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They were lying on the ground in a massive pool of blood at the feet of Leobolt and his men. Not a single one was left alive. They had all been cut down, their lives snuffed out mercilessly.
“Ah, Sieg. It took you a while.”
Leobolt
Eldest Son of the House of Alexandre


“I slugged a guy who pissed me off. Simple as that.”
“Do you realize what you’ve just done?”
Spinoza
Fifth Squadron Member – Warhammer user


“There are only two types of people in the world: predators and prey. If you’re weak, you’re stuck being prey.”
Amethyst
Bandit Gang Boss


Sieg
Fifth Squadron
Squad Sergeant
“Let’s get our little showdown started, Leobolt.”

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Chapter 1: The Guard Corps's Shortage of Manpower

Every single day, monsters flock to the royal capital where the Orb of Light is enshrined, like moths drawn to a flame.

As we stood before the city gates on this particular occasion, we saw a swarm of bugs approaching—and "swarm" wasn't just a figure of speech. These were *demonswarm*—dangerous insects imbued with magical energy. Some of them were mothlike, while others more resembled beetles or praying mantises.

There had been a sudden demonswarm infestation in a forest located a short distance away from the capital, and a portion of them had begun to invade—seemingly drawn to the city by the Orb of Light, within which the Demon King was sealed. The entire Guard Corps had gathered in front of the gates to intercept them.

The fact that we were being invaded wasn't a particularly big problem in itself; what *was* a big problem was what the horde had done on its way in. The creatures had crossed many fields full of crops as they'd headed toward the capital and had greedily gorged themselves on the bountiful harvests there, leaving nothing but ruin in their wake.

Since it was constantly beset by monster attacks, the royal capital of Astaroth was not very active in terms of merchant traffic. It wasn't able to rely on foodstuffs coming in from beyond its borders; it needed to be self-sufficient. Having seen their already limited provisions devoured before their very eyes, the guards were incensed and out for blood.

"Let's make those food-thieving insects pay!" one guard bellowed.

The others shouted out in a fiery chorus of agreement, then began turning their ire to the swarm directly.

"Keep your filthy bug mandibles off our human food!"

"Go back to sucking tree sap, monsters!"

My fellow guards swung their swords furiously, cleaving insect after insect in two, their blows far more powerful and piercing than they had been in the past. Their fighting spirit had certainly

been bolstered by their anger, and no doubt their diligent daily training was also a factor; however, there was one other reason behind their vigor that overshadowed the rest.

"Sieg will take the enemies' attacks for us!" Commander Bolton thundered. "None of us need to worry about anything at all besides tearing through every last one of these damn bugs!"

The Guard Corps responded enthusiastically. Having the ability to devote themselves to attacking without having to worry about defense was *huge*. When they were able to focus solely on striking down their enemies with all their might, the force behind each sword blow could be many times greater than usual.

For everyone else to feel safe while they're on offense, it's absolutely crucial that I do my job right on defense. I'm not going to let a single one of these things touch my comrades.

"*Iron Target!*"

That was one of the tank skills in my repertoire that let me take on every single attack dealt by my opponents. It forced the attention of the swarm in my direction—as if someone had picked them all up by the scruffs of their necks and made them focus on me, whether they liked it or not.

In battle, showing your back to your enemy meant certain death. The guards, seeing the insects' open backs on display, did not waste the chance to strike; the demonswarm could do nothing, and their corpses began to pile up on the battlefield.

However, the enemy would not be fully vanquished quite so easily. There was one variety among the demonswarm that was proving a bit more complicated to deal with.

"Ugh! I can't hurt this damn thing at all!"

A guard's sword strike bounced harmlessly off the shell of a demonswarm that resembled a giant pillbug. Its round body was as hard as armor; swords and spears were unable to penetrate it.

The pillbug-like creatures then curled themselves up into balls and began rolling toward the guards at high speed, trying to bowl them over; however, once I activated my *Iron Target* skill, they all came barreling toward me instead. Considering their weight and the speed they had picked up, their rolling bodies had a considerable amount of force behind them.

If the guards took a hit from one of these, their armor wouldn't do a thing—they'd be flattened into sheet metal. The bugs' defense power

is high enough to make swords and spears ineffective too, so our side is completely powerless against them. These things will be tough nuts to crack.

I wanted to finish our opponents off as quickly as possible, but unfortunately, I wasn't particularly gifted when it came to attack power. Breaking through their defensive shells myself would be no easy task.

It would be a prodigy of a guard indeed that boasted both high attack power and high defense power—and, well, that guard wasn't me. Nobody could master everything perfectly; whatever someone excelled at, there was always something else they were hopelessly lacking in.

But that's what makes us human. That's why people form bonds with each other—why they band together.

I didn't have high attack power, but I had comrades who did—and they were more than willing to make up for my inadequacies.

"Hah! Step back, I got this—time to smash things up!"

Spinoza, the assault leader of the Fifth Squadron, dashed out onto the front line with her roughly person-sized war hammer lifted high above her head, then brought the weapon crashing down violently.

The strong shells of the pillbug-like demonswarm had deflected every sword and spear that had come at them—but Spinoza's war hammer blasted through them like they were nothing. Her initial blow turned one of the creatures into a mangled pile of scrap, and a follow-up horizontal swing caved in over half of another opponent's body.

"*Damn,* this feels good!" Spinoza shouted out in sheer joy as she rampaged across the battlefield.

To her, the word "defense" simply didn't exist. The other guards had been told to focus on attacking, but that didn't mean it got the full hundred percent of their attention; there was always that tiny bit of awareness reserved for defending themselves on the off chance that the worst happened. Spinoza, however, didn't have that. She had forsaken defense entirely.

I would have liked to say that was because of the trust she had in me, but there was definitely more to it than that. It wasn't possible to throw caution to the wind quite that hard without being a little bit out of one's mind already. As a result, though,

Spinoza possessed an overwhelming offensive power that only manifested in those who cared about nothing else besides demolishing their enemies.

"All right, men! Spinoza crushed their defenses! Now—fire!"

On Commander Bolton's signal, the archer unit that had been on reserve in the rear released a volley of arrows. The throng of projectiles had varied success in striking their targets, but there was one archer in particular who landed perfect hits with every single shot, as if each arrow had somehow been pulled straight in by its target.

That person was Fam, the Fifth Squadron's archer.

While other arrows exceeded their range of fire and began falling to the ground, Fam's arrows left those in the dust, maintaining full velocity and power as they pierced straight through the enemies' vital points.

The other archers were absolutely amazed by her skills. Fam herself no doubt had supreme confidence in her pinpoint accuracy as well, since she was lining up particularly needle-threading shots: she would fire an arrow right over a fellow guard's shoulder.

If her aim was even slightly off, the projectile would end up lodged in her own ally's back. The average archer would be intimidated and unable to take a shot like that without some deliberation; Fam, however, could fire without so much as an ounce of hesitation. That may have been because she was absolutely certain in her ability to land the shot—though part of it may also have been the coldhearted belief that, if her ally happened to get hit, that was just how things went sometimes.

Either way, arrows with no hesitation held immense power within them. This one flew straight and true after she loosed it, passing right over the guard's shoulder and shooting through the forehead of a demonswarm.

To Fam, it was a job well done, as always. However, the guard whose shoulder space had been violated didn't have the same opinion. One wrong step and the person would've had an arrow embedded in their back.

Once the demonswarm had been completely wiped out, tempers began to flare.

"What the hell, Fam?! You tryin' ta kill me?"

The victim of Fam's shoulder shot shenanigans, Spinoza, let out

a howl of protest.

“I felt that arrow zip right past my shoulder! It was yours, wasn’t it?! What were you gonna do if it hit me in the back, huh?”

“That wasn’t going to happen,” Fam retorted. “Not when you’re as good as I am.”

“Feh. Like I can trust a single damn word from someone who just sneaks around and fires arrows from way in the rear,” Spinoza shot back. “A fight just ain’t a fight unless you’re up on the front lines.”

“Don’t you think you should cut back on your drinking a bit, Spinoza?”

“Huh? Why’d ya bring that up?”

“The only reason you said that is because your brain has shrunk from all the alcohol you’ve consumed, right? Otherwise, I’m afraid you’re way beyond help.”

“Oh, sounds like you want some o’ this! I’ll knock ya right back over those city walls!”

Spinoza moved in for a punch, but Fam quickly dodged out of the way.

“Hey, could you two cut it out?” I grumbled.

Spinoza growled at Fam. “Why, you slippery little—”

Fam giggled impishly. “Catch me if you can. Which is highly unlikely.”

My request for restraint had fallen on deaf ears; the two of them showed no signs of stopping their little game of cat and mouse. Fam was dancing expertly around her riled-up squad mate.

“Sheesh, you’ve got your work cut out for ya. We just got out of battle, and they still have that much excess energy to burn off…” Commander Bolton muttered in annoyance. “Seems like those two’ve been fighting every day lately, though. I thought they’d finally been getting along too. Are things still that bad?”

“If Seira were here, I’m sure they’d calm down in no time.”

Spinoza and Fam never did get along well, and they were pretty much constantly at each other’s throats. The fact that we had managed to go so long without things blowing up was due in no small part to the role Seira had played.

“That makes sense. Pretty much everything feels a whole lot calmer with Seira around. The only reason our rotten-ass Guard

Corps didn't fall apart before you showed up was because we had her with us."

Seira had a certain soothing effect on others. When Spinoza and Fam would get into fights and Seira would jump in to calm them down, she tended to make the sparks flying between them vanish as if by magic.

"All the townspeople really adore her too," he continued. "It's mostly thanks to her that the Guard Corps hasn't completely lost its appeal."

She was the Fifth Squadron's resident breath of fresh air—the entire Guard Corps's, really. To the citizens, she was something akin to a goddess. That was what defined the woman we knew as Seira.

"But, well, Seira isn't around anymore..." Commander Bolton murmured, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

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It turned out that the Seira we knew as a member of the Guard Corps's Fifth Squadron was actually Princess Aria of Sorcera—a kingdom that neighbored our own kingdom of Silvesta.

The ruler of Sorcera, King Sodom, had ended up getting possessed by a demon, and the princess had fled her newly taken-over country, barely managing to escape with her life. To conceal her identity, she had changed her name from "Aria" to "Seira." After that, she had joined Astaroth's Guard Corps to hone her sword skills so that she could retake her country.

During that time period, the Knight Corps of Astaroth had also come back with a knight who had amnesia. Her name was Alma, and she turned out to have been both the commander of the Sorcera Royal Guard and Seira's personal attendant.

Once we had learned who Seira really was, the Fifth Squadron had set off to stop Sorcera from invading the royal capital and snatching the Orb of Light. Seira ended up striking down the demon-possessed King Sodom—her own father—and together we succeeded in preventing the invasion of Astaroth. After the squadron finished off Baron, the demon behind everything, as he fled, the kingdom of Sorcera was finally liberated.

However, the scars of losing their sovereign had run deep. Seira

and Alma returned to Sorcera together to help them rebuild. A kingdom that had lost their king needed an icon to symbolize their reconstruction, and Seira, who had risked her life to save her country, had the ability to guide its people. She could become their light of hope.

It wasn't likely that Seira would ever come back to the Guard Corps. She had already succeeded in doing what she needed to do. After she'd fulfilled her goal of retaking her homeland, there was no reason to think that a Princess of Sorcera would go back to work as a guard in the royal capital—much less in another country.

That was why we had to learn to get by without her. The lone, refreshing flower that had bloomed in our wasteland had been transplanted back to its original location. All that remained here was a bunch of uncultured boors—myself included.

Seira had played an important role in the Guard Corps. Strong personnel were always appreciated, of course, but plain old power wasn't the be-all and end-all—for an organization like ours, having someone who could serve as a morale booster was a necessity.

Losing Seira, who always managed to lift our spirits, was a huge blow to us all.

I sure hope this doesn't have any major negative repercussions...

No doubt Commander Bolton harbored the same concerns I did, in that regard.

***

It didn't take long at all for our concerns to be proven valid.

When I got back to the guard station, I saw Spinoza and Fam facing off. A bunch of other guards had gathered around them to gawk.

Spinoza roared. "Since you won't shut your cocky little mouth, I'm gonna shut it for you—with my *fists*!"

Fam let out a mischievous giggle. "You'll have to get ahold of me first—and I doubt you can pull that off."

It felt like things were about to escalate into an all-out war.

"How could they possibly have such short fuses...?" I couldn't help but sigh in the face of all the commotion. I had only taken my eyes off them for a few minutes and they were already at each other's throats.

Normally, at that point, Seira would intervene and things would calm down. Unfortunately, she wasn't there—and she probably wouldn't ever be coming back.

I couldn't just let them fight, or they'd make a complete mess of the guard station. I didn't want either of them to get injured, as well. They might've been troublemakers, but they were also unquestionably indispensable assets.

The other guards did nothing to try and stop them; quite the contrary, they were getting pumped up about it and cheering. They might've just been excited to see how the battle would end too; there were even some people betting on who would win.

There wasn't enough time to call in the commander—and besides, if a hotheaded guy like him tried to rein them in, we'd probably have a total bloodbath on our hands. That meant it was up to me, their squad sergeant, to stop them.

Fantastic. I guess this is just how things will be from now on, I sighed, thinking about the size of the hole Seira's absence had left in our team.

In the meantime, Spinoza and Fam were just about ready to lunge at each other.

I didn't want to have to do this—but I have no choice.

My plan was to activate my *Iron Target* skill, take both of their attacks, then incapacitate them—but I never got the opportunity.

At that exact moment, a voice rang out from behind me as clearly as a ringing bell:

"You two are both being *very bad*!"



Spinoza and Fam both froze instantly in their tracks.

They, I, and the rest of the onlookers all turned around at the same time, speechless. We had heard that voice before.

Who we saw when we looked behind us was a familiar woman wearing bikini armor. Her hair came down to her waist, and her features were brimming with elegance. She was the lone calming presence among the rowdy members of the Guard Corps.

The princess of Sorcera and a member of our very own Fifth Squadron—Seira—had raised her voice in an effort to stop Spinoza and Fam. Alma, commander of her Royal Guard, was there next to her as well.

“Long time no see, everybody!” Seira flashed us a smile like a blooming flower.

“Seira?!” Spinoza sputtered.

“What are you doing here…?” Fam asked.

The two of them had been ready to get into the thick of things at that very moment, but Seira showing up had made their rivalry evaporate into thin air.

The guards were taken aback as well, their rowdy cheers replaced with expressions of shock. With the appearance of Seira, the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the room had been painted over with ease—as if through mere exposure to the kindness within her.

“We’ve finished the first stage of Sorcera’s reconstruction, so I came back. I was thinking I could go back to working for the Guard Corps.”

“Huh?” we all blurted out upon hearing Seira’s declaration, and Spinoza, Fam, and I stared at each other for a moment before another shout escaped. “WHAAAT?!”

“Wait, hold on a minute!” one bewildered guard said. “Seira, you’re a princess of Sorcera, right?! Wouldn’t you be able to just stay at home and live life in luxury as royalty?”

“I wanted to work with all of you again instead!” Seira replied with a smile. “I’ve even secured permission from the King of Astaroth. After the recent battle, relations between Silvesta and Sorcera have become quite friendly.”

“But what does Sorcera think about this?” I couldn’t help but ask. “Since they’ve lost King Sodom, I figured they’d need you now more than ever. I thought you might even end up taking the

throne as queen."

"My older brother is taking care of all that for me," she explained.

"Oh, you have a brother?" I blinked.

"I do. He had been studying abroad at a military academy up until recently. Our father placed more importance on melee combat, so they didn't exactly see eye to eye, but my brother is a man of character and a brilliant person. I know very little about politics, but with him at the helm, I'm certain Sorcera has a bright future.

"As for me," she continued, "I'll do what's within my power—which means protecting the royal capital as a guard. By doing that, I'm also protecting Sorcera by extension!"

If the Orb of Light ended up being taken from us and the Demon King was resurrected, the entire world would be in danger. By working as a guard to safeguard the orb, Seira was also ensuring continued peace for her own homeland.

Upon hearing her decision, Spinoza let out a huge belly laugh. "Hah, that's great stuff! Most royals and nobles disgust me—I hate 'em so much I just wanna puke. But you, Seira, I like!"

Seira giggled. "I like you too, Spinoza!"

"Well I'm happier than a clam to hear ya say it—that means we feel the same way about each other! Now lemme get in a li'l boob grope to celebrate our reunion!"

"I certainly don't like it when you do *that*!"

As Spinoza reached for Seira's chest, Alma's warning voice rang out. "How dare you! You think you can just casually put your hands on Lady Aria?"

"Aw, you don't gotta be like that, Alma. We're pals, aren't we? Nothin' wrong with a little bit o' physical bonding, is there?"

"There's no 'bonding' involved—it's just plain old sexual harassment."

"Now you're just bein' mean. Guess you forgot how much I took care of ya back when you had amnesia, huh? I even changed your diapers and everything..."

"I'm not an infant! Stop making things up!"

"So you came back to us too, Alma," I interrupted.

"Of course. I'm Lady Aria's personal bodyguard, after all." Alma puffed her chest out proudly, a smug look on her face. There was

no mistaking the sheer amount of pride she took in her job as Commander of the Royal Guard in charge of protecting Seira.

Fam then broke in with a question. “Speaking of which… Do you mind if we keep calling you Seira, like we always have? Or would you prefer to be called Lady Aria?”

“Seira is perfectly fine with me. Right now I’m just a guard like the rest of you.” She turned to Alma. “Please go ahead and call me what they do, Alma.”

“Understood, Lady Aria!”

“Doesn’t sound like she understood a damn thing,” Spinoza quipped.

“I owe my life to my lady. It’s not that easy to just erase the respect I hold for her,” Alma explained.

“Now she’s making excuses,” Fam added.

“Lady Aria—sorry, Lady Seira—as your bodyguard, I promise I’ll protect you with my life. Even if my own body falls to pieces, I’ll make sure you live on!”

“Thank you for that, Alma, but you’re not allowed to lose your life either,” Seira insisted. “Let’s make sure every one of us stays alive!”

“Oh, I’m not worthy of such words! I swear to serve by your side for my whole life—and devote myself entirely to you!” Alma’s display of loyalty had her looking like she was about to burst into tears of joy at any moment.

Back when Alma was suffering from memory loss, she had treated Seira just like any other colleague, but after her memories came back, she began conducting herself like an obedient servant.

“Lady Seira, I will be both your sword *and* your shield!”

***

“Alma, I’m putting you and Seira in different squadrons.”

“…Huh?” Alma stood in shock, dumbfounded by Commander Bolton’s announcement.

When we had gone to the commander’s office to report that Seira and Alma had returned, he had welcomed them both back in with open arms. Alma had felt relieved and assumed that everything had gone perfectly—which made the man’s words a complete slap in the face.

“Hold on! Why are you splitting us into separate squadrons? I’m the commander of Lady Seira’s Royal Guard! That should put me by her side at all times, shouldn’t it?!”

“You may be her personal bodyguard when you’re in Sorcera, but right now, the two of you are both just plain guards. As your commander, it’s up to me to decide where to place you. Not only that—”

“Not only that?”

“Well, we’re shorthanded. I can’t really do anything about it.”

Commander Bolton had to have known all along she’d be dead set against the idea. Grouchily, he lit up his cigar and continued his thought. “And we’re especially short on people who’ve got what it takes to command troops—the type I’d be able to trust to lead a squadron. Not just anybody can handle directing large groups of soldiers like that. You’ve gotta have the right skills and the right experience. On that note, considering that you used to work as commander of Seira’s Royal Guard, I think *you’d* be a perfect fit.”

“Hmmm. You might be right about that…” Alma mulled.

The commander exhaled a puff of smoke, then put his cigar out in the ashtray. “I definitely don’t just say that to anyone. I’m saying it to you because I’ve got full confidence in your talent. I want you to take command of some of our guards as a squad sergeant.”

“W-Well, when you put it like that, it doesn’t sound so bad.”

Having been showered with words of praise, Alma seemed rather pleased; she was grinning from ear to ear, failing miserably at hiding the gleeful expression plastered across her face.

Having people recognize her talent certainly made her happy—way happier than anyone else I knew.

“Man, what a pushover,” Spinoza groaned.

“She’s the type who would get suckered in by someone’s sweet talk, then absolutely fleeced,” Fam murmured.

“Alma is just very honest about her feelings,” Seira asserted.

Each of the members of the Fifth had to share their feelings on the situation.

“S-Still, even if I take the squad sergeant position, I can’t accept being separated from Lady Seira. I want you to put her in my squadron too,” Alma insisted.

“Sorry, no can do,” Commander Bolton informed her.

“Why not?!”

“We take Seira out of the Fifth Squadron, and Sieg’s probably gonna die of an ulcer before too long. He needs someone who can calm those troublemakers down.”

“But…!”

“I’ll be fine, Alma,” Seira assured her. “I can protect myself just fine. Please, I want you to do whatever you can to help out the royal capital.” She offered Alma a smile. “Besides, isn’t it amazing that you’re being entrusted with a squadron of your own? As both your lady and your colleague, I’m very proud of you!”

“Don’t you worry about Seira,” the commander added. “She’s got Sieg with her. Isn’t that right?” He looked at me expectantly.

“I’ll take on the responsibility of protecting Seira,” I promised. “You can rest easy, Alma.”

“Well…I do have faith when it comes to your defense power,” she admitted, nodding to herself reluctantly. “Very well. Please take care of Lady Seira for me.”

“I sure will.”

“I guess if anything happens to Seira now, it’s gonna turn into some kinda international incident, huh,” Spinoza chuckled.

I fell silent at her wisecrack. It really was a massive responsibility—we had a princess of Sorcera in our care.

“Please try not to worry about it, Sarge,” Seira assured me. “I came here of my own volition. There’s no need to feel like you’re the one responsible if anything bad happens.”

“No, as a sergeant, it’s my responsibility to protect the people under me—not just you, but the entire squadron. Nothing *bad* is going to happen to any of my comrades on *my* watch.”

“Oooh, you’re such a badass. I’m gettin’ all hot ’n’ bothered here.”

“Just what I’d expect from the only man I’ve deemed worthy enough to trust my back to.”

Spinoza and Fam had to get in their commentary.

“And now you’re making fun of me,” I said with a sigh.

Seira giggled. “*I* honestly thought it was cool.” I felt a bit of embarrassment well up inside me, which she met with her charming gaze.

“Looks like the old Fifth Squadron’s back in action.” Commander Bolton, who had been watching, put on a bold smirk. “Anyway, enough about that,” he went on, lighting another cigar. “Right

now, the Guard Corps has a huge problem."

"The run-down dorms?" I asked.

"The disgusting food, I bet," Spinoza guessed.

"Maybe the terrible manners of the guards?" Fam offered.

"Those are all problems, but it's something else," the commander replied, frustrated at the litany of other issues that came flooding out. He moved on to reveal the problem at hand. "The Guard Corps is suffering from the worst shortage of manpower we've ever had."

"Even with Seira and Alma back on the force?" I asked.

"Yeah. Even with them, we're still coming up short. It's all because of the fight with those demons Gregor let in, and of course the battle with Sorcera. Honestly, we'd take any help we could get right now—and we're especially low on people at the squad sergeant level. Sure would be nice to have someone else who could keep this pack of mutts in order."

"Have you been putting out any job postings?" I asked.

"Of course we have—but we still aren't getting diddly-squat. Hey, why do you guys think nobody wants to apply to be a guard?"

"The dismal pay."

"The demanding schedule."

"The dirty, dangerous work."

Silence filled the air. The atmosphere in the room seemed to indicate that everybody agreed. Demanding, dirty, dangerous, dismal pay—the four Ds were all right there. The saying might've gone that "*Somebody's gotta do it*," but that didn't mean anyone was going to apply willingly. About the only ones we could expect were people with nowhere else to go, or people with really strange taste in jobs.

"Now that I think about it, it's a damn miracle you ever showed up, Sieg." Commander Bolton let out a sigh. "Look, do any of you know anyone at all who's got some decent skills? If so, bring 'em on over. The way things are right now, we can't even put up a proper defensive fight."

"You've got us, don't ya? You sayin' you don't trust us?" Spinoza spat.

"Oh, I definitely trust your skills—probably more than anyone out there. But no matter how you look at it, putting the fate of all of humanity on the shoulders of a single squadron is just plain

crazy," the commander said. "Even *I* think it's a bad idea to be stuck constantly relying on you guys. If I can find some way to lighten your load, you bet your ass I'm gonna do it."

"You can start by givin' us a raise, then."

"Believe me, if I can, I will."

"That sounds a hell of a lot like a 'no' to me," Spinoza grumbled in annoyance.

While we were short on manpower, that naturally meant each of us had a larger workload—which would no doubt make things that much more dangerous.

"I guess we should probably help out however we can," I said. "For our own sake as much as everyone else's."

Chapter 2: The Fifth Squadron's Recruitment Activities

We began the search for new Guard Corps recruits in order to bolster our forces.

"Do any of us even know anyone who's any good, though?" Spinoza grumbled, her hands locked behind her head.

"You go to the pub a lot, don't you? What about your drinking buddies?" I asked.

"Nah, those guys'd be duds. They can't do a damn thing unless they've got booze in 'em at all times. They'd just be a buncha useless staggerin' morons on the battlefield."

"Seira, Alma, what about you two? I figured you in particular would know a few people, Seira."

"I do know a lot of people, but not when it comes to skilled combatants... I think anyone I know would have a difficult time battling out there as a guard."

"I'm in the same boat as my lady. There isn't even an Adventurers' Guild in this city, is there? In that case, there won't be too many citizens who can handle actual combat."

"You're probably right," I admitted. "Fam, what about you?"

"Why on earth would you think *I* have any acquaintances?" Fam chuckled. "I can introduce you to a few stray cat friends, though, if you think that would help."

"I appreciate the offer, but I think I'll pass," I muttered.

Our party had been utterly defeated.

There just weren't that many people among the general populace who could battle monsters. That was the whole reason fighters like us were able to earn our keep as guards.

"So what about you, Sieg?" Spinoza asked.

"Is there anyone you know who would be capable?" Seira's interest was piqued as well.

"Yeah, I guess you could say I do," I responded, to everyone's surprise.

"Nice!" Spinoza grinned. "Been holding out on us, huh?"

"This whole time I had thought you were almost as antisocial as

I am, but I guess you're actually the cheery type who just *looks* like the gloomy type. I feel a bit betrayed," Fam mourned.

"Some of the only people I know just so happen to meet the criteria, that's all. That doesn't make me a social person," I corrected her. "Whether they're even interested is another matter, though. They have their own lives to live, after all. But if nothing else, I can at least talk to them about it."

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We decided to go ahead and try out my contacts right away.

"You want me to join the Guard Corps?"

Upon hearing our rundown of the situation, Haruna's eyes widened in surprise. She was a mage for the party I used to be in, the Crimson Fangs. Her most memorable traits were her fiery scarlet hair and her haughty, catlike eyes.

"Yeah. Interested at all?" I asked.

"Well…I'd definitely love to help you out—I owe you, after all—but I still have my work here at the magic academy."

Ever since Haruna had made the royal capital her home base, she had been working as an instructor at the magic academy. She had always had a rather nurturing personality, and from what I had heard, her students thought quite highly of her as well.

It had also been thanks to that same trait of hers that I had ended up able to fit in with the others back when I had first joined the Crimson Fangs.

We were speaking with Haruna in one of the school buildings on the magic academy grounds; she had ended up squeezing in some time for us during a break between classes.

"They finally brought me on as a full-time lecturer not too long ago, so I'm usually booked solid during the days now. I feel bad, but I really can't…"

"That's okay. It's not a big deal," I said. "Congratulations on your promotion to full-time, though!"

"You're not upset about that? If I had still been part-time, I could've helped the guards out."

"My friend's hard work paid off. Why would I be anything other than happy?"

"That part of you hasn't changed a bit, Sieg." Haruna gave a

sudden soft smile. “Thank you. Hearing that from a friend really makes me happy.”

We exchanged smiles. There had been some misunderstandings and strained relations between us in the past, but our lingering issues had been cleared up, and our relationship was back to how it had been originally. Even though we were in different lines of work, the bond between us remained strong.

“Do you have any other connections, though?” she asked.

“You know me, Haruna. I don’t know that many people.”

“True—you’re the silent type, so you’re not much for starting conversations. Well, that’s a lot more likable than people who flap their gums constantly, if you ask me,” she said, then added, “though it seems like you’ve gotten better at holding normal conversations since you became a guard, don’t you think?”

“It’s part of the job. I can’t be an effective squad sergeant if I avoid communicating with my team members. Any failure to communicate will end up hindering our work.”

“You really are serious to a fault—just like you always were back in our party. Always trying to play your part properly, no matter what.”

“Though a lot of the time I never say a single word on my days off.”

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

“Once I was given three days off in a row. When I went back to work, I had forgotten how to speak,” I admitted.

“Next time you get a block of time off like that, you need to stop by and say hi, okay?” Haruna said, a smile plastered over her disbelief. “By the way, if you’re looking for people to reach out to, why not try Irene? By now she’s probably starting to get nervous about her funds running out.”

“Good point… Last time I saw her, she still hadn’t had any luck finding a job. If I offered, she might well take me up on it.”

“You should head over to the inn where she’s staying.”

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After that, we headed to the inn Haruna had told us about—a cheap place called “The Fence-Sitter” that stood at a nearby intersection. Apparently, that was where Irene was staying.

“Business seems to be booming,” Seira observed.

The first floor of the inn was being used as a restaurant, and there was a long line of people snaking out from the storefront. The heavenly aroma of food wafted through the air.

“Any time I smell delicious food, it makes me want booze,” Spinoza said, nodding sagely.

“Any time you smell delicious food, you’re supposed to want the food. Why booze?” I asked in exasperation as we opened the door to the inn.

We found Irene almost right away. Luckily for us, she was sitting in the restaurant area, stuffing her face with meat from a skewer and chewing away happily. Since we were there anyway, we decided to sit down and have lunch with her.

When I explained the situation to her, she gave me a weak smile. “Hmmm, I don’t think that’s gonna be in the cards.”

“You don’t like the idea of being a guard?”

“No, no, I’d totally be okay with the guard thing. Oh, though I’d definitely have to be in your squad, Sieg.”

“Then what’s the problem, exactly?”

“If I remember correctly, you’re an archer, right, Irene?” Seira joined in. “Maybe you’re concerned about you and Fam having overlapping roles?”

Fam chuckled. “I’m chock-full of unique attributes: extreme obsessiveness, silver hair, antisocial behavior. Those things might completely drown out any traits you have.”

“I can’t believe you just said all that without being majorly drunk,” Irene quipped.

“Speaking of being drunk, what exactly do you think you’re doing, Spinoza?” I said sternly.

In Spinoza’s hand was a mug that had been filled to the brim with ale, and next to that were several other mugs that were already empty. In the short time I had taken my eyes off her to try and persuade Irene to join us, she was already knee-deep in alcohol.

“What? ’S no big deal. We don’t got nothin’ but patrol today, so don’t be such a spoilsport. Long as it’s outta my system by the time we get back to the station, no one’s gonna know.”

She threw back another ale as she engaged in her smooth talk. She seemed quite pleased to have been able to fill up on her usual

supply of energy.

"You know, I'm not sure it's *ever* been completely out of your system," I muttered.

Usually she would come back to the guard station smelling of booze and Commander Bolton would give me the third degree. In the worst cases, sometimes she'd never even make it back to the station and just fall asleep in an alley somewhere.

As we stared at Spinoza in exasperation, Irene let out a chuckle.

"What?" I blinked.

"Oh, nothing. Just noticing how buddy-buddy you are with your teammates."

"More like they're a handful to deal with," I said with a sigh.

"It's kind of like how things were with us at first, right? Nacht would do something totally stupid, you and Haruna would get frustrated, and I'd just sit there and watch the hilarity."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"I'm super glad you found another group of people you get along with, Sieg."

I gave a tight smile. That was the kind of thing one would normally hear from a parent or guardian.

"Back to the subject at hand, are you sure you're not interested in being a guard? Aren't you worried you'll run out of money to stay at the inn if you don't find work soon?"

Irene had no steady job and had been surviving by blowing through her savings, but the money she had saved up while in the Crimson Fangs wasn't enough to get by on forever.

"Well, I kind of stumbled into a thing I'm doing and all."

"A thing you're doing?"

A voice suddenly piped up from behind me in response to my question.

"Irene here has been bringing us meat."

An elderly couple wearing aprons had come out from the back of the restaurant—most likely the owners of the inn. They had an aura of tranquility about them, like a pair of ancient plants.

"The hunter who always used to bring our meat got injured and ended up retiring, so we hadn't been able to serve our main meat dish for a while. We didn't know what we were going to do, but Irene decided to start hunting game for us."

As her husband said this, the wife proudly added, "Irene is such

an excellent marksman. She brings down every target with just a single arrow, so now she can bring us meat while it's still quite fresh. Our restaurant hadn't been doing too well, but now we're packed full every day, and it's all thanks to her. Our retired hunter was so happy to have found a replacement too."

Irene gave an embarrassed grin. "So now they're letting me stay at the inn for free, and I can even get some pocket money by delivering meat. Hunting is, like, *so* much safer than fighting monsters too."

Apparently, all my worries had been for naught; Irene had already firmly rooted herself in the capital's community. She was supporting the lives of the people by delivering her kills as a hunter.

"And that's why I can't be a guard, I guess," she finished. "Sorry about that!"

"No, that's fine. I'm actually relieved to hear about all this."

If she'd gotten a job, I certainly couldn't force her into the guards. Irene had already found her place.

After that, I introduced myself to the elderly innkeepers and asked them to take good care of Irene. They seemed to think of her like a granddaughter.

"I'll stop by to eat again sometime," I told them, and we decided to go ahead and leave the inn.

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Having failed to recruit both Haruna and Irene, I had exhausted the last of our options.

There were plenty of people out and about on the streets, but finding one who could hold their own against monsters was like trying to find a piece of gold in the desert sand. At the rate we were going, the excess vacancies in the Guard Corps would never be filled.

Just as we were losing all hope, a familiar voice called out.

"Oh, hello, Sieg. What a pleasant surprise."

We had just so happened to run into Eleanor, Commander of the Knight Corps, who was clad in silver armor and accompanied by a couple of subordinate knights nearby.

"Ah, Eleanor," I greeted her.

“You there,” one of her knights piped up. “How dare you address Lady Eleanor so rudely? Use ‘Lady’ when you’re speaking to her, got that? We don’t take kindly to people disrespecting our commander.”

“It’s fine, Benedetta,” Eleanor said in admonishment to the subordinate who had so passionately raised her voice at me.

“But…”

“Leaving off my title provides more of a sense of intimacy, don’t you agree?”

“Amazing! There’s not the slightest hint of arrogance to be found in you, despite your status as the commander of the Knight Corps…! I am truly taken by the level of open-mindedness you possess…!”

The woman named Benedetta knelt before Eleanor in admiration. The gaze she cast up at her commander carried a hint of intoxication.

Just then, a young man came passing by. His cheeks were red, and he had an unsteady gait; by the look of his fancy attire, he was most likely a noble. Normally the nobles stayed in their own ward, located within the second, inner perimeter wall, but there were a few among them who would wander out to where the commoners lived to check out their “local offerings.”

Upon seeing Eleanor, the drunken man sauntered up to her.

“Oh, hey, Eleanor! You’re looking quite fine today as usual. What say we head out for a drink together after this? It’ll be on me—I’ll show you a *great* time,” he purred smoothly into her ear, placing a hand on her shoulder. His expression was brimming with confidence, like someone who had never had a rough time dealing with the opposite sex before.

But there was a first time for everything.

“Do not speak my name so casually, sir.” Eleanor grabbed the man’s head with one hand and began squeezing.

With his skull caught in her viselike grip, he could do nothing but let out a pathetic shriek. “Owww! I-I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! Please forgive my rudeness! You’re crushing my skull to pieces! Aaagh!”

Upon being released from the vise, the man, on the verge of tears, immediately turned tail and ran. The confident swagger he had displayed before had vanished into thin air.

Eleanor glared at the fleeing man with disdain. “*Hmph*.”

Benedetta seemed perplexed. “Lady Eleanor, I thought you just said it was fine to leave off your title…?”

“For those I deem worthy. Was that not obvious?” Eleanor responded coolly. “I am not so easy a woman as to allow every passing stranger to address me casually.”

“O-Oh, I see.”

The other knight, seeing Benedetta’s apparent confusion about their commander’s response, spoke up. “Gosh, you’re slow on the uptake, Benedetta. Lady Eleanor’s in love with Sieg, so she wants *him* to be the one to address her like that.”

“Really?” Benedetta asked.

“Yeah, earlier she said it was a ‘pleasant surprise’ when she ran into him and the others, but she had actually been wandering around the city looking for him the whole time.”

“*Ahem*. Hold your tongue, Cherio.” Upon clearing her throat, Eleanor turned back to us, blushing slightly. “You seem to be troubled by something. The guards and the knights both protect the royal capital together—we certainly wouldn’t be unwilling to assist you.”

“We appreciate the offer, at least,” I replied.

“Are you saying our help would be inadequate?” Eleanor asked.

“Not at all,” Seira responded for me. “We have a shortage of manpower in the Guard Corps, actually. We’re looking for candidates to recruit. That’s why we can’t really ask the Knight Corps to help out.”

“It’s not as though you would just join the guards instead if we asked…” Fam chimed in.

“Of course not. We’re knights,” Benedetta said.

“I’ll definitely pass on being a guard. Their stations are decrepit, their pay is abysmal… I’d say your chances of finding someone who’d quit the knights for *that* are pretty much zero,” Cherio added.

“Hell, I’d probably refuse, myself,” Spinoza muttered.

“I wouldn’t say the chances are *zero*, necessarily.”

Upon hearing those words, everyone’s eyes widened as they turned to look at Eleanor.

“Lady Eleanor, what do you mean by that…?” Benedetta asked.

“It means that if Sieg insisted, I can envision a potential future

where I quit the Knight Corps and transfer over to the Guard Corps."

"Huh?!" the two subordinate knights shrieked wildly in unison. "Lady Eleanor?!"

"I am a maiden, after all, meaning I am susceptible to being forced around by the man I love. Were he to pressure me, I would even be willing to run off with him and elope." Blushing, Eleanor placed a hand to her heart and let out a maidenly giggle.

"Uh, what's this about elopin'? This'd just be transferrin' from the knights to the guards—an' they're both right here in the capital. You kinda gotta leave the city to elope," Spinoza pointed out.

"That would be out of the question. I have an obligation to defend this city."

"So you're firm on that point, even when romantically involved," Fam said. "Though wouldn't transferring from the knights to the guards be a huge downgrade for you in every way?"

"That matters not. Whatever difference in compensation there may be, my charge would remain the same. Though my pockets may be empty, being with the one dearest to me will keep my heart full."

"Ugh, this lady's totally head over heels..." Spinoza groaned.

"I think Eleanor in love is quite charming!" Seira remarked in excitement. Though she was a princess of Sorcera, another facet of hers was how much she thoroughly enjoyed discussions about romance.

Seira then turned to Sieg. "All you'd have to do is ask, and she'd join the Guard Corps, right, Sarge? That would give our forces a huge boost in power!"

"I don't plan on asking anything of the sort," I replied, then called out to Eleanor. "Listen, Eleanor, people shouldn't throw away their careers in a momentary fit of passion. Give all this another thought before you just give up your Knight Corps position."

"Sieg, you truly do care about me, I see."

"I was just speaking in generalities. Besides, if the Knight Corps lost their commander, the rest of the knights would be at their wits' end, wouldn't they?"

"He's right!"

"Please reconsider, Lady Eleanor!"

Encouraged by the two knights accompanying her, I did my best to talk Eleanor down. Placing my hand on her shoulder, I looked her straight in the eyes and made an offer.

"You have a deep desire to protect the royal capital, and I truly respect that about you. Why don't the two of us, the Guard Corps and the Knight Corps, join hands together as equals, and work toward making the future you desire a reality?"

"O-Of course..."

Eleanor acquiesced, nodding meekly.

"I cannot turn down feelings that have been expressed to me with such fervor. I shall continue to fulfill my duty of protecting the capital as Commander of the Knight Corps."

"Right. So long as we're on the same page, we'll always have each other's backs."

We shook hands, pledging to fight for one another to the end.

That was a close one.

Eleanor had been *that* close to transferring to the Guard Corps.

We might've seen a vast increase in combat power with her on the team, but it would've cost us our most accommodating contact in the Knight Corps. We absolutely needed her to stay in place as their commander.

Even so, using her feelings in that manner wasn't exactly a commendable action for me to take. In fact, some might've accused me of tossing my morals by the wayside; nevertheless, it was something I had to do to keep the royal capital protected. As a squad sergeant of the Guard Corps, I was fully prepared to take the blame.

"Heh. I must admit, I'm surprised," Eleanor began.

"About what?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"You spoke of us as being equals just a moment ago."

"Ah, well, I suppose you do outrank me, don't you. Did that offend you?" I asked.

"No, not at all. It actually made me quite happy. Saying we would 'join hands together as equals' makes us sound like a husband and wife. I shall replay those words over and over in my head before bedtime."

With her hands pressed against her cheeks, Eleanor seemed satisfied.

After that, we ended up visiting a certain infamous location.

I had asked Eleanor if she knew of anyone who might be a good fit for the guards, and she had told us about one place we could try if we were truly desperate. According to her, the men there were physically strong, had good combat skills, and some might even have had the desire to become guards.

So we decided to go ahead and visit the place, but, well...

"Oh, hey, so I hear you're recruitin' guards? Hell, let me do it! I'll round up every last one of them monsters for ya!"

"No, *I'm* the one who's gonna be a guard! I'm way stronger than *that* thin-armed chump! Pick me, I've got actual muscles!"

"Huh?! The hell kinda bullshit is that? You think you're stronger than me? Fine, you and me, outside, now! I'll show ya how outta your league you are...by using ya as a punchin' bag!"

"Bring it on! You're dead meat, buddy!"

"Shut your mouths, boys!"

A whip cracked against the stone floor in sharp rebuke at the two heated men, and instantly the room fell completely silent.

"I will have to ask you to *never* speak without my permission again, prisoner pigs! Also, in what world would you prisoners ever be allowed to leave this institution in the first place?"

Standing there, clad in black bondage gear, was the prison's torturer—Miss Tiara.

And yes, we happened to be in the royal capital's prison. It was situated on a lonely island, isolated from the outside world. I had even been imprisoned there myself once on false charges.

The two men who had been so vigorously extolling their own virtues in their bids to become guards were actually prisoners in their cells.

Eleanor had suggested we see what the prison had to offer. Some people had been incarcerated for lighter crimes around the city such as petty theft or assault, and the idea was that those types could be potential candidates for the Guard Corps. It made sense that people like that wouldn't be hurting in the strength department; a lot of them probably used to be bandits or thieves, and they'd likely even be tough enough to take on monsters.

It would also be difficult for them to land proper jobs once they got out of prison, so some of them would no doubt end up turning into repeat offenders. In which case, why not train them up as

guards?

The prisoners must've all assumed they'd be granted amnesty and get released from prison if they joined the Guard Corps, because they had all gathered in a group to offer themselves up for the position.

"I actually always wanted to be a guard back when I was a kid! Let me be your comrade and protect the capital with you!"

"I swear I'd bust my ass *so hard* working for the Guard Corps!"

Their sales pitches were so forceful I thought they were going to start chewing through the bars of their cells.

"Ugh, what a bunch o' shameless lyin' creeps," Spinoza grumbled in exasperation. "None o' these guys give a rat's ass about any o' that stuff."

"Yeah, probably not," I agreed, eyeing the prisoners as they kissed up to us from inside their cells. They talked big, but I could see a certain gleam in their eyes overshadowing that. They'd probably turn on us the instant we let our guard down.

Truth be told, I was confident I could handle any of the prisoners here without a problem if they pulled anything—but having to keep a constant watch on my supposed allies would've really worn down my nerves. We had enough enemy attacks already; I'd exhaust myself if I had to worry about enemies among my allies as well.

As we walked down a path lined on either side with rows of cells containing prisoners, there was one man whose silky voice stuck in my memory more than any other.

"Hi there, Sieg! It's me—good old Lambda!"

It was a face I recognized immediately: my former supervisor, Lambda. He had previously served as my instructor when I had joined the Guard Corps, but he had been bringing in members of a bandit ring behind the scenes, using his position to line his pockets with a share of their profits. When I had seen it all happen, he had tried to have me eliminated, but he had failed and ended up in jail instead.

"I heard you were promoted to squad sergeant, weren't you? That's amazing! You're such a go-getter, Sieg. Someone like me could never hope to compare." Lambda rubbed his hands together as he sidled up to me. "So I hear the Guard Corps has a shortage of manpower?"

“Thanks in part to a certain someone failing to live up to their social obligations,” I said, staring him down.

“Hah hah. You sure don’t mince words,” he replied, putting a hand to his forehead in embarrassment. “But I’ve done some soul-searching here in prison. I’m a whole new man now. What do you think? Would you give me another chance?”

“Oh?” I mused.

“I’d like to try starting over as a guard. This time I’d be your subordinate, and I’d do whatever you tell me to—clean your sword, polish your shoes, anything!”

“You just said ‘anything,’ right?”

When he heard me ask that, Lambda’s expression lit up. A wide smile crept across his face; it was time for his clutch moment.

“Of course! I’ll do absolutely anything within my power. We’re old Guard Corps buddies—I’d gladly follow any order my superior gives me!”

“In that case, there is one order I can give you.”

“By all means!”

“Keep up your soul-searching until your prison term is over.”

When I told him that, Lambda could only stare blankly back at me.

“You said you’d gladly follow my orders, didn’t you?”

When he finally registered what I had said, the smile on his face stiffened instantly. His eyes shot open wide, exposing an expression of pure, unadulterated anger. “Forget it, I’ll tear you apart right here, right now!”

“Ugh! I’ll ask you to keep your incessant, vile howling out of my earshot! As punishment, you shall be given a thorough thrashing!” Miss Tiara roared.

“Huh? Wait, there are tons of other prisoners, aren’t there? Why single me out?” Lambda whined.

“Because you disgust me, why else? I just feel like it!”

“No faaair! Aaagh!”

Even though there were plenty of other prisoners making a ruckus, for some reason Lady Tiara had decided to zero in on Lambda, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and dragging him off to the torture chamber.

“Well, we gave it a shot because Eleanor suggested it, but I guess it was a wasted trip. We can’t let these prisoners into the

Corps.”

As hard up for help as we were, I couldn’t fathom the idea of bringing in people who could switch sides on us at the drop of a hat. That kind of internal dysfunction would only hasten the demise of the whole organization.

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The next day, the Fifth Squadron was standing in front of the main gate of the royal capital. We were there as gatekeepers to intercept any monsters that attacked.

We still hadn’t been able to resolve the issue of the Guard Corps’s shortage of manpower, but the monsters sure didn’t seem to care about our problems, because they kept raiding us nonetheless.

“It’s been nothing but monsters all day today, huh…” I muttered.

It was already past noon, but the only visitors we had received up to that point had been monsters. Naturally, we politely turned them away at the gates.

“I heard there was a massive upspring of monsters on the plains near the capital,” Seira told us. “It’ll be difficult for any outsiders to make their way to the capital until that eases up, supposedly.”

“It’s already dangerous enough to come here without hiring a skilled escort,” Fam said. “Making the trip out here to peddle one’s wares wouldn’t be worth the expense or risk.”

“Even if they did make it safely, the prices they charge would probably skyrocket,” I added.

“Well, everything the merchants bring over is usually for the nobles to buy, anyhow. The common folk’d never be able to get their hands on the stuff either way.”

As we stood there in front of the gate shooting the breeze, Fam suddenly spoke up again.

“Sieg, someone’s approaching the gate,” she murmured from her position atop the city wall. As a top-caliber archer, her eyes could discern any tiny thing out of place even at great distances, and that time seemed to be no exception.

The moment we heard her say that, we immediately readied

ourselves for battle.

"Is it a monster attack?"

"No…it's not. That's a human," Fam responded after inspecting the approaching individual.

"It ain't a merchant?" Spinoza asked.

"Doubtful. They're wearing a helmet and an overcoat, and approaching us on horseback."

"All by themselves?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. I don't see anyone else in their vicinity."

When we heard Fam's report, the rest of us in front of the gate turned to look at each other.

Had the person come out to the royal capital completely unaccompanied?

"What do we do?" Spinoza looked to me. "They can't be up to anything good."

"We can't just suddenly come out swinging, though," I cautioned. "Let's just try talking to them for now. Don't let your guard down."

"Roger that, Sarge!" Seira proclaimed.

Eventually the person in the overcoat, sitting astride a mount, made their way along the main road and arrived at the gate. Since they were wearing a helmet, it wasn't possible to determine whether they were a man or a woman.

Once they had stopped their horse, the person took off their helmet, revealing the face of an androgynous man beneath it. His chestnut-colored hair swayed in the wind; his features carried such beauty that even I, a fellow man, was rendered speechless.



“Who are you? Where’d you come from?”

“Spinoza, we don’t speak to people so harshly. We’re supposed to be gentle with our questions,” Seira softly chided Spinoza for intimidating the new visitor.

“I’ve come from the Alexandre March,” the man responded firmly, not seeming offended whatsoever.

The Alexandre March was a territory located to the south of the royal capital, governed by the noble House of Alexandre and its margrave. It was the southernmost territory in the entire kingdom of Silvesta.

“Do you happen to have anything that can prove your identity?” Seira asked.

If he was a merchant, they would have issued him a travel permit—though judging by his armor, that seemed fairly unlikely. If he couldn’t prove his identity, we wouldn’t be able to let him into the capital.

“Something to prove my identity…” The man put his hand to his chin and thought for a moment, then hoisted up the sheathed sword hanging at his waist. “Will this do?”

We were all startled by what we saw. A crest, in the shape of a shield backed by a pair of crossed swords, was emblazoned into the weapon’s scabbard. A helmet, a pedestal, and various other images were arranged inside the shield.

“A scabbard with a crest—you’re some kinda noble, ain’t ya!” Spinoza bellowed.

It wasn’t just any crest either…

“My name is Leobolt Alexandre.”

Gasps of surprise echoed from around me.

He had introduced himself to us in a respectful manner. Only those connected to the House of Alexandre were allowed to bear its crest—though he wasn’t just connected, he was related by blood.

“The eldest son of the House of Alexandre…?!”

“Huh?! A noble rich kid from way the hell out there…without any escorts?! What the hell were you thinkin’? You some kinda moron?!”

Seira and Spinoza both shouted out with their own brands of astonishment.

“Man, you must be the luckiest guy on earth, huh?” Spinoza

went on.

"Why is that?" Leobolt Alexandre asked.

"If you had run into a pack o' monsters out there all by yourself, you'd probably be pushin' up daisies right now. Since you're alive, I guess that means ya didn't see any."

"Well, I do consider myself a fairly lucky man. However, the road being as long as it is, it would've been quite impossible not to encounter a single monster along the way."

"Hm? So does that mean…"

As if in response to Spinoza's question, Leobolt removed his overcoat, and we all gasped upon seeing the armor he wore underneath.

Originally, it had probably been a suit of silver armor that had gleamed brilliantly in the sunlight. However, the sheer amount of blood it had been sprayed with had made it appear quite dull. When we saw the color of the crusted remnants, it felt safe to assume it was monster blood.

"I was attacked by packs of monsters a good number of times en route. The plains closest to the royal capital were particularly dreadful. As you can see, they made a right mess of my lovely armor." Leobolt gave a bitter chuckle.

Judging from the sheer volume of blood spatter, I figured he had waged battles that defied the imagination—yet despite that, I could see no signs of injury or fatigue in him. His expression was calm and collected, as if nothing had ever happened.

He had gone through countless battles, yet came out unscathed. He hadn't brought any escorts with him either—he had done it all by himself.

If all that was true, he was astoundingly strong.

"I see… Well, I, for one, am convinced," Fam said. "If he's the eldest son of the House of Alexandre, it would certainly be possible for him to make it all the way here by himself."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The eldest son of the House of Alexandre, Leobolt, is a renowned swordsman," she explained. "Rumor has it that he alone would be a match for an entire army division."

"I've heard about this as well. It was said that in the Alexandre March in southern Silvesta, there was another master of the blade who people called a 'Sword Saint,'" Seira said. "One story goes that

some time ago, when a monster army attacked the March, he stood at the head of his own army and wiped out the enemy in the blink of an eye."

"Thanks to his efforts, every last monster in the Alexandre March has been rooted out, making it more peaceful than any other region right now," Fam added. "Even the demons that had been using me saw him as a threat."

Apparently, he was a well-known swordsman even among the demons.

"Oh yeah? Fighting monsters on the front lines, huh—that ain't half bad. I was convinced nobles always get other people to do their fightin', while they watch from a safe distance." Spinoza picked at her ear with a finger. "Well? Why'd a noble rich boy like you come way out here to the capital? Sightseein' or somethin'?" she asked the mounted man rudely.

"I have made haste to the royal capital because I have a mission to fulfill," Leobolt responded.

"A mission?" Spinoza blinked incredulously.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "It is said that this is where one can find the Orb of Light, within which the Demon King is sealed. I have come here to defend that sacred treasure, and thus preserve peace for the entire world."

That part left me with a huge question mark over my head. Why would someone from the House of Alexandre want to do that instead of leaving it to someone who already lived in the capital? There would be no real benefit to them doing such a thing unprompted; it was possible they could make the royal family here feel indebted to them, but even if they managed that, I doubted their own clan would be able to get anything of comparable value in return.

However, the next thing he said was even more bizarre than that.

"To that end, I would like to enroll in the Royal Capital of Astaroth's Guard Corps."

The Fifth let out a collective confused "Huh?"

Chapter 3: A Promising New Recruit

After that, we brought Leobolt over to see Commander Bolton.

“Well, looks like you really are *the* Leobolt Alexandre.” The Commander, seated in his office at the guard station, addressed Leobolt with a murmur. The crest-emblazoned scabbard had been placed on his desk.

“What exactly is goin’ through that head of yours that makes you want to join the Guard Corps, though? You’re the eldest son of a noble house.”

“It’s just as I explained previously,” Leobolt responded politely, placing a hand to his chest. “Your royal capital houses the Orb of Light, which seals the Demon King. I may be the eldest son of the House of Alexandre, but first and foremost I am a man who loves peace. Should the orb be stolen, our world would fall into the hands of the demons. I would like to be a part of preventing that from happening.” His gaze, as clear as a cloudless day, was straightforward and firm.

“Have you told your family already?”

“I have—though they were strongly opposed. They insist I have a duty to be successor to the House and protect our own territory. But that’s because my father is only concerned with the interests of the House. He prioritizes protection of our territory over all else—be it the Kingdom of Silvesta or the entire world,” Leobolt explained.

He then paused and shook his head. “No, that’s not quite right. It’s more than just my father in the wrong. Our neighboring kingdoms are no different; even though the Demon King would be resurrected if the Orb of Light were seized, they merely stand by and leave our kingdom with this most difficult of responsibilities. They all feign ignorance out of fear that they’ll sustain their own losses if they dare meddle—though by all rights this problem is one that all of humanity should be working together to deal with.”

It was plain how indignant he was based on his harsh tone of voice. It must have been impossible for him to stomach.

“Well, there are some people in those other countries who just

plain don't believe us. They think we made up the whole thing about the Demon King being sealed in the orb," Commander Bolton replied.

"It's quite simple to confirm that the legends of the Orb of Light are true. One need only consult their histories and literature. Their ignorance is a natural consequence of those in power putting their own kingdoms above all else."

"So how did you deal with their objections?"

"I concluded it would be impossible to convince my father, so I set out alone. In essence, I've been exiled from the House of Alexandre."

"Oh, you've gotta be kiddin' me..." The commander put a palm to his forehead in frustration.

Leobolt had given up his status as the heir to his noble family to come to the royal capital all by himself. It was an act that could only be described as sheer lunacy—though he did want to join the Astaroth Guard Corps to protect the Orb of Light, and that itself was a perfectly respectable motivation. A decent number of our own guards had said the same thing during their interviews when they first joined; however, many of them had just given that reason to make themselves look good, with very few of them holding it as a firm personal belief. And by very few, I mean virtually none.

Most of the Guard Corps was made up of people with problems. A good number of them had found themselves with no place to go in other cities and ended up drifting over to Astaroth. That meant their main motivation for wanting to join was simply to secure a job and make ends meet; they had no particular desire to protect the Orb of Light. That was how even I had been, starting out.

However, Leobolt was different. He desired to protect the orb from the bottom of his heart. Otherwise, there was no way the son of the margrave would've given up his position as the successor of his house and volunteered to join the rank-and-file city guards in the royal capital.

"I had originally intended to persuade my father and set out on my journey with my own guards in tow... I ask your forgiveness for only being able to offer myself," Leobolt said apologetically. "Protecting the Orb of Light is a duty that absolutely must be performed by someone. I have nothing but heartfelt respect for all

in the Guard Corps, who have taken on that responsibility and put their own lives at risk for the sake of humanity. I find it a more noble line of work than any other—one that should be held in high esteem."

He looked to us with reverent eyes. Under his pure, unsullied gaze, all of us in the Fifth Squadron couldn't help but look away uncomfortably. He wouldn't find anybody here who had joined the guards with such noble aspirations. Everyone had done it for their own personal reasons.

For me, the Guard had been recommended as a new place of employment after I had been let go from the Crimson Fangs. Seira had barely managed to make it to Astaroth with her life after her homeland had been taken over by demons, and Fam had infiltrated the guards as a demon spy. I hadn't been told why Spinoza had joined, but I was pretty darn certain it hadn't been for the sake of humanity.

That was why none of us could look Leobolt in the eye when he gazed at us with such reverence. We all knew we weren't exactly amazing people.

"I would like to join you all in carrying out your noble task in the service of world peace." Leobolt placed his hand against his chest as he confidently announced his aspirations. "Commander Bolton, would you be willing to bring me into the Guard Corps at the lowest rank? I swear to give my utmost effort in defending the orb."

"Well, we've definitely got a constant shortage of manpower... When a guy who knows how to fight wants to join us, there's zero reason for me to say no," the commander answered. "Especially since it sounds like you have experience leading an army. Honestly, I'd give my left arm for a future squad sergeant candidate like you."

"I am truly delighted to hear your kind words," Leobolt said, bowing respectfully.

"You don't gotta be so formal. It makes me tense up."

"My apologies."

"Seriously, what were you gonna do if I said no, anyway? You don't have anywhere else to go after running away from home, do ya?"

"I hadn't even considered the possibility of failing to get into the

Guard Corps," Leobolt responded without a moment's hesitation. "Because I am capable of pushing myself to my limits for the sake of our world—more so than any other."

"O-Oh. I see." That put Commander Bolton off a bit. He decided to change the subject. "Oh, yeah. It's no substitute for an interview, but I'm hoping I can get ya to give us a little demonstration of your skills. I wanna see what you're capable of."

"But of course," Leobolt replied in a dignified manner.

The commander looked in our direction. "Sieg. Mind taking him on?"

"Me?" I asked.

"Leobolt's good enough for people to call him the 'supreme sword'—and since you're the 'supreme shield' of the guards, I kinda wanna see who's gonna come out on top." He put on a wide smirk.

"I'm curious as hell!" Spinoza agreed.

"I certainly have some interest in knowing too..." Fam admitted.

"In that case, I have no problem with it," I responded. I did consider myself somewhat of a warrior, after all; it was only natural that a chance to fight someone called "supreme sword" would get my blood pumping.

"I see. How interesting." Leobolt's mouth suddenly curved into a refined smile. However, that elegance had another aspect hidden within it—that of a beast that was raring for battle. "I shall prove to you that my sword is worthy of belonging to the Guard Corps."

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We headed over to the guards' training grounds. Along with the Fifth, some of the other guards had gathered there to observe.

"All right, let's get this started." Commander Bolton clapped his hands together. "Leobolt, you've got to protect the balloon behind you from the guys who are gonna be attacking. Think of the balloon as the people of the capital or even the Orb of Light."

"I understand."

I had taken the exact same test when I had first joined. As I looked back on the memory, a sense of nostalgia washed over me.

You know, I never even considered I'd end up on the delivery side of this thing.

As I was heading over to face Leobolt, the other guards started coming forward.

"Let us handle this, Commander!"

"Guard work is serious business, not some noble rich kid's playtime fantasy. I'll get that fact through his thick skull."

"Best to drill in early how brutal the world can be."

Apparently, none of them had gotten great vibes from Leobolt. They were all trying to use the excuse of being his sparring opponent to give him a good thrashing.

"Tch... Ya bunch o' stubborn mutts. What do you wanna do, Leobolt?"

"I don't mind at all. In real battles, monsters will often attack in packs, so this should be excellent practice for handling multiple enemies at once." I felt zero sense of concern in his reply, meaning either he hadn't noticed their malicious intent or he had just ignored it completely.

Given the new opportunity to vent their frustrations in their usual manner, the guards had begun to get excited.

"Hell yeah. Time to knock this guy down a peg."

"Heh heh. Don't blame us if he runs off like a little coward."

"Um, Commander? Shouldn't we stop them?" Seira asked, seeming ill at ease.

"Our boys seem like they've got some animosity for our noble pal Leobolt here. Better to get that kinda bad blood outta their system sooner rather than later." Apparently, Commander Bolton was just going to sit back and watch.

"I'm betting one gold coin on fancy-pants Leobolt!" Spinoza announced.

"I have to agree..." Fam murmured. "Though, Spinoza... I'm pretty certain you don't *have* any gold coins."

"Well *duh*, it's on credit, of course! How about you, Sieg?"

"Hmmm," I said. "I'll put a silver coin on Leobolt too."

His expression was the very picture of calm, but an aura—something akin to spiritual energy, perhaps—emanated from his body. He stood in a highly polished stance, with no apparent openings to exploit. With just a single glance, it was easy to tell he was no ordinary man.

"I dunno what all that 'supreme sword' stuff is about, but we've been bustin' our balls training every day. If we all go after him at

once, we should be able to take him down."

"Prepare for a picture-perfect rain of pain, Guard Corps style!"

Nearly ten guards at once burst forward and launched themselves at Leobolt, paying no attention whatsoever to the balloon behind him.

Commander Bolton rolled his eyes. "These guys are hopeless…"

Letting out thunderous battle cries, the guards viciously attacked Leobolt with their swords and spears, attempting to lay him out flat. But just as the tips of their weapons were about to touch him—a storm suddenly erupted.

"Whoa!"

"Wh-What the…?!"

The guards were certain they had all jumped in at him simultaneously, but they had been repelled in the blink of an eye by a sudden wall of wind pressure and thrown against the ground.

At the center of that wind pressure—in what would've been the eye of the storm—stood Leobolt. He was in a post-swing stance after attacking with his wooden sword, with one foot planted forward and his right shoulder pulled inward. The storm had been caused by his swing.

"He managed to knock them all away with a single attack…" Fam said.

"But when did he even swing his sword? It happened so fast I didn't see a damn thing. He was just in that finished pose all of a sudden," Spinoza remarked.

"That was a powerful wind gust! Did he use some kind of magic, maybe?" Seira asked.

"No, he didn't," I replied. "That wasn't magic."

"You're absolutely correct. Very astute of you," Leobolt flashed a pleasant smile in response to our questions. "I have no understanding of magic. That was a sword technique. I merely cut through the air and sent everyone around me flying away with a burst of air pressure."

It was simple enough to explain, but it was clearly not an easy trick to pull off. One would have to swing their sword fast enough to cause a whirlwind, which would also require a massive amount of force. Neither the guards who had been sent flying nor the Fifth had managed to see his sword move—though Fam and I had just barely caught *something*, apparently.

The guards, scattered across the ground, had lost their will to fight after just that one strike. They had no doubt accumulated enough battle experience to realize the unfortunate truth—Leobolt's abilities were leagues above their own.

"Okay, looks like the show's over," Commander Bolton said, rubbing his chin. "Time for you to show him what you've got, Sieg."

"Understood."

"You may as well have me face the entire squadron," Leobolt offered.

"Awful sure of yourself, huh?" the commander replied. "The Fifth is our ace squadron. The other guys you fought don't even come close."

"Oh, I don't doubt their strength. It's rare to have one-on-one fights on the battlefield, though. I'd like for this to feel more like an actual battleground experience."

Leobolt did not have his sights set on a quick victory nor the glory to be gained from it; he was focused solely on the idea of battling monsters. I could find no reason whatsoever to doubt that.

Commander Bolton seemed to have come to the same conclusion that I had.

"All right, I'll allow it." He cast a glance at us. "Make it a good one, soldiers."

He had decided to go along with Leobolt's request. He was sending in the Fifth.

"Right on—we got this. I'm ready to really let loose!" Spinoza thundered.

"Let's make him regret fighting us all at once..." Fam threatened softly.

"I'm usually on defense, but I promise to do my absolute best on offense this time!" Seira vowed.

Taking their wooden weapons in hand, everyone besides me moved in to try and pop the balloon behind Leobolt's back.

"C'mon! It's smashin' time!" Spinoza swung her giant wooden war hammer around in an attempt to crush her opponent.

Between swords and hammers, the latter were vastly more destructive. If a swordsman tried to block a hammer strike, even with the side of the blade, he'd just be crushed.

Yet Leobolt managed to successfully defend against Spinoza's

attack—simply by warding off the incoming hammer swipe with the tip of his sword.

With her power disrupted, Spinoza's balance was thrown off, leaving a wide opening in her defenses.

"Agh! Shit!"

"I've got you, Spinoza!"

Before Leobolt could move in for the kill on Spinoza, Seira stepped in. He effortlessly dodged the fierce sword thrusts she unleashed in his direction.

The whole time he was battling the two of them, not once did Leobolt let his guard down when it came to keeping an eye on Fam and me either.

His weapon control and ability to concentrate are almost frightening—I'd have to agree with the people who call him another Sword Saint. I don't think the Guard Corps could ask for a more powerful new recruit.

Still, we can't just let him walk all over us either. We don't want him to get disillusioned—we've got to show him what we're made of.

"Is this all the Guard Corps' ace squadron has to offer, then?" Leobolt taunted gently.

"Hah! You ain't seen nothin' yet!" Spinoza growled.

"You have yet to see the Fifth's trump card…" Fam added.

"It's your turn, Sarge!" Seira called out.

"Right. Leave it to me. *Iron Target!*"

I stepped out onto the front line and activated my skill. Instantly, something strange happened to Leobolt's movements: his focus, which had been evenly spread across Spinoza, Seira, and Fam as well, zeroed entirely in on me and me alone.

"Wha—?! I can only focus on him…?!"

"That's my skill: *Iron Target*. It forces my enemies to make me their sole target. You have no choice but to fight me now."

Forcing my opponents into battle with me by making them focus all of their aggro on me: that was the crux of my *Iron Target* skill.

With things now being one-on-one, the two of us faced off, leaving the rest of the Fifth free to go after the balloon in the back.

"I had always wondered how the royal capital had managed to weather so many battles thus far with such a shortage of forces. Now that I've seen this skill of yours, though, everything makes

perfect sense."

"You've got to fight me now, whether you like it or not. And while we do that, you're going to lose your balloon."

"As things stand now, that may be true." Heedless of his dilemma, Leobolt suddenly smiled. "In which case, I will simply have to defeat you and force the skill to terminate. After that, I can stop the others and prevent the balloon from popping."

Things had taken a sudden unexpected turn—yet he had calmly assessed the situation, then immediately managed to choose the best option out of those available to him.

Which meant he was going to put his undivided concentration into defeating me.

I saw Leobolt pull back for a thrust—and then, all at once, he rushed in at me.

"*Heavenly Blast!*"

The tip of his sword wrapped in wind, he unleashed an explosion of power in a single devastating attack. With the wind coiled around it, the blade hurtled in my direction, threatening to pierce straight through me. It was so overwhelmingly fast that it left no sound in its wake, affording me no opportunity to dodge—which naturally meant the lone option I had left was to take it head-on.

I planted my feet on the ground to avoid being blown away by the wind, raised the shield in my left hand, and adopted a stance to take the full force of Leobolt's special technique.

The power of his strike was focused on a single point, and it broke straight through my shield. However, mere moments before it could pierce through my torso, the blade of his sword buckled from the pressure and shattered into splinters.

Apparently, my defense power had ever so slightly beaten out Leobolt's attack power.

"Guh—?!" Leobolt gasped in surprise at the splintered-tipped handle that used to be his sword. For the first time, a crack had formed in the mask of composure he had been wearing.

As all that was occurring, Spinoza and the others were nearing the balloon. Just when I thought we were about to capture the win, though—

"It's not over yet!"

Wearing an expression of urgency, Leobolt turned on his heels

and sprinted toward the balloon.

Sure, I was surprised he hadn't lost his will to fight yet—but that was nothing compared to the *other* thing that blindsided me.

He broke my Iron Target?!

Leobolt's special technique was so powerful that it had forced me to terminate *Iron Target* and devote every last bit of my concentration to defense. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have been able to stop his attack.

However, his wooden sword had already been shattered to bits. He didn't have any way to stop the others' attacks.

"Awright! Let's finish this balloon off with a *bang*!"

Just as Spinoza, certain that we had won, confidently wound up for a huge hammer swing to burst the balloon, I cried out, "Spinoza! He's right next to you!"

"Huh?!"

Only when she heard my voice did she notice Leobolt rushing at her throat. By the time she realized what was happening, she had been yanked to the ground.

"Gah?!"

Then, keeping up that same momentum, he tried to go after Seira.

"I don't think so." Fam released an arrow, which Leobolt noticed, allowing him to dodge at the last second.

However, this gave Seira a split-second opening to attack, and she brought her sword down at the balloon. "Got you!"

Just as the tip was about to pierce its target, though—Leobolt slid into the line of fire.

"Wha...?!"

Seira's wooden weapon struck the man. He had blocked the attack with his body.

"He sacrificed himself...?!" Spinoza sputtered.

Even after taking that blow, his eyes still shone with vigor. Just as he was about to lash out at Seira with a counterattack, a voice bellowed out from behind us:

"That's enough!" Commander Bolton's shout put an end to our battle right then and there. "We've got plenty of an idea how good you are now, Leobolt. If this doesn't stop now, things're just gonna get uglier."

Upon hearing those words, Leobolt relaxed his battle stance.

He released an extended breath, during which he let his bestial ferocity subside. Soon, he was back to his former pleasant demeanor.

"Were you satisfied with my performance in battle, then?"

"Sure was. You're not hailed as a Sword Saint for nothing—those were some amazing moves. I doubt any one of us guards is better than you are when it comes to pure swordsmanship," Bolton admitted. "And keeping up with the whole Fifth by yourself like that for so long? Crazy stuff. Though you only managed to pull off that last move because we were using wooden swords."

He had to have been talking about Leobolt using his body to stop Seira's sword strike. While it was easy enough to brace oneself and tank a hit like that when dealing with wooden swords in a mock battle, it wouldn't exactly be possible in actual combat.

However, the response that followed was unexpected.

"What are you talking about, Commander Bolton?" Leobolt said. "If I had encountered that situation in an actual battle, I would have done the exact same thing."

"Huh? What are you talking about? You'd be a bloody mess if you did that. Throwing yourself in front of a monster attack like that could easily get you killed."

"Of course it could. I've always been prepared for that possibility. Between my life and the entire world, I believe it's quite obvious which holds greater importance."

The commander's mouth fell open. He was blown away by the sheer strength of Leobolt's willingness to prioritize protecting the Orb of Light over his own life.

Leobolt cut his gaze away from Commander Bolton and turned it in my direction. "I was truly impressed by your skill, Sergeant Sieg. Your defensive power is absolutely exceptional. I was stunned that you were able to stop my special technique."

"You surprised me too," I replied. "Your technique forced me to cancel my *Iron Target*."

"As a foe, you would be fearsome indeed, but as an ally, there would be no one more reassuring. I could fight on the front lines without fear." He looked among the other members of the Fifth standing next to me. "The entire Fifth Squadron fought quite excellently. I firmly believe that your deeds are what have kept the Orb of Light safe for so long."

“Heh. This guy gets it.”

“It certainly doesn’t feel bad to hear praise…”

“You were quite strong as well, Leobolt!”

Spinoza, Fam, and Seira, respectively, all seemed rather pleased at the compliments. Everyone’s impressions of Leobolt, including my own, had improved greatly compared to before.

“I think we share the exact same sentiment about being reassured to have you as an ally,” I said, and he flashed us a pleased smile, as if honored by the words. He then extended his hand outward.

“With our powers combined, we would have nothing to fear, no matter what fearsome foes may come. Let us fight to protect our world.”

I took hold of Leobolt’s outstretched hand and shook it firmly. It was proof that we had become allies in defending the royal capital. We had forged a bond of trust that would allow us to rely on each other on the battlefield.

And so the Guard Corps had gained a powerful new member.

Chapter 4: A Coldhearted Side

After joining the Guard Corps, Leobolt was assigned to the Seventh Squadron, with Alma as his squad sergeant. The idea was to have him start there and see how things went.

One evening about a week later, my squadron and I were over at the pub with Alma. We had all finished our work for the day and had decided to go out for a few drinks.

"We haven't had much chance to talk recently. How've you been? Have you run into any problems since your promotion to squad sergeant?" I asked Alma.

"No, no problems. Everything's perfectly fine," she responded.

Even though we were all in the Guard Corps, people in different squadrons rarely got the opportunity to see each other face-to-face. If there was a large-scale monster attack or something, we might team up to ward them off, but things had fortunately been calm on that front for a while, so I hadn't yet gotten much of an opportunity to see Alma in action as a squad sergeant.

"I see. I should've expected no less from the former commander of the Sorcera Royal Guard."

"Heh heh. Keep those words of praise coming."



Alma puffed her chest out proudly, then turned her gaze to Seira. “Has everything been business as usual for you, Lady Seira?”

“It has! I’ve been doing quite well.”

“Really? That’s such a relief…! If you ever run into trouble, all you need to do is call me. I’ll drop everything else and come running to you.”

“I appreciate the thought, but please make your duties your top priority. You don’t want to cause trouble for your squadron,” Seira responded, smiling awkwardly. “And really, you don’t need to be by my side constantly when we’re not at work…”

“But if I’m not by your side and something happens, I might not get there in time to protect you!”

“Aren’t you bein’ overly paranoid? You’re gonna smother the poor girl!” Spinoza muttered in exasperation.

“Lady Seira is a princess of Sorcera! As commander of her Royal Guard, her protection is my absolute top priority of all! That much should be obvious,” Alma asserted with confidence. “Wherever my lady goes from now on, I intend to be there, following her at all times!”

“Can’t beat bein’ a stalker with a legitimate excuse, huh…” Spinoza groaned.

Fam chuckled. “You and I would make great drinking partners,” she said with a grin. “After all, one of my guiding principles of life is to follow Sieg like a shadow wherever he goes.”

“Our stalkers are starting to bond with each other,” I quipped.

“It’s really nice that they think so highly of us, but I’d rather they not be at our sides at *every* waking moment,” Seira added politely.

We looked at each other and shared a pained smile. It seemed the two perpetual stalkees were having a bit of a bonding moment here as well.

“Y’know, there’s one surefire way to solve both of your problems at once,” Spinoza suddenly blurted out. She had a look on her face that just screamed she had thought up something devious.

“Which is?” I took the bait.

“The two of you just gotta get together.”

“Whaaa?!” Seira squeaked.

“If ya did that, it’d make Fam’s and Alma’s brains shut down, right? You’d take out both stalkers at the same time! Not bad, eh?”

“Spinoza, you say some truly frightening things sometimes…”

Fam murmured.

“Pure evil! Is there no humanity in that heart of yours?!” Alma sputtered.

“All I care about is seein’ things that amuse me. Pairs really nice with drinks!” Spinoza said, then tossed back the entire mug of ale in her hand.

As we were getting into the spirit one would expect from a drinking party, I broached a certain subject with Alma. “So, what do you think of you-know-who?”

“Who?”

“Leobolt. He was assigned to the Seventh squadron, wasn’t he?”

“Oh, him…” Alma’s expression suddenly changed. “Leobolt’s a really talented guy. He’s got excellent combat skills, and great leadership too. He’s clearly a cut above the rest of the Seventh. Not to mention,” she went on, “he seems to be really popular with the townspeople. His whole backstory of being a noble who gave up his position as successor to rush over and defend the royal capital probably tugged at their heartstrings. His good looks and gentle demeanor don’t hurt either, I suppose.”

“People do tend to gravitate toward stories that are easy to understand. At any rate, it sounds like his actions are living up to our expectations.” I said, then took a swig of ale before finishing my thought. “The way things are going, he’ll probably be promoted to squad sergeant any day now.”

“Yeah, that much is pretty certain,” Alma responded, and started stuffing her face with the meat skewer in her hand.

Normally she would’ve eaten the entire thing in one go, but this time her hand came to a sudden stop. A shadow fell across her expression, and she let out a few murmured words. “There’s one thing I’m kind of apprehensive about, though.”

“Apprehensive…?”

“Leobolt is a straightforward person. He’s sincere, and he’s a man of character. But…he has a tendency to be a bit *too* straightforward at times.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he sees any guards slacking off, he reprimands them in a really harsh tone of voice. He also apparently tends to assign extra training after work to our less-skilled guards.”

“That’s pretty intense.”

“If that was all, it wouldn’t be so bad, but sometimes he starts going on about how ‘guards who protect the Orb of Light must conduct themselves in a certain way’ and nitpicking about our manners and whatnot,” Alma muttered in frustration. “He even yelled at me about the way I eat. He said I was too messy.”

“Well, you are pretty enthusiastic about shoveling food into your mouth. That might be hard to deal with for someone with a noble upbringing,” I said, trying to think about it from Leobolt’s point of view.

“I like the way Alma eats! It’s quite pleasant, if you ask me.”

“Lady Seira… Thank you for such kind words…!”

“Seira… You’re a true expert when it comes to spoiling people,” Fam grumbled with a sigh.

Alma’s serious expression returned. “I’m sure he has an ideal image in his mind about how things are supposed to be, and that in itself is fine. It only becomes a problem when he starts expecting those same standards from others.”

Upon hearing that, Spinoza let out a snort. “Doesn’t sound like he’d get along with me too well.”

“If Leobolt ended up in the same squadron as you, Spinoza, he’d probably die of sheer frustration,” Fam taunted. “You’re pretty much the literal definition of the word ‘vulgar,’ after all.”

“Nah, I just do whatever the hell I want,” Spinoza countered.

Ignoring Fam and Spinoza’s exchange, Alma finished, “The way things are going, the other guards will end up resenting Leobolt. I just hope it doesn’t turn into some kind of internal conflict…”

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One month later, just as I had predicted, Leobolt was promoted to squad sergeant. It was a direct result of the high level of skill he had demonstrated to those around him.

He was assigned to the Ninth Squadron, which had been without a sergeant. With his natural leadership abilities, he apparently had no trouble whipping the rowdy guards under his command into shape.

“Congratulations on your promotion to squad sergeant, Leobolt,” I said.

“Thank you, Sieg. As sergeant of the Ninth Squadron, I will

remain wholly committed to protecting the Orb of Light moving forward."

Despite how quickly he had shot up through the ranks, there wasn't a hint of arrogance to be seen in Leobolt. Quite the contrary, he vowed to be even more diligent than before.

He never flaunted his noble birth, nor did he give special treatment to anyone whatsoever, and those things seemed to make a good impression on the guards he worked with. Apparently, he was even giving extra practice sessions after regular training to anyone who desired it. I had looked in on a session once, and the morale of the guards had been quite high. Perhaps it was a product of his natural charisma.

Leobolt had become one of the main unifying forces in the royal capital. That meant that in the end, Alma's worries had all been for naught.

With the addition of Leobolt, the strength of the Guard Corps's forces had increased substantially. We still weren't exactly in tip-top shape, but compared to how things had been before, the difference was plain to see. All it had taken to completely transform our entire organization's ability to handle combat was a single capable leader.

One day, my Fifth Squadron and Leobolt's Ninth Squadron were brought together to carry out a certain joint mission.

"So your mission this time around is gonna be getting rid of a ring of thieves that's been frequenting the capital," Commander Bolton informed us from his office seat. "I've been telling you all for a while about how the ring's been spreading further and further across the city. I wanted to arrest 'em as soon as we possibly could, but they always disappear right after they do a job, and we've never been able to track 'em down... Now, though, we've finally found the bastards—Fam here managed to pin down the location of their hideout."

Fam let out a soft chuckle. "Intelligence operations are my specialty. There are plenty of cats in this city, after all. There's no way to hide when there are eyes everywhere."

"That makes sense," I said. "Great idea. Even if the thieves were careful to stay out of sight of humans, they probably would've never thought to avoid being spotted by cats."

"It really is a method only usable by Fam, who can

communicate with cats!" Seira added.

"So when you're talkin' to cats, you actually know how to hold a conversation normally, huh?" Spinoza teased.

"I may be shy around strange people, but I have no problem with strange cats," Fam explained.

"I want the Fifth and the Ninth to bust into the thief hideout Fam located and arrest the lot of 'em—we're gonna make a push to wipe this ring right out of existence," the commander told us. "You guys can handle that, right?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"We cannot stand by and do nothing while a group like that wreaks havoc across the capital. We shall go there and round up every last member of this thief ring," Leobolt proclaimed.

Upon seeing both of our positive attitudes, Commander Bolton nodded appreciatively. "Make no mistake, I have faith in all of your abilities…but remember that these guys aren't just gonna roll over for ya either. I want everyone to be extra careful when you're taking 'em on."

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The thief hideout Fam had tracked down turned out to be a run-down pub at an intersection of back alleys.

The dim alleyways were a rabbit warren of shops, which had made it difficult to pin down the place at first glance. It was plain as day they weren't exactly trying to attract customers.

There were two entrances to the pub: the main one in front and a back door in the rear. Our teams split up, with the Fifth taking the front entrance and the Ninth handling the rear. Our goal was to surround the thief ring and prevent any possible route of escape.

Soon, we got word that the guards of the Ninth had locked down the rear.

"All right. Let's get moving," I told my squadron. "We have no idea what's in there. Stay on guard."

"Yes, sir."

We moved in through the pub's front entrance. Inside, it looked exactly like one would expect a dive to look—there were a number of round wooden tables set up next to each other, along with

some sketchy-looking guys enjoying a few drinks. There looked to be about twenty men in total.

To the casual eye, it appeared to be nothing more than a pub frequented by nasty clientele. However, every person there was a member of the thief ring.

“Huh? Who the hell’re you?”

Complete silence had fallen across the place the moment we set foot inside. Amid the tense atmosphere, one of the men shot us a threatening growl.

“Place is rented out today, pals. Get lost.”

The man waved us off like he was shooing away flies. Crude snorts of laughter erupted from among the others present.

“Sorry, but we’re not here as customers,” I informed them, standing my ground. Casting a firm glare at everyone in the room, I placed my hand on the sword at my hip.

“We’re here as guards, and we’ve come to apprehend you and your ring of thieves.”

I drew my sword, and the rest of the Fifth followed suit, holding their own weapons at the ready.

Immediately, the looks of drunken revelry on the patrons’ faces were overrun by expressions of panic.

“*Tch*...! Damn it...!”

“Looks like they sniffed us out! Who the hell ratted on us?!”

“Who cares?! Let’s just get outta here!”

As soon as they had determined things looked grim for them, they took swift action. It was almost as if they hadn’t been drinking at all. They began hurling the nearby tables and liquor bottles at us, then made a mad dash for the rear exit behind them while we were distracted.

That was where they ran into a little problem.

“Whoa?!”

“Not good! The back’s blocked too! Augh?!”

As the thieves turned around, one of them was pinned to the ground by the Ninth, who had rushed in to assist. The rest of them surged back into the room like an avalanche.

With us blocking the front entrance and Leobolt and his men blocking the rear, the thieves found themselves surrounded in the center of the pub.

“There’s no point in resisting. Just give yourselves up.”

One of the thieves smirked widely in response to my advice. It wasn't a smile of resignation either—his eyes still had a savage spark within them.

"We've been very, *very* careful every step of the way so far. Did you actually think we wouldn't have thought up a plan for what to do if our hideout got compromised and surrounded?"

All at once, the surrounded thief ring members pulled smoke bombs out of their pockets and hurled them at their feet. In the blink of an eye, the inside of the pub was engulfed by thick smoke.

"Are they going to use the smoke screen to make a run for it...?!" a guard shouted.

"Everyone, lock down the exits! Don't let a single man through!" Leobolt ordered.

At their sergeant's command, the Ninth took up position in front of the rear exit. The Fifth and I did the same on our side, standing in front of the front door to block it off.

The smoke bombs hadn't been intended as attacks, so none of the skills I had could disperse the smoke. If they had tried to smash their way through the doors to escape, though, that would've been a different story; I could've drawn those attacks to me by using *Iron Target*, which would have allowed us to capture them all in one fell swoop.

"Huh? They're not coming after us," another guard grumbled in confusion.

"No, wait...!" Fam had noticed something unusual. "There's a magic circle here...! It just appeared on the floor! The smoke bombs were just a distraction so we wouldn't notice it!"

The rest of the guards were aghast.

"Whah?!"

"So they're gonna blow themselves up—and the whole pub with it?!"

I used my sword to wave the smoke away and found a magic circle glowing on the floor beneath me. It was a formula for explosion magic; it looked as if it had taken quite a long time to scrawl out, and it was already beginning to flash as if it were about to activate. In the worst-case scenario, it potentially had enough power to blow the entire building, us included, sky-high.

"Oh no! We don't have enough time to get out of range!" a guard shouted.

“Ninth Squadron, retreat behind me immediately!” Leobolt yelled.

“Sieg!” Seira exclaimed.

“Yup, I’m on it! *Iron Target!*”

The moment the magic circle was about to blow the whole place up, I activated my skill in an attempt to redirect the full force of the blast to me. Right as I was doing so, the magic circle activated as well, flooding the area with a blinding light.

However—the explosion that should’ve come afterward never happened. There was only the flash of light indicating the magic circle had gone off. After that, the markings on the floor beneath us simply faded away; all the damage from it had accumulated within me.

“Is everyone all right?” I checked with my team.

“Y-Yes!” Seira confirmed.

“Thanks to you…” Fam added.

“Shit, that was close!” Spinoza breathed a sigh of relief.

“What about you, Sarge? Are you hurt?” Seira asked in concern.

“No problems here,” I responded.

“You nullified the explosion from that magic circle all by yourself…” Leobolt murmured in wonder. “Truly amazing. I could not hope for a more heartening ally than you in protecting our world.”

“Hm? Hey, the thieves are gone!” one of the guards gasped.

After the smoke cleared, there was no sign of any of the thieves inside the pub—just us at the front entrance and the Ninth at the rear.

“We had the exits locked down…” I mused.

“You sure you guys didn’t let ’em through?” Spinoza accused the other team.

“Certainly not,” Leobolt responded. “All of us were in position in front of the rear exit. Even if we had been struck down, not even an ant would’ve made it past us.”

“So you’re sayin’ it was *us*?” Spinoza tilted her head in confusion. “But I sure as hell didn’t sense ’em comin’ this way either.”

“It seems they used a third exit,” Fam muttered.

Behind the counter of the bar was a row of giant liquor barrels. One of those barrels was out of line with the rest. In the location it should have been, a section of floor was missing, replaced with a

set of stairs that led underground. A number of footprints, presumably belonging to the thieves, were on the ground nearby.

"Ah, so they fled underground through that hidden passageway," I said.

"They blinded us using smoke bombs and escaped underground—then used that explosion magic circle to try and detonate the building with us inside it," Leobolt broke down the situation. "An impressively efficient plan. I can understand why we had been unable to track them down up until now. However, they hadn't counted on Sieg's presence here. They had likely planned on a leisurely escape after having used the magic circle to eliminate not only us, but all evidence in the area as well."

"They can't have gotten too far yet," I postulated. "If we go after them right now, we'll easily be able to catch up. Let's get a move on and head down there."

When we descended the stairs underground, a tunnel stretched out before us that was just wide enough for two people at a time to walk down. Torches lined the stone walls stretching up on either side of us. Using their light to make our way farther in, eventually we reached a split in the path.

"Which way did they run?" I asked.

"I sense people in both directions. My guess is they're probably trying to spread out as they escape, on the off chance we happen to chase after them," Fam surmised.

"In that case, we'd better split up as well," I advised.

The Fifth and the Ninth went off in separate directions in pursuit of the thieves.

Before long, we began to hear footsteps ahead of us, and the backs of the fleeing thieves became visible amid the darkness at the end of the passage. When they heard our footsteps approaching them from behind, they looked over their shoulders—and their torchlit faces immediately contorted as if they had seen a ghost.

"Wha—?! Why are they alive?!"

"That magic circle shoulda blown them and the pub to bits!"

"I'm afraid it didn't pack quite enough punch for that," I informed them.

"Ugh...! We're almost at the exit, though! We can lose 'em if we make it out into the alleys! For us, that tangled mess of narrow

roads is like our own backyard!”

As soon as the thieves reached the ladder to the surface, they immediately zoomed nimbly up it like spiders, without bothering to take even a moment to catch their breath.

“Wow, look at them go. They’ve got excellent form,” Fam murmured in admiration.

Between their ladder-climbing speed and ours, theirs was clearly superior. If we tried to climb up after them, we’d lose our advantage.

Just as I was wondering if we should use some kind of projectile weapon, Fam spoke up again. “Even if I start nocking arrows, I think they’ll reach the top before I can shoot them down.”

Apparently, even Fam’s bow wouldn’t be quick enough to stop them.

The lead thief cackled madly. “Hah! Ya did better than most, but ya still came up short! There ain’t nobody in the royal capital that can catch the Midnight Moles!”

“Take your time climbing and try not to slip on your way up!” another taunted. “Though once you make it to the top, we’ll be long gone!”

The thieves’ laughs echoed loudly downward, and the one in the lead placed his hands on the steel lid above him. “All right, once we’re out under the sun, we can run circles around these chumps!”

Certain they had beaten us, they pushed the lid aside—and were met with a surprise.

“Yo buddies. Long time no see, eh?”

The relief on the faces of the thieves instantly turned to dread. They had not been greeted by the sun appearing above them, but instead by Spinoza, who had a cruel smirk plastered across her face.

“Your info was perfect, Fam!” Seira said, her smile peeking through the opening as well.

“Wha...?!”

“Hey, moles aren’t supposed to come out on the surface—it’s too bright up there. Ya don’t wanna go blind, do ya? Guess I better smack ya right back down where ya belong!”

With those words, Spinoza hefted her war hammer high above her head.

The thieves were defenseless—they had their hands on the steel lid and couldn't draw their weapons. On top of that, the passageway was too narrow for them to get out of the way. They were quite literally targets sticking their heads out in a game of whack-a-mole.

"Waaaugh?!"

The terrified thief at the top lost his grip on the ladder and fell, tumbling wildly down into the other members one by one until they all slammed into the stone floor of the passage below with an earth-rumbling thud.

"A-Are they okay?!" Seira shouted down in concern.

"Don't worry. They're all fine," I said. It hadn't been that long a fall, and it didn't look like they had landed on their heads or anything.

I really had to hand it to Seira, though. She didn't discriminate at all when it came to being concerned about other people's welfare, even when the people were criminals like the ring of thieves we were after.

Splayed out on their backsides, the thieves couldn't hide their shock.

"H-How did you know where the tunnel led?!"

"We have Fam on our team," I explained.

"I have the entire layout of this city mapped out inside my head. While we were running underground, I let Spinoza know the rough location above that corresponded to where we were," Fam elaborated.

Fam was able to provide instructions to others across long distances using communication magic, allowing them to make full use of her intel capabilities and knowledge of the lay of the land.

"Who woulda thought they had people with that kinda talent in the Guard Corps..."

"We could use someone like that in the Midnight Moles. If we had her intel and layout knowledge of the entire capital, we could steal any damn thing we wanted!"

"Stop trying to poach her," I warned.

I mean, do these guys even understand the situation they're in? They're completely surrounded, on the brink of certain defeat...

"I never thought we'd be driven this far into a corner," the apparent leader of the thieves muttered. "I guess we have no

choice, then. We'll have to use our last resort."

Do they have something else hidden up their sleeves?

Our orders were to arrest them, so I didn't really want to start up a fight, but we got into our battle stances nonetheless, and right as we did so...

"We're so sorry!!!"

The thieves all dropped to their hands and knees and began apologizing profusely.

"Huh...?"

We were all momentarily stunned, confused as to what had happened.

"We surrender! Just don't kill us, please!"

"That was an awful quick change of attitude, wasn't it?" I asked.

"They might be trying to throw us off guard for a chance to strike back," Fam suggested.

"We wouldn't think of it! See, we've thrown down all our weapons! We don't have any way to resist anymore!"

"If you surrender, though, you'll be going to jail," I pointed out. "Your Midnight Moles will be broken up for good."

"If we don't have our lives, we don't have anything! I'm not going to die for the sake of an organization!"

The other thieves nodded vigorously in agreement.

"You just want to save your own hides, then," I stated. "Though I can't really blame you for that." It was a far more sensible idea than fighting a losing battle for the sake of pride and digging themselves into an even deeper hole.

After that, the thieves allowed us to capture them. Not a single one put up a struggle, because their safety was guaranteed if they went straight to jail without any resistance.

They might have been members of a notorious ring of thieves, but they hadn't caused any injuries or deaths. That meant their crimes likely weren't serious enough to warrant the death penalty.

"We really could've been seriously injured if things had gone south, though..."

We had been *that* close to being blown to smithereens along with the pub, after all.

Once Spinoza and Seira had descended the ladder and regrouped with us, I started thinking out loud. "I wonder how Leobolt and his men are faring?"

“I’ll try and contact him with my communication magic,” Fam offered. “I’ll let you handle all the talking once he picks up, though.”

“Why?”

“I’m no good with strangers. I can’t handle a conversation with anyone outside the Fifth.”

“...All right.”

I had Fam connect me with Leobolt using her communication magic. As it turned out, I was able to exchange messages through her, provided I was physically in contact with her.

Once I got in contact, he reported that they had managed to succeed in their mission as well.

“Let’s meet back up, then. We’ll head over to you,” I said.

After I cut off communication, we began making our way toward the designated meeting point. We brought the thieves along with us, their hands tied behind their backs with rope.

“You know, you guys have lived in the capital all your lives, haven’t you? Why would you decide to get mixed up in this whole thievery ring thing?” I asked.

“Well, we couldn’t find jobs, so it kind of felt like we had to if we wanted to eat.”

“I see. Well, going to prison at least guarantees you the bare minimum necessities of life. If you manage to learn some skills while you’re serving your time, you’ll probably be able to find jobs once you’re released.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“I can try to help you find something too,” I offered.

“Really?!”

“Sure. If you want, you could even try the Guard Corps. You’d need some training, but I think the athleticism you guys displayed back there would be perfectly suitable for the job.”

“That’s a very kind offer. But why would you do that for us...? We tried to explode you with a magic circle...”

“Nobody ended up getting hurt. I took all the damage from the explosion myself. That’s pretty much the same as nothing happening at all,” I said. “Besides, if you’re truly sorry about what you’ve done, you should be given a chance to rehabilitate. Doing that should make things better for the capital as a whole too.”

“I-I’ve never met anyone so open-minded and big-hearted...!”

“We’ll follow you to the ends of the earth, buddy!”

“Do *not* follow me.” I swatted the men away as they started coming in a little too close for comfort.

“It may not be much, but I’ll help you as well!” Seira came forward. “I want you all to be able to start life over and reintegrate into society!”

“You’re too kind to us…! Are you some kind of goddess…?!”

“We’ll follow you to the ends of the earth, lady!”

“That won’t be possible, but I do appreciate the thought!” Seira declined politely.

“Buncha smooth-talkin’ bastards.” Spinoza gave a half-annoyed grin.

While all that had been happening, we had just about made it to the meeting point.

Around this corner, we should see the Ninth Squadron there waiting for us. According to Leobolt’s report, they succeeded in their mission, so they should have the remaining thieves in custody as well.

As those thoughts were going through my mind, a strange odor reached my nostrils—a foul stench of some kind. It was coming from around the corner we were turning—from the meeting point with Leobolt up ahead. I could feel the stagnant air building up like pitch darkness.

I suddenly had a very bad feeling.

The sight that came into view as we turned the corner of the alley was something none of us could have imagined.

Leobolt and the Ninth Squadron were all gathered there. Nobody was missing.

However, we didn’t see any of the captured thieves we had expected.

No, to be more precise—the thieves were there. But “captured” wasn’t the right word for them.

They were lying on the ground in a massive pool of blood at the feet of Leobolt and his men. Not a single one was left alive. They had all been cut down, their lives snuffed out mercilessly.

“Ah, Sieg. It took you a while.” Upon noticing us, Leobolt flashed a pleasant smile. “I’m pleased to see you completed the mission successfully. Although with your level of skill, I knew it would be a trivial task.”

“What…is going on here…?” I asked automatically. “I thought

you said you completed the mission successfully?" There was a scene out of hell right in front of our eyes. The odor I had sensed earlier was the smell of blood and corpses.

"Of course. As you can see, we eliminated the thieves."

"But Commander Bolton told us to *arrest* them," I said. "Did they resist or something when you tried to tie them up?" If they had, the Ninth would've had no choice but to slay them.

"Not at all," Leobolt said. "As soon as they realized they had no chance, they surrendered. They were quite docile, actually—begging for their lives and whatnot."

"Then why did you...?"

"Why? Such a strange question to ask, Sieg. There isn't any reason to allow criminals like these to live, is there?" he responded with a slight smile. "I don't know why they think their own rights should be enforced when they've violated other people's rights themselves. Their logic is rather flawed, don't you think?"

"They told me the reason they got into thieving was because they couldn't find jobs."

"Yes, they told me the same thing as they were begging for their lives," Leobolt said. "Perhaps they were trying to garner sympathy in hopes of lightening their sentences."

"Maybe so," I said. "But if they couldn't find work, then there really wouldn't have been any other way for them to eat."

"That's nothing more than an excuse."

"An excuse?"

"There are plenty of other ways to find food when one has no work. Despite that fact, their own weakness caused them to devote themselves to thievery instead," Leobolt dismissed coldly. "Weak people always place blame on others—be it specific people or society at large. Then, to add insult to injury, they attempt to cause harm to others, turning a blind eye to their own lack of effort. These men, too, refused to take responsibility for their offenses and instead tried to shift the blame to society."

"But they still might've had a path to rehabilitation."

"Men like these do not change. They merely repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Those who cause harm to honest people should not be suffered to live."

I felt a strong force behind the expression on Leobolt's face. "I...see," I said. "I understand your thoughts on the matter now."

“I expected no less from you, Sieg. I’m pleased to have your understanding.”

“Can I ask you one thing, though?”

“What might that be?”

“When you slew those men—how did it make you feel?”

“Feel? I didn’t really feel anything,” Leobolt responded. “I have a duty to fulfill. When I slew them, *that* was the only thought on my mind.”

***

With our mission completed, we returned to the guard station, then finished giving our report to Commander Bolton in his office.

“I see. So the Ninth ended up killing off the men they chased, huh…” The commander let out a sigh upon hearing that bit of information. “For cryin’ out loud… I said to arrest ’em. Did a battle break out or somethin’?”

“Not at all. The men who surrendered were slain on my orders.”

“What?”

“Criminals like them do nothing but disturb the public order of the royal capital. There is no reason for us to let them live.”

For just a moment, Commander Bolton looked absolutely dumbfounded. He probably hadn’t expected that kind of rebuttal. However, he quickly regained his composure.

“You don’t get to make that decision. Neither do I. The law does that,” he countered in a stern tone. “And remember, this city’s pretty much half hooligans to begin with. If we started legalizing vigilante killings, we’d lose what little order we have here.”

The commander then turned to look at the other members of the Ninth behind Leobolt. “And what the hell were *you* guys thinking? You didn’t think twice when Leobolt said he wanted to kill a bunch of guys who had surrendered and weren’t putting up any kind of fight?”

“No, we…”

“Lemme guess, you didn’t feel like you could go against your sergeant’s orders, right? For cryin’ out loud, if someone’s asking you to do something excessive, you gotta put your foot down—commanding officer or not!”

“You’re misunderstanding, sir,” the men of the Ninth responded.

“We actually agree with Sergeant Leobolt’s line of thinking.”

“Huh?”

The ash at the tip of Commander Bolton’s cigar dropped impotently to the ground.

As the men of the Ninth stood there stoically, Leobolt spoke up.

“Commander, may I make a suggestion?”

“What is it…?”

“I’ve heard there is a prison here in the royal capital that holds criminals. From what I understand, several hundred prisoners are incarcerated there.”

“And what of it?”

“Why not execute them all?”

The instant he said those words, a chilling silence fell across the room. All of us, including the direct recipient of the suggestion, were completely aghast.

“Whoa, slow down there, pal. What are you talking about…?” the commander asked.

Leobolt had spoken in a gentle tone, yet the words that had come out of his mouth were beyond cruel. Our dubious stares did nothing to break his cool, composed demeanor.

“Think about it for a moment. Whose money is being used to guarantee meals for those prisoners? It comes from the taxes paid by the people of the royal capital, does it not?”

“Yeah, that’s right…”

“We are using taxes paid by honest people who have committed no crimes to feed dishonest criminals. Do you not find that strange?” Leobolt pointed out in earnest.

“So you’re saying we should just execute ’em all?”

“Yes. Doing so would benefit the capital as a whole. If the tax money used to support them was freed up, it could even be reallocated to the Guard Corps. Not only would it serve to increase motivation for our guards, we might also be able to attract more skilled personnel. In turn, I believe that would benefit the citizenry at large as well.”

“I get your point,” Commander Bolton said with a nod. “You might be right about all that stuff.”

“You see? In that case—”

“But there’s no way in hell we’re doin’ it.”

Leobolt’s eyes widened in astonishment.

After summarily cutting him off at the knees, the commander put out his cigar in his ashtray and brought a fresh one up to his mouth.

As an extended jet of smoke blew outward, Leobolt frowned in annoyance. Then, making an effort to suppress all emotion in his voice, he inquired in a low tone: “May I ask why…?”

“First of all, I don’t have the right to make that call. I’m Commander of the Guard Corps—my command starts and stops at ordering my men around. What, you think I can just blow a whistle and order the execution of every prisoner in the capital?”

“Then perhaps you could discuss it with the higher-ups?”

“Sorry to break it to ya, but I’m not gonna do that either. Reason being, I don’t agree with your line of thinking.”

“Are you saying my idea is flawed…?” Leobolt asked sharply. His voice was full of obvious displeasure.

Commander Bolton smiled, giving Leobolt the kind of look one would give a rebellious child. “Hey, Leobolt. Tell me, what do you think the point of prisons are?”

“To take criminals off the streets, and to restrict their freedoms.”

“Yeah, those are two things. There’s one more reason we have prisons, though: to rehabilitate criminals so they don’t become repeat offenders,” the commander said. “Obviously, the guys who commit the worst crimes don’t get that option. They get the punishment they deserve: execution. But for the ones with lighter offenses, we should give ’em a chance to fix themselves up. It’ll be better for the capital in the long run if those rehabilitated types get released and manage to find jobs here.”

“And that’s why you think we should let them live?”

“You got it.”

Upon hearing that reply, Leobolt spoke out in protest. “I don’t believe there is any need to give second opportunities to those who have committed crimes. They have lived their lives without ever putting forth any honest efforts. Many of them will most likely return to a life of crime if they are released from prison. And even if some *are* successfully rehabilitated, any profit they bring to the capital would be quite negligible—hardly sufficient recompense for the expenses paid. It would be even better for the capital to put the money spent on prisoners toward a more effective

purpose. Our limited resources should be allocated more wisely."

"Ah, I see. I follow your train of thought now," Commander Bolton said, then let out a long sigh. "Leobolt, you are a talented man, without a doubt. You're sharp as a tack and strong as an ox. I bet you wouldn't have a hard time doing any job you set your mind to. Heck, you're already an indispensable part of our forces here in the Guard Corps. The people of the city really love having you around too."

"Thank you for saying so."

"But you know, when it comes to life circumstances and inborn talent, not everybody in the world pulled quite as good a hand as you did."

"What exactly are you trying to say…?"

"I'm sayin' it couldn't hurt for you to be a little more forgiving toward others," the commander said. "Long as they didn't commit some fatal mistake, they should get a chance to start over. The world's a healthier place when even the people who screw up can live out their lives, right?" A relaxed smile appeared on his face. "Keep in mind there are more people out there who've screwed up than people who haven't. You're gonna have a hard time in life yourself if you can't forgive the little things."

Standing up from his seat, Commander Bolton walked over to Leobolt, who squinted and tensed his face, but the commander merely gave the stiffened man a lone pat on the back to send him off.

"Good effort out there on your mission today. Go get a nice, long rest."

With those words, he crossed in front of the rest of us and left his office.

Leobolt sat there staring intently at the commander's back as he left. He just kept on staring, even after the door had closed and Bolton was long out of sight.

Chapter 5: Happy Memories

It had been one week since the clash between Commander Bolton and Leobolt, during which nothing much of note had happened.

One evening, I ended up going out to the pub with Leobolt after our guard duties were finished. We were seated across from each other at a table in the back.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation, Sergeant Sieg,” Leobolt said with a smile.

“It’s not often you ask someone to go out for a drink,” I replied. “You always turn down the other guards when they ask—something about needing to attend to training, they said.”

“I thought it might be wise for squad sergeants to forge deeper bonds with each other,” he replied.

Just then, we were interrupted.

“Hey, it’s Leobolt!”

“You’re lookin’ cool as ever today!”

“Thanks so much for always protecting our capital! You’ve got our support!”

The other patrons had noticed Leobolt and come by to say a few words of gratitude.

“The people really seem to adore you,” I pointed out.

“It’s something I am grateful for,” Leobolt responded.

Leobolt had gained a great deal of backing from the people of the royal capital. They likely appreciated his sincerity and his straightforward attitude toward his job. Apparently, he also had quite a few women as fans, perhaps due to his good looks.

There were a sizable number of Guard Corps members who hadn’t approved of him at first, but once they had seen that he toiled harder at his work than anyone else, their impressions of him changed. The Ninth Squadron in particular idolized him especially. That was the level of charisma Leobolt had.

“I’ve brought your drinks!”

Right at an appropriate stopping point in the conversation, one of the wait staff came by with our drinks. My eyes landed on the

contents of the mugs that had been placed on the table.

"Is that…milk?"

"Yes."

"You have trouble drinking alcohol, then?"

"No, nothing of the sort. I have no issue drinking when the mood strikes me—I simply choose not to. I don't want anything interfering with work tomorrow," Leobolt stated. "Besides, drinking clouds one's judgment. As defenders of the Orb of Light, we must be in the proper state of mind to do battle at all times."

"You really take this seriously," I said. "I wish I could get Spinoza to take a page out of your book."

"She really does seem to love her liquor. I've heard she even drinks during work sometimes."

"Yeah. It's a huge mess."

"From my point of view, drinking alcohol on the job is behavior that cannot possibly be overlooked. Have you given her any guidance on the matter?"

"I have, but she's not exactly the type to follow other people's guidance."

"The woman with the silver hair—I believe her name was Fam. I understand she sometimes abandons her patrols to focus on stalking you instead?"

"Yeah, she does."

"They both sound dreadful to deal with."

"Well, they're also amazing at what they do. Despite the fact that they're constant pains in the butt, more often than not they end up *saving* our butts instead."

Spinoza ranked among the Guard Corps's heaviest damage dealers—I could never hope to duplicate the absolute devastation she could dole out with her war hammer. And there was nobody I knew of who could match Fam's range and accuracy with the bow and arrow.

"I believe both of them are essential to the Guard Corps, which is why I'm pretty forgiving of their petty offenses. Of course, I still give them a stern talking-to if they cross a certain line."

"Well, if that is your belief, Sieg, I won't press the matter any further," Leobolt said. "It is indeed true that the Fifth Squadron is the most valuable of all assets in the Guard Corps. I experienced that fact personally during our battle together today."

Earlier that day, a group of monsters had attacked the capital. That in itself wasn't exactly a rare occurrence, but that particular group had been unusually large in number. To counter that, the Fifth and Ninth squadrons had been deployed jointly.

"Especially you, Sieg. Your abilities are truly magnificent!" Leobolt went on, heightening his tone in excitement. "Your defensive power is robust enough for one man to attract and withstand every attack from every monster! Thanks to your efforts, the rest of us didn't suffer a single scratch!"

"Well, that's my role, after all."

"I can scarcely imagine how much training you must've endured to obtain such stellar defense power... It must have been quite a grueling endeavor."

"I can't say for sure, since I've never really tried to compare notes with people...but yeah, I put reasonable effort into it."

"I have encountered many warriors in my time, but never have I seen one with defensive capabilities as transcendent as yours."

"Come on, now. You're giving me too much credit." I couldn't help but give an uncomfortable smile. "Are you sure they didn't spike your milk?"

"No, I do not give meritless praise. Those are my honest feelings." Leobolt had taken my joke at face value. "All warriors have a natural craving within them to be the center of attention. They desire to be on the front lines, slaying their enemies, winning fame and glory. But even though you stand on the front lines, you make no effort to attack, choosing instead to focus solely on being a shield for your allies. There are not many who can boast that ability. I find it magnificent that you are able to carry out your role for the sake of the organization as a whole, rather than merely for your own benefit."

"It's really embarrassing to hear that said directly to my face. I still don't think I'm doing anything particularly amazing, though."

Leobolt seemed to hold me in quite high esteem. However, it made me feel uncomfortable to be showered with so much praise for just silently performing my duty, which was to keep my comrades protected.

"Believe me, you're far more amazing than you think. The reason the rest of us are able to put all of our focus into attacking is because you are there on the front line, soaking up all of the

enemies' attacks. That action is most certainly worthy of praise," Leobolt said. "After sparring against you during the entry exam, then battling alongside you earlier today, I've found myself utterly smitten with you, Sieg."

Just then, we heard a low chuckle pipe up from behind us.

"You know nothing at all."

Turning around, we were greeted by a woman who was quite familiar to me.

"I believe I know you..." Leobolt began.

"I am Eleanor Reinbold, Commander of the Knight Corps of the Royal Capital." She swiped her bangs out of the way as she introduced herself.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is..."

"Leobolt Alexandre, is it not?" Eleanor interrupted. "I've heard the tales about you—the hero who absconded from his noble house and rushed to our capital so he could protect the Orb of Light."

"I'm quite honored that you already know of me," Leobolt said with a bow. "Though just a moment ago, you told me that I 'know nothing at all,' did you not?"

"Indeed. It sounds as though you hold a deep reverence for Sieg, but you know nothing at all about him."

"Are you trying to tell me that the high esteem I hold him in is unmerited? If so, I would simply have to beg to differ." Leobolt showed he was more than willing to argue his point.

However, Eleanor brushed his response off with a smile.

"Not at all—quite the opposite, in fact. I hold Sieg in quite high esteem myself. I am merely trying to tell you that you don't know his *true* splendor."

"His true splendor...?"

As Leobolt stared blankly at her, Eleanor began to explain.

"Yes. Not once in my life had I ever been defeated in battle—until Sieg handed me my very first loss. He took the full force of every technique I unleashed and succeeded in defending against them all. Before I even realized what was happening, my heart had been stolen by his overwhelmingly superior power."



Eleanor swooned as she recalled the incident, then turned to Leobolt and posed a sudden question to him.

“Tell me, do you know what it is that I like more than anything else?”

“Um, no…”

“Well, allow me to tell you. I like people who are stronger than me,” Eleanor said. “Sieg’s strength has put me under his spell.”

“Excuse me?”

“Now this is not intended as a boast, but I am a beautiful woman—extraordinarily so, some would say. When I walk through the city streets, all the men stop and stare, transfixed. Yet Sieg shows no interest in me whatsoever, despite all my attempts to get closer to him. Everything I do is deflected by his inherent defense power.”

“I’m not sure what to say…” Leobolt searched for the right response. “That must be difficult for you. Have you ever thought about giving up?”

“Not at all. Quite the opposite, it fires up a passion within me. I find more pleasure in giving chase than being chased, after all. I swear that someday I shall win Sieg’s heart.”

“So, um, what is it exactly you’re trying to say, again?” Leobolt murmured in confusion.

“Only that I understand Sieg’s true splendor far better than you,” Eleanor announced with a proud grin, putting a hand to her chest.

Apparently, she just wanted to compete with him. There was no need for him to play her game—he could just smile, nod, and ignore her.

That was what I thought would happen, at least.

“With all due respect, I believe I have a firm grasp on Sieg’s splendor, as well.”

“Huh?” I sputtered. For some reason, he had decided to stoke their rivalry instead.

“Oho. You intend to compete against me? Need I remind you, though, that my relationship with Sieg began long before yours did?”

“Come on, that’s enough already,” I cut in, hoping to stop the two of them. They *really* didn’t need to be right there in front of my face arguing about exactly how awesome I was. If they had to,

they could at least do it out of my earshot. “Honestly, I think Leobolt is more amazing than I am.”

“What?” They both looked at me quizzically.

“He gave up his status as a noble and enlisted as a guard in the royal capital for the sake of protecting the world—it takes an amazing amount of resolve to pull something like that off.”

Upon hearing my praise, Leobolt looked greatly pleased. “I am truly honored by your words. They are like music to my ears.”

“What about me, Sieg? Have you no words for me?”

“Of course I have great respect for you too, Eleanor. It’s quite an accomplishment that you were able to rise to the rank of Commander and lead the Knight Corps at such a young age.”

“Heh heh. Your words of praise give me motivation to work twenty-four hours a day.”

“Please only work during work hours,” I groaned.

Eleanor, with her hands placed against her cheeks, seemed satisfied.

“My decision to leave the House and come here to join the guards seems to have been a wise one. It has afforded me the opportunity to work with a man of your caliber, Sieg,” Leobolt declared. “If we join hands, we can definitely protect the peace of this world.”

“Yeah, we can.”

“However, there are a few areas in which the Guard Corps is lacking currently.”

“Lacking?”

“Yes. The overall skill level of our men is far too low. They’ve been able to get by thanks to your presence, but that has made them entirely reliant on you,” he explained. “We need to raise the level of our fighting force as a whole, in preparation for emergencies.”

“How do you plan to do that?” I asked.

“Most likely the wisest course of action would be to increase the amount of time spent on training,” Leobolt said. “I proposed the idea to Commander Bolton, but he dismissed me outright. He claimed the volume of training I suggested might burn the guards out.”

He furrowed his brow, perhaps recalling his frustration at the time, then continued.

“How can he afford such leniency when we carry the very fate of the world on our shoulders? If any of the guards are so weak as to burn out from mere training, we have no need of them,” Leobolt declared emphatically. “We can’t expect the Guard Corps to progress any further while he remains their commander. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What point are you trying to make…?” I asked bluntly.

“Ah, my apologies. I let my emotions get the better of me. Please put it out of your mind.”

Having said that, he shot me a potent gaze.

“Just know that if we are to keep the world out of the Demon King’s grasp forever, the Guard Corps *must* change. It cannot remain in its current state—it is absolutely untenable.”

***

The capital had been abuzz about something that day: another city within our kingdom, Randolph, had been beset by monsters. Randolph was about two days away from Astaroth by carriage.

Monster attacks were an everyday fact of life for the people of the royal capital. When it came to other cities, though, they were quite a rare occurrence. Most monsters within our territory were drawn to the Orb of Light, which was held in the capital, meaning they usually ignored all the other cities.

“If that’s the case, it’s possible a demon is involved.” We were in the barracks cafeteria before work that morning, and Fam was giving her take on the situation. “All monsters are naturally drawn toward the Orb of Light here in the capital. Any that are bothering to attack other cities must have someone controlling them behind the scenes.”

“And you think it’s a demon,” I said. “Why would they be trying to accomplish?”

“Who knows? It could be anything. Though they might not even have any particular goal either. They could just want to amuse themselves with destruction and carnage.”

“I heard from some citizens that Randolph is in dire straits right now. It’s possible the city might fall within a few days,” Seira noted with concern.

“Well, Astaroth is usually the only city that gets attacked by

monsters, so it makes sense that Randolph's defensive forces are much thinner," Fam said. "Though whoever is behind this probably had that in mind when they invaded."

"Ugh. What a bunch o' creeps," Spinoza spat. "What the hell's so fun about huntin' down weaklings? Ain't nothin' that gets the blood pumpin' better than goin' face-to-face against the strong ones and knockin' 'em flat on their backs."

"Will the Knight Corps send anyone out?" I asked.

"I think it's unlikely," Seira responded. "Eleanor and the others are out on an expedition right now. We only have just enough knights remaining to maintain defense of the capital."

"They can't leave the capital any more shorthanded than it already is, huh..."

That meant Randolph probably wasn't going to get any backup; they'd just have to defend themselves with whatever forces they had on hand. Even though the defending side typically had the advantage, they were going to be in for a rough battle if they hadn't been specifically prepared for a monster attack.

It was just as Seira said—their city might fall.

"It also doesn't help that there's a big group of monsters headed our way right now too," I added.

Three days prior, our reconnaissance units had reported that there was a group of monsters incoming. There had been a sudden huge influx of deathworms—giant earthworm-like monsters that inhabited marshy areas—and they were apparently headed to attack the capital.

At the rate they had progressed, the monsters were due to arrive as soon as the next day. The Knight Corps and the Guard Corps were set to intercept them.

When the capital was facing an emergency, they couldn't afford to dispatch knights to other cities. Randolph almost certainly wouldn't be getting any knightly backup.

"Sieg, it's just about time for work," Fam reminded me.

"Ah, so it is." Having finished eating breakfast, I grabbed my tray and stood up. "Let's just focus on our own jobs for now."

***

Reporting for duty at the guard station, we made our way to

the commander's office.

Once roll call was over, Commander Bolton went over our assignments for the day—however, it was obvious to all of us that something wasn't quite right.

"Commander, isn't that yesterday's communication?" I asked.

"Today's is supposed to be about reviewing our formation against the incoming monsters, right?" Seira added.

"Hm? Oh yeah, that's right." The commander looked as though he had been woken from a trance after we pointed out his error.

Perhaps in an attempt to pull himself together, he attempted to light the cigar in his mouth.

"Commander! That's the wrong end!"

"Huh? O-Oh."

Thanks to Seira's warning, he realized he had been holding the cigar in his mouth backward and frantically pulled it out.

"Hey, what the hell's wrong with you?" Spinoza muttered in annoyance. "Still got last night's booze in your system or somethin'?"

Commander Bolton offered no response to Spinoza's wisecrack—he merely stood there in silence. He was there in the room with us physically, but his mind seemed to have drifted off somewhere far away.

Looking at him more closely, I saw heavy bags under his eyes. The ashtray on his office table was piled high with a mountain of cigar butts.

"Did something happen, Commander?" I asked instinctively. He clearly wasn't his normal self; he looked as though some matter of grave concern was weighing heavily on his mind.

"Nah...nothin' at all. Don't worry about it."

"But you look awfully unwell too," Seira added in concern. "If you're feeling ill, you shouldn't overexert yourself..."

"I'm fine. I just emptied a few too many bottles last night. Still not quite recovered yet. I ain't as young as I used to be, heh heh." The commander's laughter rang completely hollow.

"Hah! Told ya! I knew that's what it was! Man, you're this messed up after just one night of heavy drinking? That's pathetic!" Spinoza let out a raucous, exaggerated laugh.

"You got it. Takin' the day off for a hangover would set a bad example for the rest of the guards, right? Now let's get our butts

moving on today's assignments." The commander motioned for us to leave.

He said his behavior was because he had a hangover, but that probably wasn't true. Even if it was, he would've had some reason for drinking so much. I had no idea what it could've been, but it must've been something very significant to him—and possibly to us as well.

If Commander Bolton himself was keeping it under wraps, though, it was going to be hard for us to find out what it was.

Just as we were about to turn around and leave, Fam spoke up quietly. "It's the situation in Randolph that's making you so distracted, isn't it?"

The commander hesitated for a brief moment. "C'mon, now, what are you talkin' about? Sure, things are looking grim for Randolph right now, but we've gotta focus on defending the capital—"

"I only ask because your estranged family lives in Randolph City."

The vacant look on Commander Bolton's face instantly transformed to an expression of wide-eyed shock. Back in reality with us once again, the man was clearly disconcerted. His reaction was proof positive that Fam's comment had hit the bull's-eye.

"Fam... How did you know that?" he asked.

"I used to be a spy, remember? Information gathering is my specialty," she responded, an innocent look on her face. "Even more so when it comes to things people are hiding."

"Now that you mention it, the commander *did* say he had a wife and a daughter. I didn't know they lived in Randolph City!" Seira said.

"Huh? If you live here in the capital, why the hell wouldn't they live here too?" Spinoza asked.

"Think about it... If they lived here, they'd be in constant danger from all the monster raids. That's why my wife and kid got away from this place after we separated." His voice lowered to a pained groan. "Compared to the royal capital, every other city in the kingdom has a really low risk of being attacked by monsters. The decision to move was based on that assumption. But now, of all the places they could've attacked, they picked Randolph? And they're even saying the whole city might fall in a few days..."

The commander bit his lip in frustration. “On top of that, we’ve got monsters on their way to the capital too, so we can’t expect the knights to send anyone out there… Am I supposed to just sit here and twiddle my damn thumbs while Randolph gets wiped off the map?!”

A deafening *thud* echoed across the room. Commander Bolton had released his pent-up rage by slamming a tightly clenched fist down onto his desk, gouging a deep hole into the desktop. The whole situation must have been absolutely unbearable for him.

Fam broke the silence that had fallen across the office with a hushed question. “Even though you’ve parted ways, you still have feelings for them…?”

“Of course I do. We may no longer be together, but I still love them,” the commander responded without hesitation. “Even if they hate me so much they never want to see my face again. I’ll keep on wishing for their happiness for the rest of my life.”

“Commander Bolton…” A heartbroken expression fell over Seira’s face.

A while back, the commander had told me something. He had said that the only reason he was able to keep performing his thankless job at the top of the Guard Corps was because of his ex-wife and child. Protecting the Orb of Light was tied intrinsically to protecting their happiness.

But now, the very family that was acting as his emotional pillar was in grave danger. It was no wonder he was practically dead on his feet.

“I mean, why not just haul your ass out there, then?” Spinoza suggested. “If the knights aren’t gonna head over to help ’em, you can go handle it yourself. Then your wife an’ kid’ll be fine.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Huh? Why the hell not?”

“I’m Commander of the Guard Corps, and my job’s to protect the royal capital. Putting all that on the back burner to focus on personal stuff is out of the question. It’d set a bad example for my men,” Commander Bolton explained. “Not to mention, there’s a bunch of monsters on their way here right now too. The Knight Corps’s main forces are out on expedition, and we’re already shorthanded on defenders. If I run off somewhere, and worse comes to worst, what happens then? With that in mind, there’s no

way I could possibly leave."

It was easy to pick up on how conflicted he was by looking at his pained expression. There was no doubt that deep down, he wanted to run off to help at that very instant. He was suppressing that urge, though, because his position as the head of an organization meant he couldn't prioritize personal matters over professional duties.

"Then how about sending us over as reinforcements instead?" I proposed.

"No... Not gonna happen. As your commander, I can't agree to that. The Fifth is our ace squadron—you're the best the guards have to offer." He seemed to be shaking a bit as he spoke in a pained murmur.

If he sends us to Randolph to assist, we might be able to protect it successfully. However, instructing us to do that would also mean the royal capital might be put in jeopardy.

Amid the swirling hesitation and the thick, oppressive atmosphere, the door to the office suddenly creaked open.

"I heard about your dilemma." Leobolt stood there in the open doorway. His gaze was fixed on Commander Bolton. "So you have a wife and child living in Randolph City?"

"Yeah. There's a group of monsters headed toward the capital too, though. So as Commander of the Guard Corps, I'm gonna stay and fight to protect Astaroth."

"Commander, by all means, feel free to go to Randolph."

"Hunh?" Commander Bolton raised an eyebrow.

"The monsters already have the city by the throat. Any further hesitation may well spell doom."

"But...what about the capital? We've got monsters on the way here too, you know."

"Even with you absent, Commander, *we* will still be here. Considering the anticipated size of the monster group, it should be quite within our means to deal with them."

Puzzled, the commander asked Leobolt, "I thought you were the type of guy who didn't allow any personal feelings?"

"If Randolph City falls, you would suffer deep psychological damage, would you not? That would be a serious blow for the entire Guard Corps. Taking that into account, I merely determined that the best course of action would be taking the risk and saving

Randolph," Leobolt responded, then added one final thought. "I believe that you going to Randolph City will benefit the Guard Corps as a whole. And what led me to that conclusion was not my personal feelings, but a logical assessment."

"Leobolt..."

"I will explain everything to the other sergeants. There is not a moment to waste, correct? Please head out posthaste."

"...Thank you."

"Commander Bolton, people in the highest stations mustn't bow their heads so."

"I'm not thanking you as your commander. I'm thanking you as a fellow man," he said. "I really appreciate it. I owe you big."

Leobolt flashed him a slight smile, then turned to us. "Sieg, you and the Fifth should accompany him."

"Really?"

"As unlikely as it is, it would be quite inconvenient if something were to happen to our leader. With your shield protecting them, Sieg, I am comfortable entrusting his safety to the Fifth Squadron," Leobolt said, then smiled at me. "I have complete faith in your ability to save Randolph City. So please, place the same faith in me to lead us to victory here."

"All right. With you here, I'm sure you'll all be able to drive the monsters off," I said with a nod, then turned to the others. "Let's go with Commander Bolton and protect Randolph."

"Yes, sir!" Seira exclaimed.

"I'll just be following you regardless," Fam said.

"Yeah! In that case, let's get our asses movin'!" Spinoza roared.

With that, our decision to head to Randolph City was set in stone.

***

We made hurried preparations, boarded a carriage, and left the capital that same day. Randolph City was about two full days away from Astaroth by carriage; en route, we overnighted at a relay station and a campground along the main road.

Commander Bolton was on edge the entire time. I couldn't blame him; during every moment of our journey, the city his wife and daughter lived in was under attack by monsters.

In a defensive battle, the defending side always had the advantage. We could only hope they had somehow managed to keep the invading monsters at bay so far.

Thanks to our furious pace, we arrived at Randolph ahead of schedule. The morning sun peeking out from behind the mountain ridge had begun to cast its light down onto the plains.

"It's way too quiet..." Commander Bolton murmured. He was in the driver's seat, pulling the horses' reins.

"I don't see any monsters." Seated next to him, I scanned the area in front of us to see what info I could glean. The city was surrounded by a stone wall—and the entire area around it was as quiet as a calm sea. There were no traces whatsoever of the invading monsters.

"Maybe they retreated temporarily?" Seira asked quietly, peeking her head out from the cargo canopy.

"That, or maybe the city has already fallen," Fam said, offering the worst-case scenario.

"Hey, cool it, Fam. You gotta read the room sometimes," Spinoza muttered in annoyance. "See that look on the commander's face now? Poor guy's gonna die of a heart attack before we even fight anything. I swear, havin' zero friends is what makes you say shit like that!"

"All I did was bring up one possibility," Fam countered. "Also, I'm not completely friendless. I know lots of cats."

"Let's just head into the city. Then we'll know for sure what's going on," I said.

We got the carriage moving again and headed over to the city's main entrance. There were two gatekeepers on duty, one standing in front of each side of the massive double doors leading in.

The moment we saw them, we all breathed a quick collective sigh of relief. If the monsters had taken over the city, there probably wouldn't have been any gatekeepers in place. That meant that if nothing else, the city hadn't fallen.

"You there. Halt your carriage," one of the gatekeepers called out to us. Once we had come to a stop, he started talking to the commander and me, who were sitting up front in the driver's seat. "What business do you have here in Randolph?"

"We're guards hailing from Astaroth," I said. "We got word that Randolph was under attack by monsters, so we've come to provide

backup."

"Under attack…by monsters?" The gatekeepers looked at each other.

When I saw the puzzled expressions on their faces, a strange feeling of unease washed over me. Their sense of urgency just didn't seem to line up with ours.

Then, the gatekeepers said something that substantiated my fears:

"That's the first we've heard about anything like that."

***

When we arrived at one of the city's inns later that day, all of us were still feeling completely baffled.

Randolph certainly hadn't fallen; in fact, it had never actually been attacked by monsters in the first place.

"So the story being spread around the capital was false information, then…?" Commander Bolton muttered to himself, seemingly unable to comprehend what had happened.

"It certainly seems that way," I confirmed.

"The story might have gotten more embellished as it passed from person to person," Seira theorized.

"Still, rumors without a single scrap of truth to 'em don't spread too well," the commander countered. "Somebody had to have been making a concerted effort to keep that fire burning."

"Isn't it fantastic that the attack wasn't real, though?" Seira offered a smile to ease his concerns. "That means your wife and daughter are safe!"

"Yeah… Yeah, you're right." Letting out a huge sigh, he hung his head forward, seated in one of the chairs in our room. It appeared that his perpetually tense nerves had finally loosened up.

"So what do we do now?" Spinoza asked him.

"We head back to the capital as soon as possible. The rest of the guards are fighting those monsters even as we speak. We can't afford to sit here on our asses."

"But the sun is already setting," Seira pointed out. "It would be dangerous to leave right now."

"Seira's right," I said. "There's no point in us rushing out now and risking getting caught in a surprise monster attack. Let's get

out of here first thing in the morning," I suggested.

"Yeah...okay." Commander Bolton nodded weakly, convinced by our reasoning. "Sorry about that. My judgment is complete garbage right now, huh."

"Not at all! And you don't need to worry—Leobolt and Alma are there at the capital. With them, our defenses would be able to hold out even if demons attacked!"

They were two of the most skilled individuals in the entire Guard Corps—they could definitely drive off a pack of monsters or something similar without any of us needing to be there.

"So that means we've got nothin' to do 'til tomorrow, huh?" Spinoza gave a wicked grin.

"Don't you dare go to the pub." I glared at her.

"I didn't even say anything yet!" she grumbled.

"You didn't have to. It's written all over your face. We're leaving first thing in the morning tomorrow, and I don't want you to end up getting plastered and immediately going missing on us. You're staying at the inn for the rest of the night."

"Tch. Fine, fine," Spinoza agreed with great reluctance. "Instead of booze, then, how about we have a fun little story time or somethin'? Speakin' of, how'd ya end up breakin' up with your wife anyway, Commander?"

"Spinoza, you are unbelievable..." Fam groaned.

"You really should have a bit more tact," Seira chided Spinoza gently. "Though I do have to say, I'm actually quite curious about how you and your wife first met, Commander—tell us about the start of your romance!"

Apparently, she had been interested too. Seira enjoyed hearing about people's love stories more than just about anything else in the world. According to Alma, even in her princess days she would always ask her servants about their romantic interests.

Though she seemed to have zero love stories of her own to share...

"Hearing about how a middle-aged guy like me got together with his wife would just bore you to tears, I bet."

"No, I'd really like to know!" Seira insisted.

"Ah, fine, not like I've got anything to hide about it. We first met...I think it was over ten years ago now." Commander Bolton began to slowly recount his tale. "I had just gotten fired from the

coal mine I was working at for a dumbass reason. I was just your average punk, gettin' drunk as hell at the bar every day, constantly gettin' into fights."

"So you were a total loser, huh," Spinoza said with a smirk.

"He wasn't that far off from describing *your* life, you know," Fam pointed out.

"Needless to say, the other townsfolk didn't think too highly of me—they all kept their distance. I figured I'd end up dead in a ditch someday. That was when I met my now ex-wife. She was workin' at the pub. At one point she got right up into my dirtbag face and just laid into me. Told me a grown man shouldn't sit there sulking like a baby for his whole life. Said it was pathetic. Told me to get a job." He smiled a bit at the recollection.

"Normally I woulda gone off about it. Everyone else thought I was gonna too. But after she yelled at me, I ended up crying. Maybe I was happy somebody finally took the effort to confront me about it head-on. I fell head over heels, and I started swinging by the pub every day to try and win her over. We tied the knot a year later. Guess she finally gave in to my nagging."

"Wow...!" Seira gasped.

"By then, she was already pregnant. I had already been workin' here and there for a while as a day laborer and whatnot, but if we were gonna have a kid, I was gonna need to get a *real* job. That was why I figured I'd join the Guard Corps. If there was anything I had any confidence in, it was my own brute strength. That, and they said anybody who had any skills could get in, since they were short on manpower."

"So that's how you first joined the Guard Corps, then?" Seira asked.

"Yep. Once I got in, I worked my ass off. I was older than most of the other guys, so I had to put in more effort than anyone else—enough to make up for all the time I'd spent being a lazy slob. It was backbreaking work piled on top of more of the same every single day, but I knew I was doing it for my wife and kid, so it didn't bother me. Pretty soon I got promoted to squad sergeant, and I was even put up as a potential candidate to be the next commander."

Upon reaching that point in his story, Commander Bolton's expression darkened.

“Problem was, I ended up putting my work before my family. We had a daughter by then, but by the time I got home every night, she was already asleep. I was always exhausted, so I would always go straight to bed, barely saying a word to my wife. Then I’d have to leave early in the morning, before my daughter woke up. I let my wife raise the kid on her own, and to me it just seemed like the kiddo kept getting bigger suddenly. I had no idea how to interact with my daughter either. My parents were a couple o’ scumbags, and I didn’t remember ’em talking to me a whole lot when I was a kid.”

The commander gave a self-deprecating smirk. “Bloodlines can be pretty scary. When I was a kid, I had thought my dad was a piece of shit, but somewhere along the line, the piece of shit dad ended up being me. By the time I realized it, an impassable rift had formed between my wife and me. And eventually, we ended up deciding to break it off. I thought I had joined the guards to protect my family, but instead it ended up destroying it. Pretty damn ironic, if ya ask me.”

In an effort to bring a little cheer back into the room, Commander Bolton put on a smile. However, it was so obviously fake that it was almost painful to look at.

Seira must have noticed as well, because she suddenly decided to speak up. “Why don’t you go see your wife and daughter, Commander?”

“Eh?” His eyes shot open at Seira’s sudden proposal. “Me? Go see them?”

“Yes! You came all this way, I figure why not talk to them again after such a long time?” Seira said. “Aren’t you curious about how they’re living their lives?”

“I mean, sure, but…” The commander was hesitant. He might have wanted to visit his family, but he probably wasn’t sure whether it would be a good idea. “…Doing that would probably just bother ’em.”

“You don’t know that, though. They might feel differently now that so much time has passed. I’m certain you’ll regret it if you leave without trying.”

“You’re tryin’ to push this on me pretty damn hard, Seira.”

“You love your family, right, Commander? If they mean that much to you and you’ve been given this opportunity to see them, I

think you should take it." She stared straight into Commander Bolton's eyes. "Because once they're gone, you'll never get that chance again."

Seira's most beloved family member—her father, the king of Sorcera—was gone forever. She had slain him by her own hand to save her kingdom.

"Ugh, ya ass-draggin' bastard. Like you haven't already bothered 'em a ton in the past. You're just too chickenshit to go see 'em," Spinoza groaned in irritation.

She must have hit a sore point; the commander's face scrunched up in embarrassment.

"Don't just stand there with that mopey look on your face. Get your ass movin' already! Hurry up and get your wife to spit on you so we can get this over with."

"Spinoza, mind your phrasing..." Seira chastised.

"No, she's right," Commander Bolton muttered. "I do want to see my wife and kid. I've just been too scared. It's pathetic, really."

"Commander, we still have time before we leave. Why not see your family once first? We'll even help you find them," I offered.

After an extended silence, he muttered one short phrase in response: "All right."

With a decisive nod, he addressed us all. "We entrusted the defense of Astaroth to Leobolt and the others so we could come out here. If nothing else, I wanna see for sure whether my family's doing all right."

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Commander Bolton's ex-wife was named Matilda, apparently. Once we left the inn, we split up into groups to ask around about her.

We had to leave the next morning, so it would be a race against time—or so we thought. Much to our surprise, we managed to find his family's whereabouts almost right away. They were living in a house in Randolph City's low-density residential area. As soon as we got the exact location from the pub patron we were talking to, we decided to head there.

The commander was fidgety the entire way there—no doubt he was nervous about seeing his family again.

“Quit actin’ like some kinda teenage boy!” Spinoza grumbled. “I’m curious, though, what are you gonna do if your wife an’ kid say they want you back?”

“Huh?!” Commander Bolton exclaimed, his voice unsteady.

“I said *if*, dumbass,” Spinoza responded with a grin. “You gonna quit your job as Commander of the Guard Corps and move to Randolph?”

He stayed silent for a moment before speaking. “It ain’t gonna happen to begin with.”

Rows of stone houses were lined up on either side of the road. Based on the style of the houses and the clothing of the people walking around, it appeared to be a middle-class neighborhood.

At least his family wasn’t living in poverty. When he realized that fact, a look of relief washed over the commander’s face.

“Their house should be at the end of this alley,” Fam said.

We walked down the dimly lit alley that ran between houses. After a while, we saw a street ahead. Just as we were about to make our way there, Commander Bolton stopped in his tracks.

His eyes went wide, and he let out a gasp. “That’s…”

He was staring at a figure standing in the road at the end of the alley—a woman who appeared to be in her mid-thirties. We could see her profile as she chatted with a young girl. They were both wearing clothing made of nice fabric.

“Matilda… Kina…”

The commander murmured his ex-wife’s name as if he were in some kind of trance.

That could’ve only meant one thing: those two must’ve been his wife and daughter.

“Kina, you’ve gotten so big…” he whispered.

Then, as if reflecting upon the passage of time, a bitter smile came to his face.

“Of course you have. It’s been over ten years. But boy, you sure do have that strong-willed look about you—just like your mother.”

As he said that, Commander Bolton stared at the two of them, his gaze full of affection. We were seeing something he would normally never show to anyone while working as Commander of the Guard Corps: his fatherly side.

“Go out there and see them, Commander!” Seira urged.

“…Right.”

With a determined nod, he headed toward the street at the end of the alley.

But just then, something happened.

“Ah! Dad! You’re late!”

As soon as he heard that, the commander froze.

His daughter, Kina, had called out toward a part of the road we couldn’t see from our position in the alley. She had a huge smile on her face and was waving her hand—but she wasn’t looking at Commander Bolton.

“Sorry about that!”

Suddenly, a man came trotting hurriedly out of the aforementioned blind spot. The tall, slender fellow wore glasses, and he had a gentle, intellectual air about him.

“Are you done with work already, dear?”

“It’s family dinner night, so I left early!”

Upon hearing the man with glasses say that, Matilda smiled happily.

“All right, shall we go?” she said.

Taking each other’s hands, the three of them began walking down the road, chatting away happily.

Commander Bolton stood there in the shadowy alley, watching the scene unfold.

“So your wife remarried, then…” Fam spoke in a hushed voice.

“Commander…” Seira stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do.

“Oh… Huh. Well, uh, don’t let it get ya down, boss!” Spinoza said in an awkward attempt to cheer him up.

“You guys…” After a short period of silence, the commander turned to us. “Thanks.”

“Huh?”

“I’m glad you brought me here.”

“But…” Seira began.

“I was really worried, to tell the truth. A woman without a husband moved all the way out here, just her and her daughter—if they had been struggling to live this whole time, I don’t know what I woulda done. But it looks like I had nothing to worry about.” He gave a slight smile. “Look at that. You see their faces? They look happy as clams, no two ways about it. And I can tell that guy cares a lot about them both.”

“So you’re not gonna go see them before we leave?” I asked.

“It’s not my place to butt in. I’d just get in the way,” Commander Bolton said. “Now, starting tomorrow, I can start puttin’ my nose to the grindstone at work again—to protect the peace of this world so those three can keep living happy lives. That’s the one thing I can still do as a father.”

There were no traces of regret left on his face; he was in high spirits, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Even long after they had separated, he still wished for his family’s happiness.

The commander watched the family of three walk happily off into the distance. He stood there endlessly, staring at them all the way up until they finally disappeared from sight.

Chapter 6: Leobolt's Agenda

We left Randolph early the next morning and, after a roughly two-day journey, made it back to Astaroth.

I sure hope they managed to handle the monster attack without any trouble…

I had been worried about it our entire way back, but the city looked as peaceful as ever, and the guards at the gate reported that they had been able to successfully drive off the monsters.

"I'm so glad the capital is all right!" Seira sighed in relief.

"Yeah… Agreed."

"Hm? Is something bothering you, Sarge?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

When we had gotten back to the capital, something had been off about the gate guards' demeanor. They had been strangely cold with us—or rather, it had felt like there were some hidden undertones in their responses. Either way, I had gotten the impression they had been trying to keep their distance.

"I'm quite pleased to see you all made it back safely."

Leobolt greeted us with a pleasant smile when we made it back to the guard station. Together, we then headed to the commander's office to give our respective activity reports to each other.

Once he had made sure it was only the Fifth Squadron, Commander Bolton, and himself in the room, Leobolt asked us about our trip. "So did you make it to Randolph City in time to assist?"

"Well, about that…" the commander began.

"They told us there weren't any monsters attacking," I explained.

Hearing that, Leobolt raised an eyebrow. "So it was false information, then…?"

"That's what it looks like," I agreed.

"They say where there's smoke, there's fire," Commander Bolton followed up. "But if there was no fire, there shouldn'ta been any smoke. Somebody had to have started that rumor—probably to

destabilize things here in the capital."

"So that person may have known about the commander's personal life," Leobolt stated.

"We came to the same conclusion. They spread the rumor that Randolph was in danger to draw Commander Bolton away from the capital," I suggested.

"I see."

"You managed to defend the capital successfully, though, right?" the commander asked.

"Yes." Leobolt nodded, smiling. "A few of our men were injured, but we succeeded in slaying all of the monsters without any fatalities on our side. We were fortunate that the enemy forces weren't particularly robust."

"Way to get it done," Commander Bolton said in appreciation. "I heard the guards talking. They said you did one hell of a job leading the troops out there. You sure made up for us not being there."

"Thank you, Commander."

"At this rate, *you* might end up being the next commander, eh?" Grinning, the commander gave Leobolt a grateful pat on the back. "Whatever the guy who started that rumor was scheming up, it all came to nothing in the end. He was probably tryin' to take advantage of the window when Eleanor's main knight forces and I were all away from the capital."

"Yes, of course..." Leobolt cracked a faint smile upon hearing Commander Bolton's statement.

The expression on his face felt somehow off to me. But just as I was thinking that, we heard a commotion in the distance.

"Huh. They sure are making a big fuss out there," the commander grumbled.

We heard not just one, but an entire chorus of overlapping, angry shouts erupting.

"I presume those are the citizens," Leobolt explained. "I believe they've come in protest against you, Commander."

"Protest...?" Commander Bolton raised a perplexed eyebrow.

We ran out of the commander's office and exited the barracks. Immediately, we saw the citizens of the capital gathered there, surrounding the premises of the building. The enraged mob was shouting angrily.

“Go to hell, Bolton!”

“Resign as commander right now!”

The citizens all seemed to be furious with Commander Bolton.

“What…? What the hell’s going on?” Without the faintest of ideas, the commander simply stood there, bewildered.

“You cannot blame them for being angry.” Leobolt slowly walked up to Commander Bolton from behind. “You *did* abandon your post when the royal capital was in danger.”

“Huh? What are you talkin’ about—”

Just as the commander was about to interrogate Leobolt, a shout pierced above the rest.

“Hey, it’s Bolton! He came out!”

Upon seeing him appear, the people closed in on the premises.

“You bastard! How could you even think of putting your own issues first when the capital is under attack by monsters? And you even took the Fifth with you—our ace squadron!”

“Abandoning your post like that—do you not even care what happens to us citizens?!”

“H-Hey, now! You can’t be serious…” Standing there in dismay before the advancing crowd, Commander Bolton called out to some guards who were nearby. “Don’t just stand there, hold these people back!”

However, none of them came to his aid; they just stood there, glaring coldly at him.

“You abandoned us, you know.”

“And that means we have no obligation to help you.”

After that, they broke off eye contact and walked over into the crowd.

Seeing their reaction, the commander was at a loss for words. His gaze shot over to Leobolt. “What’s the meaning of this, Leobolt?! You said you’d explain to the others what was going on!”

“Yes, of course. I most certainly explained everything,” Leobolt informed him nonchalantly, a gentle smile on his face. “You made your personal affairs your top priority and traveled to Randolph City—not only abandoning your duties but taking the all-important Fifth Squadron along with you.”

“Wha…?!”

Commander Bolton’s eyes shot open in shock. He had thought Leobolt was going to give the guards a reasonable explanation for

his disappearance; instead, he had misconstrued the situation to give an unfavorable impression.

Leobolt was a man who knew how to communicate properly. He wouldn't have made a mistake in the way he had conveyed things to them. Which meant only one thing—he had deliberately tweaked the information to make it sound as bad as possible.

"Leobolt… *You* were the one who spread the rumor, weren't you?"

"Rumor? I have absolutely no idea of what you are speaking." Leobolt gave a slight grin. "Commander Bolton, I cannot see the Guard Corps progressing while you remain at the helm. And that fact will put the world in danger," he went on, devoid of any emotion. "What the Guard Corps needs is someone who can provide it with stronger direction."

"And you think that someone is you, huh?"

"It wouldn't matter who it is, provided they're qualified for the job. I merely happen to be the most qualified person at this point in time—more so than you, at least," Leobolt said. "Commander Bolton, you are a wonderful man who cares greatly about his family. I respect that. However, you are not fit to be Commander of the Guard Corps."

"So that's why you're trying to force me out?"

"Well, it would be difficult for you to remain in place as things stand, would it not?" Leobolt looked out over the populace as they continued to shout in protest. "The people no longer want you in your current role, nor do the guards. Do you believe they would trust your word over mine? Shall we find out?"

Commander Bolton looked over at the people. Their display of fury was pushing toward him in a massive swell, with enough momentum behind it to swallow someone up whether they liked it or not.

By that point, they probably wouldn't have listened to anything we could've said. Any attempt to defend ourselves would've fallen on deaf ears.

"Planning on getting rid of me for good, then?" Bolton spat.

"Surely you jest. I only plan on relieving you of your command and expelling you from the Guard Corps. Once a leader has been replaced, they hardly make reliable workers."

Leobolt turned back to the commander and offered a subtle

smile—the kind someone gives when they know they've won.

"You may leave the Guard Corps in my capable hands, Commander. I swear to protect the Orb of Light—along with the entire world."

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After that, Bolton ended up resigning from his commander position.

From an official standpoint, he had left of his own volition, but in actuality, he had been forced to resign. He had determined he had no choice; it was the only way to calm the people's anger.

After he was ousted from the Guard Corps, Leobolt took up his position as the new commander, having gained the confidence of every squad sergeant besides Alma and myself. The people of the capital hailed his promotion.

That night, the Fifth and I went to a pub with Alma. We seated ourselves at a table in the far back, where we wouldn't have to worry about other patrons listening in.

"I can't believe Leobolt staged a coup…" Alma muttered.

"I knew he had his complaints about the commander, but I never thought he'd go after him with aggressive tactics like that," I admitted.

He had spread the false rumors right when the capital was facing a monster attack, then had encouraged Bolton to head over to Randolph so that he could conduct a disinformation campaign while the former Commander was absent.

He had then spread word that Bolton had abandoned his duty to defend the capital in favor of his own personal affairs, and on top of that, selfishly taken a critical part of the capital's fighting force with him—the Fifth Squadron. That way, both the citizens and the guards would be displeased with him.

After that, all Leobolt had to do was take charge of defending against the monster attack and put on a great performance, winning him instant favor with the people of the capital.

"*Tch*. Can't believe we got suckered so hard. It really pisses me off," Spinoza spat in dissatisfaction. "We were just dancin' to his shitty tune the whole time."

"It was a gamble on his part, though. If their defense had failed,

the capital would've been in grave danger," I said.

"Which means his gamble ended up paying off," Fam chimed in.

"He likely had all the confidence in the world. It's a fact that he fought with the strength of a thousand men out there. When it comes to raw sword skill, he surpasses everyone else in the Guard Corps." Alma, who had fought in the battle as well, couldn't help but praise his swordsmanship.

"Speaking of, since you stayed behind—what the hell were you doin' the whole time, Alma? Didja just sit there on your ass and watch while Leobolt spouted all that bullshit to everyone?"

"*Hmph*. No, I didn't just sit there. I tried to speak in Commander Bolton's defense. I told them he must have had good reason for leaving—but they didn't pay me any heed. Leobolt... That man has the citizens of the capital completely under his thumb."

"Leobolt does seem to have enough charisma to make the people believe that anything he says must be the truth..." Fam added.

Alma nodded in agreement. "Leobolt has his whole backstory behind him: giving up his position as a privileged noble to become a hero who wields his sword in defense of the royal capital."

"His life is basically the definition of self-imposed poverty... He even donates a portion of his guard salary to the orphanage, apparently," Fam said. "He's well-bred and handsome too... When a princely man like him puts so much effort into battling monsters for the sake of the commoners, it's no wonder they see him as a hero."

Alma nodded. "That makes sense. Leobolt is just so far off from their mental image of a noble that he's gained tremendous support from them."

"On the other hand, Bolton's just your typical grubby old man. If he an' Leobolt were competin' based on image alone, it wouldn't even be a contest," Spinoza muttered in sympathy.

"Mr. Bolton is a great man," Seira said defensively. "He was the one who welcomed me into the Guard Corps, despite having no idea where I came from. Not to mention the way he defended us during this ordeal."

When he was being forced to resign, before Bolton had refused to consent to the terms of his resignation unless Leobolt promised to absolve the Fifth of any wrongdoing. We had just been forced

along for the ride, he'd said. Thankfully, Leobolt had accepted his condition.

"Well, he was just tellin' the truth," Spinoza grumbled. "We only went with him because Leobolt said we should."

"But he defended us nonetheless," Seira said with a sigh. "I'm really worried about him."

"Yeah..." I agreed.

Back in Randolph City, Bolton had mentioned he had felt a new motivation to throw himself into his work from then on. But then he had been forced out of his position almost immediately and ended up resigning from the Guard Corps. I couldn't even imagine how he must have felt.

"All of us here were brought in by Bolton. I owe him a lot, myself. I wish there was something we could do for him..." I mused.

"That wouldn't be an easy task right now—Leobolt has too much influence. Any accusations we make wouldn't have any effect against someone with so much charisma," Fam explained. "I think we should monitor the situation for a while. We also have the option of using his own tactic against him: spreading bad publicity."

"Information warfare, huh..." I rubbed my chin.

"I'm quite good at those types of operations, after all."

"While I am worried about Bolton, I'm also concerned for the future of the Guard Corps," Alma chimed back in.

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" Spinoza asked.

"The reason Leobolt revolted was because he had issues with how Bolton was running things. That makes me think we're going to see some big policy changes from what we had in the Bolton era," Alma said with concern. "I've mentioned this before, but Leobolt has a tendency to stay a little too much on the straight and narrow—worryingly so. He lives too much by his ideals."

"Good point," I agreed.

"Though a lot of people are attracted to that idea, as well," Alma added.

"The Ninth Squadron is a good example of that," Fam pointed out. "They basically worship Leobolt, to the point where it even creeps *me* out a little bit."

"So it's possible that the entire Guard Corps might fall under his

spell," I muttered.

Alma nodded. "Up until recently, he was only a squad sergeant, so everything stayed under control. But now that he's seized power as Commander, I'm worried his ideals will run rampant."

Chapter 7: Water That's Too Clean

Alma's fears were quickly proven to be right on the mark. The next morning, Leobolt made an announcement in front of the Guard Corps:

"From today onward, there will be mandatory training sessions after work."

Then, a piece of paper was posted with a list of duties for the day.

When the guards saw what was on it, they were speechless. Their daily guard duties weren't that different from when Bolton had been in command, but the training portion had been made substantially more demanding. Not only that, but they had been directed to do training after work too.

"C-Commander Leobolt! Are you serious about this?!" One of the guards couldn't help but raise an objection.

"You're saying we have to train after our guard duties are over...but going by this schedule, there's barely even any time left to sleep!"

"Sure there is—four whole hours," Leobolt responded coolly. "*I've* always been perfectly able to function on that amount."

The guard's jaw dropped. "But that leaves no time at all for recreation! The one thing I get to look forward to before bed every night is our poker games in the barracks cafeteria!"

"You have no need of such things," Leobolt said, summarily rejecting the man again. "Any time spent amusing yourself with poker would be better used on swinging your sword as many more times as you can. If you find yourself on the battlefield regretting your failure to train, it will be too late."

"Will we be paid for the after-work training sessions?" the guard then asked.

"Guards will only be paid for their regular daily duties. As such, they will not be paid for any training outside of those duties."

"So even more demanding, and the pay is just as dismal..." the guard whined.

Leobolt's eyes flashed.

“I believe you are misunderstanding something,” he said, slowly walking up to the man. “A guard’s job is demanding by its very nature. We are to be the cornerstones that protect not only the royal capital, but the entire world. For that reason, we absolutely cannot afford to fall behind. Because falling behind means suffering defeat at the hands of the monsters, which in turn will mean the death of our world.”

As Leobolt continued, the guard could scarcely breathe under the man’s penetrating gaze. “The fate of the world rests upon our shoulders. Knowing that, can you still spout such drivel?”

After an extended pause, the guard responded. “No, sir.” Faced with such pure, righteous, powerful words, he found himself unable to bear it and had to avert his eyes, as if he had been looking directly at the sun.

“We have the ability to fight for the sake of this world. The prestige that comes with that ability is the only reward we need; anything else is superfluous,” Leobolt declared.

“Well said, Commander Leobolt!”

“We should all strive to be more like him!”

The guards who were devoted to Leobolt showered him with praise.

“All of us in the Guard Corps are heroes who protect the world. That is why we all must behave in a manner befitting heroes,” Leobolt urged his men on.

The guards who were invigorated by his words shouted their approval—but there were also a significant number of guards who wore uncomfortable expressions on their faces.

“Oh man, this is way worse than we thought,” Spinoza, who was one of the latter, groaned. “Look at their faces. They completely idolize that jerk.”

“His speeches really give off a certain kind of aura,” Fam agreed.

“I felt almost like I was getting drawn in just by listening to him,” Seira admitted.

Leobolt’s message was powerful and coherent. It might have been that people felt drawn in by his words because they carried so much conviction.

Just as that thought was crossing my mind, he spoke again. “Also, from here on out, I am prohibiting all drinking and gambling.”

“Whaaa?!” Spinoza’s scream sounded as if her entire world had been turned upside down. “What did you just say?! No drinkin’ *or* gamblin’?!”

“Especially no drinking. Alcohol remains in people’s systems the next day and robs them of their ability to make levelheaded decisions. Everyone should avoid consuming it so they can exhibit maximum performance.”

“Screw that! Then there won’t be one damn thing left to enjoy!”

Leobolt, however, had no intention of listening to her vehement objection. “Spinoza, I hear you sometimes drink on the job, don’t you? We cannot have the guards who defend the royal capital doing such things.”

“Listen, pal, can you last an entire day without drinkin’ water?”

“It’s definitely possible. But there’s no reason to consider doing such a thing. Dehydration will lower one’s performance, after all.”

“That’s how it is with me. Liquor is my water. If I don’t drink, my *performance* or whatever goes down.”

“Don’t try such ridiculous logic on me. Liquor and water are not the same,” Leobolt rejected curtly, then continued. “I also hear you sometimes drink to the point of nodding off while out on patrol. As a guard who protects the capital, that sets a terrible example. If monsters were to attack, you wouldn’t be able to fight.”

“Oh, I have *zero* problems fighting with liquor in me.”

“It’s true…” Fam chimed in. “She can fight without any issues even when she’s been drinking. As a matter of fact, I’d say she moves with even more agility when she’s in that state. It’s really quite strange.”

“Hah! See? I’ve been doin’ that all along, haven’t had a problem yet!”

“However, now that I have become Commander, I won’t be allowing such behavior. Any lazy attitudes toward work *will* be corrected,” Leobolt proclaimed, leaving no room for argument. “From now on, all guards are to monitor each other. If you discover anyone slacking on the job, report it to me immediately. There will be severe consequences for the offenders.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Commander Leobolt,” I jumped in.

“And why not, Sergeant Sieg?”

“If you do that, the guards will start to be suspicious of each

other. If we want to battle monsters together, we need to maintain trusting relationships," I stated simply. "The most important thing of all is whether or not we can fight together when the time comes. I think it's fine to overlook the little mistakes if it lets us keep doing that."

"You're far too naïve, Sergeant," Leobolt said. "The guards who protect the capital are expected to exhibit proper behavior. If they don't, they are unworthy of being heroes who protect the world."

"Heroes..."

"That is correct. As your commander, I want all of you to pursue this course with me. Should you do so, the Guard Corps will be able to soar to even greater heights."

Applause and cheers erupted from his entourage of guards. The heat of their passion was so intense that I began to feel my vision waver. If I had tried to keep arguing, it would've just been drowned out by their fervor, without a doubt. Leobolt had complete control over the room.

The Fifth and I simply stood there. We hadn't been engulfed by the heat, yet we were entirely powerless to quench it.

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One week had passed since Leobolt had taken over as Commander of the Guard Corps, and the Fifth Squadron and I were out patrolling the capital as part of our regular duties.

When Bolton had been our commander, we had had a certain degree of freedom. As long as we performed our patrols properly and fully completed our rounds in the allotted time, we wouldn't get in trouble if we slacked off a little bit along the way.

However, once Leobolt had taken over, that became a thing of the past. Slacking off was completely inexcusable. Anyone who happened to get reported by other guards would receive harsh punishment. A number of guards had already experienced that ordeal. Everyone had to be as careful as possible.

"If I convince the other guards to shut their mouths, maybe I could get away with slacking off?" Spinoza was searching for some way to skirt around the rules.

"But you might get reported just for suggesting that they stay silent."

I nodded at Fam's counterargument. "That's exactly what Leobolt is counting on—making us keep an eye on each other so we can't trust each other anymore. Then nobody will be able to slack off."

"And now everybody is on edge because of that…" Seira was concerned about the atmosphere that hung over the Guard Corps.

"There aren't that many guards who've always carried out their duties flawlessly like Seira has. All the guards who can't manage to adjust probably feel like they're suffocating right now," I said.

"Spinoza probably feels like she's been completely hog-tied," Fam agreed.

"Hey, you slack off just as much, with your whole thing about followin' Sieg around! You're not gonna be able to do that if you're bein' monitored."

Fam let out a chuckle. "I would never be so careless as to let the other guards see me."

She had complete confidence in her stealth operations, no doubt—though personally, I really kind of wanted her to cut it out…

"Oh, a pub," Spinoza said.

As we had been patrolling the street, a pub had come into view.

"Can I, Sieg? Pleeease?" Spinoza turned to me, putting her hands together in a pleading position. "Lemme have just one drink… No, just one drop, even!"

"Did you listen to a single word we just said?"

"C'mon, I've been good—I haven't slacked off one single bit ever since patrol started today. If I don't start lettin' loose soon, I think I'm gonna lose my mind!"

"Sounds like you have a pretty good idea of how much you usually slack off," I said in exasperation, offering a dry smile. "Sorry to inform you, but all the pubs are being monitored. I was told that if any guards come in for a drink, the establishment owner is supposed to report it to Leobolt."

"That means you won't be able to get any drinks at night either, then," Fam pointed out.

"Huh?! So it's not just during work—I can't drink any at night either?!" Spinoza howled furiously. "Screw that shit! Ugh, that ex-noble jackass! Bolton runnin' things was a million times better than this garbage!"

“Now now, calm down, Spinoza,” Seira urged.

“Ugh, I’m so pissed off. Guess I’ll just have to squeeze your boobs, Seira.”

“Gah?! Wait! We’re in the middle of work!”

“Booze, gambling, and ladies are the three best things in life! Now that they took away the first two, squeezin’ your boobs is all I got left!”

“Please, stop iiit!”

Spinoza’s arms were wrapped around Seira, fondling her chest. If Alma had been here, she probably would have already drawn her sword.

As I tried to rein in Spinoza, who had given into her passion and wouldn’t stop groping poor Seira, Fam peered inside the pub.

“Sieg, take a look in there,” she murmured.

I turned my eyes to where Fam’s gaze was pointed. There, seated in the back of the deserted pub, was a familiar bulky man. There was something melancholy about seeing him hanging out at the pub in the middle of the day.

It was none other than Bolton. As we approached, he lifted his head and turned to look at us.

“Oh… It’s you guys.”



“Whoa. You smell like booze,” Spinoza observed.

The top of his table was crowded with empty mugs, giving us an indication of the rough state he’d been in after getting forced out of the Guard Corps.

“Well aren’t you the lucky one, gettin’ piss drunk in the middle of the day.”

“Sarcasm, eh?”

“No, for real, I’m crazy jealous right now.”

“Well, I’ve already been kicked out of the guards,” Bolton grunted derisively at himself. “I’ve had to work my ass off for so long with barely any time to relax, so I figured I’d let loose for a change. Turns out that as soon as you’re not workin’, suddenly you’ve got way too much free time on your hands. I’ve got no family, no hobbies. It’s a pretty sad life to be a middle-aged bachelor, if ya think about it.”

“But you haven’t given up yet, have you?” I asked. “You still have calluses on your hands. They’d be gone by now if you hadn’t been swinging your sword every day. That proves to me you’re still keeping up with your training.”

“Eh… I’ve just been doin’ it to pass the time. Doesn’t feel right to stop cold turkey when you’ve been doin’ it for so long,” Bolton muttered awkwardly. “Besides, givin’ up’s got nothin’ to do with anything. You guys heard everything—Leobolt forced me out. It’d be impossible to get me back in the Guard Corps now.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I told him. “Your goal is to protect the Orb of Light here in the capital, so you can protect the happiness of your wife and daughter. You can still do that without being part of the Guard Corps.”

“Huh?”

“Being a part of an organization like the Guard Corps is only one way to accomplish your goal. That means all you have to do is find some other way.”

“What, you sayin’ I should join some kind of volunteer militia?”

“That’s one possibility, yes.”

Hearing me say that, Bolton smiled. “Heh. You’re a funny guy, Sieg. Yeah, you’re right about that. I could probably manage that if I found some other job to live off of.”

Then, as if to bridge the gap between subjects, he tilted back the mug in his hand, gulping down the entirety of its contents in

one go. His face tinged red, he let out a breath and began quietly speaking at the same time.

"Anyway, I heard about what Leobolt did. He's really crackin' down on you guys, huh. They told me he's makin' everyone keep an eye on each other?"

"That's right."

"I also heard he's makin' everyone train outside of work hours, and banned gambling and alcohol. Somethin' about 'proper behavior,' they said."

"I'm amazed you know about all that."

"One of the guys who got reprimanded came whinin' about it to me," Bolton said with a slight grin. "When it comes down to it, the guards are just a buncha hopeless lugs with nothin' but their muscles goin' for 'em—just like me. Expectin' 'em to be all prim and proper is just gonna suffocate 'em."

"You can say that again," Spinoza agreed.

"Leobolt really is a brilliant guy. Problem is, that makes him think that since *he* can do somethin', he can expect that same standard from everyone else," Bolton said. "There aren't that many brilliant guys like him out there. Most people can't handle what he can. And the people who *can* handle that kinda stuff don't know how to put themselves in the shoes of someone who can't. They don't know what it's like to fail at something. People who've never been hurt before don't know how to be kind to others."

Seira nodded. "We certainly had a lot more freedom when you were our commander, sir."

I seconded her notion. "As long as we at least did what we had to do, you left everyone to their own devices afterward. And there were no bans on drinking or gambling."

"As a rule, I think most people are pretty much hopeless. If you wanna be able to control 'em, you gotta know when to give 'em the carrot and when to give 'em the stick," Bolton responded.

"Lookin' back, I liked it way better when you were in charge," Spinoza grumbled. "C'mon, man, can't ya just take back your position?"

"What, you want *me* to stage a coup d'état now? You've gotta be kidding. This ain't the time to be at each other's throats—we've got monsters to worry about." He gave a pained smile. "There might be some guys who can't keep up and come cryin' to me about it,

but a lot of the guards actually approve of Leobolt. It's not my place to butt in."

"I wonder if Leobolt plans on enacting any more reforms for us..." Seira said, furrowing her brow.

"I would assume so," Fam responded. "He seems to have an image in his head of the ideal Guard Corps. He'll probably try to bring the entire organization closer to that."

"Then he's just gonna squeeze us tighter and tighter..." Spinoza looked fed up. "Maybe I'll just quit the guards and end up like you, boss. Then I'd be able to openly gamble and drink in the middle of the day."

"How will you earn the money for room and board?" I asked.

"Well, I'd gamble, y'know?"

"Considering the massive amount you owe in debt and bar tabs, I'm amazed you can just throw together a budget like that. You could almost call it some kind of gift."

"Heh. Ya don't gotta compliment me."

Spinoza was completely oblivious to my sarcasm.

If we stayed in the pub too long, Leobolt would rake us over the coals. Having come to a good stopping point, we turned around and started to leave the pub.

"Nothing out there can live in water that's too clean, y'know."

The words Bolton said as we were leaving stuck with me for a long time.

Chapter 8: Falling Apart

It wasn't until several days later that we learned about the Guard Corps being restructured.

At Leobolt's order, over a dozen people were immediately purged from the Guard Corps's roster. Everything had been decided at his discretion alone; he made no attempt to consult with me, Alma, or any of the other squad sergeants beforehand. He just informed everyone after the fact at an all-hands meeting.

Not a single one of us could help but be thunderstruck—not the squad sergeants nor the guards. There had been people expelled from the Guard before, but that had only happened to people like Lambda, who had been involved in serious crimes.

Once the report was over, I went over to the commander's office to lodge a complaint with Leobolt, the rest of the Fifth Squadron in tow.

"Commander, why did you expel all those men?" I asked.

"It's just as I explained before," he responded, looking up from his paperwork. "They were negligent in their work. Despite being firmly reprimanded, they showed no signs of improvement. Instead, they merely complained. If I let men like that remain unchecked, it will set a bad example for the others. This organization has no need of people who cannot abide by the rules."

"But we have a shortage of manpower right now. You know that. Expelling good fighting men is too excessive a punishment," I said.

"One bad apple can spoil the others next to it, Sergeant Sieg. In fact, they can eventually spoil the whole barrel. If we don't want the rot spreading to the entire Guard Corps, we have no choice but to pick out the rotten apples when we find them."

"I don't agree that they could've ruined the whole organization like that. They might've slacked off sometimes, but all of them could be counted on when emergencies happened."

Those men had fought through hell with us time and time again—during the fight against the undead army, as well as the

time we were attacked by demon forces, to name a couple. There was no way we could just toss them out like they were nothing.

"Look, Commander Leobolt. Don't you think you might be expecting too much perfection from everyone?"

"Those men had been discontented with me for some time already, Sieg. Apparently, they wished for their former commander Bolton to be reinstated. In times of emergency, followers who defy the wishes of their commander are nothing more than complications. Culling them early on is in our organization's best interests."

"Oh, I see. So you believe that what we need most to defend the royal capital isn't comrades who fight together, but followers who are loyal to you."

"Correct. It would be ideal if there were several hundred of *me*, but that is not a realistic option. Which means I'll need to raise the bar closer to my level for the remaining guards. I have a responsibility to put together a powerful Guard Corps for the purpose of protecting our world. I needed to let those other men go to make that happen." Leobolt's tone was decisive. "It was a decision made in the interests of protecting both the capital and the world. Tell me, Sergeant, am I mistaken in any of my reasoning?"

Entwining his fingers together on top of the table, he fixed his gaze on me. It was sharp, like a knife held in a firm grip.

He hadn't expelled them because he had any personal beef with them; he had just decided that it was necessary for the health of the organization. His resolution on that point had been made perfectly clear.

"I honestly can't say I agree with you," I said after a brief pause. "If you keep things up the way they are now, the guards are going to lag behind. Not everybody is a genius like you are."

"I'm no genius—I am but an average man," Leobolt replied. "If I can do it, other people can as well. The only ingredient they are missing is the painstaking training I endured."

"Not everyone can do what you did in that regard either," I objected. "If you push them too hard, all you're going to do is exhaust them. At the rate you're pushing them right now, that's going to happen sooner rather than later."

"You *do* believe that I'm mistaken, then...?"

“That’s right.”

“Thank you for your words of caution, then. *I* am the leader of the Guard Corps, though, and you are obligated to follow my command. That is the duty of all of our personnel.”

“You’re right about that,” I responded. “And I *will* abide by whatever decisions you make. I’m hoping you’ll keep what I just said in the back of your mind, though.”

“Understood,” Leobolt finally said, and he suddenly gave a wide smile. I couldn’t tell for sure if I was getting through to him underneath his mask of cool indifference.

“That’s all I wanted to tell you,” I said. “Sorry to bother you.”

We had turned around and started on our way out when he spoke up again.

“Oh, that’s right,” Leobolt called out before we could leave. “There’s something I wanted to speak with all of you about.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It’s about the restructuring of the Fifth Squadron.”

“Restructuring…” Something felt ominous about the sound of that word. “I think we’re perfectly fine at our current strength, though.”

“Of course. There is no problem whatsoever with your strength. There is something else that concerns me, though.”

“What is it?”

“There is one member of your group who is ill-suited to be a guard.”

Silence fell across us as we looked at each other, trying to determine who he was talking about.

“I-Is it me…?!” Seira asked concernedly. “Maybe it bothers the guards to have a foreign princess among them…”

“I seriously doubt that,” I said. “If there were any problems concerning you, it would be about your outfit.”

“Huh? But why?” She blinked.

“Your lack of self-awareness scares me sometimes,” I muttered.

“He’s probably talkin’ about you, right, Fam?” Spinoza piped up.

“I should be asking *you* that question,” Fam countered.

“Hm? Why would it be me?”

“*Your* lack of self-awareness scares me sometimes,” I grumbled, giving a strained smile. “In all honesty, though, if someone were to ask me if we were suited to be guards, I’d have to admit all of us

have our questionable points—myself included."

"I personally consider you to be an ideal guard, Sieg," Leobolt commented. "And while Spinoza displays some unacceptable behavior...she is not the object of my concerns this time around."

"Hah! Take that!" Spinoza shouted triumphantly, then paused. "Wait, then who's this about?"

A sudden realization fell upon us. It wasn't about Spinoza, and it probably wasn't about me, since he had called me an ideal guard. That only left two possibilities.

Leobolt slowly brought his clasped hands apart, adjusting them before rejoining them, his elbows resting on his desk. Then, after a brief pause, he shot a piercing gaze at one specific person.

"Fam. I am told that demon blood runs through your veins."

He was looking at Fam—the Fifth Squadron's archer.

There was no intonation whatsoever in his voice, which gave it a sharp feel, like a blade made of ice.

After a moment of quiet, Fam spoke up. "I don't recall ever having told you that."

"It is the commander's duty to make certain that no rats have slipped into the midst of our organization. I did some checking up on your background," Leobolt said. "You have demon blood, and you had infiltrated us as a spy for the demons at one point... It is a massive risk to retain someone like that as a guard."

"You don't mean..." I began.

"Fam, I cannot allow you to remain in the Guard Corps. From this day forward, you are hereby relieved of duty."

His heartless declaration echoed across the room, its suddenness stunning all of us into silence.

"Hold on a second," I piped up once I regained my composure. "Fam is part demon, and she may have been a spy in the past, but she has long since cut all the old ties she had."

"Th-That's right!" Seira affirmed. "Fam is our comrade! Relieving her of duty is too harsh a punishment!"

"But we cannot be certain that she won't switch sides again. It's possible she is only pretending to have cut ties and is biding her time until she can catch us unawares and strike," Leobolt murmured matter-of-factly. "With demon blood in her veins, we cannot rule out her doing such a thing. It would be unwise to saddle ourselves with such a risk."

“Being part demon doesn’t automatically mean she’s a threat to humanity. Besides, there are plenty of humans who threaten humanity themselves,” I told Leobolt. “It doesn’t matter whether she’s a demon or a human. Fam is who she is. She is no threat to us whatsoever.”

“You cannot deny that she used to be a spy, though,” he countered.

“She had no choice in her situation,” I explained. “Becoming a spy was her only option if she wanted to survive.”

Fam’s parents had been killed when she was young. Because she was part demon and part human, both the humans and the demons had ostracized her as an inferior being. Eventually, she was picked up by a demon and became a spy. She infiltrated the humans, bringing back information and performing assassinations.

None of that was done of her own free will, though. If she hadn’t become a spy for the demons, she wouldn’t have been allowed to live—they would have killed her off long before.

However...

“That is nothing more than an excuse.” Leobolt’s tone was adamant. “If she so desperately wanted to change her situation, there were plenty of other options available. She only resigned herself to serving the demons due to her own weakness. Nobody can change the environment they were born into—they can only change themselves. If they put forth their utmost effort, they can carve out new paths. Had Fam made a serious effort, she could have changed the circumstances she found herself in. Despite that, though, she failed to do so.”

Leobolt seemed to be insinuating that Fam could’ve forced her situation to change if she had actually wanted to. “People make a conscious decision when they choose not to lead respectable lives. That being so, we cannot afford them sympathy.”

In other words, he was saying that she consciously chose to be a pawn for the demons—that if she had wanted to change that, she should’ve tried harder. She could’ve done something if she had put in the effort. Not forcing a change when it was within the realm of possibility meant she “hadn’t put in enough effort.”

As soon as I heard him say that, I knew it would be a massive undertaking to convince him otherwise. Leobolt saw the world

from an entirely different perspective than we did.

Does he seriously think Fam didn't want to change her situation from the bottom of her heart?

The idea that someone can change absolutely anything if they try hard enough only applies to people privileged enough to be in a sufficiently advantaged environment. There are people who end up in environments where it's impossible to change things no matter how hard they try.

I, for one, can't put the blame on people who've made choices out of sheer desperation to survive—even if their choices turned out to be bad ones.

"She chose to serve the demons of her own free will. Allowing such a person to remain in the Guard Corps is a risk I am unwilling to take."

Leobolt then cast a glance at Fam. "No... I believe I misspoke."

A sudden smile came to his lips. Unlike his usual smile, this one had no trace of pleasantness to it; it was a scornful sneer.

I had a bad feeling about what was to come.

Then, he spoke.

"With demon blood in her, she can't exactly be considered a *person*."

Saying that was a critical mistake. He had crossed a line with that. You didn't just say something like that—not to any comrade of mine, at least.

"Leobolt..."

I felt something snap inside my mind, and my vision began to turn red. Anger began boiling up inside me.

People could have their own opinions about things—everyone was free to think what they wanted. But insulting my comrade to her face was another matter entirely. That wasn't something I could just let slide.

I took a step toward Leobolt to confront him, and just as I was about to lift him up by the collar—

—Spinoza's emphatic right-handed jab hit him square in the face before I could get there.

"Guh...?!"

As her weighty punch connected with the unsuspecting nose, the tremendous force caused him to slam back-first into the document-filled shelf behind him. Both Leobolt and the shelf

tumbled heavily to the ground together, paperwork scattering around them.

“Spinoza...?!”

I hadn’t expected her to throw hands before I did.

But I was even more surprised that she had gotten that angry at someone insulting Fam. I hadn’t thought that they had been getting along that well. Even Fam seemed taken aback.

“Heh. That was quite the punch you delivered.” Leobolt gave a pained chuckle, pressing a hand against his nose. There were red splotches of blood on the floor around where he had landed. “Spinoza... Do you realize what you’ve just done?”

“Course I do.” Spinoza snorted out a laugh. “I slugged a guy who pissed me off. Simple as that.”

“To think you would actually strike your commander... What an unbelievable display of acting without considering the consequences. You truly are lacking in intelligence,” Leobolt said, staring at her tauntingly. “But what can one expect from a lowly bandit?”

“Wha...?!” A look of dismay appeared on Spinoza’s face.

“Are you surprised? Naturally, I looked into your background as well. That includes the fact that you were once a member of a certain gang of bandits.” He gave a brief smile. “I’ve turned a blind eye to this fact so far. Despite your awful behavior, you do possess great ability—not to mention, you’ve been a member of Sieg’s squadron. However, those days are over. Now that you’ve struck your superior, you cannot go unpunished.”

Then, he finished off his statement with a taunt. “The Guard Corps has no need for a filthy bandit wench like yourself.”

“You sonofabitch!”

“Spinoza, stop!” I stepped in to hold Spinoza back as she lunged for another punch. “Don’t let him goad you—that’s exactly what he wants.”

“I don’t give a shit! I’m gonna rearrange his face!”

“Such typical mannerisms from a savage.” Leobolt smiled as he stood back up, wiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Leobolt... You asked for that one,” I said. “If Spinoza hadn’t jumped in first, I would have punched you myself.”

“I simply can’t have that, Sergeant. You are an imperative part

of the defense of the royal capital," he said. "Fam and Spinoza, though, are not fit to remain in my Guard Corps. They are not qualified to protect our world."

"Joke's on you, I've never been qualified," Spinoza spat.

Leobolt, in a calm tone which seemed to reflect his unwavering will, responded to her venomous outbursts.

"Fam, Spinoza, you are both hereby expelled from the Guard Corps," he declared.

"Commander Leobolt!" I shouted.

"Challenge this, Sieg, and even you will receive no mercy from me," he warned. "As I said before, I am the commander of the Guard Corps now. That means squad sergeants such as you must respect my decisions."

"But..."

"Enough already, Sieg," Spinoza said, cutting me off. "I'd rather be caught dead than work under a jerk like this anyway."

"Spinoza!" Seira shouted.

"When I joined the guards, it wasn't to fight for some grand cause in the first place, y'know. You can go on about the world all you want; I don't want any part of your garbage ideals." She turned away from Leobolt and looked over to us. "That guy might be a jackass, but the rest of you were cool to be around. Stay safe out there, 'k?"

With that, Spinoza turned around and walked out of the commander's office.

"Spinoza, wait! Please!" Seira tried to chase after her, but the door slammed shut before she could leave the room.

"I probably shouldn't be here either..." Fam said, and began heading for the door after Spinoza.

"Fam!" Seira called out.

"We haven't been together all that long, but I had fun. It was my first experience having actual comrades."

With those words, Fam left the room as well. That left only Leobolt, Seira, and me.

The Fifth Squadron had been halved. We were down to just two members.

"Why is this happening..." Seira sank to the floor and buried her face in her hands. She must have felt absolutely despondent after losing our comrades to the ongoing internal chaos.

That was exactly how I felt too.

Chapter 9: Spinoza's Past

Spinoza had ended up out at the pub drinking that night. Alcohol had been off-limits to her lately, so she ended up drinking like a fish.

As a result, she got drunk. Really drunk.

Part of it might have been the fact that she hadn't had anything to drink for a while. There was also the fact that she had been really pissed off about getting expelled from the guards, which might have sped up her drinking pace. In the end, though, she ended up getting absolutely smashed and passing out in an inn room bed.

There, she had a dream—full of memories from back when she was still a child.

Spinoza had no idea what her parents had been like. She had been abandoned in the mountains before she was old enough to remember anything, and by the time she could, she was already part of a gang of bandits. Her parents had thrown her out, and the bandits had picked her up.

As a rule, children taken in by bandits tended to be sold off to slave traders; that was how robbers and human traffickers earned their livelihood. Spinoza was decently pretty, so she probably could have been sold at a decent price as well. The demand did exist—mostly because there were a fair number of disgusting nobles out there with a twisted appetite for young girls to toy with.

However, these bandits made no attempt to sell Spinoza off. They stole and they robbed, but they didn't participate in human trafficking. Nor did they steal and rob from just anybody—they only did so from the most heinous nobles out there. That was the kind of bandit gang that had found Spinoza—the type that would be considered either "noble thieves" or "eccentric weirdos," depending on who you asked.

The bandit gang also happened to be led by a woman. Her name was Amethyst, and she was the only woman in the entire group. Spinoza remembered her as being somewhere in her early thirties.

She was so full of vim and vigor that she outshone all of the men in the gang. She was also the best drinker of the entire group. When they had parties and got into drinking contests, she was always the last person standing, boasting that alcohol was like water to her.

On top of that, she was also the strongest member of the bandits. She proved that fact through the frequent arm wrestling competitions the gang held.

"There are only two types of people in the world: predators and prey. If you're weak, you're stuck being prey."

That was Amethyst's philosophy, and the bandit gang decided their hierarchy based on how good each member was at arm wrestling. If you weren't strong enough, you got no say in anything.

Even after arm wrestling the entire gang, Amethyst had never lost once. She was so strong that sometimes she pushed down too hard and came close to breaking her opponent's arm.

Above all, she was also more competitive than anyone else.

Spinoza participated in the arm wrestling competitions as well. However, at age ten or so, there was no way she could beat any adults in a contest of strength. The other bandits would always hold back to make it seem like a close match for her—but Amethyst did no such thing. The moment the match began, she would use her full force to send Spinoza's arm and entire body slamming into the floor. Before Spinoza knew what hit her, she would be on the ground, staring up at the ceiling.

"Looks like I win," Amethyst grinned victoriously, wiping the bottom of her nose with a finger.

When the other bandits would tell her she was being too immature, Amethyst had a comeback ready. "Lions always go all out, even when they're huntin' rabbits, y'know."

The bandits would just roll their eyes at her, but Spinoza was actually happy to hear her say that. She felt that Amethyst giving her a straightforward beatdown was way more sincere than the men wearing stupid grins and putting on a charade for her.

When Spinoza had first been picked up by the bandits, she had been extremely wild—perhaps because she still had vague memories of her parents abandoning her. She was violent and refused to open up to anyone at all, seeing everyone besides

herself as enemies.

However, as she continued to live with the bandits, the way she felt gradually began to change. With Amethyst as their boss, the gang members were nothing if not honest. They didn't hide anything, and they always stayed true to their desires. As she spent time with them, Spinoza was influenced by their way of thinking, and her heart gradually opened up.

When she was in a bad mood, she would arm wrestle. The others were always willing to deal with her pent-up energy, whether it was anger or worry or anything else.

She really loved arm wrestling. It told a lot about the person you were up against. When you locked palms with your opponent, not only could you get a feel for how strong and confident they were, you could almost sense the strength of their spirit as well. In just that split second, you could get a clear picture of what kind of person your opponent was.

Her favorite person of all to arm wrestle was Amethyst. Her palm gave away the absolute confidence she had in her own strength—and her spirit felt immensely stronger than anyone else's in the gang. However, the straightforwardness and kindness at the core of her wild temperament shone through more than anything else.

Once, Spinoza had asked Amethyst why she had bothered taking in a random kid like her.

"I don't like seein' things go to waste. If I see somethin' somebody dropped, I make it a rule to pick it up," she had said with a grin. "Besides, you'da probably been gobbled up by monsters if I hadn't. Wouldn'ta able to sleep right knowin' that. So basically, I did it 'cause I'm selfish."

"Besides," she had added, "I never knew my parents either, and I had a pretty shitty life back in the day too. I couldn't just leave ya there when ya reminded me so much of me."

All of the other bandits had been taken in by Amethyst as well. They had been penniless and jobless, but they at least had muscles. The group of people she managed to accumulate ended up becoming her gang of bandits, and they all adored her.

The bandit gang only targeted corrupt, money-hoarding nobles who were making the people suffer by levying excessive taxes. They would plunder money and valuables from the nobles'

carriages. When they scored big, they would head over to the village at the base of the mountain and pass that wealth on by spending it on huge drinking parties. The villagers welcomed them with open arms.

Spinoza had once asked Amethyst why they only stole from nobles.

“We’re bandits,” she had replied. “It ain’t exactly the most upstanding job out there, not by a long shot. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have our pride.”

“Pride,” Spinoza had murmured, and Amethyst had nodded.

“When you’re born low an’ raised bad, there’s only certain things you can do to get by. Try to walk the straight an’ narrow like a normal person an’ you’ll just end up dead in the gutter. If you wanna live, you gotta prey on others. We can be picky about our targets, though,” she had said. “Even if it’s just to make ourselves feel better about it.”

Amethyst gave a coy, toothy smile.



At the time, Spinoza didn't really understand what "pride" was. When she had seen the expression on Amethyst's face, though, she knew it was something important.

Spinoza knew nothing about her parents, since they had abandoned her when she had been too young to remember. Even when she had gotten older, though, she still had no interest in learning who they were—because she considered the bandit gang her family.

Someday I wanna get stronger, so I can beat Amethyst at arm wrestling, and be useful to the gang too.

However, one day, when Spinoza was fifteen years old, the bandit gang was completely wiped out by a group of knights who had been sent out by a frontier nobleman. The bandits had attacked the noble in the past and stolen his valuables, so he had sent out his knights in revenge.

The bandits only went after people who were committing wrongdoings. That particular noble had placed excessive taxes on the people and abused his authority to do all kinds of outrageous things. His villainy far outshone that of the bandits.

Under the fierce assault of the knights, the bandits were felled one after the other, while Amethyst used her tremendous strength to fight back desperately against the assailants. However—when the knights went after Spinoza, Amethyst moved in to defend her and suffered a lethal blow.

Spinoza couldn't believe what she had done. Amethyst had always told the gang that they'd need to defend themselves—that if they got backed into a corner, she wasn't going to save them. That the only types of people in the world were predators and prey; that weak people couldn't help but be overrun by strong ones. That it was the law of nature, after all.

"Why did you do that…?" Spinoza asked. "You always said we'd have to defend ourselves."

"Yeah, I guess I did." Amethyst smiled bitterly. "That was the plan too, but my body just started movin' on its own. Heh. Guess I'm more sentimental than I realized."

The only types of people in the world were predators and prey. Weak people couldn't help but be overrun by strong ones. Spinoza had known that to be an unquestionable fact. Faced with the sight

in front of her, however, it had suddenly become much more difficult to accept.

"Gutter trash," spat one of the knights, looking down at the bandits he had slain. "You only have yourselves to blame. You should have put more effort into leading respectable lives."

When Spinoza heard those words, she instantly began burning with anger. Heavy taxes had been levied in the territory of the noble who had sent the knights, and more and more of the population could no longer make ends meet because of that. Some members of the bandits had originally come from that noble's territory as well; it had become too hard to live their lives or find decent jobs, so they had ended up in the gang instead. Meanwhile, the nobles and knights were living in luxury by using the taxes they had extorted from the people.

"'Put more effort into leading respectable lives?' The only reason we ended up like this is 'cause you assholes bled us dry. People born and raised at the bottom of the ladder have to do whatever it takes to survive. Don't give me your bullshit platitudes—!"

Spinoza's eyes shot open. Looking around, she found herself on her inn room bed.

"A dream, huh..."

My head hurts... Guess I'm still sorta drunk. There's an awful pain welling up inside my head—like gears grinding against each other.

She grabbed her waterskin from nearby and gulped down some water. Gradually, the pain started to subside.

Man, that dream really took me back.

After that, Amethyst had summoned the last of her energy and helped Spinoza escape. That was how Spinoza had ended up becoming the last surviving member of the bandit gang. Everyone else had been killed by the knights. Even after so long, images from that day were still burned into her retinas.

What the knight had said back then had stuck with her, as well —

"You only have yourselves to blame. You should have put more effort into leading respectable lives."

The image of the knight from her old memories started to morph into Leobolt.

The words Leobolt had said in his office flashed back into her

mind:

"If she so desperately wanted to change her situation, there were plenty of other options available."

"Nobody can change the environment they were born into—they can only change themselves. If they put forth their utmost effort, they can carve out new paths. Had Fam made a serious effort, she could have changed the circumstances she found herself in."

"People make a conscious decision when they choose not to lead respectable lives. That being so, we cannot afford them sympathy."

She had never wanted any sympathy. Considering everything she had done up to that point, she'd figured it was inevitable for it to come back and bite her in the ass. But she wasn't about to let him preach to her with that smug, know-it-all look on his face.

Some people, born and raised in the worst conditions, don't even get the chance to put in any kind of "honest effort." But they still live with a sense of pride, pathetically tiny as it might be. Privileged people who have zero concept of what it's like to be forced to do something to survive have no right to spout shit like that, as if they know a damn thing about it.

Right as she had been about to flee from the knights, Spinoza had pleaded with Amethyst, who had decided to stay behind to hold them off.

"How am I supposed to live on my own? Without you...without our gang...I've got no reason to live..."

"Don't worry. You'll manage," Amethyst had responded firmly as she held off the knights. *"Someday, you'll run into some other people who need ya. You'll have your own gang of comrades who've got each other's backs, just like us."*

With that, Amethyst had given a toothy grin. *"You're my daughter. Take pride in that, hold your head high, and keep on livin'."*

Those were the last words the two of them exchanged.

After that, Spinoza had escaped, eventually disappearing into a distant city. She had no education and no identity; all she had was brute strength. That meant about the only thing she could do was let off steam through violence.

Soon enough, she was a wanted woman and had people coming after her. Unable to find any decent jobs, she had kept running from place to place until she eventually ended up at the royal capital, Astaroth.

Once Bolton had found her having a fistfight in the middle of town, brought her in, and assigned her to the Fifth Squadron, things had gotten pretty fun. She had finally found new comrades—Sieg, Seira, and Fam.

"End of an era, huh…"

Spinoza gave a self-deprecating smile. There was no way she could get back into the Guard Corps after being expelled for punching Commander Leobolt in the face. Not that she wanted to get back in, anyway. She could put up with the guard work when she had been under Commander Bolton, but she refused to ever work under Leobolt again.

"Guess it's back to the thug life for me…"

She figured it was time to start drinking again. She didn't have to think about things too much when she got drunk; nothing really mattered at all. All she had to worry about was feeling good.

Despite how much time had passed, the unpleasant feeling in Spinoza's head lingered. She decided to blame it on the alcohol.

***

The sun had set and night had fallen upon the royal capital. Seira and I had gone out to a pub on one of the capital's main streets. The place was packed with workers like us who had gotten out of work for the day.

And one particular person inside the establishment was already three sheets to the wind.

"I knew we'd find you here," I murmured.

"Mnuh…?"

When I called out, the blonde woman who had been face-planted on the table looked up. Her eyes were having trouble focusing. From the looks of things, she had already emptied quite a few mugs of alcohol and was absolutely sloshed. After a few moments, she finally realized we were the ones who had spoken to her.

"Oh hey, Sieg, Seira," Spinoza muttered listlessly. "What are you guys doin' here?"

"We figured you'd be at a pub—it's been about a week since we've even seen you."

She eyed us dubiously. "I ain't in the Guard Corps anymore,

y'know."

"That doesn't mean we can't hang out anymore," I said. "You didn't think we were just work buddies, did you?"

Spinoza's eyes shot open wide in bewilderment for a split second before a smile surfaced on her face.

"Heh. You two are makin' me one happy gal. Had no idea ya felt so strongly about me."

"I'm here too, you know..." Fam murmured, suddenly appearing from behind me as if out of nowhere.

Spinoza instantly lurched backward. "Whoa, you scared the shit outta me!"

Fam chuckled softly. "I *am* Sieg's shadow, after all. I'm always by his side," she explained. "Quitting the guards changes nothing about that."

True to her statement, not much had changed with Fam since she had been expelled from the Guard Corps. She had been evicted from the barracks, but she had never slept in her own room anyway. She had always slept in my room, either up in the ceiling area or under the bed, and had continued to do so. She would even sneak along behind us when we were out on patrol, despite no longer officially being a guard.

We seated ourselves at Spinoza's table. Once our food had come, I said, "I still can't believe you did that, though."

"Did what?" she asked.

"Punched Leobolt in the face like that."

"You lashed out at him because he went after Fam, didn't you?" Seira said, continuing my train of thought. "You two are always fighting, but that made me realize you really do care about her. I think it's absolutely wonderful that you're so concerned about your comrades."

"You got it all wrong, stupid," Spinoza grunted in disgust. "Why would ya think I'd do anything for *her* sake? That's dumb as hell."

"But..."

"Leobolt rubbed me the wrong way from the first damn moment I set my eyes on him. That just gave me a good excuse to deck his ass."

Seira let out a sudden giggle at that. "Oh, I see!"

"Hey... What the hell're you laughin' at, Seira?"

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking about how bad you are at admitting

things to yourself," she said, then put on a sunny smile. "I really like that about you, you know."

"*Hmph*," Spinoza grumbled, looking away uncomfortably.

"She's blushing," I pointed out.

"She is," Fam agreed.

"Oh, shut up!" Spinoza snarled. "I ain't kiddin'... I really did do it for myself."

"Oh yeah?" I teased.

"That bullshit he spouted made somethin' snap in me. There was no way I could just let that slide—so I decided to sock 'im good."

"You mean what he said about Fam?"

"That too, but I was talking about somethin' before that. He was sayin' that the reason people can't follow an honest path is 'cause of their own weakness."

"Yeah."

"'Even if people can't change the environment they were born into, they can change themselves'—says the privileged-ass noble. Freakin' hilarious," Spinoza snorted in annoyance. "People born into legitimately terrible environments only get to take the nasty paths in life—there ain't no other options. Hell, they don't even realize they're doing anythin' wrong, usually. They're just out there in the wild without a compass."

"Are you talking about back when you were a bandit?" I asked. Leobolt had mentioned back then that Spinoza had been a member of a bandit gang.

"Maybe, maybe not..." Spinoza murmured, sidestepping my question. "Either way, that bastard Leobolt's been puttin' way too much effort into diggin' up people's buried pasts. You just *know* he's a major tryhard like that in the sack too."

"I didn't really want to have to think about that," I muttered.

"The scariest thing about you, Spinoza, is your ability to say things like that with a straight face," Fam added in disgust.

"Anyway, what are you going to do when you run out of survival funds?" I asked. "It's not as though you have any savings—you're already in perpetual debt to pretty much every place out there."

"Eh. I'll manage somehow."

"Do you even have money to stay at an inn tonight?"

Spinoza didn't look at us, nor did she respond.

“That sounds like a ‘no’ to me,” I sighed, smiling weakly. “Listen. Come back to us, Spinoza.”

“C’mon, you heard what Leobolt told me,” she groaned. “As long as he’s in charge, the guards don’t need hoodlums like me.”

“He did say something along those lines,” I admitted.

“The only types of people in the world are predators and prey. This time it was my turn to be the prey. So there ain’t no goin’ back for me,” Spinoza told us. “I could put up with guard work when Bolton was the boss, but like hell am I ever gonna take orders from Leobolt again.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I said, nodding.

Then, a staff member walked by, and I decided to order a drink.

“Whoa, Sieg, you sure about that?”

“About what?”

“Didn’t Leobolt ban drinking for you guys?”

“Yeah, I guess he did,” I stated casually.

When the drink came out, I immediately took a sip, then posed a question to Spinoza. “You just said you’d never take orders from Leobolt again. That means you’d come back if he wasn’t commander, right?”

“Huh?” Spinoza’s eyes widened. “Hey, what the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“I meant exactly what I said. If Leobolt stepped down, I bet you’d come back to the Guard Corps, wouldn’t you?” I repeated.

“You plannin’ on forcin’ him out, then?”

“We sure are.”

My response blew Spinoza’s mind. “Whoa, no way…”

Both she and Fam were ace members of the Guard Corps. Without them, our ability to deal damage was drastically reduced. Leobolt, however, had prioritized removing all elements of concern to him, at the cost of lowering the overall strength of our forces.

I had no doubt that Leobolt would continue to enact reforms. If we kept following his ideals, the entire Guard Corps would end up coming to a screeching halt. We needed to replace him as commander before our organization collapsed from the inside. That was the conclusion all of us had come to together.

“You realize how popular he is, right? He’s got those guard fanboys—and the townspeople treat him like some kinda hero,” Spinoza grumbled.

“All that’s starting to get a little shaky, though,” I informed her.

“Huh?”

“After you left, he kept on enacting new reforms. Apart from one group of devout loyalists, pretty much everyone else is getting fed up with him.”

After he had cleared out the people who had broken his rules, Leobolt had clamped down even harder. The guards were absolutely exhausted, both physically and mentally.

“They’re all afraid to speak up right now because they’re afraid someone will report them. That might change, though, if they had someone to take the lead.”

“On top of that, he’s already approached the council about raising taxes on the people to give the Guard Corps a bigger hiring budget, apparently,” Fam chimed in. “If we dress up that fact a little bit and leak the info to the citizens, they might start changing their opinion of him as well.”

“What, so we’re supposed to go around shoutin’ from the rooftops?” Spinoza asked.

“Of course not, silly. The people can disseminate the info perfectly fine without our help. If you add enough oil to a rumor, it’ll spread like a raging wildfire,” Fam responded.

“You scare the hell out of me sometimes,” Spinoza told her.

“Well, information warfare *is* my specialty,” Fam said with a tiny grin.

I turned back to Spinoza. “There was something you said to me earlier. You said that there are only predators and prey in the world—and since you had ended up as prey, you couldn’t come back.”

“Yeah,” Spinoza affirmed with a nod. “What of it?”

“I’m no predator, and I’m not prey either. I’m a protector. And I promise you this: as your squad sergeant, I’m going to protect your place with us,” I declared. “We need you, Spinoza.”

Spinoza stood there absolutely dumbstruck.

“We really miss you being around,” Seira agreed.

“I can concentrate better with a little bit of noise in the background,” Fam admitted.

Falling silent, Spinoza turned her head downward and remained that way for a while. When she finally looked up again, she turned to me.

“Hey, Sieg. Let’s arm wrestle.”

“Arm wrestle?”

“Yeah. If you win, we’ll do this your way.” She fixed her gaze on me in challenge.



Why challenge me to an arm wrestling match out of nowhere?

Seeing the expression on her face, though, I could tell she had some kind of personal reason, and it was probably something very important to her. So I went with it.

"All right. You're on."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about!" Spinoza grinned. "You really gave me a good thrashin' the first time we met. Now it's payback time!"

Placing our elbows on the table, we locked our hands together tightly. The moment we did so, I thought I saw a sudden expression of realization on Spinoza's face—but it was quickly overwritten by an amused smile.

"All right—let the battle begin!" Seira, our referee, gave the signal, and we immediately started pulling our arms in our respective directions.

She really is an absolute beast when it comes to physical strength. I was sure she'd be powerful from the get-go, but it's also evident how battle-hardened she's become.

"Heh, what's wrong? That all you got?" Spinoza taunted.

"You're right," I murmured. "I should probably go ahead and start taking this seriously."

As I shifted into a higher gear, Spinoza, taken aback, let out a pained grunt. She resisted the sudden pushback as hard as she could, but it was all in vain. Overwhelmed by my crushing offensive, the back of her hand connected with the table.

"Sieg wins!" Seira cheered.

"Gah! Lost again!" Spinoza groaned in shock and frustration. "You are one tough bastard. You absolutely obliterated me."

"So, we're doing this my way, then, as promised?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine," Spinoza muttered, and a self-deprecating grin came to her face. "Man, this sure feels dumb to me, though."

"Why?"

"I'm a girl who grew up in a bandit gang. I've been stealin' from people and beatin' 'em up all my life. Now I'm supposed to fight to save the world or whatever?"

"Who said you had to fight to save the world?" I asked.

"Huh? What *am* I fightin' for, then?"

"Drinks taste better after a hard day's work, don't they? Just fight for that refreshing after-work ale. That's good enough,

right?”

Spinoza stared at me blankly for a moment, then suddenly burst out laughing. “Hah! I like it!”

I must’ve said something hilarious, because she ended up doubling over with laughter. Eventually her fit subsided, and she looked back up at me, tears in the corner of her eyes.

“Oh, man. I always knew you were top-notch, Sieg.”

Chapter 10: Signs of Collapse

Something was wrong.

As the head of the new and improved Guard Corps, Leobolt had led his troops with the goal of creating the ideal organization to protect the world. However, they still weren't shaping up to become what he had envisioned. Instead, a rift had begun to develop.

In order to strengthen the Guard Corps as a whole, it had been necessary to raise the performance bar of each individual member. To that end, he had assigned everyone training outside of their regular hours of duty. No overtime pay was given out, of course; the reason they had needed such intense training in the first place was because they were lacking in strength, and men with insufficient ability did not deserve extra wages.

Leobolt, at least, would have agreed with that line of thinking had he been in their position. Training hard outside of regular work hours was just common sense to him; if someone wanted to protect the world, they needed to set their aspirations at *least* that high.

Leobolt had never been particularly motivated by money to begin with. The very act of fighting to protect the world mattered more than anything else.

However, the guards under him were different. They were openly dissatisfied with the lack of pay for their extracurricular training, and they schemed to avoid their work duties at every given opportunity. Since they were paid for completing their set hours, the prevailing attitude was to perform the bare minimum of work and get by with as little effort as possible.

These men have the wrong idea, Leobolt thought. *A guard's salary is not paid by the hour. It is paid according to the value they provide by completing their patrols, warding off monster attacks, and defending the people of the royal capital—and, by extension, defending the world itself. That is why they should make every effort to yield as great a value as possible in the limited time they are given.*

He had tried to explain as such to the guards, but apparently it

hadn’t resonated with them.

“It appears I must tighten their discipline further still…”

The guards were still lacking in far too many ways. Their bodies and minds had to be trained thoroughly to remedy that. Yet no matter how much training Leobolt imposed on them, they did not show the progress he anticipated.

Why is this happening? Leobolt wondered.

After much thought, he reached a conclusion: *They aren’t putting in enough effort.*

If he had been training in their shoes, there was no way he would’ve shown such scant improvement. He wasn’t a genius; he was just a good learner. He had put in the proper amount of effort needed for the task at hand—so obviously, others should’ve been able to use the same tactic. If they were failing, it was entirely due to a lack of effort. It had nothing to do with talent.

Leobolt began training the guards with even more intensity. Yet the more he did so, the further he sensed them drifting away.

“Commander Leobolt, perhaps that’s a bit excessive…?”

No longer able to just stand by, a guard who had been part of Leobolt’s inner circle in the former Ninth Squadron finally offered his opinion.

“If things continue like this, our men will end up unable to function at all.”

“You would oppose my wishes, then?”

“N-No, of course not…”

“It is my job as commander to dictate our organization’s policies. Your opinions are unneeded. Everyone else need only worry about fulfilling their own roles.”

Leobolt’s words were not flawed; they were without a doubt correct. That meant any reasonable person should have obeyed them.

However, that was not how things turned out.

It happened one day at the morning assembly, while Leobolt was telling the guards about what changes there would be moving forward.

“To hell with all this!” a guard shouted, then hurled his sheathed sword to the floor.

“What are you doing?” Leobolt asked coldly.

“I said, to hell with it!” Hostility burned in the guard’s eyes. “Day

after day, it's training this and training that... You banned alcohol, you banned gambling, and now you're gonna ban going out at night entirely?!"

"Leaving during the nighttime will affect your duties the following day. If you have such free time, it would be better spent either training or resting."

"You work us like horses, and we do it for chump change... If you're gonna take away every last bit of our fun on top of that, then why the hell are we working in the first place?!"

"That should be quite obvious. You are protecting the world," Leobolt responded coldly. "We serve a greater calling, and we must strive in dedication to it."

"Hah! 'Protecting the world,' my *ass*! What a load of bullshit! Let me tell ya, that's the *last* damn thing on our minds!"

"What do you mean by that...?" Leobolt frowned scornfully at the guard's outburst.

"We don't care about stuff like 'protecting the world' and 'serving a greater calling.' Working as a guard is just a way to earn money!" the guard yelled at his commander mockingly. "Who gives a shit about 'callings' or being 'world-protecting heroes'? Don't drag us regular people into some noble rich-kid's role-playing game!"

The room fell eerily silent. A tension hung in the air. Everyone held their breath as they waited to hear how Leobolt would respond.

"I see," he eventually said, nodding. "I understand now."

"Huh...?"

"I had always wondered why none of you seemed to progress much, despite undergoing the same amount of training as I did. Now, at last, I know why."

He spoke in a tone so subdued that no emotion could be discerned from it.

"The difference between us is not talent—it's our levels of awareness. I have always aspired to work hard for the sake of protecting the world, while the rest of you have just been mindlessly doing as you're told as a means to earn your daily wages. No wonder I wasn't seeing any progress. That is where my improvements should have begun. It was such an obvious thing that I hadn't thought to notice."

“Commander Leobolt?! What are you…”



Leobolt's aides were startled to see him draw his sword.

"I am going to slay him, obviously."

"What...?!"

"He brazenly insulted his most superior officer. Allowing such behavior to go unchecked will disrupt the order of our organization. Therefore, this man must be slain."

Leobolt held no personal grudge against the guard in question. On the contrary, he was grateful that the man had made him aware of the main issue. However, for the sake of the organization, the man could not go unpunished.

Also, Leobolt realized he had expected too much from the guards. He had always assumed that approaching one's work and role with a sincere attitude came as naturally as breathing. However, they had no real awareness of the importance of their mission to protect the world, and no associated pride; they were merely working as guards to earn a living. Their motives were horribly impure, and therefore, he couldn't expect to see any improvement.

It would be difficult to bring the proper awareness to them through dialogue. That means I'll just have to force it on them by instilling them with fear. Cutting down one of their own before their very eyes will show them what happens if they oppose me—and then I will be able to lead the Guard Corps to even greater heights.

"N-No, stop! Please!"

Looking down upon this man begging for his life stirs no emotions in me. I shall suppress all my personal feelings and carry out my duty.

Just as Leobolt was about to strike the man down, someone else placed their hand on top of his, holding the weapon in place.

"Sergeant Sieg..."

"You wield your sword to protect others, right? Then you definitely shouldn't be wielding it against your own."

"Do not interfere, if you please."

"If you're going to swing that thing at an ally of mine, you'll have to get through me first."

Leobolt fell silent. The look in Sieg's eyes showed that he meant it. If Leobolt tried to attack the guard, Sieg would activate his *Iron Target* skill, drawing the attack to him.

Having faced Sieg in battle before, Leobolt knew how incredible the man's defense power was. No other person had ever been

able to defend against Leobolt's most powerful attack. Sieg was an incredibly huge asset to their forces; injuring him in a situation like that was not an option.

"...Very well. I shall stay my blade for now."

Letting out an extended breath, Leobolt returned his sword to its sheath.

After the guard's narrow escape from being purged, his nerves must have been shot; his legs gave out and he collapsed to the ground. His face appeared to have aged a good bit compared to earlier.

Leobolt's intention had been to purge the man and strike fear into the hearts of the other guards. He needed to burn the fact into their minds that no disobedience would be tolerated.

However, he had failed to do so. Sieg's intervention had prevented him from accomplishing his goal.

Leobolt looked at the rest of the guards. Seeing their eyes filled with distrust, he understood that a deep rift had formed between him and his men.

***

The next day, when Leobolt arrived at work, one of his aides rushed into the room. He had a flustered expression on his face; apparently something unusual had occurred.

"Bad news, Commander Leobolt!"

"Has something happened?"

"A group of guards have abandoned their posts!"

Leobolt's eyes shot open in surprise.

According to the report, the guards had abandoned the barracks in the night and disappeared without a trace. By the time morning had come, they still hadn't returned. That meant that in all likelihood, they had run off—over thirty guards in total, supposedly.

"Those men are simply beyond belief..."

Is there not a single responsible bone in their bodies?

However, it was my blunder yesterday that ended up causing this incident.

Leobolt had made the guards monitor each other, and the reason they had been following through with that was because

they feared Leobolt. If he had successfully purged that man the previous day and reinforced that sense of fear in their hearts, they probably never would have banded together to plot a desertion.

Unfortunately, he had failed in that purge. Their fear of him had diminished, and dissatisfaction and bitterness had grown in its place, giving the guards a sense of solidarity in their negativity.

"And what of the men who ran off…?"

"We still haven't found them yet, sir!" his aide responded nervously. "But we fear they may have already escaped the capital."

The Guard Corps is already short on manpower. If we've lost over thirty more guards, there won't be enough men left to defend against a monster attack. Not to mention if the rest of the guards were to learn what happened, their morale would lower even further. At worst, there could even be another coup d'état.

"Such foolish behavior…"

As Leobolt was attempting to use reason to quell the dark emotions rising up within him, he heard loud voices coming from outside the guard station. It wasn't just a few voices, but an entire chorus, rumbling endlessly through the air like the sounds of a heavy storm.

"What's all the commotion…?"

Leaving his office, Leobolt went outside the guard station and was stunned by the scene he saw: the citizens of the capital had encircled the grounds and were closing in on the station.

"Well, hello there! Why is everyone gathered out here?"

Leobolt looked to the people, offering them a pleasant smile. He knew the value of his own smile; a pleasant expression on his handsome face could put others' hearts at ease. He presumed it would happen the same way it always did.

He presumed wrong.

"Leobolt! You lied to us!"

The citizens' expressions were brimming with anger, and all of it was directed at him.

What on earth…?

Having trouble understanding what was going on, Leobolt tilted his head. Just then, a furious middle-aged man pointed at him and yelled accusatorily.

"We heard what you did! You've been in talks with the council

about increasing taxes on us to give the Guard Corps a bigger budget, haven't you!"

The moment he heard that, cracks began to form in the mask he was wearing.

Where did they hear that...?

It was true that Leobolt had been in talks with the council. However, that info should never have left the building.

"Yes... I have indeed," he conceded.

If the info was out there, then that was that—there was no point in denying it. It was in his best interests to go ahead and admit the truth. It wasn't as though he had any ill intent; it was a necessity. If he just explained the situation to the people, they would understand that.

"However, it is a necessary part of defending the royal capital," he continued. "If we don't increase our budget, we'll be unable to bolster our numbers."

"Liar! I heard you just wanted to line your own pockets with a bigger salary!"

"I heard he's secretly buddy-buddy with the nobles here! Someone said he's been taking bribes from 'em to turn a blind eye to their crimes!"

"We thought you were such an honest person, Leobolt—but you betrayed us!"

"No, you misunderstand! I've done none of those other things! I'm only trying to fulfill my duty—"

"Our lives are hard enough already! And you want us to suffer even more?"

"If you want a bigger budget so badly, take it out of your own pocket!"

The citizens used to worship Leobolt as a hero and look upon him with envy, but suddenly they were glaring at him as if he were their enemy. Their demeanor was nothing like it had been before.

What? Did someone plant these ideas in their heads? Why won't they just listen to me?

Leobolt couldn't make sense of it. *Increasing the budget of the Guard Corps will lead to better protection for the capital's inhabitants. If the capital were to fall, the citizens would suffer just as much as everyone else. If they would just put their emotions aside and think logically, they'd be bound to accept that fact.*

However—they were being driven by emotions, not logic. Nothing he said to the enraged townspeople seemed to have any effect. Their anger had swelled to a massive surge, taking over the entire area. All Leobolt could do was stand there motionless as they hurled abuse at him. His voice could no longer reach them.

People will only believe what they want to believe…

"Commander Leobolt! We're in trouble!"

At that moment, a guard who had been out scouting rushed over to Leobolt, pushing his way through the crowd. He wore an expression of extreme urgency—which meant he almost certainly hadn't brought good news.

"What is it?" Leobolt asked, urging the scout to continue.

Perhaps more guards deserted? Or maybe there's been a coup? If it's some sort of internal problem with the Guard Corps, that's fine—I can figure out a way to deal with it.

However, what the scout told him was unrelated to any of those—instead, it was the most undesirable type of report Leobolt could've received at that moment.

"There's a demon controlling a horde of monsters headed toward the capital!"

Chapter 11: Signal for a Counteroffensive

The worst possible turn of events had unfolded at the worst possible time. The Guard Corps was more shorthanded than it ever had been before—they didn't even have enough men to mount an effective defense. Yet a demon had chosen that very moment to lead a horde of monsters in an assault on the capital.

Leobolt listened to the rest of the scout's report. The attacking monster army was composed of slimes. Normally one would think of slimes as amorphous gelatinous or liquid creatures, but according to the scout, this particular group had forms that resembled humans. On top of that, the humanoid slimes had the ability to alter their shapes and had equipped themselves with swords, spears, and bows generated from their own bodies.

The worst part of all, though, was that the slime soldiers would eventually come back to life after they had been defeated. They would regenerate over and over again, no matter how many times they were struck down. The checkpoints and strongholds on the way to the capital weren't able to hold out against an onslaught of such enemies, and they found themselves overrun. It was the very definition of an immortal army.

The info in the report sounded all too familiar to Leobolt. When he was a child, he had loved reading heroic tales, and he had read the tale of the Great Hero of Astaroth, defeater of the Demon King, many times over. There had been a certain demon in that tale whose description closely resembled some of the info in the scout's report. He was a slime demon named Rebirth, who possessed bizarre magical powers and was feared as the most powerful of the demon generals in the Demon King's army.

He could make copies of himself by causing the cells in his body to divide. Those copies could change their shapes at will, and they would continually resurrect after being slain, provided his main body had magical energy to spare.

There was only one way to defeat his immortal army: finding the actual Rebirth hidden among the countless slime soldiers and destroying his magic core, which provided the energy to his

soldiers. This made him a truly fearsome opponent.

Indeed, in the tales, the Hero and his party had a difficult time against the general. It was written that they were unable to finish him off entirely, and that it was all they could do to force him to retreat.

Rebirth was severely wounded in his battle with the Hero and had fled. Now, after many long years, he had risen again, and was assaulting the royal capital to retrieve the Orb of Light, which held his King sealed within.

Astaroth's forces, on the other hand, were far from being in top shape. Half of their ace squadron, the Fifth, was no longer present, and they were short on manpower overall as well.

Still, they couldn't afford to retreat. Retreating would mean the fall of the capital. If Astaroth fell, the Demon King would be resurrected, which would then lead to the destruction of the entire world.

They were at a clear disadvantage and faced terrible danger—but just as he realized that, a thought came to Leobolt.

"This could be a blessing in disguise for me."

At that moment, Leobolt's influence was at an appalling low. His actions had come under fire not only from the guards under his command, but the people of the capital as well. It was only a matter of time before someone would stage a coup d'état and oust him from the commander position.

However, if he were to secure a victory against the demon and its forces, that would give his reputation a massive boost, perhaps allowing him to regain the unifying power he once held.

On top of that, as a swordsman, he couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement. He had been given the chance to face an opponent that even the Great Hero of legend hadn't managed to finish off. If he could slay his foe, it would be proof that he was no less than an actual hero. He would be that much closer to becoming what he had always dreamed of.

"I'll prove to everybody how strong I truly am…"

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However, it didn't take long for Leobolt's plan to get shattered to pieces.

On the day of the raid, he mobilized the entire Guard Corps to the front gates to engage the enemy. Commander Eleanor and the Knight Corps came running to the top of the city walls to assist.

The slime soldiers under the command of the demon general Rebirth were formidable opponents. They were all copies of him, which meant they followed orders perfectly, and each copy fought with the savage strength of a battle-hardened warrior.

In terms of skill level, the slime soldiers were leagues above the guards. While the defense usually had the advantage in a defensive battle, the slime soldiers outperformed the guards enough to overcome that advantage. In fact, considering the inherent difference in strength between the two forces, the guards could just as easily have been defeated.

However—

"Iron Target!"

The barrage of attacks unleashed by the enemy was like a raging inferno—but with Sieg using his skill and taking on every strike, the guards were able to fight on equal footing.

His defensive capabilities are reliable indeed. Leobolt watched on in admiration as the scene unfolded. *He is an absolutely indispensable component for keeping this world protected.*

With Sieg taking full responsibility for their defense, everyone else was able to pay exclusive attention to offense.

They only needed to accomplish one thing to secure victory: Find Rebirth hiding among the slime soldiers and destroy his core, which provided the magical energy to operate his soldiers. If they could manage to strike down the general, all of his soldiers would instantly be wiped out along with him.

Naturally, though, the enemy was also aware of that objective. He had arranged the slime soldiers in formation, and the ranks of soldiers at the rear—where the true Rebirth was most likely hiding—were heavily guarded.

"Sergeant Sieg, would you be able to lure out the rear units?"

"That'd be tough to pull off," Sieg responded. "The ones in the back are outside the range of my *Iron Target*. Even if I tried to push through to them, I'd have my hands full with the enemies on the front line."

Whatever information the slime soldiers acquired was no doubt being passed on to Rebirth; as soon as they'd noticed that *Iron*

Target had a range of effect, the soldiers on the front line had formed a bulwark and backed away.

What was more, the *Iron Target* skill only drew in enemies who attempted to attack. The real Rebirth had no intention of entering the fray himself; thus he wouldn't be affected by the skill. That meant their only option was to fight their way through the soldiers on the front lines until they reached the rear.

"Push forward, men! Sieg will handle our defense!"

On Leobolt's order, the guards charged at the slime soldiers. All of the slimes were focusing on Sieg, leaving them wide open to attack, meaning the guards were able to whittle them down and defeat them. However, the guards just didn't have the firepower to break all the way through the enemy lines. Upon defeating one slime soldier, another would move forward to take its place—and while they were busy dealing with that one, the soldier they had defeated earlier would come back to life.

No matter how many we strike down, there's just no end to them. At this rate, we'll *be the ones whittled down,* Leobolt thought.

As the guards struggled to find any way to break through, they couldn't help but voice their inner frustrations:

"If only Spinoza and Fam were here...!"

"Not just them—Commander Bolton and the others too. But Commander Leobolt had to go and fire 'em all."

Leobolt stood in silence. He was standing nearby and could hear the men's complaints.

They were more or less throwing it in his face that he had made the wrong decisions. It was something he simply couldn't stand for.

"Very well, then," Leobolt murmured to himself. "I shall lead the charge and push through the enemy forces myself."

He then plunged forward into the front lines.

I was not *in the wrong. I know I made the right decisions. I had to remove Bolton from the equation to realize my ideals.*

Leobolt's lightning-swift blade sliced through the slime soldiers one after another. The other guards, swept up by the momentum of his superhuman ferocity, gained a second wind of their own.

I shall break through, find our true enemy, and take his head. That will prove to everyone that I am a hero worthy of protecting our world —and that none of the judgments or decisions I made were wrong.

“Commander Leobolt! Look out!”

The guard’s shout gave Leobolt a start. He had been concentrating so hard on attacking, he hadn’t realized how deeply he had penetrated into the enemy army after breaking through the front lines. He had gone outside the range of Sieg’s skill.

When he looked up, the slime soldiers, who should have been paying no attention to him whatsoever, had taken up battle stances. Their aggro was focused directly at Leobolt, and their swords and spears were poised to strike.

I assumed I still had Sieg as a shield and let myself get too focused on attacking. Not good—I won’t be able to defend myself in this stance, and I have no time to dodge either.

Despite that, Leobolt wasn’t ready to give up quite yet. He was resolved to comb through every single possible solution until the very last moment.

In the end, though, he came to a realization. His experience as a battle-hardened swordsman was telling him only one thing: This was checkmate. There was nothing he could do. He would be struck down, and he was powerless to stop it.

Am I going to die here…?

Just as the slime soldiers’ swords and spears came raining down at Leobolt—

Their bodies were split in half.

Leobolt found himself bewildered by the abrupt, practically instantaneous phenomenon.

What on earth just happened?

It took an enormous amount of attack power to bring down a highly skilled slime soldier with a single blow—much less multiple at once.

When Leobolt turned around to check who had come to his aid, his eyes went wide with shock.

“You…”

“Hey. You really oughta quit embarrasin’ yourself like that, buddy.”

Standing before him was a guard who was never supposed to have been there.

“What are you doing here, Spinoza…?” Leobolt murmured as if he were in some kind of fever dream. “Did I not expel you from our roster?”

“It ain’t just me.” Spinoza pointed behind her with her thumb—to where Bolton and the group of men who had deserted the Guard Corps in the night were gathered.

“Wha…?!”

Leobolt couldn’t conceal the dumbfounded expression on his face upon seeing them.

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“Looks like you managed to make it in time,” I murmured after seeing Spinoza assist Leobolt.

“Sorry we’re so late,” Bolton responded, the guards who had deserted together standing behind him. “Roundin’ these guys up and scrapin’ together some weapons was a real pain in the neck.”

“No problem,” I said. “I’m just glad you showed up.”

When I had heard that Rebirth’s forces were coming to attack the capital, I had gone to Bolton to ask him if he would help us out, and he had agreed immediately. He had then rounded up every guard who had been fired by Leobolt, and they had all rushed to our side together as reinforcements.

“I appreciate everyone else coming back too,” I told all the guards who had left the Corps in one form or another.

They smiled sheepishly.

“It was a favor for Commander Bolton, y’know.”

“That, and we couldn’t just stand by and do nothin’ while the capital’s in trouble.”

“We may be out of jobs, but we still consider ourselves guards.”

Just then, an arrow struck the head of a slime soldier that had been about to attack me. Apparently, Fam was covering us from the rear as well.

With everyone together, the offensive capabilities of our forces had increased dramatically.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right, though, Commander Bolton?” I asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hasn’t retirement put you out of practice?”

“Who do you take me for, eh?” Bolton said, sporting an aggressive smirk. “I’m *always* ready for a fight.”

The guards gathered behind him seemed to feel the same way.

They all had the eyes of fighters.

"Also, you got one thing wrong, Sieg," he added.

"Oh? What's that?"

"I'm not a commander right now. I'm just your average volunteer militiaman."

With that, Bolton turned to the fighters he'd brought with him to fire them up.

"All right, men! We're movin' in as a group! Let's tear those slime soldiers some new assholes! There's not a damn thing out there we can't thrash!"

With a war cry vigorous enough to shake the very air, the guards all charged in at once, with Bolton at the lead. Their intensity was truly an impressive sight to behold.

"Then it's my job to keep them out of harm's way," I murmured to myself.

I activated *Iron Target* and forced the enemy's attention onto myself. While I was doing so, Bolton and his men tore through slime soldiers one after the other.

With the addition of Spinoza, Fam, Bolton, and the others, the Guard Corps's offensive capabilities had absolutely skyrocketed compared to before. The slime soldiers' regeneration couldn't keep up, and their front lines suffered a collapse.

"Look for the slime leader! Find him and strike him down!"

Rebirth was commanding the rest of the slime soldiers, and destroying his core would have secured our victory. We searched for a slime that seemed to have something core-like, but couldn't locate anything of the sort.

If he had been too great a distance away, he probably wouldn't have been able to use his core's energy to control that many copies. There were no obvious hiding places on the plains of the battlefield either. He had to be lying low, hidden among the many slime soldiers...

Eventually, the slime army began to retreat—most likely having realized that even if they had kept on fighting, they weren't going to win.

"Don't let them get away!"

We tried to chase after them, but a wall of slime soldiers lined up to defend their escape route. In the end, we were unable to take down Rebirth.

“*Tch*. He got away,” Bolton grumbled, clicking his tongue in disappointment. “Unless we put Rebirth down, he’ll just keep generatin’ an endless supply of soldiers for his immortal army. If they keep comin’ at us like this, eventually we’re gonna get overwhelmed.”

“If only there was some way to tell which one the real one was…” I muttered, though locating him hidden among the countless soldiers would’ve been like finding a needle in a haystack.

At any rate, we had managed to get through our crisis for the time being. After the slime soldiers had withdrawn, we regrouped with Leobolt and his men. The guards who had been working under Leobolt ran over to Bolton.

“Commander Bolton!”

“You were awesome out there!”

“We don’t want any commander but you!”

“Look at all these suck-ups,” Bolton cracked a weak smile, then turned to Leobolt. “Been a while, huh, Leobolt,” he said. “That wasn’t like you at all, gettin’ all caught up in the heat of the moment and runnin’ out there on your own. What, were you in a hurry to take all the glory for yourself or somethin’?”

“Why…?”

“Hm?” Bolton asked.

Leobolt turned a questioning gaze to Bolton, Spinoza, Fam, and all the guards who had left the Corps. “The only reason you all became guards was to earn your daily wages—meaning you had no reason to come running to our aid.”

I assumed Leobolt was trying to ask something along the lines of this: The guards had been expelled, meaning they weren’t getting paid for participating in battles any longer. The logical decision for them would have been to feign ignorance, turn tail, and run away. Why, then, did they come running to the battle in spite of that—one that wouldn’t earn them a single coin?

“Yeah… That’s true,” Bolton said with a nod. “You’re right that we didn’t join the Guard Corps with motives as pure as yours. We just picked a job so we could afford to eat.”

“Then, why—”

“But that sure as hell doesn’t mean we have zero desire at all to protect the royal capital.”

Leobolt's eyes jolted open in shock.

Bolton continued, voice subdued, "It might not've even been genuine at first. But sometimes when you start working, you end up finding something that feels rewarding to you while you're in the thick of it. It's true that we work to earn pay to feed ourselves, but we genuinely want to protect the capital too. I want to protect the happy life my wife and kid have, and that means protecting Astaroth."

He smiled, then turned to look at the rest of the guards who had come to help.

"These guys feel pretty much the same way, so when I asked 'em to help out, they came running. If they hadn't felt that way, I doubt they woulda risked their lives."

They might not have been as pure as Leobolt, but it was an indisputable truth that Bolton and the other guards had a deep desire to protect Astaroth.

Leobolt stood there staring at Bolton in silence, a sheepish expression on his face. The authority his presence had commanded up to that point had vanished entirely.

Chapter 12: Tempted by Evil

After that, the Guard Corps underwent another restructuring.

Spinoza, Fam, and all the other guards who had left were successfully reinstated. In addition, Bolton got back his commander position.

Not only had Leobolt ruled the guards with an iron fist, he had earned the ire of the citizens of the royal capital over his attempt to increase their taxes. Even the guards who had been Leobolt's closest aides ended up deciding to follow Bolton again after witnessing his bravery on the battlefield.

Commander of the Guard Corps or not, no one could lead an organization if they didn't have any followers. That fact ended up naturally forcing Leobolt out of the commander seat.

Leobolt hadn't come back to the Guard Corps after being ousted from his position. He had simply vanished into thin air, just like that.

"I wonder where Leobolt ran off to," Seira murmured in a worried voice. "Maybe he packed his belongings and went back home...?"

Presently, the Fifth Squadron was gathered in Commander Bolton's office to talk.

"He had said he'd run away from home, so I'm doubting that. I think he's probably still here in the capital somewhere," Fam remarked.

"I bet that bastard had never failed at anything before in his entire life. Poor rich kid got his heart broken," Spinoza mocked.

"We're going to need Leobolt if we want to take on those slime soldiers. There's no denying he's an absolutely top-class swordsman," I contended.

Not too long after the first raid, Rebirth had attacked us again. We had fended that one off as well, but we hadn't been able to locate the leader and destroy his core, leaving the army free to keep attacking us over and over again after that. And each time, we failed to pin down exactly where Rebirth was located.

"By the way, there've been sightings of enemy soldiers

snooping around outside the capital recently. I got a report from the sentries stationed on the city walls," Commander Bolton said.

"Whoa, shouldn't we do somethin' about that?" Spinoza asked.

"Well, I'm not too worried about it quite yet," the commander responded. "We've got sentries on watch, and we've also got our barrier around the entire royal capital. That'll keep out anyone trying to push in from above or fire off any magic attacks."

"It's technically possible to penetrate the barrier with magic, if it's not an attack spell," Fam pointed out. "I tested it out with communication magic back when I used to be a spy."

"Even so, that's not really a huge deal. Their main goal's probably to force us into a constant state of alarm and wear down our nerves," Commander Bolton replied.

"True enough," Fam offered.

"More importantly," the commander went on, "unlike Rebirth's army, we don't regenerate completely after every single battle. If things keep up like this, they're gonna beat us through sheer persistence."

We were up against an immortal army full of soldiers that came right back to life not long after being defeated. There was no way we could win using normal battle tactics.

Our men were already exhausted from the repeated engagements. If things kept going on with no end in sight, morale would fall, and their spirits could end up breaking.

"We've got to find some way to drag the big boss out of hiding..." he murmured.

But as things stood, we had no idea how to pull that off.

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Leobolt had been wandering the royal capital alone. He hadn't shown any feats of valor during the battle against Rebirth and his slime soldiers. Unable to regain any of the influence he once had, he had been ousted from his position.

He had succeeded in overthrowing the leadership previously, then ended up being overthrown himself. That had cost him his ability to remain in the Guard Corps—and since he had already given up his noble house to come to the capital, there was nowhere left for him to go.

Apparently, the guards still hadn't been able to locate Rebirth's actual whereabouts. He had heard rumors circulating around the city that they were fatigued from the constant recurring battles.

No matter how excellent Sieg's defense power was, it did have its limits. And they still had no ideas on how to break through their impasse.

Having lost his place as their commander, Leobolt no longer had any right to fight alongside them. That was why he found himself wandering aimlessly around the capital instead.

Taking a seat on the edge of the fountain in the city square, Leobolt began to reminisce about his younger days.

Leobolt had always been brilliant, even as a child. He excelled in both academics and combat and was good-looking to boot; no matter what he sought to do, he always managed to accomplish it better than anyone else.

Leobolt's father, as the head of their house, was delighted with his brilliance. He doted on his gifted son, urging him to become a successor who would expand their territory in the future.

However, Leobolt never had the slightest intention of taking over the family's legacy. There was a specific reason for that: he absolutely despised his father, who had made the common people suffer by levying high taxes on them just to fatten his own fortune and had been secretly using those funds to indulge himself in constant luxury.

I was not born to inherit this tainted House. There must be some far grander role in life for me—a role that only I can perform.

He lived with that unbearable feeling for some time. Then, one day, he found something among the books brought in by a traveling merchant: a heroic tale.

His father only kept academic books with practical benefit in his library, and even Leobolt had only ever read books that were academic or historic. On a recommendation, he decided to buy one to see what it was all about, and that night in his room, he casually opened it up.

In that moment, Leobolt's life changed. He realized he had finally found what he was looking for.

The heroes in the story were strong, kind, and honest. They never sought any recompense; they were focused entirely on fighting to save the world. He thought they were amazing—they

were the ideal image of how he wanted to be.

I see now. I finally understand.

That was when everything fell into place for Leobolt.

I was born to become a hero.

His destiny was not to succeed his avaricious father, nor was it to lead the small population of their remote territory. His destiny was to be a hero who saved the world.

Of all heroic tales, he was most struck by those that had the Great Hero of legend as the main character.

It had to have been fate that Leobolt was born in Silvesta, the same kingdom where the Royal Capital of Astaroth was located. Astaroth was not only the Great Hero's place of birth but also where the Orb of Light housing the sealed Demon King was kept. The city was under constant attack by demons trying to retrieve the Orb.

In spite of that, though, its neighboring regions offered little to no assistance, leaving Astaroth to its own devices when it came to defense. Or perhaps they just didn't believe the tales at all, dismissing them as idle gossip.

Leobolt would make it his solemn duty to protect the Orb of Light, thus keeping the world out of the Demon King's clutches.

Once he had determined what he was working toward, he devoted himself to training even harder. Having found a clear goal and trained diligently using his newfound sense of awareness, it wasn't long before he became so powerful that those around him began calling him a Sword Saint.

Then, once he was confident that he had the strength to become a hero, Leobolt abandoned his house and went to Astaroth to become a guard and protect the Orb of Light. In the blink of an eye, he was promoted to squad sergeant, then on to the top rank of commander.

From there, he intended to build his ideal Guard Corps, devoting everything he had to protecting the world.

But alas...

Things weren't supposed to turn out this way.

His ideals had been unceremoniously shattered in the face of reality.

I was supposed to become a hero who protects the world.

After losing his position as Commander of the Guard Corps, he

had nothing to fall back on.

I did nothing wrong. Everything I did was for the sake of accomplishing my goal. I only did what was right for that purpose.

Not once had he put his personal desires first. His goal was to protect the world, and everything he had done was in pursuit of that goal. He was certain he hadn't done anything wrong.

Which meant only one thing…

I am not *wrong. Everyone else around me is.*

The guards were a bunch of layabouts who neglected their training despite their lack of strength and had little awareness of the important role they played in protecting the world.

The citizens normally tried to flatter him by extolling his virtues, but the moment something came up that was counter to their interests, they turned around and became his harshest critics.

This world is beautiful—but the people who live in it are far too ugly. They deem what is right to be wrong and what is wrong to be right. They all think only in terms of their own benefit.

Up until now, I believed that I wanted to become a hero so I could protect the world—but is a world full of people like that really worth protecting?

Suddenly, a feeling of gloom developed within his breast.

As if in direct response to that feeling, a voice came booming out of nowhere:

"Yes, Leobolt. You are *right."*

He looked around him with a start, but nobody was there.

Then he looked up to the sky. There, flying above the city's barrier, he saw a bird.

No, wait. That's—

Examining more closely, he saw that while the thing flying above *looked* like a bird, it definitely wasn't one. Its body was translucent, and it had no facial features whatsoever.

It was a slime soldier that had assumed the form of a bird. It had most likely been conducting surveillance on the royal capital.

"You are…Rebirth, then…?"

"Well, well. I'm surprised you know my name."

"What does the enemy general want with me?"

"I heard you were kicked out of the Guard Corps. To think they'd give up a man as brilliant as you… Enemies or not, they obviously have no eye for talent." Rebirth projected his voice to his target.

“Enough prattle. State your business,” Leobolt said. “You’re at as much of an impasse as they are. And because I was rejected by them, I presume you’re trying to recruit me over to your side?”

“Impressive. That’s exactly right. The main issue is one particular man—the one they call Sieg, I believe. He is proving to be quite the nuisance. I want to tear down his defenses.”

“Do you really believe I’d side with the demons?”

“What other future do you have to look forward to at this point?”

Leobolt’s heart lurched.

Rebirth was absolutely right. He no longer had anywhere to go, nor anywhere to return to. He would never be able to become a hero.

“If the world is wrong, why not destroy it?” Rebirth asked. *“The world is wrong for rejecting you. That just means you need to destroy this one—then create the ideal world you envision.”*

Destroy the world that’s wrong, and create a world that’s right…

In a way, that would be the same as saving the world.

If I do that, I could still become a hero.

Leobolt could feel his heart wavering.

“Lend me your strength. With it, we can be victorious. You are the one man who can become a hero to the demons, Leobolt.”

A hero.

And there were others who needed him.

It was quite a comfortable feeling.

Chapter 13: Confrontation

We still hadn't been able to come up with a workable plan to draw Rebirth out of hiding. However, as we continued to mull our options, we were attacked yet again. The alarm bell echoed throughout the royal capital, signaling approaching enemies.

After assembling at the guard station, we mobilized to engage the invaders.

"Ugh. Again?" Spinoza clicked her tongue in weary annoyance. "When is this gonna end...?"

"We can't handle this much longer..."

With no end in sight to the fighting, the guards were absolutely exhausted in both body and mind.

"Just a little longer, everyone! We've got to hold out a little longer!"

Seira was doing her best to encourage them to stay motivated, but even that would only last so much longer. Their spirits might even break with the very next raid.

We need to make this our last battle—no matter what.

Rebirth's slime soldiers were an immortal army that came back to life every time they were defeated. They were both powerful and fearsome—but in truth, they were just as stymied by us as we were by them.

With my defense power, we could withstand every attack they could dish out. It would've been practically impossible for us to lose as long as I was out on the battlefield.

As I was running toward the front gate with the rest of the Fifth, we suddenly heard an explosion coming from a street off in the distance.

"Whoa! What the hell was that?!" Spinoza bellowed.

We heard the sound of screams, and townspeople suddenly came running in our direction.

"Hey, what happened?" I asked.

"A demon! There's a demon in the city!"

"What...?"

A demon—here inside the royal capital? Did we let one of them get

through?

No… The sentries would've noticed for sure. So then, what about the barrier—they couldn't have destroyed it, right?

Either way, we were just about to start mounting our defense. This is the worst possible timing.

Except—that makes it sound like a coincidence. They probably planned it this way.

"Where is this demon, exactly?" I asked.

"Over there!"

We headed to the location the citizen pointed out to us—and the sight we saw when we turned the corner made our hearts skip a beat.

The streets had been turned into piles of rubble. There was no trace of the cityscape remaining.

And yet, a lone figure stood in the middle of that shattered vista.

"Leobolt? Is that you…?!"

It was indeed him. There were horns protruding from his forehead, and sinister-looking magical symbols had appeared all over his body. He looked like a demon through and through—but that face of his was unmistakable.

"We couldn't find you anywhere," I murmured. "So you ended up giving in to the dark side and becoming a demon, then…?"

We unsheathed our weapons and entered into battle stances.

"Did Rebirth convince you to do this?" I asked.

Leobolt didn't respond, but his silence seemed to indicate I had been right on the mark.

"Why would you do such a thing…?"

Leobolt was a more honest and straightforward man than anyone else I knew. He had always been working toward a singular purpose: defending the Orb of Light to protect the world. Yet, in spite of that, he had ended up turning into a demon.

"This is all for the sake of accomplishing my goal," he replied.

"Your goal?"

"Yes. I have a noble cause behind me—that of saving the world."

"How on earth does this lead to saving the world?"

I looked at the debris littering the area around us. Entire buildings had been leveled, and scattered fires had broken out.

The townspeople were screaming, running frantically this way and that.

"This world is wrong," Leobolt stated. "There is no need for a world where rightness goes unrewarded. So I shall destroy it and rebuild it anew."

"And that's why you've switched sides to the demons?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Sounds more like a whiny bitchfit to me," Spinoza spat. "Things didn't go the way ya wanted, so ya threw a li'l temper tantrum about it. What a dumbass—quit actin' like a giant baby."

"Please, Leobolt!" Seira pleaded. "You need to reconsider all of this!"

"That won't help. Nothing we say will change his mind," I said solemnly. "He's a demon now. That means he's already made his choice, and he's ready to follow through with it."

"Sieg… I'm pretty sure I know what the enemy is doing," Fam interrupted.

"They're probably trying to lock the capital in a pincer attack from both the outside and the inside," I agreed.

If we left Leobolt to his own devices, the guards and knights who had gone to the front gate to engage Rebirth's forces would be vulnerable to attack from behind. Not only that, the people of the capital would be at risk of further injury. We couldn't afford to let either of those things happen.

"Spinoza, Seira, Fam, all of you head over to the front gate."

"What about you, Sarge?"

"I'll hold him off."

If we wanted to fight toe-to-toe with Rebirth's army, we needed the heavy hitters of the Fifth Squadron. If all of us stayed back to deal with Leobolt, it was quite possible the enemy would breach the front gates. If that happened, huge quantities of monsters would cascade into the capital, causing countless casualties.

"Whoa, hold on. You sure you're gonna be okay alone?" Spinoza eyed me.

"Yeah. I'll meet back up with you all soon."

"Gotcha."

"Leave the front lines to us!"

"Best of luck, then…"

Spinoza, Seira, and Fam, respectively, left me their sentiments

and turned around, dashing off toward the front gates to wait for Rebirth's army.

"I think not."

Leobolt leaped upon the three women as soon as they turned their backs on him.

But that wasn't going to work for him.

"Forgetting about someone, Leobolt?"

He let out a surprised grunt. His attacks had been redirected toward me.

Iron Target.

My skill had already been active. As I took his attempted backstabbing head-on, the rest of the Fifth ran off toward the gate.

"So they got away..." Leobolt spat, clicking his tongue spitefully. "But that matters not. My task, Sieg, is to hold *you* at bay. For without you, Astaroth's front line will crumble."

"Then I'll just need to wrap things up with you quickly."

"That will prove easier said than done."

We flashed grins at each other.

Face-to-face with my opponent, I brought up my sword.

"Let's get our little showdown started, Leobolt."

***

Leobolt had originally been a swordsman of such supreme skill that people had called him a Sword Saint. However, after giving himself over to the demon side, the dark powers he had obtained made him even more powerful than before. Each of his sword strikes boasted destructive force that defied imagination. If I had tried to use my shield to block them head-on, they would've torn straight through both me and the shield alike.

I deflected his devastating attacks one after the other, stopping them with the minimum amount of force I could muster. I had been forced into a battle with absolutely no margin for error.

"Tell me, Sieg," Leobolt asked me as we were locked in combat. "Do you remember the first time we fought?"

"You mean the mock battle during your entry exam...?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"That made me very happy."

“Happy…?”

“Yes,” Leobolt responded with a nod. “No one had ever been able to fight me on equal footing before. You, though, were different. You were not merely on par either—you had surpassed that level.”

Gazing directly at me, he continued, “I believed I had finally found a kindred spirit.”

“Honestly… I thought you would make a great comrade too,” I said. “But now you’ve gone and done this. *Why?*”

“To right a world that has gone wrong,” he replied. “This world is backward. People deem things that are wrong to be right and denounce things that are right as being wrong. Do you not find that odd?”

“Are you talking about being ousted from your Commander position?”

“I did what was right for the sake of my goal. That is why I pushed the guards as hard as I did, and why I tried to raise taxes to increase our budget. Both of those things were done for the sake of protecting the world!” Leobolt shouted in disgust. “Yet nobody else understood that.”

“Leobolt… You’re right about a lot of things,” I said. “But there’s something you’ve got the wrong impression about. Just because you’re right doesn’t mean people are going to get behind you.”

Leobolt was a brilliant, righteous man—but because *he* had those qualities, he couldn’t imagine anyone *not* having them.

“Not everybody has the same kind of strength and righteousness as you do. They’re foolish, weak, and make mistakes sometimes. That’s just how normal people are.”

“Indeed. The incident you mentioned taught me that lesson most painfully,” he said, then grinned suddenly. “You know, Sieg, I always wanted to be a hero.”

“A hero…?” I heard myself repeat, taken aback by his sudden confession.

“Yes. I desired to be someone strong, kind, and honest, who sought no recompense for his actions, devoted wholeheartedly to saving the world—something akin to a hero. That is why I abandoned my House and came to Astaroth to join the guards: it would allow me to become a hero who protects the world.”

Having said that, Leobolt revealed a self-deprecating smile.

“However…I came to an impasse and lost it all. Having been ousted from the Guard Corps, there was nowhere left for me to go. I could no longer carry out my grand cause of protecting the world. I might as well have been dead,” he said. “That was when Rebirth contacted me. He told me that the world was wrong for rejecting me.”

“So that’s why you took him up on his offer,” I muttered.

“I will destroy the world that is wrong, and create a world that is right—and that very act will make me nothing less than a hero.”

“Your logic is faulty. The only world the Demon King will create is one filled with destruction and chaos, where might rules over all. Being complicit in that doesn’t make you a hero—it makes you a villain,” I said. “Leobolt, I know you have a coldhearted side that would use any means necessary to accomplish your goal. But I also know you’re not a bad guy at heart.”

“And what point are you trying to make?”

“I don’t believe you’re actually on the demons’ side.”

“How presumptuous,” Leobolt spat. “You think you know the first thing about me?”

“I can tell from our fight that your swordsmanship hasn’t changed at all—it never has since the entry exam. It’s just as strong and straightforward as ever.”

Even with his newfound dark powers, I hadn’t felt even a trace of impurity in his combat. On top of that, while I was fighting Leobolt, I had gotten the sense that something was a little off. Though he had done a great deal of damage to the capital, he hadn’t hurt any of its citizens. If he had wanted to use absolutely any means necessary to beat me, he would have gone after the people, forcing me to protect them. It might not have taken me out, but it certainly would’ve worn down my defenses.

But he hadn’t done that. Given how logical of a person he was, he had to have considered the option, but the fact that he hadn’t meant that he hadn’t lost his sense of pride.

“Tell me, Leobolt,” I asked, looking into his eyes, confident in my theory. “Did you have some other reason for giving in and joining the demons?”

For the briefest moment, his eyes widened, and I thought I caught a glimpse of discomfit.

“I told you already, Sieg, I have no other reasons. I want to be a

hero—it's as simple as that." He returned my penetrating gaze as he added, "One who is strong, kind, and honest—who seeks no recompense for his actions, and is devoted wholeheartedly to saving the world. That has been my desire ever since I was a child."

"I see..."

There was no trace of deceit in his eyes. But that also meant things didn't add up.

Why would a human who wanted to protect the world betray his own kind and join the demons?

At that moment, a lone possibility popped into my mind.

He couldn't have... There's no way he would've gone that far.

Yet the more I thought about the kind of person Leobolt was, the less I was able to dismiss the idea outright. I couldn't deny the possibility that he *had* gone that far.

"Sieg! Watch out!" a nearby civilian shouted.

I had been so lost in thought that I hadn't reacted in time to my opponent closing in.

I gritted my teeth.

Damn.

In that instant, Leobolt brought his lightning-fast blade down upon me.

Chapter 14: The Truth

His battle over, Leobolt turned around and left the scene. He had accomplished the task at hand. There was no reason for him to linger there any longer.

Walking through the piles of debris, he made his way to the front gate. When he went out through it, he saw the Guard Corps and the Knight Corps locked in battle with Rebirth's army.

The defenders seemed to be at a major disadvantage without Sieg. With nobody to defend them from the slime soldiers' attacks, they were being slowly but surely pushed back. In fact, they were already edging dangerously close to death's door.

"We just have to hold out until Sieg gets here!"

"If we can manage to do that, he can turn this around for us!"

They continued to resist with all their might, resting their hopes on Sieg returning to the battle, and eagerly anticipating his arrival at any moment.

Someone did arrive—but it wasn't who they expected.

"Leobolt...?!" Fam, who had been perched atop the city wall, was the first to notice his approach. "What is *he* doing here?"

"Impossible! Sieg was supposed to stop him!" Commander Bolton bellowed in dismay. "Don't tell me he actually lost...?!"

Leobolt flashed a sinister smirk.

Sieg had been struck down.

When the guards and knights realized that their last thread of hope had been severed, hollow expressions of despair washed across their faces. If Sieg had fallen, they had no hope of winning. The royal capital would fall as well.

From his position in front of the gate, Leobolt launched himself into the air, landing toward the rear portion of Rebirth's army of slime soldiers. He was in a perfect safety zone, protected by their frontline formation.

A voice rang out from a nearby slime soldier.

"Ah, there you are, Leobolt."

It was the voice of Rebirth, the demon general who commanded his own immortal army. He was speaking to Leobolt

through one of his slime soldiers.

"I heard the reports. So you've brought down the great Sieg?"

"I have."

"Well done. Then victory has been secured for my army. All we need to do now is crush the rest of the opposition, then seize the Orb of Light from the rubble of the fallen capital." Rebirth's voice was brimming with delight. *"I was right to recruit you to our cause, Leobolt. In our new world under dominion of the Demon King, your heroic tale will no doubt be retold for generations to come."*

"I am truly delighted to hear that," Leobolt said with a respectful bow.

"Though I heard you unleashed quite a bit of destruction inside the capital. Were you doling out a bit of payback to those who had rejected you, perhaps?"

Leobolt remained silent.

"No matter. You should continue to serve under me after this is over. You'll find yourself well taken care of. I'll gladly help you build your ideal world."

"Thank you for your kind words," Leobolt replied. "Actually, I brought a small gift for you, Lord Rebirth."

"A gift?"

"Yes. Please, take this." He pulled a scroll out of his pocket.

"What's this... A scroll?"

The scroll had a magic circle scrawled on it. Normally, scrolls were items that would allow non-mages to use magic. This particular scroll, though, was different; it had been made for a special purpose.

"There are two walls around the royal capital: the first, outer wall, within which the normal citizens live, and the second, inner wall, within which the nobles and royal family reside. The first wall has a giant magic circle set up within it."

"A magic circle? For what purpose?"

"It is a last resort. If monsters were to make it past the gates and the fall of the capital became an inevitability, they would activate it, incinerating the entire capital and the invaders along with it."

"And how does this scroll fit in?"

"It is the activation switch," Leobolt stated. "Once this scroll is activated, the royal capital will be engulfed in a sea of flames,

pressuring their defenses even further."

"My slime soldiers are resistant to fire, so it would only be a problem for the defenders. It sounds worth testing out, if nothing else."

Leobolt nodded at Rebirth's response. "It does take a considerable amount of magical energy to activate, though. It *is* a last resort, after all. They couldn't allow just anybody to set the magic circle into motion."

"So my soldiers won't be able to activate it." Rebirth fell silent for a few moments. "*Very well. I'll do it myself, then."*

With those words, a lone slime soldier crept out from among the rest of them.

So that's the true Rebirth, Leobolt thought to himself.

It was no wonder they couldn't locate him. He didn't look any different from the rest of the soldiers at first glance.

Each slime soldier had a core inside its head, with nothing else in the rest of its body. However, that particular soldier had another core floating within its torso. That was the magic core that supplied energy to all of his copies—the key to Rebirth's ability to command his army.

"I can't wait to watch them scatter like panicked ants."

With that, Rebirth opened the scroll he had been given and began channeling energy into the magic circle written upon it.

As he did, something unexpected happened.

"What...?!"

It turned out he hadn't been able to channel any energy into the circle. Sensing something amiss, he slowly looked downward to his torso.

His precious core—the source of all his energy—had Leobolt's sword embedded deep inside it.

This is the very moment I have been waiting for—

For the true Rebirth to show himself!

Rebirth stared at Leobolt in astonishment, unable to comprehend what had just happened. Shock was evident in his eyes, slimy and inhuman as they were.

"Leobolt... Have you betrayed me?"

"I had no intention of cooperating with you from the very start."

"B-But you became a demon yourself!"

"It was the easiest way to gain your trust," Leobolt responded

coldly. “And trust me you did—enough to show yourself in front of me,” he said. “You believed me about the scroll.”

“Wait, so this scroll…”

“It’s a fake, of course,” Leobolt told him. “There *is* a magic circle that can burn down the entire royal capital—but it cannot be activated with something one can simply waltz out of the city with, like that scroll.”

That sequence of events couldn’t be set into motion unless several mages appointed by the capital were present. The scroll Leobolt had given to Rebirth only contained a low-level magic spell.

He hadn’t been certain that the scroll alone would’ve been enough to draw out the enemy commander. It would’ve been far too suspicious.

That was why he had decided to become a demon first. He would swear fealty to them and join their cause—and in doing so, he would gain their trust. They would never think someone who purposefully became a demon would do anything to deceive them.

“You mean the only reason you turned into a demon was to lure me out of hiding…? You threw away everything you had, all for this one opportunity?”

“That’s correct,” Leobolt said. “It was all done to destroy you… Rebirth.”

“You… You bastaaard!”

Rebirth howled in rage as his magic core shattered into pieces.

***

I knew *Leobolt wouldn’t actually join the demons’ cause.*

As I ran through the rubble toward the front gate, I thought about what had happened during our battle.

After I had taken the blow from his lightning-fast blade, Leobolt had spoken to me:

“I did all this to lure Rebirth out of hiding. That is why I caused such destruction here in the capital, and why I tried to strike you down. I needed to battle with all my might in order to gain his trust.

“I’m going to head to where Rebirth is, now. I will report to him that you’ve been slain, and convince him to show himself. Please remain

here, Sieg. Once I locate Rebirth and defeat him, the battle will be over, and the capital will be saved."

It had all been exactly as I suspected; he really would go to any lengths to accomplish his goal—even if it meant sacrificing himself. That was just the kind of person Leobolt was.

Back when the Fifth had fought him during his entrance exam and he had been told to protect the balloon as though it were the Orb of Light, he had thrown his body into the line of fire in its defense. He was still that very same person—straightforward to a fault.

Then, a little bit ago, after he had left for the front lines, I had suddenly heard a loud noise that sent a rumbling shock wave through the ground beneath me. It had clearly been something that could've changed the entire course of the battle.

What on earth is happening out there? Thinking the battle might have been coming to an end, I had started making my way toward the front gate to witness those final moments.

Now, arriving there, I found no trace of any of the attacking slime soldiers.

Instead, there was one giant slime soldier towering above us—apparently a conglomeration of all the other ones. Its mere shadow made the entire area in front of the gates as dark as dusk.

"Whoa, there ya are, Sieg!" Spinoza called out upon seeing me. "I knew you were still kickin'!"

"I was really worried when Leobolt came back without you..." Fam chimed in. "I thought he might've actually taken you down."

"I'm so glad you're all right, Sarge...!" Seira added, nearly in tears.

"Sorry to worry everyone," I said to my comrades. "But let's focus. What's the situation here?"

Commander Bolton was the one who responded to me. "Leobolt managed to destroy Rebirth's core, which made all the slime soldiers disappear. But then he started turnin' into some kinda giant slime!"

"We think it's because the magical energy he had been using for his copies all came back to him at once," Seira added.

"Where's Leobolt?"

"Apparently, he managed to destroy the core, but that didn't finish Rebirth off—he ended up taking a counter hit afterward."

I followed Fam's gaze over to where Leobolt was lying on the ground.

I see... So you managed to carry out your duty, after all.

By shattering the real Rebirth's magic core, Leobolt had rendered him unable to make soldiers. He had accomplished what the rest of us hadn't been able to do.

"I'll take things over from here."

Leobolt had sacrificed his very humanity to break us out of our stalemate—and I wasn't about to let it go to waste.

I pushed forward past the guards gathered at the front gate, walking toward Rebirth. The enormous slimy mass teemed with magical energy.

"That was a clever ploy Leobolt pulled on me—only pretending *to betray you,"* echoed Rebirth's voice. *"But even though he went so far as to give up his humanity to deceive me, his blade fell short. He sacrificed himself for nothing."* His words held a derisive overtone. *"Did he think I was powerless without my copies? The staggering might I wield is more than enough to tear down your precious capital!"*

"You're just a pathetic coward who hid in the background letting your copies do all the work. Your 'staggering might' can't even take *me* down, much less the capital."

"Is that so?" Rebirth sneered. *"Let's test that theory, then—by crushing your puny body into paste!"*

He raised his giant fist high up into the air and brought it down on me with a vicious crash. The force sent shock waves flying through the air and flattened the ground nearby, kicking up a massive cloud of dust.

When the air cleared, Rebirth's voice was trembling.

"How did that not hurt you...?!"

I had blocked his giant fist with my shield head-on.

Honestly, it had been quite a powerful blow—but it hadn't held a candle to Leobolt's sword strikes. Comparing the blade of a man who was prepared to risk his own life to the fist of someone who ran and hid behind others was like comparing night and day. The level of strength was simply incomparable.

"Now that this is a one-on-one battle, you have no hope of beating us. I can defend against anything you could possibly dish out."

There was one last thing I had to say to Rebirth.

“Leobolt’s blade didn’t fall short at all. It hit you exactly where it needed to.”

The massive demon roared furiously.

“Now’s the time, boys! Charge!” At that moment, Commander Bolton gave his men the signal to move in. “Leobolt gave us this chance; don’t let it go to waste!”

A chorus of battle cries erupted from the guards as they rushed in at Rebirth.

Faced with the full-scale assault of the commander and his men, along with my Fifth Squadron comrades, there was no escape for the demon general—and he was felled right then and there.

And thus, our lengthy battle finally came to an end.

***

I watched as the giant slime melted away, leaving no trace behind.

As he lay there on the field observing through his hazy vision, Leobolt saw it happen as well, realizing that Rebirth had been slain.

“Leobolt!”

All of the guards ran swiftly over to him.

“Why the hell did you go that far…?” Commander Bolton murmured as he looked down at Leobolt. His expression was laced with a sense of sadness.

“Because somebody had to do it,” Leobolt groaned softly. “If we couldn’t find a way to stop Rebirth’s army, the Demon King would be resurrected. I had to locate him before that happened.”

“That didn’t mean you had to turn into a demon yourself…”

“Everything I did was absolutely necessary,” Leobolt said, cracking a smile. “Besides, after being kicked out of the Guard Corps, I had nowhere else to go. I was at a complete dead end. Yet I still did what I could.”

Hearing him say that, I had to speak up.

“Leobolt, you were never kicked out of the Guard Corps.”

“What…?”

“Commander Bolton never officially kicked you out.”

He had been ousted from his commander position, but they

could easily reappoint him as a squad sergeant. That was the decision Commander Bolton had come to after Leobolt's fall from grace.

There had been some among the guards who thought that a much harsher punishment was called for, but the commander had brushed those voices aside. Unfortunately, Leobolt had pulled his vanishing act before he had gotten the chance to hear that announcement.

"You pushed really hard to try and make the Guard Corps better in the way you thought was best. I didn't see any reason not to give you a second shot after one screw-up," Commander Bolton said. "We've got an open position for a squad sergeant, ya know."

"You truly are far too forgiving... Someone who has orchestrated a coup should not get a second chance. It would set a bad example for the other guards," Leobolt muttered, unable to comprehend. "To you, I am a man with flawed ideologies... Keeping me on would be risky at best."

"That doesn't matter. You're not the only one—all of us have our flaws too. But we can still do a halfway decent job of gettin' along despite that."

Seeing the commander smile at him, Leobolt gave a brief smile of his own in return. Then, gazing off into space, he began speaking in a near whisper. "Commander Bolton... I always wanted to become a hero."

"Hm?"

"The heroes who appeared in the tales were strong, kind, and honest—they sought no recompense for their actions, devoting themselves wholeheartedly to fighting to save the world. It was such an amazingly beautiful thing, and they seemed so righteous. I thought I wanted to be that same kind of righteous individual," Leobolt murmured. "But...perhaps that wasn't how I truly felt."

A vaguely self-deprecating smile came to his face. "Perhaps...I wanted to become a hero merely because I wanted others to acknowledge me. Perhaps somewhere in my heart, I simply wanted to find a place to belong."

He had been alone for his entire life. Even when he did everything right, nobody had wanted to be around him. Everybody hated it when he would try to correct their mistakes. Eventually, he had started to wonder if he was the one in the wrong.

That was why he had wanted to become a hero. Heroes were the epitome of all that was right. If he could be like them, he figured he could always be in the right too.

“Sieg…” Leobolt asked in a hoarse voice. “You slew Rebirth, did you not?”

“We did,” I replied with a nod. “And we couldn’t have done it without you, Leobolt.”

“I see…” He flashed a smile of relief. “That means I really can become a hero.”

Now I will leave behind no regrets.

His consciousness began to fade, and the waves of darkness grew nearer.

“Sieg.”

“What?”

“Would you apologize to the people of the city for me? Though it was part of my plan, tell them I am truly sorry for destroying their homes nonetheless.”

“…I will.”

I’ve fought for so long without any rest.

After all that, I’m actually quite tired.

Perhaps I’ll just lie down here for a spell…

Leobolt went ahead and surrendered himself to the comforting waves that washed over him.

Epilogue

Leobolt had no idea how long he had been dreaming. He had been wandering through the black fog for what seemed like an eternity. No matter how far he walked, no exits ever came into view. It was stressful for him—painful, even. It was enough to make him want to give up and abandon all hope. Yet for some reason, he kept on walking.

At the end of his seemingly endless journey, he finally saw a light in the distance. It was a warm, gentle light. As he reached out to touch it, he felt his consciousness flow into it.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

When he opened his eyes, a familiar face was standing in front of him.

“Commander Bolton…”

Leobolt took stock of his situation. He was lying in a bed, which meant he was probably in the infirmary. A number of empty beds were spaced out on either side of him.

Something felt off about his body. When he brought his hand to his forehead, he was shocked to find there were no longer horns protruding from it. There were no symbols on his skin either.

“I’m no longer a demon…?”

“That’s right. Surprised me too. You didn’t actually give in to the darkness in your heart, so I guess that meant there was a way to undo it,” Commander Bolton said. “You kept on groaning in your sleep—you musta been fighting the darkness that whole time. It’s a damn miracle you won out against it and made it back to us.”

“I see… So I ended up surviving after all.”

He would’ve been fine with dying. If he had, he would’ve been acknowledged by all as a hero who had played a part in saving the world.

“You’re not allowed to die a hero quite yet, pal.” It was as if the commander had read Leobolt’s mind and wanted to beat him to the punch. “I need you alive so I can work your ass off here. The Guard Corps still has a serious shortage of manpower, y’know.”

With that, Commander Bolton put a hand on Leobolt’s head.

Surprised, Leobolt looked up to find the commander smiling, offering him a trusting gaze reserved for close comrades.

“Starting tomorrow, things are gonna get real busy around here again.”

As Leobolt watched the commander’s broad back retreating, a single thought came to him.

Spending my days here might not be a terrible alternative.

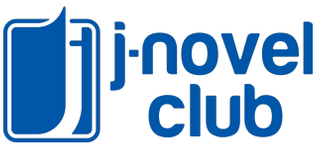












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by Kametsu Tomobashi

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