding voice, both Spinoza and Fam withdrew, their spirits dampened.

“Thanks, Seira,” I said.

“Don’t mention it!”

Seira was the only member of the Fifth Squadron with any common sense—though the bikini armor she wore was basically just as *out there* as the other two members were. I mean, she was pretty much mostly naked—it was tough to know where to keep your eyes.

“Both of you know we’re not supposed to fight among our

own team members. We all need to get along," Seira continued. "Now, the two of you need to shake hands."

"Huh?" Freezing in place, Spinoza and Fam both blurted out the same thing in unison.

"Uh, a handshake?" Spinoza sputtered. "You can't seriously expect us to..."

"I don't see why that should be necessary," Fam bristled.

"It's necessary. If you don't mark a clear end to something, it could start back up at any time. Now go ahead, ladies: take each other's hands!"

Seira's tone left no room for argument, and the two of them resigned themselves to their fate, reluctantly joining their hands together.

"Now, apologize to each other."

"Well, uh...I guess maybe I went a little too far with some of the stuff I said."

"Yeah... I suppose I might have gone after you too hard, myself."

Being completely unfamiliar with what they were doing, Spinoza and Fam seemed rather awkward; they were both blushing slightly, unable to look each other in the eye. Seira, for her part, watched over the scene with a pleasant smile on her face.

"Y'know, this is all because *you* decided to pick up this assignment in the first place, Seira," Spinoza muttered. "You coulda just made up some excuse and refused, but you're way too nice to people. You just don't know how to say no."

It was indeed Seira who had agreed to look for the runaway dog. That wasn't the only time she had volunteered either—the townspeople often relied on her to do various favors, and she always readily agreed to help them out.

"I mean, who even cares if a stupid dog runs away?" Spinoza huffed.

"Being a guard means protecting the daily lives of the citizens. Finding a lost pet dog is a wonderful way to help people, don't you think?"

"Ugh, you're way too overly conscientious. We don't get paid enough for that crap!" Spinoza responded, feigning surprise.

"I think your intentions are admirable," Fam murmured, "but you should be more careful. There are people out there who will make every effort to take advantage of that goodwill."

“That’s true. These are my principles, though—if there’s someone in front of me who needs help and I’m able to help them, I’m going to do it.”

Just as Seira had finished speaking her mind, some townspeople noticed her and began eagerly calling out to her.

“Miss Seira!”

“Thank you for everything you do!”

While the citizens weren’t big fans of the Guards in general, everybody loved Seira. In my entire time there, I had never seen a single person say a bad thing about her. Her sincere attitude in helping out absolutely anyone in need seemed to earn her the support of the people at large.

As I watched her shower everyone around her with rays of benevolence, I found myself thinking she was like some kind of saint, or even a goddess, perhaps.

* * *

When we made it back to the guard station, we headed over to Commander Bolton’s office to give a report. Having been raised as an adventurer, I wasn’t particularly etiquette-savvy, but I did at least knock.

“Come on in.”

Upon hearing his response, I opened the door. Inside the office was of course Bolton, Commander of the Guards, a brawny mountain of a man, but also one other individual whose presence was rather unexpected.

“What a rare occasion to see you here, Eleanor.”

With hair down to her waist and clean-cut facial features that exuded a deep inner strength, Eleanor was clad in the silver armor of the Knight Corps. When she saw me, the cold, dignified expression she wore melted away into a warm smile.

“Well, hello, Sieg. I haven’t seen you since the dream I had last night.”

“Uh, I can’t say I was there for that one—doesn’t ring any bells.”

She chuckled lightly. “Cold as ever, I see. Though that coldness is rather addicting, I must say. I am not often so summarily dismissed after ascending to my new position.”

“That’s right, I hear you’re the Commander of the Knights now. Congratulations on that.”

The former Knight Commander, Sir Gregor, had been relieved of his position for turning against his country, and Eleanor, the Vice-Commander, had been appointed as Commander in his place. In the long history of the Knight Corps, it was apparently unprecedented to have someone as young as her rise to that position.

"Thank you. Though to be honest, I find it a hard thing to celebrate. I merely assumed the office of my treasonous predecessor because I was next in line. I had every intention of taking the position of Commander fair and square: by defeating Sir Gregor in combat."

"That doesn't change the fact that you got your position by gaining the respect of those around you, though. I think that's worth taking some pride in."

As I said that, Eleanor went stiff, covering her mouth with her hand.

"What's wrong? Why'd you freeze up like that?"

"You just gave me words of encouragement...?! C-Could this be some roundabout way of proposing to me, perhaps...?!"

"It's not. That's reading into things way, *way* too much."

What part of that sounded like a marriage proposal, exactly?

"At any rate," I continued, "as far as the public is concerned, Sir Gregor was killed in the line of duty while defending his country. You've got to put in a solid effort as the new Commander if you want to put the minds of the townspeople at ease."

"Yes, I know. But worry not—even with the mantle of Commander, my feelings for you as a woman shall not change. Let us continue the honeymoon phase of our relationship as before, shall we?"

"I wasn't worried, and I don't remember us ever being in *any* phase of a relationship."

That was when Commander Bolton, who had been watching our exchange, finally spoke up. "Well, we guards are all pleased as pie you got the top position, Eleanor. You're way easier to work with than Sir Gregor ever was."

In the days of Sir Gregor, the Knight Corps prioritized royalty and the noble class over everyone else, and thus they looked down on the Guard Corps, meaning cooperation between the two groups was more or less nonexistent. However, Eleanor took the entirety of the Royal Capital into consideration, including all

of its citizens. With her at the head of the Knight Corps, we were no doubt headed toward seeing a bit of reform.

"So what brings you to our guard station anyway, Eleanor?" I asked.

"I wanted to see you, of course—well, that was part of it, but I also had an urgent matter to discuss with Commander Bolton."

"What kind of matter?"

"When that moron Gregor turned traitor, he made the Knight Corps go berserk by dosing them with demon blood, right? Well, a whole bunch of knights got injured in that whole ordeal, and she tells me they're facing a massive personnel shortage right now," Commander Bolton explained, giving a brief summary of the discussion they'd had up to that point. "We're already lacking manpower here in the capital as it is. We don't have an Adventurers' Guild here, and the Knights are the ones who usually fill those shoes."

"As things stand, we are an easy target for demons, monsters, and other blackguards alike. Which is why I have swallowed my pride and turned to the Guard Corps for assistance."

"We Guards only focus on defending the capital itself, right? She says she wants us to work together with the Knight Corps to defend the whole damn *country*."

The Guards and the Knights had different jurisdictions. While the chief duty of the Guards was to defend the Royal Capital of Astaroth, the Knights worked under direct supervision of the royal family and were tasked with defending the entirety of the country. They guarded the various bridges and checkpoints, and when villages in the kingdom would come to harm at the hands of monsters, they would head out on extermination expeditions.

"Your Fifth Squadron played a pivotal role in the recent battles—if you join forces with us, I believe the anxiety felt by our fellow countrymen would be at least somewhat assuaged," Eleanor said. "The four of you are considered heroes; I would like for you to become lights of hope for this country."

"Hah. If you're tryin' to flatter us into workin' for ya, you're outta luck. You expect us to take over work for the Knights, but I doubt you plan on increasing our pathetic paychecks, do ya?" Spinoza spat out immediately—her reaction speed when it came to money matters was second to none. "Even heroes have to eat to survive. And me, I need booze and gamblin' money too."

"You don't even *try* to hide your greed, do you?" Fam shot

back with a sigh. “Though I suppose I do agree with the point you’re trying to make.”

“But if the people of our country are in trouble, shouldn’t we go ahead and just help them out?”

“You’re too naive, Seira. A softy like you will just end up gettin’ taken advantage of—they’ll take you for everything you’ve got, down to the very last hair on your butt.”

“Wait a second! What if I don’t have any hair on my butt like you do, Spinoza?”

“Hey, I don’t have a hairy butt either! It was just a figure of speech, dammit!” Spinoza complained. “What I’m sayin’ is, it’s a bad idea to just up and do anything someone asks you to! It’s gotta come with proper compensation!”

That was when Eleanor spoke up in response. “Naturally, I’ve already considered that aspect as well. I had a discussion with His Majesty, and I have arranged for a bonus to be paid out to the Guard Corps.”

“A b-bonus?” The moment that word reached her ears, Spinoza’s ears perked up and her demeanor changed entirely; suddenly, she seemed very eager to listen. “S-So, uh, how big a bonus are we talkin’, anyway…?”

“Well, it’s only an approximate figure, but—”

As Eleanor whispered into Spinoza’s ear, the latter froze in shock, her eyes lighting up.

“F-For real?”

“Yes, *for real*.”

Spinoza fell speechless, unable to move for several moments. Finally, she cleared her throat with an abrupt cough.

“Well, then! If the Knights are in trouble, we can’t just leave ’em hangin’, now, can we? Nothin’ wrong with us steppin’ up and helpin’ out our old pals!”

“You sure didn’t hesitate at all on that change of heart. Not everything is about money, you know,” I said incredulously.

“Her gambling debts and bar tabs have mounted up again,” Fam explained. “She probably wouldn’t even hesitate to sell her soul to the devil if it would make her some cash.”

“Don’t be stupid. How cheap a woman do you take me for?” Spinoza countered. “If I was gonna sell my soul to the devil, I’d need to get at *least* ten gold coins for it.”

Seems pretty cheap to me. Though better yet, don’t sell it at all.

“I’m truly moved by how considerate you’re being, Spinoza!”

Though Fam and I had been exasperated, Seira alone seemed honestly impressed—though that was likely because she thought that Spinoza was doing it out of genuine concern for her country, rather than for the bonus.

Commander Bolton looked over to me. “What do you think about all this, Sieg? Let me hear your opinion.”

“If the Knight Corps isn’t able to keep up with the country’s defense on their own right now—I think we should do it.”

“That lines up with my opinion. We Guards may have been at odds with the Knights in the past, but we *are* allies with the same goal—protecting the country and the Orb of Light.”

“I truly appreciate your assistance. Let us join hands in cooperation and come to the defense of our country. Should we do that, we shall fear nothing, not even demons.”

At that, Commander Bolton firmly grasped Eleanor’s outstretched hand. From that point on, the two groups that had been at odds with each other would start working together toward a common goal.

I got the sense that, bit by bit, the country had begun changing for the better.



“Now, I shall take my leave.”

“Right. I appreciate you coming all the way out here.”

Eleanor gave a light chuckle. “When I think about the fact that I may be working with Sieg at times in the future, a smile comes to my face that simply won’t go away.”

She left the Commander’s office, a spring in her step. She was even humming a little tune—I half expected her to break into skipping.

Once Eleanor was out of sight, Bolton started grinning, stroking his beard. “Seems like our new Knight Commander’s pretty smitten with you, huh.”

“Yeah…”

“Why not just go out with her? If you could get Eleanor under your thumb, it’d be that much easier for the Guard Corps to get our way.”

“I have no intention of using anyone’s romantic feelings to gain political favors.”

“Figured you’d say that, ya straitlaced bastard. What if it wasn’t political, though? It’s not like you’re seeing anyone right now, are you?”

“No, not really.”

“Why not start, then?”

“I’m a guard; any given day of work could be my last. If I die, my partner would end up suffering, wouldn’t they?”

Having taken a job that was constantly face-to-face with death, I had given up all expectations of obtaining the kind of happiness reserved for average people—I had already decided that from the moment I made up my mind to become an adventurer.

“Sometimes people put out their best effort when they have a special someone, though.”

“Do you have a family, Commander?”

“Nah. Got an ex-wife, though. I paid so little attention to my family that they finally had enough of me. No idea where she and the daughter even are, nowadays.”

“Doesn’t sound very convincin’,” Spinoza muttered in disbelief.

“Oh yeah? Well, the only reason I haven’t quit being commander of this shithole is because I believe my wife and daughter are out there somewhere alive and well. I want to protect the world for them so they can keep on living a peaceful life. That fire in me is pretty much the only thing keeping me

going.”

“Who’re you calling a shithole, huh?” Spinoza shouted. “I think not having a family would make things way easier, though, right, Sieg? Then you could just bang all the ladies you want!”

“You need to stop applying your own standards to me,” I said firmly. “And why are you taking the male point of view, anyway?”

“Bang? Why would you ‘bang’ on ladies?”

“I think you’re better off staying clueless on this one, Seira,” Fam advised, then gave an exhausted shrug. “Spinoza…you really have no common decency whatsoever.”

I agreed with that statement one hundred percent.

Chapter 2: Mission with the Knight Corps

“Oh really? So from now on, you’ll be doing the job of a knight too?” Haruna asked.

The day had faded to evening, and I was at a cheap pub off the Royal Capital’s main thoroughfare. Amid all the buzzing activity, I was off in the corner having a few pints with Haruna and Irene, two of my former companions who had worked together with me in the party called the Crimson Fangs.

When the City of Estahl, the party’s base of operations, had been destroyed by Nacht, the two of them had fled to the Royal Capital. Today, however, I had run into them when I had been leaving the guard station upon finishing my duties; they had said they were heading out to get some drinks together, so I had ended up tagging along.

Haruna had asked me how things had been going, so I had been providing some tidbits of information to go along with our drinks.

“Yeah, it sure seems that way,” I said presently. “I’ll probably be leaving the Capital more often, at any rate.”

“You’ve always been such a crazy hard worker, Sieg,” Irene remarked thoughtfully. “No matter how many missions in a row our party took on, I didn’t hear you whine about it a single flipping time.”

“Meanwhile, you did nothing *but* whine about it, Irene,” Haruna teased.

“It was totally exhausting, though! Every mission was super dangerous, and all that long-distance travel sucks the energy out of you. Sieg and Nacht were the weird ones; who even has that much stamina, anyway?”

“We were the frontliners; stamina was kind of a prerequisite,” I explained. “Anyway, what about you two? I’m eager to hear what you’ve been up to lately.”

“I’m teaching at the Magic School, as always,” Haruna responded.

“Have you gotten used to working there yet?”

“I’m getting there. Teaching people to do things is pretty difficult, though. I keep finding myself on the verge of giving up,

wondering why people can't do such simple things. Becoming an instructor has really driven home how talented a mage I must be."

"There it is—the classic Haruna humblebrag!" Irene teased.

"Despite the things that come out of your mouth sometimes, you've always been the nurturing type," I said. "I bet your students love you, don't they?"

"Well, I do get a lot of questions, and I'm always there to answer them."

"You love talking about your students when we hang out too," Irene said. "Always worried about the best way to teach 'em so they can wrap their minds around what you're doing, and stuff."

"I-I mean, that's my job, isn't it?" Haruna asked.

"We all know you're secretly a big softie once you get past that hard exterior," Irene said with a grin.

"Sh-Shut up! Enough about me; you need to hurry up and get your own job!" Haruna squawked.

"What, you haven't found a job yet, Irene?" I interjected. "I could help you look for something, if you want."

"Don't worry about it. It's not that I haven't *found* anything yet; I just haven't really been looking."

"It's been a good while since you first came here, though. Did you really have enough savings from adventuring to cover your living expenses for so long?" I asked.

"If we're being brutally honest, that money was on the verge of running out—but I ended up doing a little gambling at the casino on a whim, and before I knew it, I had a whole pile of cash!"

"So that's how you've had enough money to spend all your time just having fun. You really lucked out, Irene," I said.

"I swear, the gods must be trying to tell me it's not time to go back to work yet. They want me to take more time to recover from the exhaustion of being an adventurer!" She laughed.

"Who knew there were gods that serve your interests so perfectly?" Haruna quipped.

"Serving people's interests is basically why gods exist in the first place, right?" Irene countered, giving a flippant smile. "Though I guess there are probably some genuine ones in the mix there somewhere too."

"Ugh, you wear me out with how irresponsible you are, girl," Haruna said.

“Though I’ve got to admit, being able to manage jobless for so long is a talent in itself,” I pointed out.

“Right? My willpower is totally top-notch,” Irene boasted.

“You’re too easy on her, Sieg. You’re just way too tolerant,” Haruna remarked.

“If I wasn’t, there’s no way I’d be able to be Sergeant of the Fifth Squadron.”

“Just how wild a group of troublemakers is your squadron, anyway…?” Haruna asked, with a look of vague horror.

Smiling weakly at Haruna’s expression, I took a large swig from my mug. “If Nacht were still alive and he was here at the capital with us, I wonder what kind of job he’d have,” I murmured quietly.

“With his short temper and massive ego, I can’t picture him getting a proper job,” Haruna said.

“Then maybe a guard, where he could leverage his strengths?”

“Well, I doubt he’d ever be satisfied with not being the top dog. I just can’t picture him playing by the rules and working in an organization like you’ve been doing, Sieg.”

“Being an adventurer might’ve been, like, his true calling in life,” Irene added. “With no Adventurers’ Guild here, though, he probably would’ve had a super tough time landing a job.”

“As long as they’re competent in their abilities, anyone can make it as a guard—even if they’re lacking in the teamwork department,” I said. “There are actually quite a few people like that among my coworkers.” Considering Spinoza had managed to keep her job as a guard, Nacht probably wouldn’t have had a problem either. Back when I had first met him, he was a pretty decent guy, if rough around the edges.

I tried to imagine what it would’ve been like to work alongside Nacht as a guard. I pictured him tearing his way across the battlefield without a care in the world while I acted as his shield, and us laughing it up together over drinks after work.

Soon, though, my fleeting daydream fizzled and vanished like the frothy head on a cup of ale.

“You know, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you about,” Haruna interrupted.

“Hm?”

“Back when we were together in the Crimson Fangs, you had been protecting us as our shield, right? Why didn’t you ever say

anything about it?" she asked.

"What she said. I've been wondering the same thing," Irene agreed.

"If we had known you were protecting us all along, you might not have been kicked out of the party," Haruna murmured.

"Even if I had spoken up, by that point he was probably too far gone to believe me." Nacht had looked down on me, and he had absolute faith that his opinions were infallible. There was no way he would've listened to a word I'd said.

"Well…that does sound like a pretty likely scenario. I still wish you would've told us, though. We might've been able to do something." The smile that came to Haruna's face seemed a bit melancholy. "Looking back on it, it almost seems like Nacht was already brainwashed back then."

"Brainwashed?" I asked. "By the demons?"

"No, not really by anything specifically—just by the surrounding atmosphere. Everyone had been saying the Crimson Fangs were a party with amazing firepower, right? Once we started getting that kind of publicity, he started placing more and more emphasis on our attack power."

"Yeah, I suppose he did," I admitted.

"The more famous our party became, the greater the expectations of those around us grew to be; Nacht probably started to take on missions that were beyond our normal difficulty level in response to that. 'The Crimson Fangs don't *do* ordinary missions,' and all that."

"Mm-hmm, that might as well have been his catchphrase, right?" Irene chimed in.

"But what the Crimson Fangs supposedly 'did' was just what everyone else had been saying about us, and Nacht had been trying to fit us into that mold, though he didn't seem to realize it himself. He was making a concerted effort to avoid losing any money, standing, or popularity in the eyes of those around us."

Nacht had only started becoming domineering once the Crimson Fangs had become famous. The party had gained a reputation for having extreme attack power, and that was when he had started to place excessive emphasis on our firepower as well. Since I had been taking a defensive role in the party, he began to look down on me.

"You could say that's something similar to brainwashing in a way, don't you think? Being brainwashed by the atmosphere

around us, or by the systems in our world that place so much emphasis on money and status," Haruna went on. "He still takes the biggest blame for going on a rampage like he did, of course. I just haven't been able to help but wonder lately if there was anything we could've done to snap him out of that brainwashed mindset, somehow."

Perhaps feeling that she had poured too much of her heart out, Haruna snapped herself out of her reverie. She forced a smile in an attempt to dispel the darkened mood. "Well, whatever. It's too late to do anything about it now. Sorry, just forget I said anything—I don't want to ruin a good round of drinks!"

"You may be right, Haruna," I murmured, looking down into the bottom of my empty glass. "I never said anything to him because I thought it was impossible to change others—that people can only believe what they want to believe."

That was why I had given up trying to discuss things with him.

"We fought a lot in the beginning when I first joined the party, but somewhere along the line we just sort of stopped fighting..." In the depths of that empty mug, I started seeing visions of the past. "I should've tried to have more honest discussions with him—even if that might've ended up getting us into big arguments."

Silence fell across the three of us—but it was soon broken by Irene.

"Wait just a sec, let's nix this whole bummer thing, 'kay? Nacht always used to say there was no brooding allowed at the drinking table, remember?" She turned cheerily to a nearby member of the waitstaff. "Excuse me! Three more ales, please!"



As Haruna and I sat there flabbergasted, Irene turned back to us and offered a smile—one that was lukewarm, like stale ale that had lost every last ounce of its froth.

“As punishment for totally ruining the mood, the drinks can be on you two today!” she cheered.

We two offenders exchanged defeated smiles.

Nacht had indeed always said that he didn’t want anyone brooding while we were drinking. If he had been there, he definitely would’ve been pissed off.

Thanks to Irene’s cheerful disposition, though, the dark fog that had been hanging over us up to that point had lifted completely.

The Fifth Squadron of the Guard Corps had ventured outside the capital that day. We were on a joint mission with the Knight Corps to clear out a den of goblins that had shown up in a nearby village.

The villagers had shown us to a mountainous area behind the village proper, and as we walked through the dense, lush woodlands, we eventually came to a clearing. There, amid the shadows of the boulders, we found the entrance to a burrow that led deep underground.

Hiding between the tree trunks with the ten or so knights under his command, the Sergeant of that particular Knight Corps Squadron—who went by the name of Narthos—began murmuring information to us.

“These goblins have been devastating the village’s crops and kidnapping their women and children, from what we’ve been told. When harm comes to the villages, it affects the capital’s tax revenue as well—we must wipe these things out.”

“Ugh, they’re just a bunch of weak-ass goblins, right?” Spinoza muttered in undisguised irritation. “Why doesn’t the village chief just send his guards in to take care of ’em?”

“They would have, if these had been normal goblins—however, a mutated variety has been identified in this den. The village’s forces would have a difficult time dealing with these.”

Even a person with no formal combat training could defeat a normal goblin. However, mutated goblins had fighting ability on an entirely different level—and a group of those together in a den could pose a serious threat.

The knight peered out from between the trees, eyeing the

area around the burrow entrance. Next to the distant den, several goblins were visible, hideous monsters about the size of human children.

"Four guards… We'll find an opportunity to take them down, then charge into the den and eliminate the main force."

"Roger that." I nodded in response, along with the rest of the Fifth Squadron.

"Before you get any ideas," Narthos said, "don't forget that you guards are only here as our assistants. Do not interfere with our task—I don't want you getting in our way."

"The hell?" Spinoza growled.

"Good grief… And here I thought that the Knight Corps would've started changing for the better after getting a new Commander. I guess things just aren't that simple, are they?" Fam shrugged in annoyance, gazing at the knights that stood behind Sergeant Narthos. They and their commanding officer all shared the same look in their eyes; it was obvious they didn't think very highly of us.

"We beat the shit out of Gregor and got medals from the princess, y'know? I think we're a hell of a lot more useful than you chumps are," Spinoza spat.

"That particular achievement is questionable at best. What proof is there that you were the ones who did it?" Narthos asked back.

"Huh? How about beating the shit out of *you* right here and right now? Would that be proof enough for ya? You'll get to taste our strength firsthand."

"Please stop fighting, everyone—our enemies are in there, not each other! We need to focus on defeating the goblins!" Seira urged.

Her plea for restraint somehow managed to prevent catastrophe from breaking out; however, the awful tension in the air remained. Teamwork was the last thing on anyone's minds.

Narthos examined the guard patterns in front of the den for a while. "There's no cover in the area around the entrance, so it won't be easy to get close," he eventually muttered. "Things will get rough if they catch sight of us and warn the others inside the den. What to do…"

"Fam, can you take care of them?" I asked.

She let out a soft giggle. "But of course." With a smile and a nod, she pulled the bow from her back.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

“I’m going to skewer the goblin guards with arrows.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Narthos grunted. “We’re too far away. No matter how skilled an archer you may be, taking down targets from this distance is impossible.” He cast an angry glare at us. “If the arrows didn’t reach all the way, or if you missed completely, it wouldn’t matter; however, what if you get a near miss and the enemy is alerted to our presence? The guards would go to alert the others in the den, and they’d be put on high alert. That would make our job of clearing things out much more difficult.”

“You heard the man,” I said, looking at Fam.

“I see. I hadn’t considered that,” Fam admitted.

Hearing her response, Narthos let out an exasperated sigh, putting a hand to his forehead and giving an exaggerated shrug. “You have zero capacity for hypothetical thought. It’s amazing you’ve managed to stay alive for so long. I suppose a guard is just a guard, though.”

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” Fam murmured, continuing to knock an arrow. “Have you ever thought about how you walk around?”

“What do you mean?”

“As in, how to put one foot in front of the other.”

“Of course I haven’t thought about such things. Walking comes as second nature.”

“The same goes for this,” Fam said. “I can do it without even thinking, so I’ve never thought about what would happen if I missed.”

Pulling the bowstring taut, she released her arrow. The goblin guard, which had been no larger than a speck in the distance, collapsed to the ground, an arrow shaft sticking out of its head.

Another guard nearby grunted in surprise, unsure of what had happened. Before it had the chance to find out, though, the next arrow had already pierced its skull, killing it.

Wasting no time, Fam fired off a third arrow immediately after that one, putting an end to another goblin.

The last one, though, seemed to realize it was under attack. It turned around and started running back toward the den in an effort to warn the others. However, before it managed to disappear into the burrow, a flying arrow struck it in the back of the head. It didn’t even have a chance to let out a death cry; it merely crumpled to the ground, motionless.

“And there you go,” Fam said nonchalantly. “Hitting them from this distance was as easy as pie.”

“Impossible...! I can’t believe it...!” said one of the knights.

“Even the best archer in the Knight Corps wouldn’t be able to land a hit from this far away. And she did it so easily... That woman is no ordinary archer...!” gasped another.

The knights were in awe of Fam’s archery skills.

“Great job, Fam,” I said.

“To me, it feels almost like getting praised for taking a walk—but I’ll gladly take the compliment from you.”

“As if you don’t live for that stuff,” Spinoza quipped.

“Maybe you could pat me on the head now?” Fam asked.

“Save it until we’ve completed our mission,” I said.

“Oh, dear. You really do have excellent command of the carrot and the stick, don’t you?”

“You always seem like such a cool character, Fam, but you secretly crave attention, right?” Seira interjected. “I’d be happy to pat you on the head instead, if you’d like. I’ll even call you a good girl!”

“That’s quite all right, Seira, but I appreciate the gesture.”

“Oh dear, I’ve been politely turned down!”

I turned back to Sergeant Narthos. “Well, the guards have been taken care of. Shall we move on to clearing out the den?”

Narthos and the other knights looked on bitterly. No doubt they were none too pleased at me and my team of guards taking the lead.

We moved out from the forest and trees into the clearing and headed toward the burrow entrance. It began at a crevice between crags and continued deep underground into an area of dense darkness. A shadowy miasma emanated upward from the depths.

“Considering there’s a den here as well as a large number of goblins, there must be a goblin lord leading them,” Narthos said. “If we defeat him, we can make the entire group fall apart.”

“So we need to prioritize taking down the goblin lord,” I confirmed.

“That’s right. Also, from this point on, we will advance in formation,” he said as we prepared to charge into the den. “You guards will take point.”

“So we’re the decoys? Screw that,” Spinoza growled.

“No, that’s fine. We’ll head in first.”

“You sure about this, Sieg?”

“I’m supposed to be the party’s shield. Shields don’t do good if they’re behind you. Being at the front works out better for me if I want to protect everyone.”

“Your attitude is commendable, but you’d better not let your guard down. This is the enemy’s home base, so we’ll be at an overwhelming disadvantage when it comes to terrain,” Narthos warned.

“That won’t be a problem,” I replied. “I’ll draw all of the enemy’s attacks. Everyone else can focus entirely on wiping out every last goblin.”

“I won’t simply nod and accept your proposal,” he said. “Depending on others requires trust to be involved, and I can’t yet say I have trust in your team’s abilities.”

“I think trust is essential when you’re heading into battle with others, but so be it. I’ll go ahead and earn it as we fight.”

When I said this, Narthos let out a derisive snort, and Spinoza, next to me, scoffed in response.

“Who gives a crap about protecting these jerks, anyway? Just let the goblins eat ’em.”

“They recruited us because they’re short on manpower. Why would we want to decrease their numbers even further?” I tossed back.

They may not have been particularly likable, but the knights were our comrades, and they shared the same desire to protect the Royal Capital as we did. I wasn’t about to let them die on my watch.

We entered the burrow and began our descent. The dark, damp corridor was paved and illuminated by candles on either wall. The area was dim, but there was still some measure of visibility. I felt the presence of goblins, but none of them made an appearance.

After continuing down the corridor for a while, we came out into what seemed to be some sort of open area. A dense layer of darkness had accumulated at the bottom.

At that moment, a number of shadows rose up in front of us. Illuminated by the flames of the candles, the hideous faces of goblins emerged. In addition to some normal goblins, I saw some that were larger and more muscular, some clad in robes like mages, and some equipped with massive wooden shields.

Ah, I see. These must be the mutations.

"Those are goblin brutes, goblin mages, and goblin paladins, I believe. They specialize in attacks, magic, and defense, respectively."

"You sure know a lot about them, Seira," I said, impressed.

"As a guard, I've always studied the biology of the monsters we might have to face."

"That's a very commendable attitude to have."

"Moving on," Fam interrupted, "did you notice already, Sieg?"

"Yup—apparently they've surrounded us."

I heard the flustered shouts of the knights behind us. Another party of goblins had appeared and blocked off the tunnel we had entered the open area from, leaving us trapped between the two groups with no means of retreat.

"Where did they come from, though…?" Narthos sputtered.

"There are probably a ton of narrow passages all over their den. This is their stronghold, after all—with someone to lead them, they could set up something like this with ease," Fam theorized.

"Having coordination like that will make them a pain to deal with, huh," I said.

"Now what do we do? They've taken our rear! You won't be able to be our shield now! Our unit is in danger of being wiped out entirely!" Narthos shouted, unable to hide his dismay. "Gah…! How dare these lowly goblins act so cocky…!"

"Calm down. Them taking our rear won't be a problem. Just leave the defense to me; everyone else, don't worry about anything but attacking the enemy."

Among the throng of goblins, there was one that stood out from the rest. It was about the same size as a human, and it was clad in highly decorated garments. It held a staff in its hand, and the light of reason shone in its eyes.

That must be the goblin lord.

It raised its staff and let out a harsh, monstrous roar. The goblin troops, responding to that command, began to take action; they all closed in on us at once, attacking from both sides simultaneously.

No matter how skilled someone may have been, if they were attacked from behind, they'd be as good as done for—the goblins would overrun them and they'd end up as mincemeat.

Well, in that case…

I burst forward, straight into the pack of enemies directly in front of me.

“Sieg?! What are you doing?!” Seeing my sudden strange behavior, Sergeant Narthos yelled out in confusion behind me. “Have you lost your mind?!”

Lost my mind? Don’t be absurd. I’m as levelheaded as can be—I know exactly what I’m doing.

As soon as I reached the enemy’s front lines, I activated my skill.

“*Iron Target!*”

All of the goblins gathered in the clearing had their aggro redirected to me. The moment that happened, the group of goblins that had been behind us started running right past all the knights and guards, heading straight toward me instead.

“What the—?!”

Narthos wore an expression of utter disbelief as the goblins inexplicably paid him and his soldiers no heed, instead focusing solely on me.

That was what my skill did, though: gathered the aggro from all enemies in the area onto me and me alone. That allowed the entirety of our forces to move up to the front, preventing any possibility of being attacked from behind. In fact, with the rear enemy forces facing away and focusing on me, the Knight Corps and the Fifth Squadron could attack *them* from behind instead.

“Now’s our chance! Take the goblins down!”

All the troops charged in and began tearing down goblins left and right. Since the goblins were all focused on me, they were completely open for attack.

However...

The goblin lord suddenly let out a strange cry, and the goblins who had been locked onto me as their target suddenly turned their ire toward the others once again; their collapsed formation had been reassembled. With a single shout, the goblin lord had apparently canceled out the effects of my skill.

What a powerful beast. It’s on an entirely different level than the others.

The battle turned into a melee at that point, with humans and goblins locked in mortal combat with each other.

“What’s with this thing...? Its defense is way too powerful!”

The spear the knight had thrown was stopped cold by the goblin paladin’s giant shield; his attacks did nothing against such

an ironclad defense.

Due to the paladins' defensive positions at the front lines, our forces found themselves unable to advance. Just when it seemed we had fallen into a stalemate, though, we heard a ferocious yell echo out.

Spinoza unleashed a mighty swing with her war hammer that was the size of a person—it flew through the air with a thunderous roar and smashed straight through the massive shield and goblin paladin's body alike. With all of her weight behind it, the blow was more than enough to end the creature's life.

"Wh-What power...!"

"Hah! Fresh servings of goblin meat, comin' right up!" She proceeded to rampage freely across the battleground, tearing through the goblin paladins one after the other.

Others on the front line began to cascade into the open spaces she created. However, the next set of fearsome opponents quickly descended upon them—mixed among the regular goblins, there were some exceptionally large, intimidating specimens.

Goblin brutes.

They began mowing down the knights, swinging their massive clubs with their thick, treelike arms. Each horizontal blow distorted the air, and the vertical ones shook the very earth. The knights who still stood began to falter in the face of such overwhelming power.

"Everyone stand back, please!"

With the balking knights at her back, Seira valiantly confronted the enemy.

Letting out a guttural roar, one goblin brute swung its club down at Seira, but she dodged nimbly to one side. Such agile movements, which would have been impossible for a guard wearing normal gear, were quite possible for her due to the lightness of the bikini armor she wore.

Lashing out with their clubs again and again, the brutes kept trying to smite her, but she dodged each and every attack with ease. As they eventually tired, the beasts began to slow down, and Seira took advantage of this to unleash a powerful, well-timed strike, letting out a battle cry as she did so.

She didn't have as much power behind her strikes as Spinoza had; however, her sword skills, honed through her grueling daily

training sessions, were sharp enough to penetrate the high defense power of the goblin brutes, putting an end to them.

"You're not hurt, are you, Knight Corps?" Seira asked.

"N-No... But why aren't we...? We got sent flying by a swing from one of those giant clubs, yet we're not injured at all..."

"That's because Sieg is taking all the damage for you."

"Taking damage for us...?"

"That's right. It's one of his skills."

"You're not telling us that a single person is taking damage for everyone here, are you? That's unbelievable—how could he still be standing?"

"Hey, Miss Seira, watch out!" one of the knights shouted.

Whirling around, she saw a group of goblin mages—elite spellcasters—surrounding her and taking aim at her. If they managed to get their attacks off, all the agility in the world wouldn't save her.

However, before their spells could fire, a volley of arrows pierced the goblins' skulls.

Fam let out a chuckle. "Sorry to inform you, but your incantations can't outdraw my arrows." She nocked another arrow on her bowstring, a bold grin on her face.

The other goblins began to go after Fam to support the mages; however, she evaded every attack. Archers typically didn't have any means of doing battle at close range, but Fam excelled at dodging, and she had the ability to fight with small blades in close-quarters combat.

My comrades were not the type to rely solely on me using my skills; they each wreaked their own special brands of havoc. Spinoza had her massive war hammer; Seira delivered piercing sword strikes; and Fam fired off her arrows with deadly accuracy. With all three of them pressing in at once, the group of goblins was being whittled away to nothing.

* * *

The battle was being entirely dominated by the Fifth Squadron.

As soon as they had been surrounded on both sides, their side had been at a clear disadvantage, and though they had been prepared for the worst possible outcome, one man ended up turning the tide of the battle entirely.

Sieg… It was all his doing.

Seeing the fighting prowess of the Fifth Squadron, the knights had regained the hope they had abandoned, and they had overwhelmed the goblins with that momentum.

Sergeant Narthos glared at Sieg from behind in disgust.

How dare a lowly guard act so cocky…!

Narthos had long disliked that man, and it was because Eleanor, the current Commander he held in high regard, was extremely fond of him. She wanted Sieg to join the Knight Corps, speaking frequently and fervently about how strong he was.

Narthos didn't want to hear it. He respected Eleanor greatly, as a woman who not only boasted peerless strength among the Knight Corps, but whose raw swordsmanship was also said to surpass even that of Commander Gregor.

Put simply, he was in love with her—and he didn't want to hear the woman he loved go on about another man. So before he knew it, he had grown to harbor a deep hatred for Guard Sergeant Sieg.

When Eleanor entrusted him to lead the extermination of the goblin den, he had thought that this would be his chance: if he could perform that feat with excellence, he might just be able to get her to look his way.

However, the words that she spoke right afterward sent his soaring mood crashing back to earth in an instant:

"*I have arranged for Sieg and the Fifth Squadron to participate in this extermination mission. With them alongside you, there should be no concerns whatsoever.*"

He had nearly erupted into a scream right then and there: *Sieg again?!*

But he knew that knights must keep a firm composure at all times—and repeating that sole reminder allowed him to maintain control of himself, albeit just barely.

Each time he witnessed the deep affection that surfaced on Eleanor's face when she spoke that man's name—the agony he experienced was almost intolerable.

Therefore, he had made a firm vow to himself to perform better than Sieg during their mission. But how had things actually turned out? In the end, the Knight Corps couldn't manage to do a single thing without him.

"Gah…! At this rate, our renowned Knight Corps will be brought to shame…! No matter what, I must accomplish some

deed of valor...!”

There was only one thing left he could possibly do.

“I will take down the goblin lord myself!”

Striking down the enemy commander would certainly count as accomplishing a valorous deed.

Narthos soon spotted the goblin lord waiting at the rear of the enemy ranks. Judging by the battle formation they had taken, it seemed possible for him to reach their leader.

I can do this!

He dashed forward at the goblin lord, intent on taking its head.

“No, Sir Narthos! Wait!”

He had become so obsessed with obtaining glory that he must have lost his ability to think calmly, narrowing his field of vision, because a group of goblins suddenly popped out from a location he hadn’t noticed whatsoever. A goblin brute swung at him with its giant club, trying to flatten him.

The Guard Corps woman in the bikini armor—what was her name, Seira?—had defeated some goblin brutes, but there must have been others lying in wait as well.

“Curses—!”

It was an absolute blunder born of being overeager. Regrets would be of no use at that point, though—in his current situation, he would be unable to dodge the incoming blow no matter what he did.

Time began to distort, running in slow motion. The boundary between dream and reality began to blur, and a flurry of scenes began to appear behind his closed eyelids; he realized instinctively that it was his life flashing before his eyes.

He had visions of when he had first joined the Knight Corps, and of when he had met Eleanor during that time period. He had underestimated her since she was a woman and challenged her, but had been soundly defeated by her in no time at all. Before he knew it, he had been smitten with her gallantry and her finely honed sword skills.

Then, the scene switched to Eleanor, showing how different her expression looked when she spoke about Sieg compared to when she talked to Narthos—she seemed absolutely enraptured, like some starry-eyed maiden.

Ugh! That last part was completely unnecessary! If my life’s going to flash before my eyes, at least stick with just the good memories!

Now the moment has been ruined!

Ah well…it doesn't really matter. I'm about to die, anyway.

The imagery came to a stop, and death was imminent. Narthos was just about to close his eyes, bracing himself for the impending pain of the goblin brute's club smashing down onto his head, when suddenly—

A figure dashed in front of him, taking the brutal impact of the weapon instead.

The force of the blow was so powerful that the air itself shook; however, the man did not so much as flinch.

Turning just his face back to look at Narthos, Sieg offered him a smile.

"That was a close one."

"Wh-Why?! Why would you save me?!" Narthos couldn't help but ask. "I've done nothing but mock you this entire time! Yet you still put yourself in such danger to aid me—in spite of all that?!"

"Are you saying I should've left you to die?" Sieg asked, as if he were saying aloud what Narthos had actually felt. "I'm afraid that's not how I work. I promised I'd be your shield, after all—that I'd draw all of the enemy's attacks, and everyone else could focus solely on attacking."

He gazed at Narthos with clear eyes. "So none of you are going to be dying. Not on my watch. I promise I'll protect you all."

The members of the Knight Corps fundamentally tended to look down on Guards. Unlike the renowned Knights, the Guards were basically a bunch of common rogues. Knights gave their lives in loyal service; Guards ran away as soon as a battle was no longer in their favor. Somehow, that impression, mistaken as it was, had been ingrained deep within their group.

However, the knights who had participated in the mission to escort the Oracle of Light seemed to harbor a different perception of the Guard Corps—particularly of the Fifth Squadron. They no longer looked down on guards as a rule.

Back then, that fact had puzzled him, but at that point the reason became clear: the guards took their jobs seriously as well. If they hadn't, they wouldn't have risked their own lives to protect Narthos and his men in the face of such danger.

After taking care of the goblin brute, Sieg confronted the goblin lord, who had been waiting in the rear.

The enemy commander was right before his eyes; if Narthos

wanted glory, all he had to do was push past Sieg and claim it. However, instead, he suddenly found himself shouting in earnest.

"Take that thing down, Sieg!"

"Got it."

The goblin lord unleashed a desperate blow upon Sieg, but it might as well have been a gust of wind to him; he simply took his raised sword and summarily beheaded the enemy general.

The glory had been taken from Narthos. Despite that, though, he never felt the surge of bitter emotions he'd expected. Quite the opposite, in fact—he felt strangely invigorated.

I could never win against this man.

The moment he realized he had accepted that fact, it was like a weight had lifted off his shoulders. He felt all the resentment inside him start melting away.

Narthos turned to face Sieg and, though he was rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, he made sure to convey his honest feelings in a voice loud enough to be heard:

"Sieg...you saved my life. Thank you."

"No problem."

Sieg accepted those feelings without a second thought.

We had managed to successfully defeat the goblin lord.

With their leader defeated and nobody left to take command, the enemy forces crumbled, and we went on to wipe out any remnants we could find.

"Well, I guess that takes care of that. Let's head back."

As we made our way back to the burrow's entrance, Sergeant Narthos, who had been walking behind me, suddenly spoke up.

"We searched every corner of this den, but can we truly say we've cleared out every single goblin?" he asked.

"Well, we wiped out the goblin lord and all the other mutated varieties, there's no doubt about that," I responded. "It's possible a few normal goblins might've gotten away, though."

"With their commander defeated, it's unlikely the regular goblins will pose much of a threat... Still, I'd rather not run the risk of them coming back for revenge."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I'll close off the entrance and make sure they'll never be able to use it again. If there happen to be any surviving goblins, they'll be trapped inside and most likely starve to death."

“Close off the entrance…? How would you do that?”

“Well…you’ll see.”

We reached the burrow entrance and crossed the threshold to the outside. The glow of sunlight fell upon us once again, dispelling the damp, gloomy darkness.

Once I had confirmed that everyone in our raiding party had gotten out, I turned around and stood myself on the boundary where the outside world ended and the entrance to the den began. The Knight Corps and the Fifth Squadron watched on from behind me.

“All of the skills in my repertoire are specialized for defensive purposes—I’ve never had any that are used for attacking. So after a long time training, I recently ended up learning a new one.”

I had plenty of confidence in my defense power, but I had judged myself to be lacking in the realm of attack power. My new skill was meant to compensate for that weakness.

“I call it ‘Pain Reversal’—it converts the damage I take into attack power and releases it in a single strike. All the damage I accumulated in the battle earlier should be enough to seal off this entrance.”

I sucked in a deep breath, activating the skill. All of the damage that had been dealt by the goblins pounding on me, along with that from all the attacks I had taken for my allies, was converted to energy and went coursing through my body.

“*Pain Reversal!*”

Turning pain to power and collecting it in my fist, I delivered a solid punch to the ground. The force of the impact sent shock waves rippling through the ground from where I struck, causing an avalanche of stone debris to collapse violently inward. In just a few moments, the entire entrance was blocked off by fallen rocks.

“Now, even if any of them survived, they won’t be able to get out of the burrow. Mission complete.”

“W-Wow, that packed quite a punch, Sarge!” Seira’s voice was full of awe. “Does that mean all the damage you took is gone now?”

“No, it’s all still in place. The skill doesn’t actually remove any of the damage I’ve taken.”

“Oh, I see…”

“I do have a skill that lets me get rid of damage, though. It’s

called ‘Pain Movement,’ and it lets me transfer damage to others. It’s a really handy skill that lets me deal damage and heal at the same time. I can also transfer damage from others onto myself instead.”

The Fifth Squadron didn’t have a healer, so I had learned that particular skill to make up for that little deficiency. That way, we would be prepared in the event that someone was unexpectedly injured.

Fam nodded at my words. “I see,” she murmured quietly. “In that case, feel free to transfer a little bit of damage to me. The thought of living with the same wounds as you has a rather delightful ring to it.”

“Don’t worry about it. This is barely a few scratches.”

“My ass. Considerin’ you took enough damage to let ya pulverize that entrance…” Spinoza muttered.

“You just keep getting stronger and stronger, Sieg… I’ll need to train a lot harder if I want to have any hope of catching up, even just a little bit!” Seira said in admiration.

As we were talking, a voice called out: “All of you truly did an excellent job today.”

Sergeant Narthos was standing there wearing a solemn expression. For a moment I thought there might’ve been some sarcasm in his voice, but one look at his face quickly told me otherwise.

“It seems we were under a misapprehension. You share the exact same sentiments as we do, putting your lives on the line for the sake of protecting our country. That makes us equals—comrades to whom we can entrust each other’s backs. I would like to apologize for the discourtesy we’ve shown you up until now.”

Narthos, followed by all of the rest of the Knight Corps men standing behind him, then bowed their heads deeply.

“Hah! So you finally get it, do ya? Too bad, though, apologizin’ only goes so far! If you wanna show you *really* mean it, you’re gonna have to fork over enough cold, hard cash to—*grrk*!”

Forcibly closing Spinoza’s mouth to end her attempt at a gangster hustle, I stood face-to-face with Sergeant Narthos, as the Sergeant of the Fifth Squadron of the Guard Corps.

“We’re of the same mind. In the same way that the Knight Corps used to look down on the Guard Corps, there are quite a few guards that have nothing but bad things to say about

knights—that they barely even lift a finger yet still get to collect a free paycheck, and whatnot. But this mission together proved to me that the Knight Corps works just as hard as we do. I'm sure when we tell this to the other guards, it'll alter their perception a little."

"You know...we should have made the effort to try to understand each other sooner," he said.

"You're absolutely right on that one," I agreed.

At that, Sergeant Narthos extended his hand rather sheepishly, and I grasped it firmly in response. Seira, Fam, Spinoza, and all of the knights watched on as we did so. Our joined hands were almost like a bridge—one built for the purpose of connecting the divide between us.

Chapter 3: The Amnesiac Knight

After completing our mission to clear out the goblin den, we returned to the Royal Capital and headed into Commander Bolton's office at the guard station to give our report, letting him know that the entire den had been eradicated successfully.

"Great job. Not that I doubted you guys for a second," the Commander said with a grin as he puffed on his cigar. "At this rate, the Knight Corps is gonna keep owing us more and more. The more debt they stack up, the sweeter the payoff's gonna be when it comes time to collect."

"You sure they ain't gonna just blow it off?" Spinoza asked.

"Nah. There's no way the Knights of all people would do that, considering they value honor more than anything else. They wouldn't dare do anything to sully their good name, unlike you, Spinoza," the Commander shot back dryly.

"Hey, hold on a sec. You tryin' to say I blew off a debt, huh?"

"You saying you didn't? I heard you have massive debts at pubs all over the capital, and that you're banned from entering most of 'em because of that." He chuckled.

"You borrowed some money from me too, didn't you?" Seira added.

"I told ya, I plan on paying all those back! Eventually, y'know. Soon as I hit it big on the slots, they'll be gettin' everything back with interest!"

"How about you just pay it back by earning money the normal way instead of relying on gambling?" Commander Bolton asked.

"Hah, don't even start. It's already way over the amount anyone can earn by workin' the normal way. If I had to do it in piddly little installments like that, I'd be payin' my whole life!"

"Why do you say that like you're proud of it?"

Just then, we heard a knock on the door to the Commander's office.

"Yeah, come in," he called.

"Excuse me. Oh—we meet again, Sieg. A rare coincidence. Perhaps this is a sign that our destinies are intertwined in some way...?"

It was Eleanor.

“It’s not really that much of a coincidence—you *are* in a guard station,” I pointed out.

“So? What do ya got for me?” Commander Bolton looked somewhat annoyed as he prompted her to continue.

“I’ve come to let you know that a certain woman in our care has awakened.”

“Oh, really?” he replied. “That was quicker than I expected.”

“Indeed. The doctors said her powers of resiliency are astounding. If the worst had happened, it was possible she might have stayed asleep forever.”

“What woman is this?” I asked.

“I shall explain more about it on the way,” Eleanor stated. “She’s in the infirmary. May I ask everyone to come with me?”

Eleanor explained the situation to us en route to the infirmary. The Knight Corps had been on guard duty at the Milleon Bridge leading to the territory of the Kingdom of Silvesta, of which the Royal Capital of Astaroth was a part. While doing so, one of the knights had come across a woman lying by the river. She was wearing a suit of armor and had a serious head wound which had rendered her unconscious. They had no idea where she had washed in from, but they were fairly confident she wasn’t from our country, at least.

They had taken her to the infirmary and treated her wound successfully, but she hadn’t regained consciousness at the time. Apparently, she had finally just awakened.

We arrived at the infirmary, and the doctor took us to a room in the back. Among the rows of empty beds, only one was occupied; when the woman sitting up in it noticed us, she looked in our direction.

“Huh...?!”

Upon seeing the woman, Seira let out a sudden gasp of surprise.

“What’s wrong, Seira? Do you know her or something?” I asked.

“O-Oh, no, I was just caught off guard by how pretty she is...” Seira responded hesitantly.

“Hah! Yeah, she had the same reaction the first time she met me too. Guess she freaks out whenever she sees a beauty!” Spinoza chuckled.

“Heh. She seemed surprised when she met me too,” Fam

added.

“Spinoza, the first time I met you, you were hungover and threw up on me! And Fam, you snuck up behind me out of nowhere!” Seira asserted, but then she followed that up with a carefully worded addition: “I do think both of you are very pretty, of course, but the other things had a much bigger impact on me at the time!”

There may not have been any reason to gasp about it, but the woman in front of us was indeed beautiful. Her looks were a part of it, naturally, but there was something else there that seemed to permeate through to her very core. Still, her hair reached all the way down her back, and her face was elegant and fine-featured. Her body was trim and muscular enough for it to be evident even through her linen clothing. She was like a piece of burnished ore.

“So our Sleeping Beauty has awakened, has she?” Commander Bolton joked with a grin.

The woman squinted her eyes warily. “Who are all of you people…?”

“Whoa there, no need to look so suspicious,” the Commander cautioned. “We’re not gonna eat ya. We brought you here after we found you lying on the ground out there.”

“Lying on the ground? Me?” the woman asked.

“Yeah, on the riverbank by the Milleon Bridge. Your head was hurt and you were unconscious.”

“Is that so… Well, I apologize for making you go through all that trouble. Thank you. You saved my life.” With that, the woman gave a deep bow.

“Well, it was some fellas from the Knight Corps who actually saved you. We’re not really the ones you should be thanking,” the Commander admitted sheepishly. “Anyway, so did you get attacked by monsters or something?”

“I hate to admit this, but…I can’t really remember anything.”

“Well, you might’ve temporarily lost your memories of the incident from the shock. In that case, what about yourself? Where are you from?”

“I…can’t remember *that* either.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t remember anything at all. When I try to think back, it’s like my head is full of fog…”

“Hold on a sec, you have amnesia? Now that’s gonna be a

problem," Commander Bolton muttered, palming his forehead in disbelief. "So you really don't remember *anything*? What about your name?"

"My name..." The woman put her hand on her chin. "For some reason I remember the name 'Alma.' I'm not sure whether it's *my* name, though..."

"It most likely is," Eleanor offered. "That was the name inscribed on the armor you were wearing when they found you."

"So you don't remember anything but your name," Commander Bolton mused. "You know, you kept mumbling some guy's name over and over while you were asleep and feverish... You don't remember that either, then?"

"Whaaat...?! I-I was calling out a man's name?! Really?!" Alma's entire face went red, all the way to her ears.

"Ah, you were moaning his name so lovingly—musta been someone you were *really* close with. No idea if it was a lover or a husband or what, though," he added.

"A-A lover?! Or a husband?! Is it possible that I'm married?!" The idea made Alma's voice squeak involuntarily.

"I mean, maybe so?" the Commander said.

"Could... Could I even have a child already, maybe? There's just no way! I don't remember giving birth. Would it be a boy or a girl, though...?" She kept mumbling to herself, her imagination running wild.

As he watched on, the Commander stroked his beard and nodded to himself, convinced. "Seeing you react like that, it's looking like you really don't remember anything after all. See, I was pulling your leg about the whole sleep-talking thing."

"Huh?! P-Pulling my leg?!"

"Hey, nothing personal! We just needed to make sure you really *do* have amnesia, and aren't just *pretending* to have amnesia."

"Why would I pretend to have amnesia...? What would be the point of doing something like that?"

"Well...let's say for instance that you were a spy for another country, feigning ignorance to infiltrate the Royal Capital. That's a possibility we can't completely rule out," Fam said.

"That's an ex-spy for ya! You've got that spy thought process down like the back of your hand!" With a great big laugh, Spinoza patted Fam firmly on top of the head.

Fam was utterly dumbfounded at Spinoza just blurting out

info about what was a rather sensitive topic to her. “You know…your lack of sensitivity is almost applause-worthy.”

She honestly didn’t look overly disgruntled, though. Perhaps it was because Spinoza wasn’t trying to be mean to her—she just had zero filter, which might’ve been her saving grace, in a way.

“So how did she seem from your perspective, Fam?” I asked.

“Well…I’ve been observing her ever since Commander Bolton started talking to her, but based on her eyes, her expression, and her complexion, I don’t sense any lies. Her amnesia is the real thing.”

I see. Well, if Fam says so, it must be true.

“If you are uncertain where you came from, you are likely just as uncertain about your destination. For the time being, Alma, let us have you stay here in the Royal Capital,” Eleanor proposed.

“Thank you. I really appreciate you giving me a place to be.”

“We would still need to put you to work, of course.”

“Based on the equipment she was wearing when they found her, she was probably a knight from some other country, right? Why not put her in the Knight Corps, then?” Commander Bolton suggested.

Eleanor, however, had a bleak expression on her face. “It’s difficult to say this, but…only those of rank are able to join the Knight Corps. People who have no means of verifying their identities are not permitted.”

Hearing this, Spinoza started whispering into Alma’s ear. “Hey, make up some rank for yourself, quick! Just tell ’em you used to be a noble or somethin’ and they might let ya into the Knights!”

“Huh? O-Oh yeah…!” Alma turned to the others. “I, uh, just remembered something! I’m starting to feel like maybe I was a really high-ranking noble back before I lost my memory!”

“A really high-ranking noble…? That’s an awfully vague description,” Eleanor said.

“Oh! A princess! I feel like I was probably a princess!”

“Of all the things you could’ve picked, a princess was probably the worst choice…” I groaned.

“Your eyes are darting all over the place too. You can’t lie worth a damn, huh,” Spinoza added.

“Wh-What did you expect?! I can’t just come up with something believable on the spot! My favorite rank just happened to pop into my mind, so I spouted out ‘princess’!”

“I must apologize. Even if you did happen to be of noble birth,

you would not be allowed to join the Knight Corps without any means of proving yourself as such."

It wasn't going to work. Of course it wasn't.

"Even if I was a princess?"

"Even if you were a princess."

That's not the part you're supposed to push back on.

Though, never mind that, it's highly unlikely you're a princess in the first place.

At that point, Commander Bolton decided to speak up and break the odd atmosphere that had developed. "All right, we'll take you into the Guard Corps. If you were wearing armor, that probably means you know how to handle a sword. You can work with us for the good of the Royal Capital."

"A-A guard?! Me?"

"What, you don't like the idea?"

"No, that's not it, I'm grateful for any employment at all! I promise to work my fingers to the bone!"

"Hey, you've got some pluck, there, kid!"

"Hold on a sec, you may wanna think twice," Spinoza whispered to Alma again. "Workin' as a guard isn't somethin' people just do willingly, y'know?"

"Really?"

"Guard work is one of those jobs that's demanding, dirty, dangerous, and pays dismally—you know, the four Ds. It's absolute garbage, I tell ya. It's a trash heap where people with nowhere else to go get dumped."

"You sure have a high opinion of your own workplace, Spinoza," I quipped.

"Hah! She ain't wrong, though."

You're not supposed to laugh at a tirade like that, Commander.

"Just like Spinoza said, our pay is low as hell, and we're pretty much constantly shaking hands with danger. But working in the Guard Corps comes with some perks, too, y'know? You get a dorm to live in, and you get three whole meals a day! How about that, huh?"

That's not nearly enough advantages to outweigh the disadvantages...

I was pretty sure everyone else had been thinking the exact same thing.

Everyone but Alma, apparently. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“She’s set the bar pretty low for what she considers an amazing job, huh?” I whispered to Fam.

“She’s probably one of those tough types who can somehow survive no matter what they end up doing,” Fam whispered back.

“I’ll tell ya right now, though, for people with questionable backgrounds, being a guard is one of the best job options out there. At any rate, consider yourself a member of the Guard Corps now—looking forward to working with ya!” Offering her a hearty smile, the Commander gave Alma a firm pat on the back, and she gave her chest a confident, enthusiastic thump in response.

“But the question is, which squadron will end up taking you in?”

“Why don’t we just take her into the Fifth Squadron?” Seira volunteered. “We’re mostly women already, which would probably make it easier for her to adapt.”

“Huh. That actually makes a lot of sense,” Commander Bolton said. “Sieg of all people has plenty of experience taming all our wild beasts.”

I never exactly asked to gain any experience in wild beast taming…

Ah well—I’m sure she has all kinds of things to be worried about, considering she’s lost her memories. If someone needs to look out for her, it might as well be us.

“All right. In that case, I’ll take her onto the team.”

“Appreciate you saying that,” the Commander responded with a grin.

“I look forward to your guidance, Sieg!”

Seeing Alma’s smile, though, untainted by the slightest hint of despondency, made me think she wasn’t particularly worried about the state of her memory after all.

The morning after Alma had joined the Guard Corps, when I headed out to the cafeteria for breakfast, I saw Alma and greeted her as her Sergeant.

“Good morning. Did you manage to get some sleep?” I asked.

“Yeah, I did! I had some great dreams,” she replied.

“Alma seemed to be enjoying her sleep very much, with all that snoring! She was spread out all over the bed, scratching her stomach,” Seira explained; she had been sharing a room with Alma since the day prior.

“That’s amazing, Alma…” I found myself sputtering.

“Hm? What is?”

“Well, the Guard Corps beds are notorious for being rock-hard and tough to sleep on. It’s pretty amazing that you managed to get a good night’s sleep on the first night.”

That was the initial trial by fire that befell anyone who ended up joining the Guards: they couldn’t sleep because the beds were too hard, which meant they were unable to recover their stamina; then the accumulated fatigue wore down their bodies and their sanity until they ended up breaking. Yet we’d never had funding to buy new beds, leaving everyone stuck in pillow purgatory. You really had to be as tough as nails to survive in our world.

I was also one of the ones who managed to get some sleep when I started out, but there was no way I would’ve called it restful.

“Really? I thought it was pretty comfortable!” she beamed.

“You call that *comfortable*…? Where on earth did you used to sleep?” I wondered aloud.

“Who knows? I can’t remember anything, you know.”

“That reminds me—does it not worry you at all that you can’t remember anything?”

“Not really. If I can’t remember, I can’t remember. Anyway, it might come back to me at some point—letting it bother me is just a waste of time.”

“That’s quite the positive mindset.”

“Just so ya know, for every second of beauty sleep little miss Alma here got, *we* had to pay the price,” Spinoza said.

Fam and Spinoza had shown up at the cafeteria a bit later than usual.

“Huh?” I asked. “What does that mean?”

“Our room is right next to hers, and we could hear her snoring. It sounded like the whole building was under construction in the middle of the night,” Fam said.

“I couldn’t take it anymore, so I busted into her room to yell at her—but she wouldn’t wake up, even after I grabbed her by the collar and shook her around for a while,” Spinoza grumbled.

“I’ve never seen anything more fitting of the phrase ‘dead to the world’ before.”

The two women both had dark circles under their eyes—evidence of their vicious struggle with Alma’s snoring.

Faced with multiple testimonies and visible damages, Alma hung her head in embarrassment like a scolded puppy. “Er... S-Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to keep you up.”

“Well, you had a lot going on yesterday. You were probably pretty tired,” I said.

“Exactly. You shouldn’t worry about it. Besides, it’s good you were actually able to get some nice sleep, rather than being awake all night!” Seira assured her.

When Alma heard Seira and I back her up like that, tears began to well up in her eyes, and she spoke to us in a voice steeped with emotion. “You two... You’re so nice...! I’ll never forget this for as long as I live...!”

“That’s a bit much,” I said.

“But we can definitely tell you aren’t a bad person,” Seira added.

Seira and I smiled somewhat awkwardly.

Alma turned to Spinoza and Fam and bowed her head. “Sorry for causing the two of you trouble, as well.”

“Don’t worry about it. I already got my payback anyway.”

“Payback?”

“Well,” Spinoza began, “since you weren’t wakin’ up, I slapped you across the face two or three times. I also took the liberty of fondlin’ that chest of yours to my heart’s content while you were asleep.”

“Wuh-Wha...?!” Alma sputtered.

“You sure do have a nice pair on ya! Gives Seira a run for her money.” Spinoza gave a big thumbs-up, a massive grin on her face.

“Did you just say you fondled my chest?! While I was asleep, and without my consent, no less?! That is just beyond the pale! I should never have apologized to you!”

“Hah! Too late, you already did!”

“Then I take it back! Consider yourself unapologized to!”

Alma, her face red with anger, seemed as if she was about to spring upon Spinoza at any moment, and we just couldn’t have that kind of family feud first thing in the morning.

“All right, calm down, you two. Let’s just get our meals. If we don’t hurry up and eat, we’ll have to head into work without breakfast.”

“Th-That’s a good point... It wouldn’t do to miss out on breakfast just because I was dealing with you, Spinoza. Let’s call

a truce for now.”

Once Alma had been calmed down, Fam suddenly turned to Seira. “That reminds me, weren’t you and Alma discussing something yesterday?”

“Huh?” Seira blurted.

“I couldn’t quite hear what you were saying, but the tone of your voice sounded awfully serious. What were you talking about?”

“U-Um, well…”

As Seira stood there stammering, we heard Alma call out.

“Hey! If you don’t hurry up, you’ll all miss out on breakfast! Do you want me to eat your portions too?”

“Oh, right!” Seira responded. “Come on, Fam, let’s go!”

And thus, their conversation was cut short.

Picking up our meals at the service window, my squadron and I sat down together at a vacant table.

“Wait, so this is breakfast?” Alma murmured, staring at the meal on the tray in front of her. It was black bread and bean soup—our typical bleak fare. No doubt it was a few steps below the kind of meal she had been expecting.

Seira did her best to explain. “Since the Royal Capital is so dangerous, we don’t have a lot of goods coming in. And the nobles always get first choice when it comes to our locally grown foods.”

“Are we really allowed to eat these…?”

“Huh?” All of us couldn’t help but turn and stare at Alma in confusion.

“We even get to eat black bread and bean soup…this is like a dream come true!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. She *likes* this stuff?!” Spinoza squawked.

I had assumed that her shaking had been out of anger, but apparently it had been out of sheer joy at seeing such a lavish meal before her. Each and every one of us was obviously thinking, *Wait,* what*?*

“Mmmm! This is amazing!” Taking a mouthful of bread and soup, Alma apparently found them even tastier than she had anticipated, because she didn’t stop eating after that. Her cheeks were soon stuffed full of food like a hamster’s; she must’ve had a pretty voracious appetite.

“Seira, is our breakfast really that tasty?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t call it tasty, even on a good day…but I would call it a perfectly edible meal, one that gives us the minimum basic nutrients for survival, I’d say!” Seira replied.

“Yeah, that’s about the extent of it…”

“I certainly can’t believe it’s something that any normal person would actually enjoy,” Fam said, casting a brief glance at Alma. The hungry woman must’ve been worried that someone would take her food away if she didn’t hurry, and was slurping her bean soup right out of the bowl hands-free.

“She’s one hell of a sloppy eater, ain’t she?”

“Mm, that was so delicious! Thanks so much!”

Alma, having polished off her breakfast faster than anyone else there—eagerly, at that—sat there wearing a satisfied grin, specks of food stuck to her face.

As the point of connection between the Capital’s main entrance and the outside world, the bridge over the moat surrounding the Royal Capital was constantly under attack by monsters. We, the Fifth Squadron, were in the midst of intercepting one such attack.

It wasn’t a particularly urgent situation or anything—just another day at work for us, really. When it came down to it, the Capital had more monster visitors than human ones.

It also happened to be Alma’s first battle with us. We had recruited her under the assumption that she had at least some fighting experience, considering she had been wearing a suit of armor when she’d been found, but we had no idea how good she actually was—so I was both hopeful and concerned at the same time.

“*Hyah*!”

With a swing of her sword, Alma sliced straight through the golem in front of her. The powerful blow cut through the stone creature’s resilient body like it was nothing.

Even when faced with multiple opponents, she stayed perfectly levelheaded, dodging their attacks and steadily whittling down their numbers one by one.

Upon seeing her battle prowess, Spinoza and Fam both let out murmurs of admiration.

“Hot damn. She’s pretty good, huh?” Spinoza said.

“The way she moves is exceptional…and both her composure and situational assessment abilities are excellent as well,” Fam

agreed.

If things had turned south, I would've been able to use my skill to take on any damage Alma suffered—but she didn't really seem to require any assistance. Before we knew it, she had slain the entire group of golems all by herself, leaving the bridge littered with their rocky remnants.

"Her origins may be a mystery, but she's quite skilled, if nothing else. I'd say she's easily among the top five swordfighters in the Guard Corps," Fam remarked.

"Definitely an unexpected find for us," I agreed.

Alma sheathed her sword, then turned around and headed back over to us.

"So, how'd I do?" Letting out a proud sniff, she stared expectantly at me for words of praise, like a dog bringing back a thrown ball. I could practically hear her inner voice asking me to confirm how awesome she was—so I decided to play along and feed her ego a bit.

"Way better than I expected," I admitted. "That was quite the performance."

"Whoo! They like me! They really like me!" Alma shouted, clenching her fists in front of her chest in sheer joy. Every single one of us imagined a tail wagging happily behind her.

She placed a hand to her chest, beaming a confident smile. "It doesn't matter what kind of monsters show up, you won't have to worry with me here—I'll handle them! I promise I'll protect the peace for everyone in the Capital!"

"Man, she really just goes with the flow, doesn't she," Spinoza said with an awkward half-smile.

"We've still got some time before our shift is over. Make sure to stay on guard," I told Alma.

"Got it. There's only two hours left in the shift, though—I can't imagine there'd be that many monster attacks in one day. That's probably all we'll see today, right?"

"Wouldn't *that* be nice," I responded.

Seira, Spinoza, and Fam could only cast lukewarm gazes at Alma as she stood there with giant question marks floating above her head.

By the time our shift had ended, we had been attacked by monsters three times—an average of about once per hour.

"Ugh... H-How many of these do you get?!"

Alma was nearly out of breath after repelling the last of the monster attacks. She leaned on her sword like it was a walking stick, panting heavily. She may have been a fantastic fighter, but she still wasn't immune to exhaustion after facing so many consecutive battles in one day, apparently.

"I'd say this is about average," I responded.

"Today was a little on the light side, if anything," Spinoza specified.

"Oh, no, no, no! You all have to be mistaken! Why so many?! Are you keeping some kind of monster bait in the Royal Capital or something?!"

"Oh, right..." I murmured. "You don't know about the Orb of Light, do you?"

"The Orb of Light?"

As Alma tilted her head inquisitively, Seira explained things to her in a gentle tone: "The Orb of Light, which keeps the Demon King sealed, is enshrined here in the Royal Capital, and the monsters are drawn to it. With so many monsters surrounding the city because of that, it's difficult for us to bring goods in."

Alma asked what must've been the first simple question to come to her mind: "Why is it here in this country in the first place? Why not just pass it over to some other, bigger nation?"

Hearing this, Seira responded, "Supposedly it's because the Great Hero who defeated the Demon King was born here in Astaroth. The Hero and the woman he married conceived a child who had the power to keep the Demon King sealed—what would become known as an Oracle of Light. The Orb of Light has been kept safe here in the Royal Capital ever since."

"Huh. So I guess the people of your country just ended up pulling the short straw?"

"Though thanks to that, there's been a greater demand for guards here," I added. "You could even say that the Orb of Light attracting so many monsters is the reason they let even people of questionable origin become guards."

With the Orb being held there, Astaroth was a dangerous place, so they were even willing to take in people who had been shunned from other communities. That was how I had managed to start working there as a guard after the Crimson Fangs had kicked me out.

"Our country doesn't turn anyone away, y'know. An' we got lots o' folks with shady pasts. Though it's easier to get through

life hangin' out on the shadier side, if ya ask me!"

"Hm? What's going on over there?" Alma murmured—we turned to look in the direction she was staring, and sure enough, there was some kind of commotion happening on the main thoroughfare.

Two adult men were having a fight, furiously beating on each other in broad daylight. A crowd of curious onlookers had gathered around them, and they were cheering, whistling, and pumping their fists in excitement.

"What's all the fuss about?" Alma asked one of the onlookers.

"Apparently these two guys were drinking at the pub and got into an argument. One of 'em punched the other one, the other guy punched back, and now it's an all-out war!"

I fell silent. Hanging out in pubs in the middle of a weekday was an issue in and of itself, but two grown men snarling at each other and punching each other in the face was a serious problem as well.

"C'mon, who's gonna win? Everyone, place your bets!"

"Three copper coins on the tall guy!"

"I bet five copper on the short one!"

And that was another problem: the fact that the crowd of onlookers had decided to start gambling on the outcome.

"Two silver on the short guy!" Spinoza shouted. "I can tell just by lookin' at him he's got a solid pair!"

Which brought me to the biggest problem of all: Spinoza, a guard whose job normally meant intervening and putting an end to the fight, was enthusiastically participating in said gambling.

"Hey, cut that out. You're supposed to be stopping the fight," I said, grabbing the back of Spinoza's collar. "Besides, you don't even *have* two silver, do you?"

"Heh. Don't matter, long as I win the bet. And on the off chance I lose, no big deal, I'll just owe 'em."

"That's exactly how people end up spiraling into massive debt. Anyway, the fight's over—I'm putting a stop to this before someone gets hurt or something gets damaged."

I grabbed the two brawling men by the scruffs of their necks and pulled them apart. They were both already long since beyond reason; they flailed wildly and shouted obscenities at each other the entire time—the kind of words that made one wince to listen to.

The crowd of onlookers, deprived of their gambling

opportunity, started hurling boos at me. I noticed Spinoza had casually slipped in among them as well.

Alma, who had been watching the scene from afar, seemed impressed. “The people of this city are so energetic!”

“You really don’t get put off easily, do you?” I couldn’t help but mutter. “People who come here for the first time are usually shocked by how uncultured the citizens are.”

“Hm, is that so…?” Alma put a hand on her chin, then nodded. “But it’s not like having a lot of spirit is a bad thing, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, I can’t deny that. Their simplicity in itself makes them refreshing to be around, even. And since everybody has their own set of nasty circumstances, they don’t tend to look at others with too much bias.”

“If they sense money, people will come running to you; if you’re beautiful, the men will hit on you. Nobody cares at all about what your background might be,” Fam said.

“So everyone in this city is equal, then.” Alma nodded over and over in apparent admiration.

That’s certainly a way to interpret it.

Well, what she’s saying isn’t wrong either. Everyone in the city is true to their desires.

“Do you think I should learn a few things from the townspeople too…?”

“Don’t. You’ll ruin your life.”

I moved on to a new subject. “Enough about that. The next job will be our most important task for the day. It’s going to take everyone working together for us to succeed. Brace yourself and let’s get moving.”

“Hmph, leave it to me. You saw how well I fought earlier, didn’t you? There’s no task in the world I can’t complete!”

“Glad to hear that. I have high hopes.”

Seeing Alma’s smile brimming with confidence was rather heartwarming to me. I just hoped she’d be able to maintain that same composure throughout our next mission…

“So we’re exterminating monsters that showed up in the sewers?” Alma asked, confirming what I had told her. The six of us were in a remote underground corridor.

“Yeah. Some monster rats have been sighted in the sewer systems,” I explained. “If we leave them here to breed, that could end up having negative consequences for those living in the

capital."

"That makes sense. It sounds like something we really should deal with."

The rest of the Fifth, at a loss for words, could only stare disdainfully at Alma's enthusiasm.

"Hm? What's wrong with all of you? You don't look so great," she said.

"You gotta be kiddin' me... You never told us we were goin' into the sewers!" Spinoza griped, her face pale.

"If I had let you know ahead of time, I figured you would've probably skipped out, so I decided to keep the details under wraps until just before it was time to start," I said.

"Sieg, you sneaky rat bastard! No fair!"

"Why are you so angry? Are the sewers that dangerous?" Alma asked.

"Oh, no, it's not particularly dangerous in the traditional sense of the word," Fam replied. "There's a different reason Spinoza is so reluctant."

"Which is?"

"It smells," Fam said, removing an iron covering that had been set in the paved path. A thick odor wafted up from the opening. Seira and Spinoza made disgusted noises and held their noses, their faces scrunching up in revulsion.

Fam continued, "The sewer system underneath the capital is filthy, and it smells absolutely awful. It takes more than just a little shower to get the stench off."

"Ugh, my nose is gonna melt off," Spinoza grumbled.

"No matter how many times I do this, I just can't get used to the smell." Seira sighed.

"I used to work in all kinds of harsh environments as a spy, so I can still manage down there. It's probably way beyond what normal people can handle, though," Fam stated.

"Hm, I see." With a nod, Alma stood in front of the opening leading to the sewer. "There's definitely a smell, but it doesn't really seem that awful to me."

"Huh?" A chorus of confusion erupted from the rest of us, and we all stared at her.

"You tryin' to pull our legs or somethin'?" Spinoza asked incredulously.

"Even from up here, the odor is pretty foul, I'd say," Seira opined.

“Nah. I really don’t think it’s gonna be a problem for me.”

With that response, Alma placed her hand on the ladder leading to the sewer and began descending into the depths without any hesitation whatsoever.

“C’mon, hurry up, everybody! I’m not sure how to do this on my own.” Her voice echoed up from the bottom of the dark opening without a care in the world.

We couldn’t help but exchange glances with each other.

“The hell’s her deal? She lose her sense of smell or somethin’?” Spinoza sputtered.

“That seems unlikely, considering how much she enjoyed eating her breakfast,” I said. “If she didn’t have a sense of smell, she wouldn’t have been able to taste her food.”

“I knew she was the tough type, but now I’m thinking she might have been raised by wolves,” Fam mused.

“Yeah, no way in hell she coulda passed for a high-ranking noble,” Spinoza muttered.

I put my hand on the ladder to follow Alma.

“You’re seriously goin’ down there, Sieg?”

“As an adventurer, I’ve got experience with harsh environments too—enough to where I won’t put up a fuss over the smell of sewage.”

That, and I wasn’t going to leave Alma down there by herself.

“Well, Sieg is going. As his shadow, I’m obligated to follow.” Fam began descending after me.

“Seira! You’re stayin’ here with me, right? Right?!” Spinoza said, looking over to her last hope.

Seira beamed a smile at her in return. Spinoza must’ve taken that as agreement, because her face brightened with excitement. However...

“With Alma working so hard, I need to try to match her level of effort! Besides, the townspeople are in need,” Seira said, then added, “Let’s do our best to get this done, then we can all head to the bathhouse together!”

Pinching her nose in preparation, she descended the ladder to the sewer.

“Agh, dammit! You’re all a buncha dumbasses! Gimme a break! Like hell am I goin’ down there!”

Spinoza had been left all alone up there...

“Come on, Spinoza, hurry up!”

“You’re going to make us late finishing the mission.”

“Spinoza, please!”

“Ugh, fine, *fine*! Whatever, I’ll go!”

With us calling out to her, she finally came down into the sewer, either out of embarrassment or desperation.

* * *

We ended up charging into the sewer with Alma at the head of the pack and managed to exterminate the monster rats that had been multiplying in the area, successfully completing our mission. By the time we got back to the surface, the sun was already setting.

With our work for the day complete, once I had given my report to Commander Bolton, we headed to the public bathhouse to wash off the funk that clung to every inch of our bodies.

Once we had managed to cleanse ourselves, the Fifth Squadron made our way over to the pub.

“Whew! The day’s work is finally over... A guard’s job is a lot tougher than I thought it’d be...”

Inside the bustling establishment, Alma was resting her head in her hands, looking utterly exhausted after working nonstop the entire day.

“You did a fantastic job, though, Alma! You were taking down monsters left and right—you were working way more efficiently than any of the rest of us!” Seira said.

Having been basically unaffected by the stench, she had indeed worked quite efficiently in the sewers, cutting through the monster rats one after another. The sight had been rather terrifying to behold.

Alma chuckled smugly. “I have to say I’m proud of my performance today!” She put one hand to her chest, an unrestrained smile plastered all over her face. “What did you think? Does the Guard Corps need me? They do, right?”

“Yeah. It’s reassuring to have you on the team, Alma,” I confirmed.

“Oooh...! It feels so amazing to be wanted...!” She seemed to be savoring every moment of joy. “Not to mention, that post-mission trip to the bathhouse together was so refreshing—it really made me feel alive again!”

It really *was* nice to rid ourselves of all the sewer grime at the

bathhouse. I had used a separate bathing area from the rest of my comrades, naturally.

"Though I wonder if I managed to get all the smell off?" Alma pondered. "I've got a pretty good sense of smell, but it's harder to tell when it's on *me*."

"Don't worry. There's just a pretty soap scent coming from you now," Seira assured her.

"Damn right," Spinoza added. "I scrubbed down every last inch of your body in there, didn't I? Doubt you could get any cleaner."

"You just wanted to get your hands all over me, didn't you! You had them on my breasts pretty much the whole time! Everybody heard me squeaking and kept staring at me—it was really embarrassing!"

"Hey, I was gettin' such a good reaction outta ya, couldn't help it that I was havin' a blast!" Spinoza responded with a guffaw. "Been a while since I ran into a nice squishable pair like yours!" She wiggled her fingers lasciviously, with a look on her face to match.

Seeing that, Alma wrapped her arms around her shoulders warily. "Remembering that sensation just completely ruined my nice shower-fresh feeling..."

"Y'know, you do realize I'm *complimenting* your boobs, right?"

"R-Really?"

"Yeah, having big ol' titties like that is seriously impressive!"

"Hmph. Well, if I ignore *what* you're complimenting me about, being complimented in general certainly doesn't feel bad."

"That's why you should let me squeeze 'em every once in a while! I don't say that to just anyone, y'know—only to people I deem worthy!"

"Well...if it's *only* every once in a while..."

"Woo-hoo! A huge toast to Alma's huge boobs, then! Hey, waitress, some ales over here! An' a massive pile of grub to go with it!"

"Alma, you shouldn't take what Spinoza says seriously," Fam advised. "It will *not* lead to good things for you."

"You take things at face value so much, I'm worried you might get mixed up in something shady." *As her Squad Sergeant, I'm going to need to keep a close eye on her.*

After a while, our drinks and food had all arrived at the table. There was wine and ale, along with pie, stew, grilled fish, and all

kinds of other dishes.

"I think our good ol' Sergeant should give a toast!" Spinoza suggested.

"Me?"

"I think so too... A speech from you would probably have more zest," Fam agreed.

"You can do it, Sarge! ♪" Seira chimed in melodically.

"Sheesh... All right, fine." Urged on by the others, I reluctantly began a toast.

"It was quite a day out there for us today. We got to welcome Alma here onto our team—so let's give it our all in protecting the Royal Capital together moving forward. Also, we—"

Suddenly, in the middle of my speech, an intense rumbling sound roared out from someone's stomach, drowning out my voice. Everybody instantly froze.

I turned my gaze to the source of the sound and saw Alma standing there, head hung, her face bright red. Apparently *she* was the owner of the noisy stomach.

I let a smile slip onto my face. "I've gone on too long, though. Let's go ahead and get started."

Alma let out a wail of embarrassment, and the others couldn't help but grin upon seeing her in such a state.

We toasted, then started to dig into the food—and in a matter of moments, Alma was making noises like a wild animal.

"Man, she is just *havin' at* that stuff, huh?" Spinoza said in amazement. "She's like a starving dog that finally got her treats."

"We were running around all day long, so she must've been really hungry. Meals always taste better after a hard day's work!" Seira declared.

Before long, though, we heard Alma begin to make a pained grunting noise—she had apparently gotten carried away eating, and the food had gotten stuck in her throat. She started pounding her chest like some sort of gorilla.

"Alma, nobody is going to take it from you. You don't have to eat so fast! Here, drink some water," Seira said, and she handed the poor woman a mug. Alma took it and chugged, gulping the liquid down noisily. Slamming the mug down onto the table with a *thunk*, she wiped the excess water off of her mouth with the back of her hand and let out a big sigh of relief.

"She's one hell of a hearty eater," Spinoza couldn't help but blurt out as she watched on.

“In a way, she kind of fits right into this city,” Fam noted.

As we were enjoying our food and drinks, a few of the men in the pub, normal townsfolk, noticed us and came over to our table to talk.

“Hey, if it ain’t the Fifth Squadron!”

“We heard you got rid of those nasty sewer rats for us. Thanks a ton! Those damn things kept sneaking out onto the surface in the middle of the night and tearing up our crops. Pain in the ass for everyone in town.”

“The one who did most of the work was Alma over there,” I said, causing the townspeople to look her way.

Looking up from stuffing her face with a meat pie, Alma let out a slight “Hm?” Her cheeks were full of food; it was a great hamster impression.

“Oh, so you’re the newbie we heard about!” the townspeople said in realization.

“You know about me?”

“Everyone’s been talking about how the troublemakers in the Fifth Squadron got themselves a *brand-new* troublemaker. They say you’ve got no memories at all from before you got here, huh?”

The people of our city had a habit of barging right into what could be considered sensitive topics for the other parties. That could be both a good thing and a bad thing; luckily, Alma seemed unfazed by their brashness.

“Yup, that’s right.”

“So you don’t remember anything at all?”

“What about you being a former princess?” Spinoza asked with a half-smirk.

Alma tossed her a miffed glare. “You’re making fun of me, aren’t you…?”

The townspeople erupted into laughter. “You all crack me up! Hey, waitress, could we get another ale for the princess over here?”

“For me? Really?” Alma asked, seeming baffled.

“Just consider it a little ‘congratulations’ from us on your new job,” one of the men said.

As Alma drank her ale and partook of her meal, a bunch of people started to gather around her, mesmerized by the way she was gorging herself. When they learned she had amnesia and had joined the Guard Corps, one by one the guests started

ordering more food for her. It was almost like they were feeding a wild animal.

Once Alma had scarfed down the veritable cornucopia that had been brought out, she sat back and rubbed her belly in satisfaction, then gave a conflicted smile.

"The people of this city really confuse me... You're so kind, even to someone like me. I know I shouldn't be the one saying this, but if I heard about some woman who came from outside the city and had amnesia, I'd think they're pretty suspicious, you know? Wouldn't people normally be wary about stuff like that?"

"There are a good number of us city folk who came from outside the city ourselves. A lot of us were forced to leave our old towns and ended up just sort of drifting our way here," one of the men explained.

"In a way it's almost like we *all* lost our memories," another added.

"The same goes for the Guard Corps. Pretty much every last one of 'em washed up here from somewhere or other. I could probably count the ones who came from this city on one hand."

Upon hearing what the townspeople had to say, Alma looked over to me. "Did you all 'wash up here' too, Sieg?"

"Yeah. I used to be in a party called the Crimson Fangs, but I got kicked out. The guild receptionist introduced me to the guard job here." After I had been ousted from my party, I couldn't stay in our home city any longer and ended up drifting over to the Royal Capital.

"I was planted into the Guard Corps as a spy for the demons. Before that, I had been sneaking around between all kinds of other cities," Fam admitted, bringing her origins right out in the open. "In case you're wondering, though, I've completely stopped my spy activities. I decided to cast my lot with the Fifth Squadron permanently."

"You wanna know how I ended up here?" Spinoza asked smugly, attempting to elicit everyone's interest.

Alma, however, held up her open hand, refusing her flatly. "No, that's all right. I can imagine how that probably went down."

"Oh *come on*! Show some interest in me, dammit!"

"You probably either beat up a bunch of people or gambled your way into massive debt," I said.

"Whoa there, how'd ya know, Sieg? You got a thing for me or somethin'? Shoulda told me earlier! Look at my boy, he's all

grown up!”

“You’re just an easy person to figure out.” *She could use a bit more of a twist to her backstory.*

“R-Really?! Sieg, you and Spinoza are a *thing*?!”

“Huh?” The two of us blinked in confusion.

“I had no idea that romance had blossomed in the squadron… Looking back on it now, your attitude toward Spinoza has always been so straightforward, Sieg. Was that the shared bond of a couple in love…?!” Alma put her hand to her mouth and shrunk back a bit in embarrassment.

“I don’t know how you managed to come to that flawed conclusion…but no, we’re not in a relationship. The reason I’m so straightforward with her is because she’s not someone you need to pull your punches with.”

“So you’re not in love with Spinoza… Oh! That must mean you’re going out with Seira or Fam, right?!”

“What?! He is?!”

“That’s not how that works! And Seira, don’t react like that!” I grumbled.

Fam chuckled quietly. “I wouldn’t mind, personally.”

“Not you too, Fam…”

I couldn’t help but sigh at the rampant teasing. “I have no intention of getting romantically involved in my workplace. People can let their imaginations run wild with thoughts like that as much as they want, but in reality, I don’t have that kind of relationship with anyone.”

Having said my piece, I diverted the subject a bit. “I always took you for the straitlaced type, Alma, but you’re surprisingly interested in this stuff. You’re a lot more into the whole romance thing than I thought you’d be.”

“Hah, she’s totally a closet perv!” Spinoza said with a smirk.

“Stop treating me like *I’m* the pervert!” Alma shouted, then cleared her throat and moved on. “So I’ve got a pretty good idea of why most of you left your old cities…but I still can’t figure out why Seira’s a guard. She’s got manners, she’s kind—she clearly doesn’t fit in with the rest of the Guard Corps, from my perspective.”

“Now you’re straight up making fun of us,” I quipped.

“I don’t think she meant any harm. She probably just wasn’t thinking,” Fam said. “At all.”

“Ah, good point,” I responded.

“Hey, wait! Who’s making fun of who, now?!” Alma shouted.

“Speaking of, I don’t think I ever asked—where are you from, anyway, Seira?” Spinoza asked. “Pretty sure you’re not from around here, right?”

“Huh? W-Well, um…” She trailed off.

“The hell? Don’t tell me ya did somethin’ so bad ya can’t even tell *us*? Damn, girl, you’ve got a naughty side behind that pure and innocent face, huh—not bad!” Spinoza gave her a few nudges.

“C-Could you please not use your elbow to poke me in the breasts?”

“Don’t take advantage of her confusion, Spinoza. Especially not in the form of sexual harassment,” I insisted.

“You shouldn’t pry any further. No matter what may have happened in her past, Seira is a fellow Fifth Squadron comrade. We don’t need any more information than that, do we?” Fam said.

“Bah, fine. I’m not gonna force it, though. Whatever she used to have goin’ on, I know those two massive mounds she’s got attached to her are as real as real can be!”

“Spinoza, I really don’t like the way you’re moving your fingers like that!”

“C’mon, just let me have a little squeeze, huh?”

“Absolutely not!”

Faced with the threat of Spinoza’s tentacle-like fingers wriggling toward her, Seira wrapped her arms around herself protectively, shrinking back.

Watching from afar, the townspeople started laughing and cheering. Alma had an amused grin on her face as well.

Our rowdy little drinking party went on late into the night.

Chapter 4: The Hunter Demon

While Sieg and the others were having their drinking party, a certain unit within the Knight Corps was on the verge of being annihilated outside of the Royal Capital.

In the kingdom of Silvesta, near the village of Gabo, a group of knights galloped on horseback through the forest. They were on the road that connected the village with the Royal Capital of Astaroth.

Each knight wore an expression of urgency. Eleanor was there as well, riding in the center of their formation. Though their lineup had been full when they had first ventured into the forest, by this point, a number of positions were vacant: the missing members had fallen to the ground, no longer breathing.

Just then, another joined them: an arrow pierced deeply into the head of the man on Eleanor's right, penetrating through his helmet as if it were nothing. The struck knight fell from his horse and tumbled to the ground; the riderless horse let out a dismayed neigh and dashed away into the forest.

"What on earth is happening...?" The words escaped Eleanor's lips at the situation she found herself in.

She knew they were under attack, and clearly it was an archer's doing. However, no matter where in the forest they ran, they couldn't break free from the attacks. It was as if the eyes of the gods had been trained on them.

When they had gotten the report that Gabo Village was under attack, the knights had rushed to the scene. What they had found there was truly a gruesome spectacle: the corpses of countless villagers stretched out on the ground. Despite the fact that nearly every villager had been killed, though, the village itself remained untouched, as if nothing had happened—which was both peculiar and eerie.

Based on what the few surviving villagers had said, there was no doubt that they had been attacked. However, not a single person managed to get a glimpse of the attackers the entire time. According to them, arrows had simply rained down out of nowhere.

In the end, Eleanor's group had been unable to determine the

identity of the assailants and had decided to return to the capital. It had been during their journey back through the forest that the knights had come under enemy attack.

The Squad Sergeant accompanying her, Sir Narthos, gave his report: “Lady Eleanor! We’ve searched the entire area but haven’t found any sign of the enemy!”

Upon hearing that, Eleanor could feel despair gnawing at her heart. They had checked every location where they thought a sniper could have been targeting them from. Yet they had somehow come up empty-handed.

“Lady Eleanor…your orders?” Narthos asked. The other knights waited in silence for her response as well. Upon seeing that, Eleanor came to her senses.

That’s right… I’m the Commander of the Knight Corps now. Falling into despair is out of the question—as the leader of my fellow knights, I must provide them guidance.

“We have no hope of defeating an enemy we cannot see. Because we have no means to counterattack, we must retreat for now.”

For Eleanor, it was a painful decision to make. However, if they could manage to survive, they could return. But if they all perished here, no information would make it out. Therefore, her first priority had to be getting her knights out of the forest alive.

As the knights ran frantically about the forest, someone was watching them from afar.

Atop a cliff some distance away, in a spot where he could get a bird’s-eye view of the entire forest, a lone man sat with his legs crossed.



He had a youthful appearance; at a glance, he could even have been mistaken for a boy. However, apart from the bow slung over his back, he also had a pair of horns growing from his forehead—something no man possessed. Those horns, brimming with magical energy, were proof that he was not a human being but a member of the long-lived race of demons.

The demonic man—Flavi—stood on top of the hill with a smug look on his face, surveying the expansive forest below him. The knights riding their horses looked like tiny specks in the forest from his position over ten kilometers away.

It would've been quite difficult for human eyes to see anything at that distance—in fact, the band below hadn't noticed him atop the hill whatsoever. However, with eyes like his, keeping the knights in his sights was child's play.

"Hah! They're trying to retreat. Maybe they figured they had no hope of winning?"

If they made it out of the forest, that would put them outside of his firing range.

Flavi smirked. "So I guess it's a game of what happens first—them getting out of the forest, or me killing them all. Looks like it's time for the hunt! ☆"

Drawing upon the magic within his body, Flavi wrapped some of that energy around the arrow nocked in his bow, then fired it off toward the knights as they galloped through the forest.

The magic-imbued projectile sailed through the air in a massive arc. This increased its potential energy several times over, so when the arrow struck one of the completely unsuspecting knights positioned on the right flank, he was sent flying off his horse and tumbled wildly across the ground.

The horse let out a shocked neigh, and it galloped off from the scene. The knight who had taken the arrow hit lay prone on the ground, motionless; the breastplate of the silver armor he had been wearing was shattered to pieces.

"Bull's-eye!" Flavi chirped. Relishing in the sense of accomplishment that came with taking down his prey, he soon fired off another arrow, which struck and dismounted another knight.

"Yeah! Nailed him!" Flavi pumped his fist after successfully hitting two targets in a row. "Hah! They're freaking out now. I guess I would too. They probably feel like they're getting struck down by bolts from the blue!"

As he watched the knights break formation and scatter into chaos, a grin spread across the demon's face. "I bet they're looking around desperately right now, trying to find where the attacks are coming from. Too bad for them, though—I'm not even in the forest! ☆"

Flavi was over ten kilometers away from the knights. Not only would they never even consider the possibility they'd be attacked from so far away, there was nothing they could do about it even if they somehow did figure it out. Even the most skilled archers and mages out there couldn't reach that far. There was also the fact that he was just way better than they were—but that didn't matter, because nobody else out there besides him had a firing range of over ten kilometers.

As a demon who specialized in ranged attacks, Flavi took great pride in being the absolute best at fighting over long distances. Though his physical abilities were only on par with those of humans, the power and extreme range afforded by his magically imbued arrows were second to none.

In the world of demons, might ruled over all. Flavi, whose basic abilities were inferior to most others', had to think of a way to stay on top. He had eventually come to the conclusion that all he needed to do to secure victory in battle was "not lose."

Not losing meant not dying. So what did he need to do to keep from dying? The thought came to him that if the enemy could never attack him, there was no way he could ever die. So he would set up situations where there was no way to fight back, then do all the attacking himself. That was the surefire strategy for victory Flavi had come up with.

"Oh man, hunting is so much fun!"

One after the other, the arrows he fired off at the knights found their marks; his interference brought each distant, animated speck to a dead stop.

The demon race was not a monolith. Unlike other demons, Flavi had no interest in the resurrection of the Demon King; he was only interested in the joy of the hunt. Nothing pleased him more than watching humans flee in panic, not knowing what to do, only to find themselves cornered and eventually having their lives snuffed out.

That was the reason he had wiped out Gabo Village too. Once the knights from the Royal Capital heard what had happened there, they had come to hunt him down.

Unfortunately for them, the hunters had become the hunted.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going? You’re next on the list. ☆”

The numbers in the retreating knights’ formation had dwindled, leaving only a small force. In an effort to further shave that number down, Flavi fired off another shot. The arrow arced through the air, and just as it was about to pierce through one of the knights—a different knight stepped into the line of fire.

She was a beautiful female knight with shiny hair that reached down to her waist—and with a flash of her sword, she knocked the arrow from its course.

“Huh. That knight isn’t half bad.”

She had noticed the arrow at the last moment and managed to slip her body into its path. If she had tried to use her shield to deflect it, the arrow would’ve gone straight through it and most likely given her a mortal wound. By parrying it with her sword, she was able to disperse its energy. It was honestly impressive—though she still hadn’t managed to suss out his location.

“Nice to see there’s at least *some* worthy prey in the bunch. Taking down the lively ones like you is where the real pleasure of the hunt lies, after all.”

Each time Flavi loosed an arrow, the female knight vigorously warded it off. She was focused solely on defending her allies—trying to buy enough time for them to escape, no doubt.

“How long do you think you can last, though? You must be exhausted by now.”

She had most likely accumulated quite a bit of damage—her movements had begun to slow.

There wasn’t much time left before they were out of his range, either, so he fired off a burst of arrows in rapid succession.

“And—this should do it!” Flavi shouted as he loosed one last arrow with all his strength. That final shot from high above flew toward Eleanor with a velocity and force several times greater than any of the arrows she had deflected up to that point. With her energy already worn down, she wouldn’t be able to react in time.

“Hah! Gotcha!” In mere moments, he expected to see the tip of his magic-imbued arrow penetrate her armor and pierce straight through her heart.

However—another knight who had been riding next to the woman dashed forward and took the blow for her. Struck by the

arrow, he tumbled from his horse and rolled along the ground before coming to a stop. He continued moving weakly for a while, but he eventually expired completely.

By the time Flavi had nocked his next arrow, the knights were already outside of his range. He hadn't been able to finish them all off in the end—along with the female knight, he had allowed a handful of the others to escape.

"Aw, man. They got away. Even *I* can't reliably aim farther than that." Grinning widely, Flavi relaxed his battle stance. "I can't believe I let my quarry get away. If that lady knight hadn't been there, I could've picked off every last one, easy."

As the knights were retreating, just before the female knight had disappeared, she had looked in his direction. In that brief moment, Flavi was pretty sure her eyes had met his. That cold stare had given him the shivers.

"It felt like her spirit hadn't quite been broken yet... Well, once I've had my quarry in my sights, there's no escape for it. I promise you, I *will* hunt you down."

As he thought about his upcoming rematch, Flavi felt his soul burn with excitement.

At first Alma had been overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work guards had to do, but she seemed to have a natural supply of stamina, and before too long she seemed to have gotten the hang of things. She was already getting quite used to life in the Royal Capital—when something happened.

News reached the Guard Corps that a group of knights commanded by Eleanor had been caught in a demon attack and taken heavy losses.

When Commander Bolton had told us this, the entire Fifth Squadron had decided to pay a visit to the infirmary where she was recovering. Once we stepped inside, we found her at the end of a row of beds occupied by other wounded knights.

"Sieg... So you came to check on me."

"Yeah. We heard you were attacked by demons."

"Thank you. I'm so happy—or would be, at least. But happiness is a distant dream for me right now. Because of me, many of my comrades lost their lives..." Eleanor cast her head downward in regret. "As Commander of the Knight Corps, I failed in my duty to protect them." Her bandage hands were clenched so tightly into fists that they had begun to swell.

“Not everyone died, though. You made it back to the capital. That’s not only impressive, but important as well,” I assured her.

“The only reason I made it…was because one of my men protected me at the cost of his own life. Without his aid, I would not be alive right now.”

“Really…? Sounds like he performed quite a valorous deed.”

“Indeed. You knew him well too—it was Narthos.”

We were taken aback. Knight Corps Squad Sergeant Narthos, the man with whom we’d cleared out the goblin den. We hadn’t seen eye to eye at first, but through battle together we had forged an understanding, in my opinion. To think that he of all people had been killed during their mission…

I remembered talking with him on our way back to the capital after we had finished dealing with the goblins. He had told me how he had admired Eleanor for a long time and how envious he was of her strength and knightly nobility. For those reasons, he had said that he wanted to find a way to be of assistance to her in her role as Commander of the Knight Corps.

He had certainly managed to fulfill his duty in that regard—at the cost of his own life.

“It was my responsibility to protect the others—yet I had not the strength. Instead, I had to rely on one of them to protect *me*. And now, he…” Her groan-like murmurs trailed off; she gazed down at her blanket, her long eyelashes trembling. Seeming on the verge of tears, she went on: “Had I been strong enough, Narthos and the others would have escaped death.”

I could tell she held feelings of guilt and regret at her inability to protect her comrades and keep them alive—and she was on the verge of being crushed under their weight.

“Before we came here to see you, I was talking to another knight. He told me that you had protected him during the battle.”

“What?”

“You may not have been able to protect all your comrades. But thanks to your presence, lives were definitely saved.” I then posed a question to Eleanor. “Do you think the people who died would want you to live in regret forever?”

“I…”

“Narthos told me he had always admired you. He said he wanted to do whatever he could for you as the new Knight Commander. He put his life on the line to keep you alive. If you

stay there hanging your head, he will have done that for nothing," I told her. "He fulfilled his duty bravely. That's why you, as his commanding officer, need to fulfill your own. Those at the top shouldn't put their weakness on display. If you're going to let your feelings of regret and guilt crush you, save it until after you've carried out every last one of your duties and are already resting peacefully in your grave."

"Sieg…you've told me exactly what I needed to hear right now," Eleanor said, a faint smile appearing on her face. "My apologies. You are absolutely correct. I cannot afford to wallow in sadness forever." She brought her head up and looked forward. "I must honor their wishes, as well."

I knew the brave smile she forced was merely an act, but at least she had regained enough energy to even put on that act. She really was a strong woman.

"So tell me—what was the enemy like?" I asked.

"I…don't know."

"You don't know…?"

"That's right. The arrows came flying out of nowhere, and we were struck down one after the other. Before we realized what was happening, our formation had collapsed. We were never even able to ascertain the enemy's whereabouts… It hardly could have been called a battle at all."

They had been completely overwhelmed—it sounded more like a hunt than a battle. Considering Eleanor's ability, I had thought it was odd that she hadn't been able to lift a finger, but apparently there had been literally nothing for her to lift any fingers at. No matter how skilled she was, there was no way to win if there was no battle to be had.

"What kind of trick could the enemy have used to stay completely undetected, though? Do they have the ability to turn invisible or something?"

In response to my question, Eleanor's voice grew quieter, laced with a bit of uncertainty. "I might have caught sight of them for a brief moment as we were retreating. If my eyes did not deceive me, they were standing on top of a hill more than ten kilometers distant. In all likelihood, it was a demon."

"So it was sniping the knights from that distance, you think?"

"…Most likely."

"Whoa, hold up. Ten kilometers? And you say it was takin' accurate shots at you from that far away…? You sure you weren't

seein' things wrong?" Spinoza asked.

"Even an exceptionally skilled archer like Fam can only reach about a third of that distance. Hitting a target over ten kilometers away doesn't sound very realistic, honestly," Seira agreed.

"You're wrong—it's not impossible," Fam, who had been standing by idly, cut in. "I know of a demon who specializes in ranged attacks. He could easily hit a target that's ten kilometers away or even a bit farther."

"If an enemy that could attack from that far away hid somewhere and started shooting at us, we really wouldn't be able to lift a finger, would we...?" Seira murmured.

It was true that if their attacking range was that wide, it would be difficult to spot the enemy—and even if we did manage to catch sight of them, our own attacks wouldn't reach them. It was pretty much the nastiest possible situation.

Seira furrowed her brow. "It would be awful if someone like that decided to attack the Royal Capital. They might even try to snipe the Oracle of Light right there in her castle from outside the borders of the country."

"Even if they happened to attack the capital, we have the barrier in the sky that the mages erected. It won't be that easy to break through," I assured her—and even if the barrier did break, we had Haruna and plenty of other mages who could shoot down any arrows that came flying in.

"Yeah. Also, the demon I know has no interest in resurrecting the Demon King. He probably wouldn't bother going out of his way to attack the Royal Capital, I think."

"No interest in resurrectin' the Demon King...? Do demons like that even exist?" Spinoza asked.

"Demons aren't a monolith, you know. They each have their own ways of thinking. As proof of that, take the elite members of the Demon King's army: they all want to resurrect their king, but they haven't joined forces to accomplish that goal. So yes, demons exist that don't care about their king at all too," Fam replied. "All that particular demon cares about is the joy of the hunt, I believe."

"Sounds like a nasty bastard either way," Spinoza spat.

"Even if said demon has no intention of attacking the capital, if they plan on continuing to hunt us, we've got to take it down," I said firmly.

“Correct. If we leave them be, our casualties will only mount.” Upon saying this, Eleanor looked to me. “You plan on going out to put the demon down, correct? If so, might I accompany you as well?”

“You want revenge for your comrades, I take it?”

“I do,” Eleanor replied, placing a hand against her chest. “I know in my mind that it would be wrong for the head of the Knight Corps to let their emotions drive their actions—and that my own life must come first. However—”

“Fine. You can come with us, then.”

“Huh?”

“Why do you look so surprised? You asked me, didn’t you?”

“I, um, expected that you would say you were against the idea… That I was still injured, and that considering my position as Commander, I shouldn’t go.”

“You knew all that already, and you still asked to go with us. Even if I stopped you from coming with us, you might try to head out and find the enemy by yourself—in which case it’d be better if we just travel together.”

I had one more thing to add. “Also…if I’m with you, I can protect you.”

Eleanor sat there dumbfounded.

“What’s wrong? Why are you spacing out like that?” I asked.

“O-Oh, nothing. I was just taken by surprise.” She averted her eyes, her cheeks having turned red.

“You have your hand on your chest—are your injuries bothering you?”

“This damage is purely psychological—and it was dealt by you.”

“By me?”

“Sieg…you truly are a wicked man,” Fam chimed in.

“Huh?”

“Let us depart. With you by my side, Sieg, I have nothing at all to fear. I *will* avenge my fallen comrades.”

And thus, with Eleanor alongside us, we set out to exterminate the demon.

When Flavi saw figures walking the distant road through the forest that stretched out beneath him, he felt his lips twist into a smile of pure delight.

It’s her! The lady from before is back!

The woman knight who had gotten away during his previous hunt had come back to try and take him down again, and this time she had brought some of her other friends with her.

"I like it. I don't mind playing your little game."

Feeling excitement well up within him, Flavi looked down at his new prey. *One guy and four more ladies, huh. The ladies are all real lookers too. It must really be my lucky day!*

Of all the options out there to hunt, Flavi preferred to hunt women—not the frail, noncombatant types, but the fighters, especially those who were confident in their skills. Seeing strong women slowly lose their wits as they became absolutely overwhelmed was his greatest pleasure.

In those terms, his current set of prey was everything he could've ever asked for—perfection. There may have been a man in the mix, but every last one of the others were women, and they all seemed pretty competent to boot. Simply imagining the despair he would bring to their faces gave him chills of excitement.

"I'll take down the guy starting off, then it'll be just the girls to play with. Out of that group, I'll definitely save the knight lady for last." First, he'd drill it into her head how powerless she really was by picking off her comrades one by one, with her completely unable to protect them—then he'd finish her off last. He could already picture her expression of despair upon seeing her comrades' corpses littered around her and sensing her own impending doom, and it sent his heart aflutter.

As he peered down upon his prey in the expansive forest below, Flavi licked his lips. The sky above him was an unbelievably crisp, clear blue.

"Today's gonna be a great day! ☆"

* * *

The knights had been attacked by the demon on the road through the forest between Astaroth and Gabo Village. Eleanor, the Fifth Squadron, and I made our way to that forest via carriage, then entered it from there on foot. Unlike Eleanor, who had been trained as a knight, we guards had no riding skills—at best, Fam knew the basics.

"Are we already within the enemy's range of fire?" I asked.

"Most likely. We should assume this entire forest is his

hunting grounds," Fam replied.

"Not knowing when we'll start getting attacked or where the attacks will be coming from is going to make this a real pain. Not only that, we'll have to figure out where the enemy is hiding at the same time," I mused.

"Even once we find them, there's a high likelihood they'll be in a place where our attacks won't reach too," Fam said.

"Ugh, fights like this are a pain in the ass. If they'd just come out and have a good ol' face-to-face fistfight, this'd be over in a second," Spinoza muttered.

"Your honor may be at stake in a street fight, but in battle, your entire life is at stake. Not giving away your position makes perfect sense as a battle strategy to secure victory," I explained. "Even so, we've got to find where they're hiding and put them down."

"Indeed. The only issue is, how exactly to go about locating them...?" Eleanor wondered out loud.

"I have an idea." Alma, who was listening to our conversation, had her hand raised. "I thought of something that could not only tell us where the enemy is hiding, but deal damage to them too. It's actually kind of a revolutionary idea, if I do say so myself."

"That's an awfully high bar you've set for yourself..." I smiled wryly. "So what is it?"

"We knock the enemy's arrows right back at 'em! If we bat it back at the exact same trajectory it flew in on, it should land right on 'em! —How's that?"

Silence filled the air.

Alma was sticking her chest out proudly, but the rest of us were at a loss for words. We looked at each other, unsure which of us would be the first to say something to her.

Eventually, Spinoza went up to the proudly grinning Alma, put a hand on her shoulder, and returned her smile, giving her an almost pitying gaze.

"Alma. You know I love ya."

"Hey, why are you looking at me like you feel sorry for me? You're making fun of me, aren't you?!"

"Well, they say there's a fine line between genius and stupid, right?"

"Oh! So you're saying I'm a genius?!"

"I sure ain't."

"So you're calling me stupid after all!"

“Putting forth an idea in the first place was quite impressive, though!” Seira added in encouragement. “We appreciate your valuable input!”

Alma started grinding her teeth in frustration. “That’s it, I’ve made up my mind. I’m gonna make myself really useful this time around, and that’ll make all of you look at me in a completely different light!”

“I like your enthusiasm, but losing your cool on the battlefield can cost you your life. Just make sure not to rush in too fast simply because you want to make yourself useful,” I cautioned.

“Of course,” Alma responded with a nod.

“Like putting a leash on a dog,” Fam quipped.

That’s certainly an apt comparison.

At that moment, Alma’s expression suddenly changed. “Hm…? Did you just hear a noise?”

“A noise? Did anyone else hear anything?” I asked those around me, and Seira, Spinoza, and Eleanor all responded in kind.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Me neither.”

“I heard nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Nothing here either—” Fam started to agree, but soon corrected herself. “No, wait. There’s something coming toward us—from above!” She tilted her head up toward the clear sky above her, danger apparent in her eyes.

From an open space between the cover of the tree leaves, a volley of arrows came hurtling toward us, threatening to turn us into pincushions. The rain of projectiles was aimed at Seira—so I quickly stepped into the line of fire and took all the hits for her.

I gritted my teeth and let out a short breath. The impacts were way heavier than what I would’ve expected from arrows. The stories about the knights’ armor being shattered to pieces after they took hits suddenly made a lot more sense—the arrows certainly had enough force behind them to make that happen.

“Are you all right, Sarge?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Still, they weren’t enough to deal any appreciable damage through my ironclad defense power. My training was intense enough that hits like that weren’t going to get a peep out of me.

“Hm? There’s the sound again!” Alma shouted.

My hearing wasn’t good enough to pick anything up—but

sure enough, a few seconds later, another volley of arrows came raining down from above. Once again, I stepped into their path and stopped every one of them with my body.

That's got to be it...

"The noise Alma is hearing must be the sound of the enemy firing off arrows, right?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe that theory is most likely correct, Sieg," Eleanor responded.

"You know...I've got pretty decent hearing as well, but hers surpasses mine by a long shot. That's one more mark for the 'raised by wolves' theory," Fam stated.

"Oooh, I'm not quite sure, but it sounds like you're impressed with me, right?! Pretty awesome, aren't I? I may not look it, but I really can do all kinds of things when I put my mind to it!" Alma thrust her torso forward with pride.

Seira looked at Alma with a smile of amusement, then turned to me. "Though now, we can actually pinpoint the timing of our opponent's attacks."

"Yup."

That's pretty huge—that means we can be ready for them.

"Yeah, but in the end we still don't know where the hell they are, right? If we can't strike back, they'll just keep whittlin' away at us, won't they?" Spinoza muttered.

"Heh. Well, well there, Spinoza, sounds like you're jealous of my contributions, huh? You're just trying to rain on my parade out of frustration, aren't ya?" Alma teased.

"Ugh, you are stupidly annoyin'!"

As Alma approached her with a smug grin on her face, Spinoza tried to swat her away like she was some kind of fly, but Alma kept edging closer, undeterred.

As I watched the two of them, an idea suddenly sprang to my mind.

"Actually, with Alma here, we might be able to pin down our target's location after all."

"Huh?" came the chorus of confused voices.

"I have a plan. I'm gonna need everyone to help out with this."

* * *

This guy's a pretty tough nut to crack...

Flavi stood atop his hill overlooking the forest below and

hissed in frustration. The knights from before had all taken lethal damage after being struck by just a single arrow—but no matter how many arrow hits the new man seemed to take, he just wasn't going down. Apparently he was their designated scarecrow for absorbing attacks—and an effective one, at that.

"That doesn't change the fact that I've got an overwhelming advantage, though. All it does is buy them a bit more time to live. The hunt must go on!"

Flavi's demon eyes could see his enemies in the forest roughly ten kilometers away, but their human eyes couldn't hope to see him from that distance. Not to mention that, while they were in *his* range of fire, even the best archers and mages out there couldn't hope to reach him from that far. He was the only one who could attack, and he could keep doing so forever without ever showing himself.

The only requirement for victory was not to lose. The way to keep from losing was not to die. The way to keep from dying was to never let the enemy attack you.

"Now, let's see if you can manage to keep your pals alive..."

After deciding on a target, Flavi loosed another arrow. Imbued with magic energy, it sailed through the air in a huge rainbowlike arc. The enemy squad, seeming to have noticed the attack coming, began to flee from the area.

Hate to break it to you, but you're not getting away! ☆

The demon gave his finger a twist, and the trajectory of his arrow changed in tandem with the motion. Its trail curving like a snake, the projectile began to chase after its target. His foes all seemed taken aback.

Did that freak you out? My arrows have more going for them than just power and range—they can also follow their target even as they try to run.

Let's start with the woman in the bikini armor. With light equipment like that on, even a single hit'll leave her in a world of hurt. There's no way their tank guy will be able to block the attacks in time either.

And— Nailed her!

Exhilarated, Flavi awaited the gruesome spectacle that was moments away—but instead, a baffling phenomenon unfolded before his eyes.

"What the—?!"

Against Flavi's will, the arrow that had been tailing the woman

in the bikini armor changed its trajectory toward the tank, hitting him instead.

"What just happened...?"

He hadn't made a mistake in the trajectory; the arrow had clearly changed course on its own.

"Hmmm. Maybe the guy used a skill?"

If he's the tank, it wouldn't be strange for him to have some special skill—one that takes attacks meant for others and draws them to him instead.

To test his theory, Flavi fired off two arrows in succession, one at the woman in the bikini armor and one at the woman with the hammer as big as she was—and just as he expected, both arrows changed course and were pulled toward the man, who took the hits.

Yep. That's a skill of his, all right.

"So you think you can just keep taking all my attacks no problem, all by your lonesome, do you? Awfully cocky of you—let's see just how long that feeling lasts. ☆"

His skill isn't going to change the outcome of this battle—it'll just shift the order they die in. In fact, it'll allow me the pleasure of watching the women fall into despair when they finally lose the man they trusted to be their party's tank.

"All right, time to kick things up a notch!"

Flavi began firing arrows one after the other, and the tank took each and every hit. The enemy party wandered around the area as if they were searching for him—but he remained far outside their field of vision.

You'll slowly end up cornered by an enemy you have no clue where to find. A slow, torturous meal of terror awaits you—bon appétit!

He kept on attacking, and after a while, his quarry began to retreat.

"Hah! Did they finally realize they couldn't win and decide to run away, I wonder? Well, they're not going anywhere. ☆ I'll make sure every last one of them keels over dead before they can get out of the forest."

Flavi kept moving in pursuit of his prey, looking for a vantage point from which he could target them. Eventually, the enemy arrived at a rather open area in the middle of the forest. The location had excellent visibility—perhaps they had theorized they could locate where Flavi was hiding nearby, provided he wasn't

under cover.

However, that was a huge mistake. Flavi wasn't in the forest at all. Instead, he was on a distant hilltop—the perfect spot to snipe from. Of course, the others would've had no way of knowing that.

Their tank is looking pretty rough. I bet he'll be going down after just a few more hits.

"Our little game of cat and mouse is over. I'll put you out of your misery now."

As Flavi pulled back his bow mightily to fire one final, deadly arrow, a voice rang out:

"Very well—no more cat and mouse, then."

He felt a cold knife being pressed firmly against his neck from behind.

"Huh...?"

The unexpected voice sent chills racing down his spine. He hadn't felt any trace of a presence anywhere nearby—it was enough to make him think for a moment that his own shadow had come to life and spoken to him.

With a knife blade up against his neck, all he could do was turn his eyes to look behind him. There, he saw a small silver-haired woman clad in a black outfit; she had been one of the women in the party with the lady knight who had gotten away before and the tank man. And standing next to her, that lady knight herself was present as well.

Flavi had actually noticed they had gone missing; he had figured they had just run off somewhere, but apparently they had been circling around looking for him. He hadn't noticed because he had been so focused on the tank—the skill the man had been using had forced his attention away from everything else.

But still—

"How did you know where I was...?"

"One of our comrades has really good hearing. She could hear the sound of you firing your arrows. We were able to calculate roughly where you were by measuring the time between your shots being fired and landing, along with the angle they came in at. Our comrades kept feeding us info using my communication magic, and we used it to narrow down the search area." The silver-haired woman continued evenly, "We knew you were hiding on top of the hill, but we couldn't pinpoint your exact

location—so we decided to lure you to this spot."

"So you lured me into a trap…"

"To figure out where you were, we had to make sure you kept firing arrows at us. We only managed to pull this off because our squad sergeant put his life on the line to make it happen," the woman responded, showing a hint of a smile. "Checkmate."

I thought I had them cornered…but the one in the corner was me all along… What a devastating mistake I've made.

"You really got me good. I didn't even notice you until you were right behind me… Those were some truly amazing stealth movement skills. I never would've imagined I'd be backed into a corner like this." Flavi raised his hands in resignation.

"I shall have revenge on you for slaying my comrades," the woman declared, giving him a sharp, penetrating glare.

"Hah. It makes me happy to know that a beautiful lady like you has such deep feelings for me," Flavi said with a grin. He could immediately feel her anger intensify.

Keeping her roiling emotions in check, the knight asked him lowly, "Tell me just one thing, if you would. Why do you hunt humans?"

"No particular reason, really. It's just like when humans hunt deer or birds: it's fun to see how good you are with a bow. Makes sense, right?" Flavi responded, then stopped for a moment as if he had just remembered something. "Oh yeah—unlike deer and birds, humans can talk. The fact that I get to hear them beg for their lives or bawl their eyes out or whatnot makes them more fun to hunt than other animals, I'd say."

"I see… I understand. You demons truly are nothing like us—you are incapable of finding mutual understanding in others," the woman spat.

I had a clear advantage in this game, and the tables got turned on me completely. But I can't let it end like this—I can't let the hunter become the hunted.

Near the end of his rope, Flavi's brain raced for dear life. He'd have to think fast and hard if he wanted to break free from the hopeless situation that he was in.

Is there something I can do? Anything at all—

At that moment, he felt a demonic presence within the aura surrounding the small woman.

"You… You're not a pure human, are you? You're a demon."

"I'm impressed you could tell…"

I knew it.

Flavi suppressed his urge to let out a gloating chuckle. It was like a lone ray of light had shone down out of the darkness.

"Of course I could tell. We're kin, you and I."

If there's any opportunity at all I can take advantage of, it's this. I've got to make my move carefully, though, without riling her up in the process…

"Hey… Why not come to my side?" he asked.

"Are you asking me to betray my comrades…?"

"Yeah. If you double-crossed them, we could turn the tables here completely. You could kill this knight lady, then go back to your party and tell them you finished me off. With my sniping skills and your stealth skills, there's nothing out there that'd stand a chance against the two of us working together!"

Flavi added one more bit of info to tempt things in his favor: "You know the humans will betray you someday. You heard what that lady said just now: demons and humans will never find mutual understanding. I agree with her on that too: you are demonkin, and someday the humans will turn on you, guaranteed. So instead of sitting there and waiting for the inevitable betrayal, you're better off taking the initiative and betraying them first."

"Yeah…you may be right," she admitted.

Yes! Got her!

Flavi pressed on, his voice going up in pitch. "I know, right? In that case—"

"However, I have no intention of betraying my current comrades."

Flavi nearly choked at his offer being refused so flatly. Moderating the tone of his voice to keep his irritation from coming through, he asked, "And why would that be…?"

"I've already betrayed countless people in my life—and honestly, I'm just plain tired of it. I never want to betray anyone ever again."

Flavi had heard tales before of a girl who was half human and half demon. She had engaged in spy activities for the demons as a means of survival. She would slip in among the humans, then pass intel along to the demons, deceiving and betraying people along the way.

The woman before him at that moment—she must've been the very same girl from those tales.

“Not to mention,” the silver-haired girl began quietly, that same hint of a smile from earlier surfacing on her face—the kind of expression you’d only see on someone who had gone through countless trials and tribulations and finally found their answer. “I learned how comfortable a feeling it is…to trust in someone.”

The moment he saw that expression on her face, Flavi knew there was no way he would be able to change her mind. He knew because reading the emotions of others through their facial expressions was one of his specialties. The woman had already placed her complete trust in the humans.

“Hah… A total rejection, huh…?” Flavi gave a humorless, self-deprecating grin. “I’ve never been rejected by a woman before, you know. The guy you’ve put your faith in must be a real man among men, I bet.”

“Yup. He’s an amazing person.”

“Ah, fine. I give up.”

Flavi raised his hands once again to show his intent to surrender, then—

“Not!”

He instantly snapped around backward and attempted to deliver a surprise attack on the silver-haired woman. He wasn’t going to go down without a fight; he’d at least take one of them down with him.

However, the knight moved faster than he did. With one swift horizontal strike, she sliced Flavi’s head clean off.

His eyes shot open in shock.

“I can read the thoughts of betrayers as if they were my own,” Fam stated dryly.

Because those thoughts used to be *my own*, he heard the silver-haired woman whisper faintly afterward.

The moment before his head hit the ground, Flavi had sudden visions of a chess board appear in his mind. There were various different pieces on his opponent’s side of the board; however, his entire team consisted of only a lone piece—a king. Him.

Ah, that’s right… I never did have a single ally, did I.

Just as the king on the board found itself checkmated by the opposing side, the image in his head came to an abrupt halt, and his consciousness faded into the depths of eternal darkness.

Chapter 5: A Brief Leave of Absence

After eliminating the demon that was using the forest as his hunting grounds, we returned to the Royal Capital. When I had finished giving my report, Commander Bolton recommended that I take a leave of absence—despite me telling him I didn't think I needed it.

"That fight took a lot out of you, right? You need to rest up while the resting's good. I'll need you in top shape so I can keep busting your ass, after all," he had said, and he ordered me to take some recuperation time.

I had no idea what to do with the time off that was thrust upon me so abruptly. I wasn't even allowed to *train*. Staying cooped up in my dorm room would've probably just depressed me, so I decided to head outside.

Guess I'll go for a walk around the capital...

There wasn't a single cloud in the sky, and people were out and about in the street. As I was walking along, losing myself in the crowd, somebody walked up alongside me—a woman wearing bikini armor.

There were very few people in the capital—or even in the world, probably—who would wear that particular piece of equipment. I only knew of one specific person, personally.

"Hi, Sarge! Out on a walk?"

"Oh, hi, Seira. Yeah, sorta."

"It's rare to see you in your civilian clothes!"

"Oh, yeah... I'm usually always in my armor. Commander Bolton told me that my civilian clothes are too plain, though, and I should get some better outfits."

"The Commander does have some fashion sense, oddly enough!"

"I really couldn't care less what I wear. Though I have to ask, why are you wearing your bikini armor? Aren't you off duty today?"

"Trouble can happen in the city even when I'm off duty! I need to be ready to respond to anything at a moment's notice."

A true professional in every sense of the word. Though to be more accurate, I guess her desire to help the people is more of a personal

conviction.

"So what have you been up to today? Don't tell me you're actually on patrol?" I asked.

"No, the Commander ordered me to take some recuperation time, so I'm making sure to do that. I just stopped by the church, actually."

"Ah, the church. How were the kids doing?"

"They were running around playing and having lots of fun. We played hide-and-seek, but they're all so good at it—I couldn't find any of them!"

Seira would often play with the orphaned children from the church. She would also apparently use her meager guard salary to regularly donate less-than-meager sums to the church. According to her, she just truly wanted to help the people in whatever small way she could...but I found myself utterly humbled by her saintly behavior.

I should try to take a cue or two from her.

"I do have one small thing that's bothering me, though," she admitted.

"What's that?"

"One of the boys at the church has started to be a bit avoidant toward me lately. He won't even look me in the eye for more than a second or two anymore."

"Oh?"

"I wonder if I did something to upset him?"

I had visited the church with her before too. The children all really loved her—none of them seemed like they were trying to avoid her. To me, that meant she might be misinterpreting something.

"Just out of curiosity, you wore that outfit to the church, right?" I asked.

"I always do!"

"And how old is that boy, exactly?"

"He just turned ten last month, from what I understand. They had a little party for him at the church, and I stopped by to celebrate with them!"

"I see. And is that boy giving the cold shoulder not only to you, but to the other girls and the nuns too?"

"How did you know, Sarge?! That's exactly what he's doing! He's the same as always with boys, but he'll barely give girls the time of day!" Seira said, then clarified, "Though it's even worse

with me specifically. That's why I thought I might've upset him…"

"You've got nothing to worry about, then. He's just reaching adolescence."

"Adolescence…?"

"Yeah. It's not that he doesn't like being around you or anything—he's probably just starting to become overly conscious of the opposite sex and is having trouble coping with that."

"But why is he worse around me than the others?"

"Well, he's probably more conscious of you than anyone else."

"Huh? But why…?" Seira asked, cocking her head quizzically.

She truly and honestly didn't seem to get it.

I barely managed to swallow the urge to tell her to take a look in a mirror. To boys at that sensitive age, I could easily imagine that the sight of a woman in bikini armor could be a powerful drug, not to mention an overstimulating one. On top of that, Seira herself was quite the rare beauty. With her trying to approach them while clad in that extremely revealing armor, it could've easily turned into a lethal dose of stimulation for the kids. I could definitely feel that boy's pain.

"I don't really have any plans for the rest of the day. Can I come along with you?" Seira asked.

"All I'm doing is walking—but if you don't mind that, sure," I told her.

Seira and I wandered around the capital together, getting chatted up frequently by some of the locals Seira helped out regularly. Eventually we came to the town square, where we were greeted by another familiar face—Alma.

Some of the city children were gathered around Alma. She was shouting things in a thunderous voice, and every time she said something, the children would shriek with joy.

"What is she doing?" I wondered aloud.

"Who knows…?" Seira responded.

That's when Alma noticed us. When she saw the two of us next to each other, her eyes shot open in shock.

"Wha—?! Sieg and Seira, together…?! I knew it! You two have been dating behind my back all along, haven't you?!" A complicated expression arose on her face. "Honestly, I don't think I'm ready to take it all in quite yet…but first of all, as your colleague, let me give you a few words of congratulations."

"You can keep the words. I already told you before, we're not going out," I corrected her. "You shouldn't immediately assume a

man and a woman are romantically involved just because they're doing something together."

"Huh? R-Really?" Alma stammered.

"Really," I insisted, then turned the subject around to her. "You know...you seem *really* interested in love affairs and whatnot."

"I-I-I-I'm not *particularly* interested or anything! It's none of *my* business who goes out with whom! And of *course* I'm not concerned about romance personally!"

With an awful acting job like that, she was clearly more than interested. She reacted like an adolescent boy. *Maybe she could give that church kid a run for his money.*

"All right, let's just leave it at that. But anyway," I said, moving on, "You sure were getting these children excited with whatever story you were telling, weren't you?"

"What were you talking about?" Seira asked.

"Heh! I'm glad you asked!" Alma smiled proudly. "The children seemed interested in our fight with the demon in the forest the other day, so I was telling them all about what happened during our battle!"

The news of how we had exterminated Flavi, the demon who had been hunting and overwhelming the knights in the forest, had already spread across the capital like wildfire. The Fifth Squadron had always been teased and treated like problem children, but after the incident with Gregor and the subsequent defeat of Flavi, we had earned an improved reputation, apparently.

We were starting to hear more and more voices of appreciation and thanks as we walked the streets. I was just glad people were starting to feel they were safer due to our presence in the capital.

"Hey, you guys are Miss Alma's henchmen, right?" one of the boys who had been listening to Alma asked us.

"Huh? Henchmen?" Seira raised an eyebrow.

"Miss Alma told us the Fifth Squadron are her henchmen. She said you make her do all the work and can't do anything without her."

Once the boy had finished, a girl added, "The only reason you could beat the demon in the forest is 'cuz of what Miss Alma did, right? She was saying none of you would be alive if it wasn't for her!"

Seira and I exchanged silent stares, then looked over at Alma.

“Wh-What? I wasn’t exactly lying, was I?” Alma insisted. “It’s true that we couldn’t have figured out where the enemy was if I wasn’t there, right?”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one, but I *definitely* don’t remember agreeing to be your henchman,” I stated flatly.

“All that means is that I *think* of you as my henchman! Everyone’s entitled to their own point of view!” she retorted.

“You’re getting awfully defensive about this…” I groaned.

Just then, Spinoza showed up in the square.

“Hey, Alma!” she shouted. “I heard you’ve been wanderin’ around town spoutin’ all kinds of bullshit! Since when was I ever your henchman, huh?”

“So you’ve already gone all around town saying this… I was wondering how you managed to spread the word out to so many people,” I said, exasperated. “Don’t you think it typically sounds cooler when it’s someone *other* than yourself talking about your achievements? Why would you just blurt it all out on your own?”

“Why not? If I don’t say anything, nobody will ever know! I’m gonna keep showing off my achievements until I’m blue in the face! I want everybody to lavish me with praise! There’s nothing I won’t stoop to if it’ll make people fawn over me!” Alma shouted with fervor.

It was such a brazen display of attention seeking it was almost refreshing.

The children had believed every word Alma had said, and they were looking at her with eyes of reverence. To them, the Fifth Squadron might as well just have been “Alma and Her Merry Men.”

“What are we going to do with you…?” I sighed.

“Though you really do seem to be popular with the townspeople, Alma. You can spin a tall tale, but you approach your work with complete sincerity,” Seira complimented.

“Heh. I sure do, don’t I?” Alma responded with a grin.

“That reminds me,” I interrupted. “How’s your memory doing?”

“Hm?”

“You said you couldn’t remember anything but your name. Has anything else come back to you yet while you’ve been living here at the capital?”

“No, not really,” she replied. “Honestly, until you just said that,

I had kind of forgotten that I even had amnesia to begin with."

"You've got to be kidding me..." I grumbled.

"Maybe a sudden shock or somethin' might jog your memory?" came Spinoza's voice. "C'mere, I'll give ya a nice jostlin' jab right to the noggin!"

"Whoa, hold on there, Spinoza! That's a bad idea!" I admonished.

"He's right! Punching Alma isn't guaranteed to bring her memory back. For all we know, it might make her lose her current memories instead!" Seira said, frantically trying to quell Spinoza's clenched-fist anger. "Not to mention, it really seems like Alma has started getting quite used to life here in the capital. There's no need for anyone to force her to remember."

By that point, Alma had integrated fully into life in the capital. She was on friendly terms with the citizens and had built excellent relations with them. Seira was right: there probably wasn't any need to try and force any memories back into her head.

Alma was honest to her feelings, gullible, and a bit of a show-off who loved to be praised. However, she performed her job faithfully and had earned the trust of the people of the city. And more than anything else, she really, really loved to eat.

Even if she had lost her past self, I had no doubts whatsoever that the Alma there with us in the Royal Capital was the person she truly, fundamentally was.

Chapter 6: An Unexpected Attack

The Fifth Squadron and I were helping the Knight Corps guard the Milleon Bridge, which was at the border of our country and the foreign territory beyond.

That being said, our squad was down a couple of its usual members; Alma and Seira had been assigned to other duties that day. But there was a specific reason for that:

"Can't believe Alma's actually bein' considered for promotion to Squad Sergeant," Spinoza murmured quietly.

There happened to be a vacancy for a Squad Sergeant position, and apparently Commander Bolton had decided to try letting Alma handle those duties. That day, he had sent her out with a different squadron on a separate mission to test her suitability for the role.

"Apparently the Commander heard how Alma's reputation has been spreading around town and took that to heart. Since she has a reputation for being strong, he said he figures making her a Squad Sergeant would put their minds at ease as well," I explained.

"Her ability has proven to be more than adequate from the outset, after all," Fam added. "She may not seem like it, but she's surprisingly good at taking command too. If you focus only on her strengths, I'd say she has top-tier talent."

I feel like there might be some hidden meaning in that "focus only on her strengths" part...

"Why'd Seira go with her, anyway?" Spinoza asked, curious.

"For protection, she said," Fam responded. "We all know Seira can get along with anybody, so if Alma and the guards get into any disagreements, she can get between them and calm things down."

"Yeah, I guess a huge pair o' tits can calm anyone down."

"That's definitely not what I meant..."

"It's a simple matter of her ability to communicate," I interjected. "There's not a person in the capital who has anything bad to say about Seira—everybody adores her."

If there were any disputes within the other squadron, she definitely would be able to keep things from falling apart. Her

role in doing that for the Fifth Squadron had already been huge; wrangling my squad full of troublemakers all by myself would've worn me out, frankly.

"So do either of you have any interest in moving up in the Guard Corps?" I asked casually.

Fam gave her signature soft giggle. "You know how antisocial I am. Do you actually think I'd be able to lead anyone? I can't even look people in the eye."

"You don't need to say that like you're proud of it," I said with a sigh.

"Besides," she went on, "I've already decided I'll be sticking with you. Even if you quit the Guard Corps, I fully intend on devoting the rest of my entire existence to you."

"You're way too serious about things," Spinoza muttered, annoyed.

"Maybe you aren't serious enough," Fam shot back, seeming completely unfazed.

Well, being idolized that much is something to be grateful for, honestly. I'll need to make a concerted effort to avoid doing anything that would betray that level of trust.

"Eh, I'll pass on the whole 'orderin' people around' thing too, though. Don't wanna take on that much responsibility. It's more my style to just wander around whoopin' ass wherever I damn well please. I'm takin' on enough already—like all this debt!"

"You could just *not* take on any more of that," I groaned.

At that moment, something interrupted us.

"Wh-What the hell is that?!" a panicked knight's voice howled from atop the bridge's watchtower.

Just as I was wondering what was going on, I heard the shrill, piercing echo of the call-to-arms whistle reverberate through the air.

"It's an attack! We're under attack!"

Demons, maybe? I wondered. *It doesn't matter how big of a group they try to attack us with, though—they won't be getting through here as long as the Fifth's around. We'll take down every last one of them.*

However, as I was psyching myself up for battle, the knight on top of the watchtower said something completely unexpected:

"Those aren't monsters! It's an army!"

An army...?

Not long after, figures indeed began to come into view before

us. They were clad in armor, steadily moving toward us in a military formation while wielding swords and spears. It was as if a giant wall were approaching us.

Even at a quick glance, their forces appeared to be thousands strong; if we counted the reserve forces at the rear, their numbers could have even exceeded ten thousand. To me, though, the most unbelievable part of all was the fact that the well-equipped forces advancing upon us were not monsters, but humans. *Other human beings* were invading our territory.

“That’s the army of the Kingdom of Sorcera!” I heard one of the knights next to me murmur.

“Sorcera?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “You mean…”

“The neighboring country located to the east of Astaroth—ruled by a king who is known as the Sword Saint. I thought our countries were on excellent terms…” The knight trailed off.

“Why would they bring so many soldiers with them, then?” I asked.

“I have no idea, but it certainly doesn’t seem like they’re bringing good news.”

To me, the whole situation was extremely unsettling, and the others no doubt felt the same way—their faces were all tense. Standing there on top of the bridge, we were all on full alert.

“You there, halt! Beyond this point lies the territory of the Kingdom of Silvesta! No one crosses this bridge without the proper permissions!” shouted the knight atop the watchtower in an effort to halt the army’s advance.

The Sorcera Army, however, continued their march; either they hadn’t heard the warning, or they had no intention of heeding it to begin with.

And then—they began firing arrows at the watchman.

Letting out a gasp of shock, the knight immediately ducked, just managing to avoid a direct hit. A large number of the projectiles bounced harmlessly off the stone walls nearby.

If anything, that made one thing absolutely certain: we were facing a hostile army. They had heard our warning and deliberately ignored it.

“Their eyes… There’s something abnormal about them,” Fam murmured as she gazed at the troops.

“Do you think they’ve been brainwashed?” I asked.

“I don’t know…but I feel a strong hatred for us coming from them,” she replied.

“Either way, they’re definitely trying to force their way through the checkpoint! We can’t let them take the Milleon Bridge!” one of our knights interjected.

“Then we’ve just got to defend it,” I said matter-of-factly.

“But how?!” the panicked knight shouted. “Their forces number in the thousands upon thousands! We don’t even have a full hundred men on our side!”

“They’ll need to cross this bridge to invade our territory, right? They won’t be able to deploy in a full battle formation in this narrow a space.”

Had they been on a wide-open plain, they would have been able to move in large-scale formation and completely overrun us, but that type of movement wasn’t possible on a narrow bridge.

“In which case, we should be able to stop them,” I went on, finishing my thought.

In order for them to invade our territory from the east side, they would have to cross a massive river, and the only means for them to do that was to use the bridge we were on. In other words, if we could stop them from crossing, our defense would be successful.

There were vast numbers of people living behind where we were standing; if the enemy got through, many would lose their lives. It would be no different than any other time I was on gatekeeper duty. My job remained the same as always: protect my assigned post.

I stood at the very front of the bridge—directly in the path of the approaching enemy force.

Standing next to me, Spinoza and Fam assumed battle stances as well.

“C’mon, I’m ready to let loose on these chumps!”

“Leave the support fire to me.”

Upon seeing us, the knights finally seemed to firm their resolve to make a stand.

“That’s right, we have Sieg on our side! Remember our battle with the goblins—with his defense power, we can pull this off!”

“We won’t allow the honor of the Knight Corps to be sullied any further!”

A chorus of agreement sounded out from the rest of the knights in the form of a war cry, and they raised their swords to the sky in solidarity. I could feel their morale skyrocketing.

“Don’t worry—I’ll protect every last one of you,” I announced, and the knights returned my gaze with trust in their eyes.

Sorcera’s army approached our lines, and the Knight Corps and Guard Corps banded together to intercept them.

“Gah! These are their heavy infantry—our attacks aren’t having any effect!”

The enemy’s front lines consisted of heavy infantry—soldiers equipped with thick, heavy suits of armor. Their defense power was so high that our knights’ attacks were doing very little to them.

“With armor that thick, even my arrows aren’t getting through. I can still injure them if I aim for the chinks in their armor, but it won’t be easy to bring them down entirely.” Fam’s projectiles were bouncing off of her targets. “We could deal more damage to them if we had some mages on our side, but neither we nor the knights have any magic abilities.”

“Huh? Weren’t you usin’ some magic just the other day?” Spinoza asked, confused.

“I can use a few support spells like communication magic, but I don’t have any attack spells. I’m just an archer, after all.”

“We should’ve brought Haruna along with us,” I quipped. “But heavy infantry really are a pain to deal with. They’ve got their own archers and mages waiting in the back too. At this rate, we’ll be completely at their mercy.”

“If we could cut through into their ranks, we might be able to get them to break formation. It’d take a pretty extraordinary amount of power to do that, though,” Fam mused.

Spinoza pointed a thumb toward her own face, grinning. “A job for me, then. Got it!”

“Think you can pull it off, Spinoza?” I asked.

“I had every last coin of mine sucked dry at the casino yesterday, so I’m pretty pissed off. I should be able to tear through their li’l shield formation easy-peasy.”

“Sounds promising to me.”

Spinoza’s war hammer might be just the thing we need to break through their heavy infantry.

“All right. I’ll draw their attacks—as soon as I do, get in there and do your thing,” I commanded.

“Got it!”

Just then, the enemy’s archers and mages, protected by the shields of their heavy infantry, all launched their long-distance

attacks directly at us.

“Here they come, Sieg…!” Fam shouted.

“Okay—*Iron Target*!”

As soon as I activated my skill, all of the incoming attacks were drawn toward me. Arrows and offensive magic spells started raining down toward me like a torrential downpour.

While that was happening, the rest of the sky was clear of any danger.

“Now, Spinoza! Cut through!”

As the melee seemed to fall into a lull, Spinoza dashed out onto the battleground. The forward-facing heavy infantry held up their massive shields in a defensive stance; Spinoza whipped around her equally massive person-sized war hammer into a battle stance as if it weighed nothing.

Then she leaped high into the air and unleashed a mighty swing. “This is for an entire month’s paycheck down the drain!!!”

The war hammer, having full follow-through on it, easily tore through the infantry’s shields and penetrated the armor they were wearing, sending the hapless men careening through the air, equipment and all.

Unfortunate scapegoats for Spinoza’s losses at the casino, the heavy infantry she had struck collided with the archers and mages behind them, and the lot of them were knocked flat to the ground.

Upon cutting into the center of the space she had just opened up, Spinoza had successfully managed to break through the heavy infantry’s front lines and circle behind them. From behind, their heavy equipment wouldn’t be able to serve them nearly as well.

As she crushed her foes one after the other, leaving carnage in her wake, Spinoza reminded me of some kind of berserker.

With the enemy’s formation shattered, our knights, not to be outdone, charged into the fray to make use of the opportunity they’d been given.

“Let’s move in! Follow Spinoza!”

However, things were still looking grim.

“Ugh…! There are too many of them!” a knight shouted.

“No matter how many we take down, they just don’t stop coming!”

There was simply too great a difference in numbers between our forces and theirs.

“Not just that, none of ’em are even tryin’ to run away when they’re injured—it’s like they don’t give a damn about their own lives! Are they not afraid to die or what?” Spinoza grumbled.

The enemy forces surged forward with a hellish fervor. It felt like more than simple hostility; it was as if they had a burning desire to annihilate us entirely.

“They’re just going to slowly whittle us down, at this rate. They’ll get through eventually,” I remarked.

Our side had started out carrying some good momentum, but as time went on, the situation had begun to deteriorate. In battles like that, overcoming such an overwhelming difference in numbers was just too difficult.

“Sieg…what’s the plan?” Fam asked.

We weren’t going to be able to win using the conventional method of fighting them head-on. However, retreating wasn’t an option either.

There was only one way I could think of to overcome the overwhelming difference in numbers.

“I have an idea—and I’ve already done some prep work to put it into action. Fam—I need to use your communication magic.”

“All right.”

With the communication magic Fam cast on me, all of my allies were able to hear my voice even in the midst of the battlefield.

“*Everyone fall back behind me, now!*”

Shocked looks appeared on the faces of the knights as they heard me call out, and a commotion began to stir among them.

“Fall back? Now? What is he thinking?”

“Is he forfeiting the battle?”

“This is Sieg we’re talkin’ about, I’m sure he’s got some kind o’ plan. C’mon, let’s get the hell outta here! I’ll cover your asses,” Spinoza shouted out.

With that, our knights turned around and began their retreat, with Spinoza and Fam keeping all of the pursuing enemy soldiers at bay.

Good—everyone made it back.

After confirming that everybody on our side had fallen back behind me, I stepped forward to the front line once again, facing the enemy forces as they tried to give chase.

“All right! It’s all you now, boss!” Spinoza shouted.

“If anyone can turn this battle around, it’s you. That’s my

sincere belief," Fam said with certainty.

"Leave it to me—*Pain Reversal*!"

Pain Reversal was the skill that let me convert all the damage I had taken into an attack.

I had accumulated a considerable amount of damage over the course of the battle. If I converted all of that into attack power and managed to unleash it in one single strike...

"Hey, that's the skill you used to seal off the goblin den! I get it, you're gonna nail the whole enemy army at once with a super powerful attack, right?" Spinoza guessed.

"No, I won't be aiming for the enemy soldiers. They've got ten thousand units—it's highly unlikely I'd be able to incapacitate every last one of them with just a single attack."

"Huh? Then how're ya gonna—"

"The important thing is not letting them pass, right? We don't need to fight them to manage that. We just need to destroy the route they're using to invade."

I activated the skill, and all the damage I had taken was converted to attack power. Once I had imbued my sword with that power, I let out a shout of effort and unleashed it all in one go—not at the enemy army, but at the paved bridge below me.

The force behind every sword, spear, arrow, and spell the enemy had thrown at me was returned in kind—which was certainly more than enough power to destroy the bridge.

I swung my sword in a horizontal line along the ground, creating a massive shock wave—and the stone bridge was severed in half right across the middle.

Panicked screams echoed out from all around.

"The ground is collapsing...!!!"

As the ground beneath their feet crumbled, some of the enemy soldiers got caught up in the collapse and tumbled down into the river below, while the rest scrambled backward in a panic. The battlefield was engulfed in a swirl of chaotic screams.

When the tremors eventually subsided, a massive gap had formed between our side of the bridge and the side the enemy army was on—a gap that was completely impassable.

"We have no way to advance...!"

Coming from the east, the only possible way to cross the river and invade our territory was to cross the Milleon Bridge—however, that bridge was no longer standing.

"Retreat!"

Having lost their only route of ingress, the army had no choice but to withdraw. They turned around and left.

"With an army of that size, I doubt they have enough resources to try and make a detour," I said. "They'll probably be leaving us alone and heading back home for today."

"But man, I can't believe you destroyed the whole damn bridge! You think *way* too far outside the box, Sieg," Spinoza uttered in awe.

"You're not just all defense power anymore… You're finally able to harness massive attack power as well," Fam murmured in admiration. "I'm shocked at how quickly you've progressed."

Once things had started to calm down, the knights came over to talk to me.

"That was a close call. I shudder to think of what would've happened if you and your team hadn't been here. Thank you for risking your life to protect us."

"No problem. It's my job, after all," I responded.

"You… You really don't have an arrogant bone in your body, do you?"

"It doesn't matter what enemies we face—with Sieg around, there's nothing to be afraid of!"

It made me glad to know my presence was helping to boost everyone's morale. I smiled in response to the knights' voices of gratitude, then brought them back to sobering reality with an announcement.

"This whole thing isn't over yet, though. I'm sure they'll launch another attack on us—so we've got to come up with some countermeasures before that happens."

***

We returned to the Royal Capital and gave our report on the events that happened at the Milleon Bridge. The information we related to Commanders Bolton and Eleanor was immediately passed on to the royal family; however, it was kept secret from the citizens at large, for fear of fueling anxiety.

In the commander's office at the guard station, Commander Bolton was muttering to himself as he puffed on a cigar. "I can't believe the Kingdom of Sorcera would just up and start a war with us… What a complete mess. This ain't the time for us humans to be at each other's throats."

Cigar butts were piled up high in the ashtray on his desk; he was evidently dealing with a lot of pent-up frustration.

"Sure is a good thing you managed to stop 'em, though," he went on. "If they had gotten past the bridge, this would've turned into an irreversible catastrophe."

"Maybe so, but I did end up destroying the bridge…"

"Yeah, breaking the bridge hurts, but it was better than giving 'em a free pass to invade. If you lose a bridge, you can at least put it back together, but that's not gonna work with people's lives."

"Commander Bolton speaks the truth; you made the optimal decision. You kept casualties to a minimum and forced the enemy army to retreat. There is no better outcome to hope for in battle," Eleanor said. "Considering Sorcera's distance from Astaroth, they will certainly require some time to prepare before they can launch another attack. That will buy us some additional time."

"Problem is, what the hell do they want with us, anyway? Our country's got shit for resources. There's nothing of value here worth going out of their way to invade us for." The Commander grabbed a new cigar; in his ashtray, the elevation of toxic Mt. Cigar Butt had risen one butt higher.

"What do we got that other countries don't got—the Orb of Light?" Spinoza suggested casually.

"Not a chance. Thieves and bandits I can understand, but why the hell would another country want the Orb of Light? The only thing a country gets by having the Orb is nonstop disaster. If they wanted it, we'd gladly give 'em the damn thing—no warring necessary," Bolton said wryly.

"Well, what *do* they want, then, huh?" Spinoza grumbled.

"That's what we're concerned about. Sorcera isn't a very warlike nation—on the contrary, it used to place great value on its harmonious relations with other countries," Fam explained.

"Sure didn't feel that way when we were fightin' 'em," Spinoza spat. "They were actin' like a buncha crazy barbarians."

"True," Fam agreed. "The look in their eyes told me they didn't just want to defeat us—they wanted to slaughter us."

In contrast to their battles with demons, humans generally didn't kill each other indiscriminately when they fought wars with each other—all one side had to do was injure enough enemy combatants to force the other side to retreat.

However, the army of the Kingdom of Sorcera had been brimming with the intent to kill their enemies. I could sense their unshakable determination to wipe us off the face of the planet.

"Either way, continuing to toss about conjectures like this will not bring us any answers. We may as well simply ask them directly," Eleanor suggested.

"Ask them directly...?" I wondered.

"You brought back some prisoners from the battle, did you not? Then perhaps we can learn more about the circumstances by asking them."

***

We'd come home from the battle at Milleon Bridge with a number of prisoners from the opposing army. They were being held at the Royal Capital prison. Spinoza, Fam, and I—led by Eleanor—made our way over to said prison.

"I just realized Alma and Seira still ain't back yet. What's the deal?" Spinoza grumbled.

I frowned. "Commander Bolton *just* told us they'd be coming back any minute, and they'll be heading over to join up with us as soon as they get here."

"Oh, did he...? I wasn't listenin'—that's not really my thing."

"Please don't let that happen on the battlefield." Fam sighed. "I'd rather we not start taking casualties just because you weren't listening to orders."

"You know, it sure has been a long time since I've been here," I murmured, looking up at the prison complex towering before us.

I had been locked up in the prison once before, back when Sir Gregor had devised a scheme to have me falsely accused of stealing the Orb of Light.

"By the way, I heard that you were the first person in the entirety of the prison's history who succeeded in escaping it. You've become something of a hero among the inmates, as the one who managed to escape the inescapable fortress."

"Having a prison inmate fan club doesn't make me all that happy, honestly," I said. "Besides, I only managed to get out because I had Fam's help."

"Nice try, smooth talker," said Fam. "You broke out of your jail cell and lowered the exit drawbridge with your own two arms. You could've easily escaped without me being there."

“The place is set up like some kind of intricate labyrinth,” I insisted. “If I had been alone, I probably would’ve gotten lost and never made it out. You showed me the way.”

“Ah, I see…so that’s what you meant.” Convinced, Fam let out a light chuckle. “In that case, I’ll just let myself be happy I was able to be of use to you.”

Once the drawbridge at the entrance had been lowered for us, we walked into the prison. A gloomy atmosphere pervaded the interior of the complex.

“I seriously doubt the prisoners’ll just up and tell us what we wanna know,” Spinoza grumbled, her fingers locked behind her head.

“You needn’t worry about that. We have an extremely skilled torturer in this prison. Under her ministrations, prisoners will divulge every last tidbit of information we desire.”

Hold on—a skilled torturer? Why does that ring a bell for me…

“As a matter of fact, the prisoners have already undertaken her torture session. The information in their heads has likely already spilled out like water from a broken vessel.”

Eleanor stood in front of the torture chamber, which had an even gloomier atmosphere than the rest of the prison. Opening the massive doors, she stepped into the room, and the person inside turned around—a woman with lustrous blonde hair and a sadistic expression on her face. She was clad in black bondage gear, with a leather whip gripped tightly in her hand.

“Well if it isn’t Miss Eleanor. You look as noble and beautiful as ever—though I would love to see that face twisted in pain someday. And—hm?”

When the sadistic blonde torturer, Miss Tiara, noticed me waiting there behind Eleanor, her smug expression froze over instantaneously.

“Eeek!!! Isn’t that…S-Sieg?!”

“Huh?” Eleanor blinked in confusion.

Miss Tiara’s legs gave out on the spot, and she fell to her rear end, trembling in fear. Her face had gone straight past pale to sheet white.

“Please don’t kill me…! Please don’t kill me…! I beg you, please spare my life…!” she whimpered.

“Sieg, did something happen between you and Miss Tiara…?” Eleanor asked.

“I undertook one of her torture sessions once. She threatened

to harm my comrades, so I decided to give her a stern talking-to, that's all." I didn't mind being hurt myself, but nobody hurts my comrades—and I had told her as such. While holding her up by the neck.

Still, I had no idea she would end up in such a panic. It must've been pretty frightening for her.

"I've never seen her act this way before in my life. You must have instilled some extraordinarily deep-seated trauma in her," Eleanor said, furrowing her brow in dismay. "We cannot hold a conversation with her in this state."

Well, it's technically my fault she ended up like this... Ah well. Guess I'll have to provide Miss Tiara with a bit of psychological comfort here.

"Listen, don't worry. I'm not angry at you or anything," I began.

"R-Really...?"

"Really."

"Even though I whipped you that hard...?"

"Yeah."

"You say that now—but what are you going to do to me when I turn around?"

"Nothing at all. No need to be so suspicious," I said. "They threw me in this place back then because they thought I'd stolen the Orb of Light, and you tortured me to try to get information out of me. You were just doing your best to do your job. I don't resent you for that."

"S-Sieg...you're too kind...!" Miss Tiara's eyes welled up with tears; she seemed deeply moved. Her relief-filled expression showed no trace of the sadist from before.

"It seems you've finally regained your composure somewhat," Eleanor said. "Well? Were you able to get any information from the prisoners?"

"Y-Yes, of course I was. Nobody can withstand my torture, after all! However, there is one problem..."

"A problem?"

"What they're saying makes no sense whatsoever."

"Pardon? The language of Sorcera is no different from our own. It should make perfect sense to our ears, I would think."

"That's not what I meant. I can comprehend the words just fine—what they're saying with them simply makes no sense, though." Miss Tiara turned her gaze elsewhere, pointing our

attention over to one of the prisoners, who was affixed to a pair of crossed planks. “In short—they were after the Orb of Light.”

“They planned on stealing it from our country? For what purpose? Without the Oracle of Light’s presence, the seal on the Demon King cannot be maintained,” Eleanor asked, confused.

“That seems to be their goal exactly,” Miss Tiara replied. “They wanted to release the seal on the Orb of Light and resurrect the Demon King.”

“Huh?” The same noise of confusion erupted from all of us upon hearing those words.

They want to resurrect the Demon King? What is she talking about?

“Their goal was the resurrection of the Demon King? Surely you jest? What would they gain from such an action?”

“They believe the Demon King is some kind of messiah. They think that if he is resurrected, he’ll save their country from the turmoil they’re currently in—so they are trying to make that happen. And because we are the ones hindering their goals by keeping him sealed away in the Orb of Light, they consider us enemies.”

They think the Demon King will save *them…?*

Miss Tiara’s explanation had helped us figure out what they were after. However, the ideology that led them to that goal was beyond our comprehension.

Eleanor spoke to the man on the cross. “The Demon King is a terrible menace who once tried to destroy mankind. If you resurrect him, you risk bringing humanity to the brink of extinction. Do you realize that?”

“No, he won’t destroy us. The resurrection of the great Demon King will be the true beginning. All of the problems in this world will disappear.” There was no cunning in the man’s eyes. “Look at the world today. People all across the world fight each other constantly, they suffer famines, and the strong oppress the weak. Even if there are no conflicts with other races, humans will forever be in conflict with each other. The way things stand, times of peace will never come.”

“So you’re saying we should be ruled by the Demon King instead?” I asked.

“That’s right. All of humanity should submit to the rule of the Demon King—of the demons. When we give control of the entire world to the beings who are the most powerful, all of the

problems in the world will disappear. Doing that is what will bring about peace."

"This guy's lost it. What a waste of time." Spinoza shrugged her shoulders in defeat.

"All of the other prisoners were controlled by the same ideology as his: the single-minded insistence that the Demon King should rule over humanity," Miss Tiara explained.

"Perhaps the demons are manipulating them?" Eleanor asked.

"Hm, well, if so, a good sock to the face might knock 'em out of it." Spinoza smirked. "All right, I'll handle this—say goodbye to that screwed-up ideology of yours!"

"I wouldn't bother," Fam insisted. "They aren't being manipulated by demons—they're doing this of their own free will."

"So they *aren't* bein' manipulated?" Spinoza grumbled.

"If they were, they wouldn't be able to speak to us with such clear detail. They'd act more like puppets, devoid of any wills of their own," Fam replied.

"You mean these guys are actually tryin' to resurrect the Demon King of their own free will?" Spinoza sputtered.

If so, there's no way to stop them.

"There's still a chance the demons are pulling the strings from somewhere in the shadows. Either way, though, there's no doubt these people attacked us of their own volition," Fam said. "That's going to be a serious problem. If they were being manipulated, we could just snap them out of it by killing the puppet master—but that doesn't seem to be the case, here."

If there *was* a demon pulling the strings from the shadows—even if we defeated it, we wouldn't be able to stop Sorcera's army. Not as long as they considered us enemies. They were absolutely convinced that resurrecting the Demon King was the right thing to do, and it wouldn't be easy to overturn that misconception.

Just as the atmosphere in the room was getting heavy, the door to the torture chamber opened, and two familiar faces appeared.

"Hey, took you two long enough!" Spinoza called out, her hands once again clasped behind her head.

Alma and Seira had finally shown up.

"As soon as we got back after our mission, we heard we got attacked by another country. When they told us you were here,

we rushed over.” Alma puffed out her chest proudly. “I wish I could’ve shown you all how great I did! Even Commander Bolton was impressed. I bet I’m a shoo-in for that Squad Sergeant position, now…”

“You’re not s’posed to just *say* that,” Spinoza muttered.

As Alma spoke proudly of her accomplishments, Seira stood behind her wearing a somber expression. She had her face turned away from us awkwardly, her gaze pointed toward the floor.

Just as I was wondering what had happened, we heard a surprised voice from behind us:

“…What is Commander Alma of the Royal Guard doing here?”

It definitely wasn’t one of us. I turned around and saw the prisoner on the cross staring directly at Alma.

“Hm? *Commander* Alma? Royal Guard? I’m not even a Squad Sergeant yet. I mean, sure, I might climb the ranks even higher, but, well…”

Alma seemed awfully confused—but there was no way the prisoner could’ve known what Alma’s position in the Guard Corps was. That meant the only way what he had said could’ve possibly made sense—

—was if he was talking about Alma’s position *before* she came to Astaroth.

“I had heard you had disappeared suddenly… You’re alive, then. To think that you had washed up in enemy territory, though…” the man said in contemplation.

The river they had found Alma lying next to also flowed through Sorcera’s territory. If the prisoner’s story was accurate, then Alma, injured while fighting monsters, had been carried along by the river and had washed up near the bridge.

“So you were from Sorcera all along, Alma… I had no idea,” I said.

The man had called her a Royal Guard. That meant she had to have been working for someone in the royal family.

“Commander of the Royal Guard—sounds like I was pretty high up in the ranks before I lost my memory, huh. Hah, nice! I guess I really did have top-tier talent!” Alma, unable to hide her delight, was grinning from ear to ear. Her cheeriness made her seem quite out of place in the otherwise rather serious atmosphere.

“So you’ve lost your memory… That explains why you’ve joined

the enemy…!" the prisoner muttered to himself in realization.

If Alma used to be Commander of the Royal Guard of Sorcera, that means she might've originally held the same bizarre ideology as the prisoners.

That means we could really be in trouble if she gets her memory back… If she does, she might turn against us. And considering how strong she is, that could turn into a huge mess.

As those anxieties filled my mind, I happened to glance over at the prisoner, and I saw that he had a look of shock on his face —as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

He was staring at Seira. With his gaze fixated on her, he began to whisper hesitatingly, as if he were touching on some forbidden topic.

"Are you…Princess Aria…?"

"Princess."

I know I just heard him say "Princess."

"What are you doing here?! You, the witch who betrayed our country, who abandoned our people! You were in league with the enemy all along, weren't you!"

The prisoner exploded into a fiery display of emotion. Snarling like an animal, he began to struggle wildly, trying to tear out of his restraints. His rage was even more fierce than what he had shown toward our forces in battle.

He's under some kind of misunderstanding, though. Seira's name isn't Aria, and she isn't a princess either. She's a guard of the Royal Capital of Astaroth, a member of the Fifth Squadron under my command, and a valued comrade.

So she should just brush aside what he said and tell him it's a case of mistaken identity—that he's confusing her with someone else.

But Seira didn't do that. She just stood there in solemn silence with a pensive expression on her face, not offering a word of denial or rebuttal.

"Silence, you! Who gave you permission to speak?! A strict punishment is in order, it seems!" Miss Tiara shouted angrily. She cracked her whip, and the pain brought the prisoner back under control; after several more whip strikes, his body went limp, his will to resist sapped entirely.

Even though he could no longer speak, the man's penetrating stare stayed fixed on Seira. Flames of fierce resentment burned in his gaze.

Seira made no attempt to evade the man’s murderous glare; she simply stood there and took it. Her expression seemed as fragile as cracked glass.

Chapter 7: Seira’s Homeland

Leaving the torture chamber behind, we returned to the guard station.

All of the Fifth Squadron gathered in the Commander’s office, along with Commanders Eleanor and Bolton, for one very specific reason: to hear from Seira directly about what the prisoner had said earlier.

“Seira, I want to talk about what that prisoner said,” I finally stated, breaking the silence in the room. “What did he mean when he started calling you ‘Princess Aria’?”

“The guy was probably just mistakin’ her for someone else she reminded him of,” Spinoza offered, laughing the issue off. “Pretty sure that torturer had just roughed him up pretty good—there’s no way his head coulda been on straight.”

“We won’t force you to talk about anything you don’t want to,” Fam said, voice laced with concern. “Everybody has a secret or two they’d rather keep to themselves.”

Seira remained silent for a while. Eventually, though, the tense expression on her face loosened, and she addressed us, her voice resigned.

“I appreciate your concern—but this is something I need to talk about. I can’t just keep it locked up inside me.” She took a deep breath to prepare herself, then spoke—about the truth that she had kept hidden within her. “Seira…is not my actual name. My real name is Aria Sorcera—Princess of the Kingdom of Sorcera. A year ago, I defected to this country.”

I could hear everyone in the room gasp. We were all stunned.

Seira was a princess all along. A princess of Sorcera, at that.

It was true that she was pretty much the lone refined woman among the rest of us uncultured louts of the Guard Corps. Also, when we had our audience with the Oracle of Light, she’d been able to conduct herself properly for the occasion, while the rest of the Fifth and I had no clue on the proper etiquette.

Still, I had no idea she was *actually* royalty.

“Why exactly did you defect, though?” Eleanor asked her.

Seira held her breath for a brief moment; then, after putting all of the emotions swirling within her to the side, she responded

in a flat, matter-of-fact tone, “Because Sorcera—my homeland—was taken over by demons. I defected to your country to avoid falling into their hands.”

***

Sorcera—my homeland—was a country that opposed conflict. Our pacifistic nation had no desire to quarrel with other countries; if we did end up in such a situation, we would always seek a peaceful path of resolution through discussion, rather than use of military power.

However, not everything about our country was perfect. We suffered from a number of issues, such as a lack of resources and a great wealth disparity among our people. Even so, those in power were making great efforts to eliminate those issues; not once did they consider looking the other way and ignoring them. I loved that about our country.

I’m certain that the reason we thought that way was because that was also how my father, Sodom Sorcera, thought. His skill with the blade was so great that he became renowned as the Sword Saint. As a king who also excelled in swordsmanship, he had enough innate talent to defeat our country’s most able knights and win multiple successive swordsmanship tournaments.

Once, when a monster attacked us—a massive wyvern—he had led the charge against the beast and cut it down with a single mighty sword strike. My father was the strongest, most courageous, and kindest man I knew. He was deeply loved by both the citizenry and the knights too.

He was also the one who had taught me how to use the sword. Though he was always gentle toward others, as my sword instructor he was very strict; when I was young, he would put me through grueling training sessions every day.

If you want to be able to defend our country, you must be strong, he always used to tell me. *You cannot defend anything without strength. To be a true princess of Sorcera, you must train hard enough to land at least one blow on me.*

I put my all into that challenge. I trained and trained until my hands were bloody and blistered, and by the time each session was over I could barely move at all. Yet in the end, I never did land a blow on my father. I simply wasn’t able to reach his level of

strength.

That was also about the time I first met Alma. She was originally from a very poor area, but her physical abilities were truly exceptional, so I ended up employing her as my personal Royal Guard.

Everyone around me was strongly opposed to the idea; they had never heard of someone with such poor origins being placed alongside royalty. However, it was my belief that people of great ability should be assigned fitting positions regardless of their origins. So I proceeded anyway, against the wishes of the others. Even my father reluctantly decided to allow it in the end.

Eventually, Alma rose to the rank of Commander of the Royal Guard, so I think that proved I had sound judgment in bringing her on.

Ah, my apologies… I seem to have strayed from the topic.

Sorcera may have had its issues, but it was a peaceful kingdom.

Until that fateful day…

At the time, not only was Sorcera suffering from chronic food shortages due to widespread crop failure, but we were also plagued by abnormally frequent monster attacks. The people began to starve, some even to death; in some cases, people went as far as burning down the nobles' mansions in search of food. It was as if our entire country had fallen under some kind of curse.

One day, father gathered the nobles and knights in the royal chamber to hold a speech. I couldn't hide my shock when I heard what he told them. He said:

What our country needs most at this moment is to resurrect the Demon King.

The cause of all the chaos that plagues us is the miasma. It covers our land and causes our crops to wither, attracts monsters, and leads the people's hearts astray, tempting them to violence.

I say our *land, but it is not only our kingdom that suffers. Each and every problem in this entire world is brought about by the miasma. Were we to resurrect the Demon King and allow him to rule over our land, all of our current problems would be resolved—the Demon King would be able to absorb the miasma and use it as energy.*

Should the Demon King be resurrected, the miasma would disappear, and our crops would no longer fail, ending starvation. He

would also be able to rein in the monsters that attack us. With the Demon King reigning over everyone, conflicts between all people would cease.

It was a poorly thought out speech that normally would've been dismissed outright. Depending on the country, anyone suggesting something like that might have ended up getting branded as a traitor to humanity and executed.

Yet the very king of our country had just suggested exactly that.

It had really been nothing more than reckless ravings. However—

The nobles and knights, who had been skeptical at the start, gradually began to change their attitudes as they heard the passion with which my father spoke. The reason they started giving credence to his speech was probably because the entire kingdom had absolute trust in my father—so everybody had come to believe that if *he* had said such a thing, then it must have been true.

Above all, though, everyone had felt so backed against the wall that they were no longer able to make levelheaded decisions. In the throes of such a desperate situation, the spider web that had descended upon them probably seemed to glimmer with light.

Before I knew it, everyone's beliefs had been changed. They had begun to think that resurrecting the Demon King was the right thing for them to do—that it would benefit not only the kingdom, but all of humanity. Somehow everybody was grateful for this idea which, to me, was completely unfathomable.

I remember feeling extremely scared by the fact that something so clearly wrong in my eyes was believed to be the correct path by everybody else.

From that point on, father began to spread his views across the entire country. He would give entire speeches about how resurrecting the Demon King was their path to the future, and that there was no other way to ensure the survival of Sorcera. He would also spread the news that the people of Astaroth, who were keeping us from our desired goal by protecting the Orb of Light, were our enemies.

As citizens gathered in the square listened to him, the dubious looks on their faces would inevitably transform into expressions of fervent admiration—it was truly a bizarre sight.

He was convincing the people that black was white. The people, stuck in dire straits, were reaching out to grab hold of the spider web suspended above them—though to me, it seemed like such a tenuous, unreliable thing to hang onto.

When his speech was over, the square had been taken over by a bizarre fervor. I almost felt as though if father had ordered everyone to take their own lives, they would've gladly obeyed him.

I started to wonder if I might have been the one mistaken. Perhaps father and the people of our country had been right all along, and I had been wrong. I even considered whether resurrecting the Demon King might actually have been in our best interests for the future after all.

Then, one day, I witnessed something.

My father was in the royal chamber speaking with one of his retainers, and there were two horns protruding from the man's forehead—something no human should have. It was proof beyond a doubt that he was a demon.

Despite the fact that his origins had been uncertain, the retainer had been appointed to a position of trust soon after my father had started acting strange. The people figured he had simply been assigned a fitting position regardless of his origins because of his great ability—using my recruitment of Alma as a prior example.

I heard the retainer call my father "Lord Baron"—not his actual name, but one I'd never heard before. That was when I started to think that the man before me might not be my father after all, but someone else who had taken on his form.

In an effort to confirm my suspicions, I researched everything I could about the name *Baron*. In the end, I discovered that Baron was one of the feared vassals of the Demon King's army—one of its Four Generals. I suspected that either my father's mind was being controlled by Baron or his body had been possessed; either way, that meant my father hadn't changed of his own free will.

It was that simple: my country had been brainwashed by the demon, Baron. He had used my father's body to try and incite our people into resurrecting the Demon King.

At the rate things were going, Sorcera would start a war on Astaroth before too long—and if that happened, both countries would suffer needless bloodshed.

So I came to a decision: I would snap everyone out of their brainwashing. I went around telling everyone that my father was an impostor—a demon pretending to be the king. I told them that all the demons wanted was to resurrect their king, and to make that happen they had been spreading the lie that the Demon King's mere presence would save our country and all of humanity.

However, no matter how hard I tried to convince them, nobody would listen to me, and soon enough, they started to brand me as a heretic.

Then, when my father caught wind of what I was doing, he tried to have me eliminated. He used our fellow countrymen to entrap me, labeling me a witch who was an enemy to mankind.

By all rights, I should have been apprehended and executed. But Alma, at risk to her own life, assisted me in fleeing the country. If they had found her, she would've been executed as well, but she had helped me nonetheless.

Once she had gotten me out of the country, I made my way to Astaroth and informed the King about everything. I told him that I was a princess of Sorcera and that I had fled to Astaroth to escape King Sodom, who was being controlled by a demon. I let him know that if things stayed as they were, Sorcera was likely to attack Astaroth someday, then pleaded with him to help me save my homeland.

However, the King did not grant my wish. He didn't believe that I was who I said I was, so he sent an envoy there to confirm. What they told him was that the princess had been executed; Sorcera had already decided to treat me as if I were dead.

With nowhere left to go, I decided I would join the Guard Corps. I had failed to save my country because I was too weak. That was why I had to make myself stronger—strong enough to slay Baron and to protect the precious lives of the people.

I made an appeal to Commander Bolton, telling him there was a good reason that I absolutely had to get stronger, no matter what—and he was kind enough to let me into the guards.

After that, I trained excruciatingly hard, day and night, so I could become strong enough to return to my homeland someday and free the people of Sorcera from Baron's grip with my own two hands.

I was surprised to see Alma again—not to mention learn about her amnesia. However, I was deeply relieved to know she

was alive too. Ever since she had helped me escape, I had been worried sick that something horrible might've happened to her.

Above all else, though, when I heard that the army of Sorcera had attacked Milleon Bridge, I was in complete shock. I realized that the time I feared had finally come.

***

Once Seira had caught us up on her journey thus far, she finally paused to catch her breath.

The reason that she, a foreign princess, had joined the Guard Corps was so that she could personally take back her homeland, which had been thrown into chaos by the demon named Baron—one of the Four Generals of the Demon King's army.

"So," I began, "the reason that prisoner called you a witch who betrayed the country was because you were trying to deter the populace from their attempt to resurrect the Demon King—out of your desire to *save* the country."

"Yes. Though he wasn't wrong either... It's true that I abandoned my country and ran. I can't make any excuse for that." Seira put a hand to her chest, her expression pained. "Because of my cowardice, war has broken out, and now both of our countries have suffered needless bloodshed. If you hadn't been there on the battlefield, Sieg, Milleon Bridge would be in their hands, and so many people in the Royal Capital probably would've lost their lives."

Much blood had indeed been spilled in the battle at Milleon Bridge, and apparently Seira was under the impression that it was her fault. The weight of the guilt she felt on her shoulders was obvious from the tormented look on her face.

"Sieg, you mentioned something a while back...something about a skill you had that transfers damage you've taken to someone else, right?"

"Yeah."

She was talking about *Pain Movement*—using that skill would allow me to transfer damage I'd taken to others. Alternatively, it would also let me transfer damage taken by others to myself, instead.

"Then I have a favor to ask. Could you please let me take on all the damage you took at Milleon Bridge?"

"Excuse me?" I balked.

“If I had been able to stop everyone back then, none of those injuries would’ve happened.”

“So you want to take responsibility for that?”

Seira nodded. “Obviously I don’t believe this will absolve me of everything—but I want to shoulder at least a little bit of the burden of dealing with the feelings of those who didn’t make it.”

Ah, so she wants to take on the damage dealt to me by the fallen Sorcera soldiers as punishment for her own powerlessness, then. She’s being crushed under the weight of her guilt right now, so she’s probably trying to protect her mental state by punishing herself.

“What do you plan on doing after that?” I asked.

Seira paused for a moment before responding. “I’ll go back to Sorcera. There should be some time left before they try to invade again. I’ll take Baron’s head before that can happen. And also,” she added, “If I can kill the demon who managed to sneak in as a retainer, it might help dispel the mass brainwashing of our people.”

“I see,” I responded. “In that case, I’m afraid I can’t help with the favor you’ve asked of me.”

“What?”

“How do you expect to fight after taking on that much damage?” I asked. “Besides, I have no intention of letting you go back there anyway. If you returned to Sorcera in your current state and tried to take on one of the demons’ Four Generals, it’s highly unlikely you’d win.”

Confronted by these harsh words, Seira lowered her head, fists clenching, as if in acknowledgment of her own powerlessness.

“I know… I know that more than anyone. But I can’t just sit back and watch this happen. I need to fight to protect the people.” Murmuring these words, she turned and started to walk out—but I grabbed her by the arm and stopped her before she could.

“Going over there right now isn’t going to change anything, though. As sergeant of the Fifth Squadron, I’m not going to let my subordinates get themselves killed for no reason.”

“What *should* I do, then?! I already know I’m not powerful enough! I know I’ll probably die in vain! But I absolutely can’t just sit here watching, twiddling my thumbs and doing nothing at all!” Her voice was strained with desperation. “Tell me, Sieg…what am I supposed to do? How do I save my country…?”

“That’s simple,” I said. “Let us help you.”

“Huh…?”

Seira looked up in surprise. Judging by her expression, apparently she had never even considered that option.

“You might not be able to accomplish anything alone,” I explained. “But if we’re there with you, there’s a possibility we could turn things around.”

“B-But I don’t want to get everyone caught up in this any further…”



“That may be how *you* feel, sure. But not once have *I* felt I didn’t want to be caught up in this,” I assured her. “Besides, if we don’t do something, Sorcera’s forces are going to attack Astaroth. This isn’t just your problem, Seira.”

I took a deep breath and added one more thing: “Either way, princess or not, I consider you a member of the Fifth Squadron before all else. As your sergeant, I’m rejecting your request for solitary action.”

Seira fell silent, at a loss for words.

Spinoza gave her a big grin. “You don’t gotta try and take on everything yourself—you can toss a little somethin’ my way. Pretty sure I’m dependable enough for at least that, y’know?”

Fam chuckled. “If Spinoza’s going to speak up, I suppose I’ll have to put my name on the list as well. I would shudder to be considered less dependable than *her*, of all people.”

“Hm. I’ll help too, then!” Alma chimed in. “Apparently I used to work before you before I lost my memory, after all…and I owe you a lot for helping me out since I arrived here too.”

Every single one of us seemed to be in agreement.

“Why are you all so kind to me…?”

“Because everyone loves you,” I explained. “We all love you, so we all want to help you in any way we can. You aren’t alone in this, Seira,” I told her in no uncertain terms. “We’re here with you. If there’s a burden on your shoulders, we’ll share it with you. So please, don’t ever hesitate to ask for our help.”

The others all nodded emphatically.

Upon hearing that, Seira nodded, her eyes moist with tears. “Thank you, everyone… Thank you so much…!”

Then, finally, she addressed us. “Please…lend me your strength. Come with me and help me save my homeland—help me save Sorcera!”

“Well, that’s that, then,” I said. “The Fifth Squadron’s next mission is as follows: force our way into the Kingdom of Sorcera and slay Baron—and in doing so, stop the war between our two countries.”

My comrades nodded. When it came to helping Seira out, we were all of the same mind.

Chapter 8: The Battle at Sorcera

Sodom, the King of Sorcera, stood atop the balcony attached to his royal chamber, looking down across the cityscape of the royal capital that stretched out below him.

His appearance might have been that of Sodom, but his personality was someone else's entirely: he was actually Baron, one of the Four Generals of the Demon King's army, and he had taken control of the king.

It had taken him a long time to reach this point; compared to the other generals, Baron had relatively few demon subordinates—far too few to attack Astaroth. So instead, he had hatched a plan to make the entire kingdom of Sorcera his puppets.

After taking over the king's body, he had spent years and years planting the idea across the entire kingdom that resurrecting the Demon King would be their salvation, and after all that, he could finally see before him the web of strings with which he was puppeteering the kingdom.

By all rights, the Demon King, my lord, should already have been resurrected. Our demon utopia, shrouded in darkness, should already have manifested unto this world. But my plans were thwarted—not just once, but twice.

The first time was when I stoked the embers of that adventurer in Estahl and had him attack Astaroth. He was wallowing in his sense of inferiority, so I tempted him with power and made him a demon. I then sent him out with a horde of monsters to raid the Royal Capital —but that ended in failure.

The second time—I sent Sorcera's army to Milleon Bridge, but they were defeated. We had thousands upon thousands of troops, yet they were unable to penetrate the lines of the defensive forces who numbered fewer than one hundred.

According to our reports, the Fifth Squadron of the Guard Corps played a key role in the battle each time—especially the Fifth Squadron's sergeant, Sieg. They say he defended against every single attack all by himself.

His existence is the greatest single threat to my plan to resurrect my lord. He must be eliminated.

Just then, Baron received a report that the Fifth Squadron he was so concerned about had invaded Sorcera—and that Aria, Princess of Sorcera, was among the members of the squadron.

So she had managed to escape to Astaroth and join their guards, had she? I suppose she's come to slay me and put a stop to the war?

Well, her wish shall not come true. I am not controlling the inhabitants of this country directly; I merely used their king's form to incite them into believing they're doing the right thing. Even if I were to die, the ideology I've imprinted into the minds of the people will live on. There is no way for you to stop this war.

Besides...none of you can defeat me. I possess the body of Sodom Sorcera, the Sword Saint. In terms of pure combat ability, none of you can best me.

This country may as well be my own domain. No matter how much faith you may have in your abilities, you cannot survive long if the entire nation is against you.

Now, foolish trapped rats—I shall show you what true suffering is.

***

We departed Astaroth and headed toward Sorcera. Though the Milleon Bridge, which was the main path to Sorcera territory, had fallen, small groups of people like ours could cross the river by boat.

We had to set up camp a few times along the way, but eventually we reached Sorcera. There, Seira led us in through an underground waterway that connected from the outer moat to the inside of the country.

After walking through the dimly lit tunnel for a while, we came to a ladder that led to the surface. Once we opened the iron lid at the top and came out, we were officially in Sorcera.

"Whew...we finally made it." Letting out a massive stretch, Spinoza began looking around the area. "So this is your homeland, huh, Seira?"

"Yes. I haven't been here in a very long time." She stared at the cityscape, looking rather emotional.

"Huh? What's that?" Spinoza's surveying gaze came to a halt. There was a strange device installed on one of the city's outdoor lights.

"That's a loud-hailer. In addition to giving speeches in the public squares, Baron would also use them to incite mobs."

“Hm… It seems to be set up to react to communication magic and amplify the speaker’s voice. That means I could probably use it as well.”

“Do you have some information you want to spread to the public, Fam?” I asked.

“Nope…not a thing. I’m shy, after all. Just the thought of something I say turning into a public speech makes my face feel flushed.” Fam’s cheeks were indeed tinged slightly red.

“What do we do next, Sieg?” Alma asked.

“We find out where Baron is, defeat him, and stop the war,” I said firmly.

“Baron has taken over my father’s body, so he must be in the castle. I can lead us there,” Seira offered.

“Perfect. You and Alma will need to be extra careful, though,” I warned. “Everybody knows who you are around here, so things will get nasty really quick if someone sees you.”

In Sorcera, Seira was a princess, and Alma was the commander of the Royal Guard. Their faces were most likely well-known among the citizens. On top of that, though, the people believed Seira was a witch who had betrayed her country; if they discovered her identity, things would definitely turn into an absolute mess.

“…I know.” Seira pulled the robe and hood she was wearing farther down.

“Oh yeah. I guess I’m pretty famous here, right? Does that mean if I start walking down the main street, I could just…*get respect* from the people?!”

“Alma, stop. Keep terrible ideas like that out of your head,” I warned her.

“Hey, keep your damn hood on!” Spinoza hissed.

“Owww! You pulled it down too far! Now I can’t see where I’m going!” Spinoza had pulled Alma’s hood down completely over her head. Her eyes covered, Alma started flailing her arms and legs frantically.

We’re supposed to be in a serious situation right now. Having Alma around is really making things weird…

The streets were alive with the bustle of people—the sounds of footsteps, shouts of merchants hawking their wares, echoes of shared laughter. Children were running around, innocent smiles on their faces.

“This definitely isn’t what I expected from a place that’s under

demon control," I remarked.

"That's because they aren't being controlled directly. At a glance, they just seem like normal people. Even they themselves don't have any awareness that they've been manipulated. That's why this is such a difficult situation."

Having your thoughts controlled without ever realizing it…having an ideology implanted into you and being convinced it was your own…it felt even more evil than simply being controlled outright.

Suddenly, static erupted from the loud-hailer on a nearby streetlight. Alarmed, we turned to look. The device, which had been dead silent up until then, began to emit a deep, male voice—and the moment I heard what he was saying, my entire body tensed up.

"Guards from Astaroth have infiltrated our kingdom. I repeat: guards from Astaroth have infiltrated our kingdom. There are five enemies in total. As soon as they are found, all knights and guards are to eliminate them with full force. Regarding their appearances: all of them are wearing robes, and their leader, a male, is—"

The loud-hailer then proceeded to list off all of our physical characteristics—with perfect accuracy, as if the speaker could see at us at that very moment.

"That's…my father's voice! I'm sure of it!" Seira declared.

"But how does he know exactly what we look like right now? Is he hiding around here somewhere?" I asked.

"He might be in a location where he can see the entire Royal Capital…or he might be using some kind of magic," Fam theorized.

"Whoa, whoa, either way, we're in deep shit now, aren't we?" Spinoza sputtered.

Baron's words were being transmitted all throughout Sorcera via the loud-hailers. That meant information about what we, their enemies, looked like was being shared with every citizen across the country.

That was when I started to feel that something was off. The city had been bustling up to that point, but I suddenly realized that the noise had died down, leaving the area filled with an eerie silence.

Looking around us, I saw that all the people walking in the streets had stopped, and they were staring in our direction. We were surrounded by rows and rows of glassy eyes—all of which

began to fill with hostility.

We immediately took off like bats out of hell.

“It’s them!”

“After them! Don’t let them get away!”

Soon we had guards and knights chasing after us, and as time went on, their numbers increased more and more.

We turned onto another street, but waiting at the end was another set of guards.

“Crap!” Spinoza spat.

“Looks like they’ve laid out a perimeter for us,” I grunted.

The pursuers behind us were closing in as well; we were all out of escape routes.

Both groups, wielding swords, spears, and other weapons, glared at us sharply, their eyes filled with clear animosity.

“We can’t allow people like you, who would hinder the resurrection of the Demon King, to live. For the sake of our country, all of you must die!”

“Damn, looks like we’ve gotta fight ’em this time,” Spinoza muttered. She pulled out the war hammer she had been carrying and held it at the ready. The rest of us followed suit, getting into our battle stances. A tense air filled the area between us and our opponents.

Then, just as it seemed that fighting was about to break out at any second—

“Please, wait!” Seira shouted, shattering the tense atmosphere. “It’s not possible to save our country by resurrecting the Demon King! You’ve been manipulated by the words of a demon!”

When they heard her voice, the pursuers were shocked.

“Are you…Princess Aria?! I thought you had been executed…”

“You say we’ve been manipulated…? That’s ridiculous!”

“King Sodom enlightened us with the truth! A king’s word cannot be wrong! The Demon King’s resurrection will be our country’s salvation!”

“You don’t understand! My father the king has been possessed by a demon named Baron—part of the Demon King’s army! He’s using my father’s body to incite you so he can fulfill his own agenda! He wants to use you all as pawns to steal back the Orb of Light!” Seira let out a desperate plea. “Resurrecting the Demon King won’t solve Sorcera’s problems! Please, everyone, open your eyes!”

However—our pursuers were not swayed by her words.

"*You're* the one who's trying to brainwash us, filthy witch! We'll slit your throat so you can't spit out any more lies!"

"Let's execute her for real this time!"

The speakers' spears thrust toward Seira, causing her to gasp in shock. However, before the weapons could pierce Seira's slender throat, I leaped in front of her and took all of the attacks myself.

As I did so, Spinoza took a massive swing at our attackers, sending them flying. One of the men let out a pained grunt as he slammed violently into some of the other pursuers, knocking them over as well.

I saw immediately that a breach had been formed in their perimeter.

"Run! Now!"

We broke through their encirclement at the point of the breach, dashing off toward an abandoned alleyway in an effort to shake off our pursuers. After going around corner after corner in the mazelike alleys, we finally sensed no one behind us.

"Well...it seems like we finally lost them," I said.

We came to a halt there in the alleyway, finally able to take a short breath.

"I'm going to survey the area... Everybody wait here," Fam said.

"Okay," I replied. "Thanks, Fam."

Once Fam had left to go scout, Seira began to murmur quietly, "Will they be all right...?"

"I didn't hit 'em with the business end. It won't kill 'em," Spinoza asserted.

"Oh, I see..." Seira looked down, a somber expression on her face.

After a while, Fam finally returned.

"How do things look?" I asked.

"The pursuers are still searching for us, it seems. There are an awful lot of them too. I can't help but wonder if they've fully mobilized their knights and guards."

"That's not good. With that many people after us, we won't be able to get anywhere by fighting and pushing past them. We're going to have a tough time reaching the castle," I muttered.

"When the next group of pursuers finds us, I'm going to try and talk them down again. If things go well, we might be able to

make it to the castle without fighting at all."

I couldn't help but object to Seira's suggestion. "Seira, it's pointless to try and discuss things with them. They've already been brainwashed by Baron—they won't listen to any of your arguments."

"But they aren't under his complete control, are they?" she pointed out.

"That's right. If what Seira said is true, the people of Sorcera have only been brainwashed. Apart from that, they're no different from normal people," Fam explained.

"Which means that I should still be able to convince them."

"Why are you so insistent on that?" I wondered.

"I've already run away once—from both Sorcera itself and from facing its people. This time, I don't want to run from anything. Also," Seira added, "I don't ever want to give up on trying to find mutual understanding."

A powerful light of determination burned in Seira's eyes. It was the kind of inextinguishable strength present only within those who had fully steeled their resolve.

What she had said about running away from facing things struck a chord in me; I had a very similar regret myself.

Back when I was in the Crimson Fangs, when Nacht had started slowly losing his grip on reality, I had just sat there giving him the side-eye; I had never confronted him directly. I had given up before even trying, figuring it was impossible to change people.

Seira, however, was different. She looked other people in the eye and never gave up on telling them exactly how she felt. She believed it was possible to come to a mutual understanding.

"I'll plead our case to the people who are chasing us. Then, once they're on our side, I'll see to it that they guide us to the castle without a fight."

"Whoa, now. That's crazy talk," Spinoza groaned.

"I think it's a bad idea too," Fam agreed.

"Hm. I agree, that's gonna be a tough sell," Alma thirded.

Not a single one of our comrades was on board.

"You tell her too, Sieg," Spinoza prodded.

Under normal circumstances, as Seira's squad sergeant, it would have been my duty to stop her—to tell her I couldn't let her make such a risky gamble. However...

"All right. We'll let you handle it, Seira."

I decided to go ahead and respect her wishes.

“Huh?” came the inevitable chorus of voices.

“Whuh?! Are you kiddin’ me?!” Spinoza shouted incredulously.

“It’s going to be difficult to reach the castle as things stand. Let’s go ahead and try our hand at persuading them. If things go south, I can protect us,” I assured them.

Seira was going to attempt something that I had never been able to do, and that was why I wanted to put my faith in her. It was a decision made completely based on my own personal feelings—not exactly a commendable decision for a squad sergeant to make. However, we were out of options at that point. We were surrounded by our pursuers and had no way to reach the castle where Baron was; why not try relying on Seira’s powers of persuasion?

“Sieg… Thank you.”

Once Seira had said that, the others couldn’t help but chime in.

“Sheesh… I guess we did say we’d help share your burden, huh. I’ll follow ya to hell and back, if that’s our next stop,” Spinoza said with a smirk.

“I can agree with that,” Fam added.

“Don’t worry! This is Seira we’re talking about; I’m sure things will go fine! She’s a good person, after all. I can guarantee that much!” Alma asserted.

“I won’t let your sentiments go to waste, everyone… I promise I’ll measure up to them.”

Seira’s eyes were unwavering as she said those words of resolve, and I felt myself almost flinch under her gaze. That pure, sincere light was something that did not reside within me—and that light might be able to illuminate the way for Sorcera. It might be able to break the people free from Baron’s brainwashing.

The only thing within my power was to protect Seira to the end.

After having lain low in the back alleys for a while, we finally made our move. Sticking our heads out of the proverbial water, we maneuvered our way back to the main road.

It didn’t take too long for our pursuers to notice us and come running our way. As we heard their footsteps draw closer, Seira announced, “I’ll talk to them. Even if they start attacking me, please, *don’t* use your skills, Sarge.”

“Wait, what…?” I asked in confusion. “You realize what you’re wearing, right? Taking even one hit could be fatal for you. It’s my duty to protect you—I can’t do what you’re asking me to.”

“My thought is that I need to be completely defenseless, or this will lose all meaning. If my words don’t come from a place of vulnerability, they’ll never reach the hearts of the people.”

“If you make one wrong move, they’ll eat you alive,” I warned.

“I’ll do my absolute best to make sure that doesn’t happen,” she responded, ready to see things through one way or the other.

She was right; people who know they won’t be hurt don’t display the same kind of gravitas. So I resolved to simply watch over her from afar.

When we inevitably found ourselves surrounded, Seira stepped out in front of the rest of us, then slowly started approaching our pursuers, step by step, until she at last stood face-to-face with them.

“Please listen to me, everybody. My father, Sodom, has had his body taken over by a demon. I saw it myself: he met in secret with a demon who had been posing as his retainer. The retainer didn’t call my father ‘Sodom’; he called him ‘Baron.’ Baron is the name of one of the vassals in the Demon Lord’s army known as the Four Generals, special demons who despise mankind and are clearly our enemies. He doesn’t want to resurrect the Demon King to help our country; all he wants is for the demons to control the entire world!”

Seira looked across her people, continuing her speech. “Everything Baron has told you using my father’s body has been a lie—words he made up to justify sending our kingdom’s troops to attack Astaroth. Resurrecting the Demon King will *not* resolve any of the problems that are plaguing our country. Everyone, please believe me! If things continue on this path, both of our countries will only suffer needless bloodshed!”

“That’s ridiculous! King Sodom, a demon?! Enough of your insults and lies! The words of our king cannot be wrong!”

“Don’t let the simplicity of the things he said fool you!” Seira pleaded in response. “He’s trying to take advantage of you while you’re in a vulnerable state!”

Her words, though, seemed only to add more fuel to the fire. The pursuers began to look even more infuriated.

“Enough! I’ll listen to no more drivel from a traitorous witch

like you—I'll cut you down myself!" One of the enraged men, a knight, held up his sword and went in for an attack.

"Seira, look out!" Spinoza shouted.

It was a mighty strike unleashed from point-blank range—and though it would've been impossible to miss with such an attack, the blade stopped right as it reached Seira's face, causing her bangs to flutter slightly from the wind pressure. With the tip of the blade pressed up against her forehead, blood began to run down her face—yet her gaze did not falter.

Seeing this happen, the blade's owner stared in shock. "Why aren't you dodging...?! You think I'm afraid to kill you?! You'll get no mercy from me just because you used to be a princess!"

"I won't stop you. Kill me, then." The knight stood frozen under the effects of Seira's piercing gaze. Soon, she spoke once more to the bearded man: "What's the matter? I'm certain we taught you better swordsmanship than that—Harold."

"What?! H-How do you know my name...?" The man seemed flabbergasted. "You're our princess. You couldn't possibly know the name of a lowly knight like me. How did you get it right?"

"So you're still willing to call me your princess..." Seira said, casting a gentle smile at the man. "There's no way I could forget the names of the people with whom I protected our kingdom. I remember every last one of my knights and guards," she asserted without a moment's hesitation.

Turning her gaze from the knight in front of her to the rest of the pursuers, Seira began looking across the crowd. "You're Adel, you're Geld...Gastof, Folker. You're Victor. The man in the back is Folkhard, I believe." To prove she was speaking the truth, she correctly listed off the names of the guards and knights one after the other.

Apparently, none of them had expected a princess to remember their names; as each person's name was called, their bodies went rigid, as if they had been turned to stone. Everyone simply stood there in bewilderment.

"I've been fighting alongside Astaroth's Guard Corps ever since I first ended up there. At times, we've even worked together with their Knight Corps as we engaged in deadly battles," Seira said. "Every last one of them was willing to put their life on the line in combat—for the sake of protecting our world. What you're doing right now is an insult to that bravery."

"But if we don't resurrect the Demon King, then our country

will…” The knight’s murmur sounded pained, as if he were delirious from fever.

“We can get our country back on its feet without resorting to bringing the Demon King back. I can prove that to you with my own two hands,” Seira declared. Placing her hand on her chest, she stared unflinchingly at the pursuers before her. “The fact that I’m standing here before you right now is an indication of my resolve to do exactly that. If you instead believe that I’m a traitor, please, strike me down.”

The knight and guards brought their weapons up in preparation to attack. However, Seira simply stood there, not showing even the slightest shred of fear. Her assailants faltered in the face of such sheer determination, unable to actually swing the weapons they had raised.

“Hurry! Strike me down!” Seira shouted, urging the men on.

“I…I can’t do it,” one of the pursuers muttered, lowering his spear meekly. “Once…when I was wounded on a mission, Princess Aria tended to my wounds personally. She was so kind, even to someone as lowly as me. There’s no way I could slay someone who’s done so much for me.”

Hearing that, one of the older knights put his sword down as well. “When my daughter came down with a sickness, the princess went to the ends of the earth to procure a medicine for her. She put in all that effort for a nobody knight like me…”

“King Sodom said that Princess Aria is a witch who’s turned against our country, but I can’t believe such a thing. There’s no way I could put her to the blade.”

One after another, the pursuers all lowered their weapons. All of them had probably been indebted to Seira in some form or other. Even in her homeland, she had always treated everybody as equals—and because of that, nobody could bring themselves to attack her.

Looking at the men, their heads hung and their weapons lowered ineffectually, Seira took in a deep breath and spoke her heart out to them.

“Please. I want you to believe me when I tell you about my true feelings regarding our kingdom—and about my resolve moving forward. I, Aria Sorcera, have returned here to save our country—to save all of you.”

She then gave an earnest appeal in hopes of reaching the men’s hearts: “I would like you to take us to where my father is.

Then you can decide for yourselves whether I'm worthy of your trust."

As the men looked on at Seira, I could see that the hostility that had been present in their eyes previously was gone—replaced with expressions that made me think they could finally see light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

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The pursuers took us all the way to the castle. They didn't necessarily trust Seira completely, but at least it seemed certain that her words had moved them.

They contacted the other groups that were after us using communication magic, then led us through their own assigned area—where the other groups wouldn't be in the way. Eventually we made it to the castle without encountering anyone else at all.

"We'll stay here to keep any reinforcements that arrive from rushing in," one of the men who guided us there said. "May luck be with you, Princess Aria."

"Thank you all. I won't let your feelings go to waste."

We proceeded into the castle. Inside were a number of guards on watch duty, but they numbered far fewer than the pursuers who had been sent after us outside, so Fam was able to use her stealth skills to incapacitate them without us being noticed.

Eventually, we reached the topmost level—the royal chamber.

Baron is probably behind these doors...

I pushed the massive double doors open. In the back of the room stood a man clothed in a regal outfit, facing away from us. He spoke to us as he peered out the window.

"I was told the invaders had been struck down," he said, his stately voice reverberating across the room. "Why, then, do they enter my chamber right now...?"

The man turned around and looked down upon us. He had a stern face, lined deeply with wrinkles. He was tall, and his broad physique was apparent even through his royal robes.

Seira had said King Sodom was powerful enough to be known as the Sword Saint—apparently she knew what she was talking about. By looks alone, he certainly gave off the aura of a formidable opponent.

"The pursuers I sent gave me false information, then. Their hearts were won over by my dear Aria, no doubt... I shall have to

punish them severely later," the king said. He spread his arms and grinned.



“Welcome home, Aria. And you as well, Alma. You’ve come such a long way to see me—I’m sure there’s much you’d like to talk with me about. You must forgive me for trying to have you arrested so long ago. I merely wanted you to take some time to reflect after spouting such strange things. I never had any intention of actually having you executed. If nothing else, please believe me when I say that.”

“Please stop pretending to be my father.” Seira glared, flatly rejecting the man’s offer. “You are not King Sodom. You’re one of the Four Generals of the Demon King’s army—Baron. You can’t fool me with your silver tongue.”

“It’s so difficult dealing with daughters when they reach that rebellious age… How can I make you believe me? Shall we speak frankly and have a heart-to-heart discussion, then?” It seemed he was ready to pose as the King to the very end.

“No matter what you might say—I saw you actually consorting with a demon. That means that as a princess of this country, it’s my duty to slay you.” With that, Seira pointed her sword at King Sodom—indicating that it didn’t matter whether he was Sodom or Baron, she was going to cut him down all the same.

As soon as he saw this, the smile vanished from Sodom’s face, and he let out an exasperated sigh. His eyes glassed over in annoyance. “—For crying out loud. Such a cold reception for such a long-awaited reunion—couldn’t you at least pretend to be a *little* happy to see me?”

From somewhere beneath the skin on King Sodom’s face, an inhuman smirk—no doubt belonging to Baron himself—surfaced. It was enough to strike sheer reflexive fear into the heart of anyone who saw it.

Baron looked us over, his eyes eventually landing on Alma.

“Alma…I heard you had disappeared unexpectedly from our kingdom. I see you’re still alive—and you even managed to rejoin Aria and her friends. How fortuitous you’ve been,” Baron said. “Tell me—you didn’t happen to end up with a case of amnesia, did you?”

“Hm? How did you know that?” Alma blinked.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. It just means things are working properly.”

What does he mean by that…?

Whatever he was insinuating, Baron turned his gaze to me

once he was finished talking.

"So you are Sieg. How nice to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you—about how hard a time you've been giving my underlings for so long now."

"So one of the Four Generals of the Demon King's army knows who I am. I suppose I should be honored," I spat. "But I don't recall ever dealing with you. You never did any fighting yourself; you just sat back in a safe spot and watched the whole time, didn't you?"

"Only a foolish general puts themselves on the front lines," Baron responded. "I've been told *you* are the reason my incursions into Astaroth thus far have failed. You've foiled my plans not just once but twice. Color me impressed by your mettle." He smiled gently as he said this, but his voice was laced with an unmistakable irritation.

"I don't understand what you mean by 'twice.' I know the Sorcera soldiers were under your control, and you were pulling the strings from the shadows when they invaded us. Are you saying you were behind another incident as well?"

"Indeed I am. If you hadn't been there, my first invasion would have ended in the resurrection of our dark lord. That one had some adventurer commanding a horde of our monsters—I believe his name was Nacht."

"*What* did you say...?"

The scene in front of me began to sway, and I felt like I was about to lose my balance. Putting my unsteady breathing back into proper rhythm, I focused on maintaining control of my faculties as I asked him my next question.

"Did you just say...*Nacht*? So you were involved in his attack on Astaroth, then...?"

"Correct. I was the one who instigated him into attacking your royal capital—and turned him into a demon, as well. Though to be more precise, the subordinates I sent out were the ones who did that."

Baron and everything else in my field of vision had gone red. I felt my temples throbbing; the blood rushing through my body was boiling. It felt as though my sense of reason was about to be swept away by the intense fury building up inside me.

So Baron was the one who tempted Nacht away from the path of humanity? This man *was the one pulling the strings when Nacht took on a demon form, destroyed Estahl and killed so many people,*

then led an army of monsters in an attack on Astaroth?

If Baron hadn't tempted him with power, Nacht might not have had to die. He might have been able to stay human.

It was all meaningless conjecture by that point, but I couldn't help but think about it.

"To think that the one behind Nacht getting dragged over to the demon side was you all along…"

"Ah, I see—*you* were the comrade who was the source of Nacht's inferiority complex, weren't you? He chose to take on a demon form out of his intense desire to kill you, you know." It seemed Baron's memory had been jogged after seeing my response. "Such a powerful inferiority complex it was too. It was quite easy to convince him to turn, honestly. He did some excellent work as my pawn."

"I'd stop talking now if I were you," I warned.

I had to keep repeating to myself, *Losing your cool in battle is like handing victory to your opponents.* Otherwise, I risked falling into a mindless rage.

"Seira, apparently I have my own reason to take down Baron now," I declared.

"Right," she agreed.

We've got to take this bastard down right here, right now—as payback for Nacht too.

I unsheathed my sword and assumed a battle stance. Each of my comrades brought their weapons to the ready as well.

"You may think you have me cornered, but I'm afraid you're the cornered ones here. Did you think a general wouldn't have any other units hidden around him?"

A number of knights who had been concealed in the shadows stepped out in response to Baron's call. I felt a powerful animosity toward us emanating from each and every one of them.

"Please, don't do this!" Seira pleaded with the knights. "Didn't you hear what he just said?! That man isn't my father—he's a demon who's taken over his body!"

"That won't work. They'll never listen to you," Baron declared, a twisted smile appearing on his face. "They're not humans, after all."

"Huh?" Seira's eyes went wide.

"They're my demon subordinates. They've taken human forms and slipped in among the knights. It makes the knights much

easier to manipulate."

With a snap of his fingers, Baron's illusion magic was lifted, and the knights' features twisted back into their original forms. The horns sprouting from their foreheads indicated their true nature as demons.

Apparently Baron wasn't the only one who had wormed his way into the heart of Sorcera; quite a few demons had taken up residence there.

"I see. That's a relief to hear," I said.

"A relief?" Baron looked at me, perplexed.

"Yeah," I informed him. "If we're fighting demons, we can kill them with zero hesitation."

"Hmph. We'll see just how long that confidence of yours lasts," he responded with a mocking grin. "Once I've killed the lot of you, Astaroth is as good as fallen—and soon after, the day of our lord the Demon King's resurrection shall be at hand!"

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The demons attacked us as a group. I deflected the first incoming sword strike with a parry, then cut my opponent down while he was wide open. It took only one blow to a vital point to finish him.

Baron shouted orders at his demon subordinates. "Forget about him! Go after the others!"

The demons began to ignore me and attempted to focus on my comrades as instructed.

I don't think so.

"*Iron Target!*"

I activated my skill, forcing the enemies' attention onto me. Against their own will, they began swarming me with their attacks. As always, I took every one of their blows.

With our opponents left vulnerable to attack, the rest of my squadron began tearing through them one after the other—Spinoza swinging her war hammer, Seira and Alma wielding their swords, and Fam supporting with her bow and arrows. In terms of raw firepower alone, they likely rivaled the military of an entire country.

"Hah! Man, it's so easy to fight when Sieg's around!" Spinoza cheered.

"We can concentrate on our attacks without having to worry

about anything else!” Seira agreed.

“Hm. It makes me feel like I’ve gotten even stronger,” Alma mused.

“The problem is, when it’s this easy to make my arrows land, I worry my skills will get rusty. His presence could well make his allies lose their edge,” Fam pointed out.

When the battle had started, we had been vastly outnumbered—but soon the difference in number had been flipped in our favor. Baron watched as his demon allies were annihilated, and his self-confident smirk gradually began to stiffen.

“Gah…! How could they be so strong…” Baron then barked orders at his fallen comrades: “You’re not through yet, men! Get back up and fight!”

The demons, however, remained silent and motionless on the floor.

Seeing that, Baron clicked his tongue in irritation. “Ugh, useless fools…”

“Why don’t you take us on yourself instead of relying on your underlings?” I taunted.

“Very well… I’d be glad to.”

Baron tossed off the royal cloak he’d been wearing, then let out a loud battle cry to get his blood pumping. He drew his sword, raised it high into the air, and then brought it down swiftly.

“While I’m in control of the body of the Sword Saint, I cannot be defeated!”

The moment after his sword sliced through the air, a massive shock wave swept across the royal chamber, threatening to engulf my comrades as it approached.

I moved to stand in front of the rest of my team and, gritting my teeth, took the shock wave myself. It struck with tremendous force, making the attacks from the demons seem like cat scratches.

It was no wonder they called him the Sword Saint. King Sodom’s body certainly boasted an incredible magnitude of power.

“The others may have fallen, but as long as I have not, the battle isn’t over. I can defeat the lot of you by myself!”

Baron began to unleash sword strikes upon me with all the fury of a storm. I barely managed to defend against his torrent

of blows using my shield.

Despite the blinding speed of his attacks, I found myself able to follow their motion after taking enough of them.

There—! I see it!

As he took a swing at me, I matched his timing and knocked his sword aside with my shield.

“Wha—?!”

Upon my successful parry, Baron’s body was bent backward awkwardly. I immediately swung my own sword—and in that moment, my opponent’s left arm went sailing through the air, spurting blood everywhere.

“Now! Get him!”

My teammates all went after Baron at the same time. He desperately fended off their attacks, but taking on all of us at once was a nearly impossible task—especially now that he was down one arm.

Finally, a perfect opportunity arose to strike.

“Go, Seira!”

“Right!”

Seira jumped into Baron’s range. He attempted to counter her attack, but the speed of her sword strike beat out his counter—a feat possible due to both the extremely light bikini armor she wore and the sword skills she had honed through diligent daily training.

I thought she had him—however, the moment she was about to land her swing, Seira hesitated for the briefest moment.

Her hesitation did not escape Baron’s notice. He managed to dodge her strike at the last second, then unleashed his own attack to strike her down.

Not good—!

“*Iron Target!*” I called, standing next to her.

Baron’s blade came hurtling toward me instead.

That was a close one. If I had been just a split second later activating my skill, he would’ve landed a direct hit on Seira.

Baron then stepped backward, and we put some distance between each other.

“I’m sorry, Sarge…”

“Well, Sodom *is* your father. It’s natural to show some hesitation.”

“I wonder if there’s any way at all to release my father from Baron’s control. If there were just some way we could avoid

having to kill him…”

“Ah, so that’s what happened. I understand now,” Baron interjected, chuckling at the realization. “You can’t deliver the final blow because you don’t want to kill King Sodom. How convenient. That gives me free rein to take the offensive, then!”

He went after us once again, and I began taking his attacks. Our comrades attacked as well, but they weren’t trying to inflict lethal blows; they also seemed to be concerned about killing Seira’s father.

“This is bad. We can’t keep this up…” We were being driven back into a disadvantageous position.

“It seems even someone as sturdy as you starts to weaken once they take enough damage,” Baron gloated as he looked down at us. “As a parting gift, allow me to let you in on a little secret. This country has suffered from crop failures and monster attacks for a long time—and the one who caused those was none other than me. As one of the Four Generals of the Demon King’s army, my presence brought in the miasma, which caused the crops to fail—and I secretly orchestrated the unusual amount of monster attacks as well. I figured if I weakened the country, I could then capitalize on that fact to incite its citizens.”

Baron went on bragging about his dirty deeds. “Everything has been in the palm of my hand from the very start. Now, once I defeat you, I’ll take back the Orb of Light, and my long-awaited plan will finally come to fruition. Nobody will be able to stop me—now that I know that none of you can finish off King Sodom!”

“Damn…!”

“Now, let’s see just how long you last!”

Once again he began unleashing his furious attacks. Just as the fleeting thought hit me that we might not be able to last, though—

“*Aria…slay me!*”

A voice emanated from Baron’s body—but there was a quality in it that differed from what we had been hearing. The moment Seira heard that distinguished voice, her eyes shot open wide in surprise.

“That voice… Father…? Is that you?” she asked cautiously.

“*Yes, my child. I was finally able to get through to you now that Baron has lost one of his arms…though my control won’t last much*

longer, I'm certain."

King Sodom, having temporarily regained his senses, spoke to Seira. "*Baron has taken control of me. I cannot be saved. That is why I must ask you, Aria—strike us both down.*"

"But father..."

"*As princess of this country, your duty is to protect the lives of its citizens—do not concern yourself with* my *life. You know what must be done.*"

"I..."

I know, I heard her whisper in a voice that was barely perceptible. She was already well aware that it was her duty to slay the corrupted king. However, convincing herself to bring down her own father was not a simple task.

Seeing her hesitation, King Sodom spoke again. "*Aria. I'm certain I taught you that to defend what is most important to you, you must be strong. You cannot defend anything without strength.*"

"You did..."

"*Now you lie on the verge of giving into your emotions of the moment and losing sight of the bigger picture. Were you always such a hopelessly weak person?*"

Seira did not respond; she merely bit her lip upon hearing King Sodom's words.

"*You are my daughter, but you are also princess of this kingdom. Do not confuse your priorities. You striking me down will be the greatest gift you can give me.*" The king then softened his tone suddenly. "*You never did land a single blow on me, did you? This will be our final sparring session. Prove to me that you can defeat me—that you've become stronger. If you do that...I can pass on with peace of mind.*"

"Father..."

His tone at the end hadn't sounded like a king—it had been the gentle, caring voice of a father speaking to his daughter.

"All right, that's quite enough. What a blabbermouth." Apparently Baron had managed to quash Sodom's consciousness and had returned to his former self. "That sneaky bastard... I can't believe any of his spirit still remained. I should've expected as much from the Sword Saint. I'll see to it he never surfaces again, though." A smirk formed on Baron's face. "Now, shall we continue where we left off?"

Even after King Sodom's presence had left, Seira was still just standing there, and I soon found myself calling out to her:

“Seira!”

“I’m fine,” came her response. The hesitation that had been in her voice before was gone entirely. “I want everyone else to stand back, please. I will be the one to defeat my father.”

She brought her head up and stared straight at Baron—at the form of her father. A light of powerful determination burned within her bright, clear eyes.

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Ever since she was young, Aria had always opposed conflict. She was a kind child; rather than quarreling with others when their interests clashed with hers, she was always willing to prioritize their needs over her own.

The same was true when she practiced her swordsmanship. With the blood of the Sword Saint running through her veins, Aria’s aptitude for the blade was not bad by any means. However, she was lacking in one vital area: no matter what, her strikes never contained the aggressiveness needed to defeat her opponents. Kindhearted Aria was unable to harbor such aggressiveness toward others—even though it was the most important trait to have in a battle.

I wanted to raise Aria to be strong. Peace was something built on the foundation of strength as a deterring force. The ability to stir the hearts of the people with your words was important as well, but if I wanted her to lead our countrymen, I would need to instill in her the strength to be able to make them follow her orders.

To that end, I put her through harsh training; however, she did not live up to my expectations. Her sword skills continued to advance, but she was never able to obtain the kind of strength I wanted her to have. Not once in our training matches was she ever able to land a blow on me.

Though she lacked fighting spirit, Aria could be surprisingly strong-willed. One time this aspect of hers showed was when she tried to recruit Alma, who lived in the slums. Everyone in the royal court opposed her selection, myself included. Bringing in someone of such poor station to be a princess’s royal guard was completely unheard of.

However, Aria refused to give in. She insisted without hesitation that one’s social standing did not matter, and that if

someone had the proper aptitude for a job, they should be given employment. We bent to her strong will and allowed her recruitment of Alma to take place.

After that, I decided to train Alma in the sword as well. Just as Aria had said, she had had true talent as a swordfighter. Unlike my daughter, though, she also possessed a sufficient amount of aggressiveness.

I used to battle against the two of them almost every day…and I had come to the conclusion that Aria simply didn't have the talent for fighting.

However, I was apparently mistaken in that assessment. Her movements as she did battle with me earlier had improved so much that they were nearly unrecognizable. Both her poise and her skill with the sword had improved remarkably.

More than anything else, though, the thing she had been lacking the most—raw aggressiveness, the desire to defeat your opponent no matter what—she had finally found in spades.

I finally understood: Aria was the type of girl whose strength was demonstrated through defending others. She was able to tap into her full potential when acting for the sake of her kingdom and her comrades. It was no wonder she had never shown it during our training sessions.

Before I realized it, I had broken free from Baron's grasp and started speaking with my daughter. However, I knew it would be but a fleeting few moments; even then I could feel him struggling to regain control.

I've let you use my body as you please for a long time now…but I won't allow you to interrupt these brief moments with Aria. This is a battle between father and daughter—and my final opportunity to give her guidance.

I continued my battle with my child, resisting against Baron's control all the while.

Yes, that's it. That's the proper way to respond to a slash coming from the right.

I had told her those words time and time again.

No matter how overwhelmed she was, Aria kept coming at me. The sight made me feel almost as if we had returned to those long-gone days when I had been training her—though she had gotten much stronger since then.

I brought my sword down, aiming for her left shoulder.

Aria never could figure out how to respond to that particular

attack of mine. She would stand there not knowing what to do and end up being struck, often breaking into tears.

However—this time was different.

She dodged nimbly out of the way of my attack, then stepped back into range with one swift motion. It was an incredibly polished movement—far beyond my expectations. She must have practiced it countless times before; I could see the traces of unimaginably grueling training behind it.

I see now, Aria. You've been fighting this whole time, haven't you? While I've been under Baron's control, you've been trying desperately to take this country back…

Letting out a piercing cry, Aria unleashed her strike. With a flash, the tip of the blade pierced straight through my heart. It was a perfect thrust—one that left no room for complaint.

I crumpled down to my knees on the spot. As I slowly raised my head, I saw Aria there looking down at me, tears flowing down her cheeks. Large teardrops were falling one after the other, discoloring the ground below.



Aria…you needn't cry. Be proud; you landed a blow on me, missing an arm though I may have been. It was a magnificent strike. Now I can pass on with peace of mind.

I wanted to be able to tell you this out loud—but it seems I won't be allowed that luxury, so I shall just have to keep it deep within my heart:

Aria—I'm truly proud of you, my daughter.

Seira's fervent thrust pierced through Baron's heart.

Coughing up blood, Baron collapsed to his knees on the spot like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Impossible," he groaned in disbelief.

It was, without question, a fatal blow. Any further resistance would've been a futile effort for him.

"It's over, Baron," I declared.

Baron, hanging his head limply, gritted his teeth in disgust. "You fools are under a misconception… Defeating me does not mean you will be able to stop Sorcera's invasion of Astaroth." His voice was dark, as if echoing up from the bottom of an abandoned well. "Even after my demise, the ideology I implanted within the people will remain; they will no doubt continue to pursue war. My defeat will not change the larger picture. With Astaroth's forces in the state they are now, they will have no hope whatsoever of stopping Sorcera."

As he gave his grim prediction, Baron's lips suddenly formed into a derisive sneer. "I am not the one doomed here. That honor belongs to you."

"That's not true. We aren't doomed at all." It was Seira who immediately countered his words. "After you've been defeated, I will appeal to the people of Sorcera; I'll free them from your brainwashing. I won't allow war to happen."

"Such an excessive amount of confidence for one who has only managed to persuade a few pursuers to her cause thus far," Baron snorted. "My brainwashing extends all the way to the far reaches of this country. You cannot stop a massive surge by bringing a paltry few people to their senses.

"Not to mention," he went on, "To them, you are still a witch who has betrayed her country. I highly doubt the people would listen to the words of one they consider their enemy."

"Even if they don't listen to my words, I'll keep calling out to them."

"And if they capture and execute you?"

“I’m willing to take that risk,” she replied.

Baron paused for a moment. “I don’t understand,” he finally responded, baffled. “Your countrymen hate you, you know? What possible reason could you have to risk your life for them?”

“My father once taught me that royalty cannot be royalty without its people. That is why, as princess of Sorcera, I must dedicate myself to serving my people.”

“Because it’s the duty of royalty?”

“Yes,” she replied with a nod. “But that’s not the only reason. I also love all of the people of Sorcera.”

“Hah! *Love*, she says! Now that is *rich*!” Baron let out an exaggerated laugh, then set his gaze upon Seira with a glare of challenge. “Struggle with all your might, then; I look forward to seeing you be utterly crushed as your struggles end in vain. You’ll fail to stop your own countrymen, suffer the sting of your own powerlessness, fall into despair, and be killed mercilessly!”

“We won’t let war break out, and we won’t let anyone kill Seira,” I declared. “We’ll protect her. Also, when you die, the miasma plaguing Sorcera will dissipate.”

“But you won’t be able to stop the people. By the time the miasma is completely gone, the unknowing populace will already have invaded Astaroth,” Baron countered. “Only then, once they’ve stormed Astaroth and our lord the Demon King has been resurrected, will they realize the folly of their ways—that the one who was supposed to bring them salvation is actually a being of true evil that only brings destruction and chaos. They’ll learn that their princess was right all along, and that the miasma that had been bringing calamity to their country had already dissipated.” His smirk widened. “Just imagining the looks on their faces when they realize all of those things makes me tingle with excitement—such a shame I won’t be able to witness it in person.”

As Baron’s victorious laughter boomed out, Fam merely stared at him evenly. “Don’t worry,” she asserted. “Nobody else will be able to witness it either.”

“And what is that supposed to mean…?”

“The people of Sorcera believe deeply that resurrecting the Demon King will save their country—words that you, Baron, told them using King Sodom’s body. If they were made to realize that actually *isn’t* the case, we could undo their brainwashing.”

“It would be rather difficult to get that message across to everyone in Sorcera, wouldn’t it? You don’t have enough time…”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. It’s already taken care of.”

“What do you mean…?” Baron eyed her dubiously.

Fam smiled softly. “I went ahead and broadcast your entire conversation with Seira just now all across the country—using all of those loud-hailers you were kind enough to set up all over the capital.”

“Wha—?!” A look of absolute shock burst onto Baron’s face. “Impossible! When did you…?!”

“After hearing you relay orders to the people of Sorcera over the loud-hailers, the idea came to mind that I should probably let them hear your little chat with Seira too.” Fam gave her best *gotcha* grin. “I’m a former spy, after all. Tactics like that are my specialty.”

While the knights had been leading us to Baron, Fam appeared to have been investigating the city’s loud-hailers—perhaps she had been checking to see if they would work using her own communication magic?

“I’m certain that Seira’s feelings reached the hearts of her people—and I guarantee everyone now knows that their king isn’t who they thought he was,” Fam said.

Baron’s face contorted in dismay. If the people of Sorcera had heard their earlier exchange, they now knew beyond a doubt he was a demon who meant them nothing but harm. They also knew that with him gone, the miasma would dissipate, and their country would be saved.

“It looks like your evil schemes have come to an end here, Baron,” I declared.

The demon general glared at me in indignation; it was proof beyond a doubt that his plans had been utterly crushed.

“Don’t you dare think you’ve won… It isn’t over for me yet.”

The moment he finished saying those words, Baron’s life came to an end. Slumping forward and collapsing onto the floor, his body lay completely lifeless.

Looking down, Seira murmured quietly, “It’s over… Our long battle is finally over.” She sighed, no doubt filled with a flood of emotion. She had been waiting for this day to come ever since Baron had first taken over Sorcera—and she had made it happen with her own strength, by cutting down Baron along with her own father.

“Were you watching, father…?”

“Seira, we haven’t crossed the finish line yet,” I warned.

“Yes, I know. It’s not time to rest on our laurels quite yet,” she replied.

“Though thanks to Fam’s countermeasures, everything else should go pretty smoothly, I’d think.”

“Heh. You’re welcome to praise me, you know?”

“I know. I’ll give you heaps of it—later.”

We had just started to head out of the royal chamber when I suddenly felt that something was off.

They said that Baron had taken control of King Sodom’s body… If that’s true, then where is Baron’s actual *body?*

As we were leaving, I turned around to take one last look at Baron’s corpse—or more correctly, King Sodom’s.

That was when I noticed something crawling sluggishly out of the body on the ground. It looked like some kind of caterpillar, and it wasn’t even ten centimeters in length. The one-eyed creature evoked instant disgust—and growing from its head was a pair of horns.

The moment the caterpillar locked eyes with me, it began trembling in fear. Based on that reaction, I knew what was going on.

“I see. So you’re Baron’s true form, then.”

I picked the caterpillar up between two fingers. “What a fitting body for a coward like you. So I’m guessing you just worm your way into people’s bodies, then control them from within?”

The caterpillar let out a little squeak.

“You’re not getting away—this ends now.”

Without even giving him a moment to struggle, I crushed the caterpillar—Baron’s true form—in my hand. A *squish* sounded out, and purple goo splattered everywhere. It was a truly anticlimactic ending for one of the Four Generals of the Demon King’s army.

Now, all that was left was stopping the people of Sorcera.

Chapter 9: After the Battle

Since Baron's true nature had been broadcast across the country thanks to Fam's sneaky setup, the brainwashing on the people of Sorcera was undone. Once they came to the realization that a demon had been inciting them all along, the army of Sorcera no longer had any reason to invade Astaroth.

In the name of Aria, Princess of the Kingdom of Sorcera, war was called to a halt, and a truce pact was forged between their country and Astaroth. Upon our return to Astaroth, we delivered the documents related to said truce pact directly to the castle.

"You have all truly done us a great service through your recent endeavors," the King of Astaroth said, offering his words of appreciation. "With such great shortages in our forces due to Gregor's insurrection, there would have been no escaping enormous losses had war reached our lands."

"I believed all along that if anyone could accomplish such a feat, it would be you," Sonia, the Oracle of Light, told us.

"It's an honor to have you place so much trust in us, Princess Sonia," I replied politely.

"Sieg..."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"I distinctly remember telling you not to address me by such names, did I not?" Sonia seemed irked with me; she had insisted once before that I call her only by her given name.

"I understand that...but I don't want to cause a scene in a public setting."

"Very well. I do not wish to be thought of as an overbearing woman, after all." She then turned to address Seira. "So you truly were a princess of Sorcera all along, Seira. Please accept my sincere apologies for showing you such discourtesy for so long." With that, Sonia bowed her head.

"Please! You don't need to bow!" Seira responded, rather flustered. "It would've been even more absurd to simply accept the word of a stranger who appeared out of nowhere claiming she was a princess."

Once our audience was over, we departed from the royal castle. No matter how many times I experienced it, I just couldn't

get used to being in a public forum like that. I began rolling my stiff neck and saw Spinoza doing the same thing; the others didn't seem to be bothered by things at all.

I'm not sure why, but I still have this nagging feeling about something…

As we were heading back to the guard station, I casually asked Seira and Alma: "What do the two of you plan on doing now? Are you going back to Sorcera?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, honestly," Seira replied. "I might return for a while until Sorcera gets back on its feet, then come back here and take advantage of your hospitality again. I want to keep fighting alongside everyone as a guard, after all. Protecting the Royal Capital here is a direct link to protecting Sorcera too."

"Oh, come on! Being a princess would be way better than being a guard," Alma objected. "Hey, if you want, Seira, how about *I* be the princess instead of you?"

"You're joking, right?" I said.

"I can't think of anyone less princess-like than you," Fam agreed.

I couldn't help but get that jab in, and Fam had gone the same route.

"Sorcera may be my home country, but Astaroth is my home away from home. I love everyone here just as much as there." There seemed to be a halo of light glowing behind Seira as she declared those words.

Is she some kind of goddess…?

At any rate, the shadow that had been hanging over Seira's head seemed to have been lifted. She was no doubt relieved to finally have all that weight off her shoulders.

"And you, Alma? What are your plans?" I asked.

"Hmmm. I hadn't really considered going back to Sorcera. I haven't gotten my memories back, so it doesn't feel quite right to call it my homeland."

"So you never did end up getting them back in the end, huh?" I said.

"Nope, not at all. Can't remember a thing."

"Normally you'd think you'd remember at least a little something," I mused. "Though, you know, that thing that Baron said still kind of bothers me."

Baron had seemed like he had known the reason for Alma's

amnesia; perhaps it was possible he had something to do with it.

"Anyway, I'm surprised to hear you say you want to stay here. If you went back to Sorcera, you'd be Commander of the Royal Guard—that'd be a much better deal for you than being a guard here, I bet."

"But if I went back, I'd be working with a bunch of people I don't even know. Building all those personal relationships up from scratch again would be a real pain."

"That's kind of a pathetic thing to try and pass off as bragging." Alma had been puffing her chest out proudly as she admitted that, and I couldn't help but poke fun at her for it.

"And also..." she went on.

"Also what?" I asked.

"Well, how do I put this... I'm actually rather fond of my current environment," Alma murmured, rubbing her cheeks in her hand awkwardly.

Hearing that, a huge grin crept across Spinoza's face. "Oooh. Ended up getting that attached to us, huh?"

"It's kind of embarrassing to be asked that to my face...but yeah, I suppose so," Alma muttered, looking away somewhat bashfully. "Besides, Commander Bolton offered me that squad sergeant position. If I'm needed that much, I'm perfectly willing to stay here."

"Personally, I'd prefer if both you and Seira stayed here," Fam said. "The more allies the better, in my opinion."

"Oh? I can't believe I'm hearin' that from a recluse like you, Fam," Spinoza quipped.

"Shocking, isn't it? I'd like to think I've grown a bit," Fam replied.

"*Grown*, huh..." Spinoza narrowed her eyes.

"Why are you staring at my body, Spinoza? Perhaps that feeble mind of yours can't comprehend the concept of spiritual growth?"

"Please, stop fighting, you two!" Seira immediately jumped in between Spinoza and Fam. It was a familiar scene that hadn't changed a bit.

"I know!" she went on. "Since we're all here, why don't we go out to eat together after this?"

"A party's a great idea! Nothin' like a li'l celebration!" Spinoza agreed.

"You don't even have any money, do you?" Fam scoffed.

“So be it,” I said. “As your squad sergeant, I’ll go ahead and spring for this one.”

“Awww yeah! You rock, Sieg! That’s how it’s done!” Spinoza cheered.

“If there’s food and eating involved, you can guarantee I’ll be there!” Alma assured us.

We headed over to the guard station to give our reports, then moved straight on to the pub from there. Footing the bill for the entire squadron was definitely going to sting, but seeing as I didn’t exactly have any hobbies, I had enough spare cash to cover it. It was a small price to pay if it let me deepen my bonds with my comrades.

***

It was early in the morning the day after our fun little get-together. We had been drinking well into the night, and I had actually woken up late for a change. Looking out the window, I saw that the sun had already risen; normally I would’ve long since been awake by that time.

I wasn’t particularly concerned about having overslept, though; I was off duty that day. Commander Bolton had arranged for that, telling us that we probably could use a bit of rest after completing our mission to infiltrate Sorcera.

Even so, I didn’t really have much of anything to do. Once I had finished my morning training, I stopped by the dorm cafeteria, where I happened to run into Seira.

“Good morning, Sarge!”

“Hi, Seira. You’re here early for being off today.”

“The same goes for you! How are you feeling, though? I thought you took a whole lot of damage during the fight in Sorcera.”

“No problems here. I’m a durable guy.”

“That’s our Sieg! Just don’t overdo it, okay? If things get tough, you can always rely on us!”

“Right. I’ll do that.” I took a look around the cafeteria. “Did we just hire someone new?”

“What? Why do you ask?”

“There’s someone over there who looks exactly like Spinoza—but it’s before noon, on a day she’s not even on duty.”

On the receiving end of my gaze was Spinoza, lying face down

at one of the cafeteria tables. The day after a drinking party, she was usually dead to the world until the sun was high in the sky.

"Oh! You certainly don't see that every day!" Seira exclaimed.

"She may *be* here, technically, but I wouldn't consider her awake," Fam said, appearing out of nowhere.

"Meaning...?" I asked.

"It's quite simple: She never made it back to her room last night."

"So you're saying she's been that way ever since last night?" Seira blinked.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Fam confirmed.

"Ah. Sounds like we didn't get a new hire after all, then," I quipped.

"This isn't a laughing matter! We have to do something for her! She's going to hurt herself trying to sleep in a place like that." Seira then went over to try and help her out. "Spinoza! It's morning! Time to wake up!" she said, rubbing her back gently.

Eventually, Spinoza's tightly shut eyelids creaked open.

"Augh...! Every inch of my body hurts like hell...!" she groaned, lifting her head languidly. She took a huge stretch, then looked around her, and a puzzled look appeared on her face. "Huh? What the hell am I doin' *here*?"

"You really hit the bottles hard last night. You don't remember?" I asked.

"I can't remember a damn thing after we left the castle..."

"That's a bit excessive. So you lost memories from before you even started drinking? I would've understood if it had been from the point you entered the pub," I stated incredulously.

"Hey, you know what they say—time flies when you're havin' fun, right?"

"That's not flying, that's vanishing into thin air."

"Anyway, where's Alma? I don't see her around," Spinoza asked in sudden realization.

"Good question. I haven't seen her yet today," I said.

"Heh heh. So she's still sleepin', huh? What a slob. All the rest of us are awake, even though we don't work today."

"You were completely passed out until just a moment ago," Fam said, rolling her eyes.

I sighed and forced a smile. "Look, we have the day off. She's probably tired from our battle; we might as well let her sleep."

"I think Alma is already awake, though? I didn't see her in bed

when I got up, at least," Seira reported.

Ah, that's right—Seira and Alma are roommates.

"Where the hell'd she run off to so early in the mornin'? The pub, maybe?"

"She's not you, Spinoza," I said, deadpan. "Well, she'll be back soon enough, I'm sure."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Spinoza responded, then immediately moved on. "Well, now that I've finally got some time off, guess I'll go hit up those slots!"

"You shouldn't gamble, Spinoza," Seira chastised.

"You risked your life for that money, yet you seem to have no problem tossing it all right down the drain," Fam berated. "It's pretty much the same as gradually killing yourself."

Just as we were getting ready to relax and enjoy our day off—

DINGDINGDINGDING!

—the alarm bell began ringing loudly from outside.

"That sound—I guess we're under attack," I said.

"You gotta be kiddin' me... Why couldn't they save it for a workday?!" Spinoza sputtered.

Of course, we couldn't just ignore it.

"Let's head over to the guard station, everyone!" Seira yelled.

We equipped ourselves in a hurry and made our way over to the guard station.

***

"Apparently there's a group of monsters heading over to attack us."

We had made our way over to the commander's office, where Commander Bolton was giving us a rundown of the situation.

"They're packing some pretty big numbers, from what I hear. We're thinking there might be a demon commanding them—if they're targeting us while we're shorthanded for troops like this, the Royal Capital's in serious trouble."

"We'll back you up," I assured him.

"Appreciated. I know you're supposed to be off today," the Commander said. "Truth is, though, we'd be up shit creek without you guys. Go out there and get 'em."

"Leave it to us, Commander!" Seira saluted.

"You better pay us overtime for workin' on our day off," Spinoza muttered.

“Hah! I know I can always rely on you to keep track of that paycheck, even when things get crazy.” Commander Bolton then raised an eyebrow. “Hm…? Where’s Alma, anyway?”

“No clue—she ran off somewhere this mornin’,” Spinoza responded.

“Well, that stinks. She’s one of our top units too.”

“If she’s here in the city, she will have heard the alarm bell and will catch up with us soon enough. For now, let’s head to the gate without her.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Right!”

“Roger.”

It boggled my mind that such a massive force of monsters had come to attack us—it was almost as if they were trying to take advantage of the fact that our wounds from the battle in Sorcera hadn’t yet healed. The timing was just too perfect.

Maybe I’m overthinking things…?

***

We soon arrived at Astaroth’s front gate, where we were greeted by a combined force of the Knight Corps and the Guard Corps. As soon as they saw us show up, they began cheering enthusiastically.

“It’s the Fifth Squadron! They’re here to back us up!”

“With you here, it doesn’t matter what might be coming after us—we’re not afraid!”

Everyone really seemed to have faith in us; I could feel the morale of our allies rising.

“And to think, not too long ago they were a bunch of creeps…” Fam pointed out.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Though it ain’t a bad feelin’ to hear ’em compliment us either,” Spinoza admitted.

“Let’s do our best to live up to the faith they’re putting into us!” Seira insisted.

We positioned ourselves at the front lines on the bridge to the main gate and waited for the enemy forces to arrive. Eventually, we saw a horde of monsters approaching from across the plains.

The reports were right. There are quite a few of them—I’d say probably close to a thousand that I can see so far. It’s not just a

single type of monster either; if they're able to control this many different species at once, it's only natural to assume there's a demon with some very powerful magic in command.

It looks like this'll be a pretty backbreaking battle—but we can't allow them to get past this point. If we let the monsters break through our lines, the Royal Capital will fall. If we lose the Orb of Light to them, it'll end up being the Demon King's second coming.

As I was psyching myself up for combat, I heard a sudden commotion in our ranks. Apparently, they had seen something among the horde of monsters.

"Hey, take a look at that…"

The first voice I heard was Spinoza's. Looking over among the army of hideous monsters, I saw a lone human on horseback commanding them. It had to be the leader of the enemy forces.

It was surprising enough to see a human commanding the monsters, but what shocked us even more was that it was the very person whom we'd noticed had been missing since earlier that morning.

"Oh, this has gotta be some kind o' sick joke," Spinoza muttered.

"I certainly didn't expect to see *her* leading the monsters," Fam murmured.

"Alma?!" Seira gasped.

It was Alma—Commander of the Royal Guard of Sorcera, and our Fifth Squadron comrade who supposedly had amnesia—commanding the massive monster army.

Chapter 10: The Final Battle

The one commanding the horde of monsters was Alma.

The sight unfolding before our eyes seemed like some kind of bad dream.

“Why is Alma leading the charge for these monsters…?” I couldn’t help but ask in bewilderment.

“Do you think perhaps her memory came back? And maybe that’s why she’s attacking the Royal Capital—just like the others who were brainwashed before did…?” Seira wondered nervously.

“No, she’s been with us this whole time. Besides, even if her memory did come back, there’s no way she’d attack the capital,” I insisted. “First and foremost, though, it makes no sense that she’d bring monsters with her. Even if she had some residual brainwashing left over, she’d still only be able to do things humans are capable of.”

It was impossible for any human to command a huge group of monsters—or should’ve been, at least. Yet the monster army that Alma was leading approached as we spoke.

I guess no matter how we slice it, it doesn’t change the fact that she’s turned against us…

Once Alma got close enough to where we could hear each other’s voices, Seira called out to her.

“Alma, please stop this! The battle is already over! There’s no reason for you to attack Astaroth!”

“I don’t think it will do you any good to try to appeal to her better nature,” Fam advised. “Because in all likelihood—that’s not Alma anymore.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Seira blinked.

“I sense the essence of a demon coming from her. It’s not the same as the people who were brainwashed—it’s an aura that’s only given off by actual demons.”

“Are you saying—”

“*So we meet again,*” Alma called out, looking down at us from atop her horse—but everything about her, from the tone of her voice to the way she carried herself, was completely unlike the Alma we knew. It was as if she were an entirely different person altogether…and one I recognized, at that.

“You—you’re Baron, aren’t you?” I asked.

“*How astute of you. Guilty as charged.*” Alma—or rather, the being that identified himself as Baron—cast us an audacious smirk; traces of his face were visible beneath hers.

So it’s him after all… But there’s something I still don’t quite get.

“I’m pretty certain I crushed you. How did you manage to make your way back here as Alma?”

“*The simple answer to that is: I took over Alma’s body.*”

“What…? When did you even come into contact with her?”

“*I laid an egg inside her. Once it hatched, ownership of her body was transferred to me.*” Baron grinned widely. “*Implanting eggs into others and hatching them allows me to take over their bodies. Should I die, any egg of mine will begin to hatch automatically.*”

“I see—so that’s how you move from host to host.” The Baron we’d faced back in Sorcera wasn’t his original form either. He had been staying alive by taking over other people’s bodies like a parasite.

“*Exactly. You could say Alma was my ‘spare.’ It’s always good to have a backup, isn’t it?*” Baron declared. “*The problem is that there aren’t many individuals who can withstand being controlled by me. They must harbor great power, like she and Sodom did, otherwise their bodies simply break. In actuality, the reason behind Alma’s loss of memory was the egg I implanted.*”

So that meant that Alma had lost her memory as a side effect of having the egg implanted inside her, then just so happened to land in our laps.

“Then what does that mean for Alma…?” Seira asked fearfully upon hearing Baron’s words—as if gingerly touching a box that should not be opened.

“*She no longer exists. I’ve taken possession of her. Her personality has disappeared from this world without a trace.*”

“N-No…!”

Upon being told that Alma was gone, Seira was visibly shaken—and the same went for the rest of my companions. Though we hadn’t known her all that long, we had all been through thick and thin together as comrades; it was only natural for us to feel distraught after hearing that she had just vanished into nothing.

I certainly wasn’t calm on the inside myself either. Despite that, though—

“For now, we just need to focus on the enemy in front of us,” I stated.

This is a battlefield. If we lose focus, it could mean our lives.

"*Such a levelheaded decision. Truly befitting of a squad sergeant,*" Baron commended, seemingly impressed. "*The quantity and quality of my subordinates may be inferior to those of the other generals—but it should be more than enough to grind down Astaroth's battered forces.*"

Then, he shouted out an announcement: "*I hereby order every monster here to eliminate Sieg.*"

Upon Baron giving his orders, all of the monsters advanced on me at once.

"Bring it on."

And so the opening salvos of the battle had been fired.

***

My consciousness had sunken into the cold depths of darkness.

I could neither see nor hear anything. I had no idea which way was up or down.

After a while, a hazy image came into view amid the darkness. It was a vision of what Baron was seeing—and that was me, pointing my sword at Princess Aria. It wasn't just her either—I was attempting to strike down Sieg and all the other defenders of Astaroth.

Why am I doing this...?

"*That should be obvious. It's because they are your enemies.*"

Baron was controlling my body, and his thoughts flowed into my head. Those thoughts were telling me that the people of the Royal Capital were all my enemies.

I see. So they're bad people, then. In that case, it makes complete sense to cut them down.

But does it really? Is slaying them really the right thing to do?

The Guard Corps were a bit rough around the edges, but they certainly weren't bad people. They gave everything they had when fighting to protect the people of the city. I had battled alongside them, celebrated victories with them, and more—and somewhere in all that time we spent together, I grew attached to them.

But the voice inside my head told me otherwise. It said they were my enemies—that I had to eliminate them.

The two voices in my head kept arguing. Then, when I was on

the verge of losing my mind, something happened.

"*Alma! Don't let someone like Baron beat you! Come back to us! You're my attendant, aren't you?*"

Seira's—or rather, Princess Aria's—voice came echoing into the darkness from outside.

Oh, that's right.

I used to be employed as Commander of the Royal Guard for Princess Aria. Protecting her with my blade was my entire reason for living.

That was when my lost memories came back to me. I remembered every last thing about who I was and how I had lived my life up to that point.

Princess Aria, having learned that Baron had taken over King Sodom's body and was plotting to bring the entire kingdom under his thumb, had tried to persuade our people to listen to reason. However, that plan had failed, and Baron had tried to have her executed. I had sheltered her and helped her escape the country.

They ended up learning what I had done and nearly had me executed as well, but because I had such excellent physical abilities, Baron implanted an egg inside of me instead. He then kept me locked up as his spare body; however, I had managed to find an opportunity to escape, then eventually ended up in Astaroth. All my memories from after that were still with me as well.

I remembered everything—but it was all meaningless. Baron had already taken control of me. I wouldn't ever make it back to them.

"*I won't give up on you, Alma! You saved me before; now it's my turn to save you!*"

Princess Aria was trying so desperately to rescue me. Despite the fact that she was royalty, she was still reaching her hand out to me, a mere attendant.

You're mistaken, Your Highness, I whispered inside my heart. *You may say that I saved you, but I've owed you a great debt of gratitude since long before that.*

I was born in the slums and had lived there my entire life. I had no family, and as an orphan, even getting something to eat was an everyday struggle.

The one who had rescued me from that lifestyle was Princess Aria. She took me, an orphan from the slums, and made me a

Royal Guard, placing me at her side. Supposedly, everyone around her had been strongly against that decision, but she had gone ahead and hired me despite their disapproval.

According to her, I possessed exceptional strength—and those who are most suited should always work the jobs appropriate for them, regardless of their origins.

Princess Aria had never had a single arrogant bone in her body. She was constantly toiling away for the sake of the people's happiness, and everyone around her was always smiling.

I was so proud to be working in service of my princess. From the bottom of my heart, I wanted the strength to be able to protect her.

Ever since that day, I had devoted my entire existence to her protection.

But now...

Baron, using my body, was trying to cut Princess Aria down. Sieg was too busy dealing with the other monsters to be able to do anything about it.

If I didn't do something, she would be slain.

My entire life has been devoted to protecting her. I'm not going to let anyone hurt her, no matter who it might be.

That's right. The only person I believe in right now is the one who saved me: Princess Aria.

It makes no difference who's a friend and who's a foe. The only thing I'm absolutely certain about being the right thing to do is to protect her.

And right now, there's nobody here who can protect her besides me.

***

I could hardly believe the scene that was unfolding before my eyes.

Baron—in control of Alma—had his sword raised above him, ready to slash Seira, but no matter how long we waited, the weapon never came down. The arms wielding the blade seemed to be resisting Baron's will.

"*Gah...?! Wh-Why...can't I...move...?!*"

Baron struggled to complete the slash, a tortured expression on his face; however, his arms wouldn't budge, in direct defiance

of his mind's orders.

While he was thus occupied, I took down all of the monsters in my vicinity and positioned myself in front of Seira. Then, as Baron stood there panicked, I peered inside of him and asked, "Alma—is that you?"

Against his will, Baron's arms came to a complete halt. The only explanation I could think of was that Alma's mind had done it.

"Alma!" Seira shouted, calling out to her inside of Baron. "Can you hear me?! If you can, come back to us! I haven't had the chance to pay you back yet!"

"*My body isn't following my orders...!*"

Baron tried to raise his sword again, but he couldn't seem to control his body; he simply stood there unmoving, completely vulnerable to attack.

"*I was certain I had absolute control over Alma's spirit...!*"

"She's resisting him. She was never consumed," I said. "If her spirit is still there—we might have a chance."

"What do you plan on doing?" Seira asked.

"Baron's true form is some kind of worm, and that's probably what's controlling Alma. I'll draw him out of her body and make myself his parasitic host instead. If we do that, Alma might turn back to normal."

"Whoa, hold up, that's insane," Spinoza groused.

"But Sieg...if you happen to slip up..." Fam murmured.

"I know. Then *my* body will get taken over." I would end up exactly like Alma was at that very moment. If that happened, I'd be as good as dead—in fact, with Baron having free use of my body, it'd be even worse than simply dying. "But don't worry, I'm not so weak as to let this bastard take control of me. Besides—I'm still not finished paying him back for the whole situation with Nacht yet."

I turned to Baron and approached him with my offer. "So how about it, Baron? This battle is already basically over—you have no hope of winning. I don't think it's too bad of a proposal for you."

"*Oh, so you're trying to lure me out, are you?*" Having heard my suggestion, Baron laughed loudly. "*You make a good point—if I could take over your body, the tides would turn dramatically. With your strength, taking back the Orb of Light would be child's play.*"

"You seem to think rather highly of me."

"*It's an accurate assessment. Your actions alone have more or less decided the outcome of this battle. The monsters I brought with me likely won't last much longer,*" Baron admitted. "*However, if I could take possession of you, I could turn everything around in an instant. If I can gain control over you, victory here will be ours; if you can prevent me from doing so, victory will be yours.*"

"That's exactly right. Shall we make this our final gambit, then?"

"*I won't bother using such roundabout tactics as laying an egg—I'll enter your body directly and bring your spirit under my domination!*"

A caterpillar-like creature suddenly flew out of Alma's body—and, before I had a chance to prevent it, entered my body through my mouth.

***

Baron slipped into Sieg's body. From there, he entered the subconscious region of his brain—the realm of the spirit. There, he began to think.

This man is overwhelmingly powerful. He dominated the entire battlefield all by himself; the huge group of monsters I brought with me could barely make a dent in him. With him drawing every single one of their attacks to himself and somehow managing to defend against them all, there was no way we could've possibly broken through into Astaroth. As a matter of fact, the difference in power between us was vast enough to make me think that even if I'd sent the entirety of Sorcera's forces against Sieg, they probably wouldn't have been able to get past him.

There was no way to match him in hand-to-hand combat. At the rate things were going, Baron's army would fall. If he could take over Sieg's body, though, that would change everything. His naive desire to save his comrade would backfire against him—the man's body simply possessed that much raw power.

If Baron could take over Sieg's body, bringing about the fall of Astaroth would be simple—and he could finally seize back the Orb of Light as well. Then the world would soon be enveloped in darkness with the second coming of his lord, the Demon King.

The moment he had invaded the realm where Sieg's spirit resided, the battle had already been over. Even the most skilled individuals were vulnerable when it came to their spirits; they

were easily dominated, barely even able to put up a fight. Even King Sodom had been the same.

Baron then attempted to take over Sieg's spirit. However—

I can't dominate him...!

No matter how hard Baron tried to dominate Sieg's body from within, he wasn't able to control it. His spirit's defenses were just too strong—there were no openings to exploit.

I'm in danger of being consumed myself...?!

Suddenly, he felt a presence, and he turned around to see Sieg behind him—not his physical body, but most likely an astral form that governed his spirit.

How convenient. If I defeat his astral form, I might be able to wrest the ability to control his body from it.

Such was Baron's intent. However—

"*Wh-What is this intimidating aura...?!*"

There was an overwhelming power residing within Sieg's astral form—so much so that it gave off a sense of beauty, even to Baron. He couldn't help but find himself captivated.

The moment his heart was stolen by that sight, the battle was already over. Baron's body was slashed in two, cut through by Sieg's descending blade. The sense of awe he had felt in that moment, along with the very thread of his life, were both severed together.

With no chance to even let out a death cry, Baron vanished without a trace.

***

"Sieg! Are you okay?!" Seira called out in deep concern.

"He better not've gotten swallowed up, dammit..." Spinoza muttered.

I heard my comrades' voices calling me from the outside. I opened my eyes; Seira, Spinoza, and Fam were all staring at me worriedly. Seeing that, I realized I was back in the real world.

"Oh, thank goodness you're safe!" Seira seemed relieved. "So...that means you defeated Baron, right?"

"Of course."

Upon hearing my response, Spinoza cast a suspicious stare at me. "What if you're just Baron pretendin' to be Sieg or somethin'?"

"Do you want me to give you exact numbers for how much of

your bar tab I've paid off so far?"

"Welp, looks like you're the real deal, huh!"

"You probably need to start reflecting on your life choices, Spinoza... Basically all of them," Fam quipped.

"Anyway, how did the battle go here?" I asked.

"Take a look!"

At Seira's request, I looked around and saw the area littered with the corpses of monsters; among those who were still standing, I didn't see a single monster. Apparently the knights and the guards had fought valiantly for us.

"We managed to take Baron down, too, so I guess this thing's in the bag for us," Spinoza said with a grin.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Alma!"

Seira dashed over to where Alma was lying on the ground and lifted her upper body, cradling it. Alma's eyes were closed, and her expression was serene and calm; at a glance it would be easy to mistake her as having already left the world of the living.

"Baron moved from her body into mine, so her consciousness should be back, at least. She's bound to wake up before too long," I said. "The only problem is that her spirit had been taken over. Her mind experienced a huge amount of stress. It could take some time to overcome that."

"It's Alma. I know she'll come back to us," Seira said. "I believe in her."

Hearing Seira's words, the rest of us nodded and voiced our agreement.

Alma was honest to her feelings, gullible, and a bit of a show-off who loved to be praised. However, she performed her job faithfully and had earned the trust of the people of the city.

She also boasted the most amazing physical abilities in the entire Guard Corps.

Having fought with her for so long, all of us knew: Alma wasn't the type to just up and die in a place like that. She'd definitely wake up for us—with all of her old memories back, as well.

***

In my entire life, nobody had ever placed any importance on me.

I never even knew my parents' faces—they'd tossed me away into the slums not long after I was born. As time passed, I ended up having to lie, cheat, and steal every day just to survive. Everybody talked about me behind my back and constantly spat out all kinds of nasty abuse at me.

That was how I had always lived, and I had assumed that was how I would die—buried in a heap of trash along the side of the road with the remains of sewer rats and cockroaches, unnoticed by the world.

I had stolen from someone that very day, swiping a bit of food from a roadside vendor. It had never occurred to me that it was wrong to do things like that—after all, I didn't have any choice, did I? I'd die otherwise. It was impossible to survive without taking from others. That was why, even when I messed up and got caught and was receiving a beating from the townspeople like I did that day, I never had the faintest sense of being in the wrong.

However, I did end up feeling miserable. What was the point of living when everyone shunned you? Life felt empty when nobody wanted you. Somewhere deep in the recesses of my heart, I started wishing someone would just kill me.

Just as I began to harbor those thoughts, the flood of violence I had been receiving came to an abrupt end.

When I looked up, I saw the sun shining down on me. A woman stood over me, protecting me from the other townspeople, bowing and apologizing to them on my behalf. For some reason, the people at the receiving end of her apologies seemed apologetic themselves—a completely different attitude from the looks of disgust they always gave me.

Once the townspeople lowered their weapons and left, the woman turned to look at me. Her beautiful face held a certain kind of inborn elegance; the thought came to mind that she must've lived in a completely different world than mine.

"I saw what happened back there—you were fighting against five grown men. Considering they were armed, though, of course you weren't going to win."

Is she going to hit me?

Or will she yell at me, maybe?

I braced myself, but all she did was smile.

"You were amazing!"

I stood there, mouth agape, after hearing that unexpected

word.

Amazing?

Did she just compliment *me?*

"I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Aria."

I had heard the name Aria before. That was the princess of Sorcera's name.

Why on earth would a princess speak to me?

"Would you be interested in coming to work for me?" she asked. "You have extraordinary strength—and I'd like you to put it to use to protect our people."

I stared in bewilderment at her outstretched hand. Nobody had ever considered me important before—yet this woman was treating me as though I was.

Before I realized what was happening, I had already taken her hand. Even as she touched my grimy skin, she didn't show the slightest sign of discomfort; her smile kept shining as brightly as the sun.

"What is your name, may I ask?"

Guided by her gentle voice, I responded that I didn't have a name—that my parents might've given me one, but they'd abandoned me without ever calling me by it, and I'd survived alone ever since.

"In that case, how does the name 'Alma' sound?" she suggested.

Alma—I thought it was a fantastic name.

For my entire life, all I had done was take things from people—so I had never thought twice about having things taken from me. I had never had a single thing I was worried about losing.

But on that day when she first found me, I made a firm vow to myself: I would never let anyone take that name away from me. Even if I lost everything else, no matter what happened, I would protect the name she had given me, forever.

***

A voice reached my ears. It had a gentle, nostalgic ring to it, and it made me feel nice and warm, like a sunny spot on the ground.

Drawn in by the sound of that voice, my consciousness began to float up out of the frigid dark depths. I wanted nothing more than to rise to the surface and see that sun.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Princess Aria. She looked exactly the same as she had back then—the day she had pulled me up out of the darkness back in Sorcera. As my consciousness gradually came into focus, her appearance soon morphed into the present-day Guard Corps version of herself.

She's grown so much stronger...

But that sunny smile of hers, and the warmth she gives off, are still exactly the same as they were on the day she rescued me.

When she saw me open my eyes, tears began to well up in hers. Then, she held a tender hand out to me.

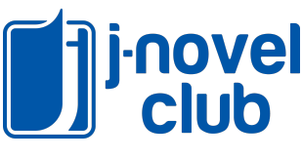
"Welcome back...Alma."

With her and the rest of my Guard Corps comrades behind her watching over me, I gently took hold of her outstretched hand.









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by Kametsu Tomobashi

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