
Story By
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!


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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel! Volume 10 [Complete]

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Prologue: End of the Respite

Pigs were hot on my heels.

“Oi... Oiiink!!!!!!!”

Gigantic pigs, with their skin dark like charcoal, were *chasing me.*

“Oi-Oink! O-Oiiink!”

I knew I was snorting, but they were, too. I knew what they were after too—the sizzling hot meat skewers in my hands. They panted heavily in anticipation, maybe because they hadn’t had a good meal in a long time. They sprinted as fast as their feet could carry them, so fierce looking that I feared they might gobble me up as a snack alongside the skewers.

“Oin! Oink! Ohhh noiiink!!!!!!!”

What could I do but run for my life?

The straight tunnel I ran down was dark and damp. *Why in the world did past me come to a place like this?! Why the heck did you think it was a good idea to eat meat skewers right in front of those starving dudes?! Those dozens of pigs have crazed looks in their eyes! Shouldn’t it have been obvious that they’d come running after you?!*

As I ran, I turned around and tossed the skewers over my shoulder. “Fine, take them! Stop chasing me already! See, I already threw them there!”

The food would’ve served as a distraction and an opening for me to escape. My plan seemed foolproof, but...

“Wait, Slowe,” a dignified voice boomed.

...what I didn’t see coming was the sight of my *father* riding full sprint on the colossal pig that headed the pack.

“Ack! It’s *you*?!” I grimaced.

As they say, out of sight, out of mind. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d envisioned my father’s face in my head. My family had been making very

frequent appearances in my dreams lately, and...I didn't know why.

I hurriedly greeted him as I kept sprinting. "It's been a long time, Father!"

Is it because I met Louis the Skeleton inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista? I wondered. My encounter with Louis had opened the rusty door to my memories of the past, and dreams of my childhood were the latest trend.

"Har har har!" my father barked out a hearty laugh. "You've been making a name for yourself recently, Slowe! Will you return to House Denning soon?"

Wait. Stop. My strict and old-fashioned father would never *laugh like that!*

"Knowing you," he continued, "you likely feel too guilty and awkward to return to House Denning!"

The worst part of this nightmare was my figure. My body was as round and plump as a grape, like it'd been back in my blackhearted Piggy Duke days. Unfortunately for me, this body wasn't built for sprinting.

"Stop! For once, *I'm* the one proposing a compromise! Don't run away!" he shouted.

At that, I deliberately slowed my pace and let him catch up to me. I was curious about what my father would do in my dream. But he apparently didn't have anything else to say, because he disappeared like smoke from the back of the giant pig.

My eyes cracked open.

"Seriously? He didn't say anything?"

I realized I'd been dreaming. My heart pounded in my chest.

Letting out a sigh, I muttered, "You know, I honestly thought he'd tell me to become the head of House Denning or something."

No words could accurately capture the hardships that came with the title of family head. They had to meet the queen's expectations and shouldered the burdens of the responsibilities that came with being one of the most influential nobles in Daryth. I wasn't cut out for that job at all. Of course I had run away from such things, in real life *and* in my dreams, but... *He's not going to comment*

on that?

"Not only that, but that dream took place at..." *Kirsch Mage Institute.*

What kind of nonsensical dream is that? It's not like my father's going to pay me a visit here or anything. Quite frankly, it's a horrifying omen...

I sighed once again. "I have a few...no, a whole *laundry list* of choice words for my father, as well."

Specifically, I wanted to express my displeasure about the new betrothal between Alicia and I, which had been orchestrated without my knowledge or consent.

Our expedition to Cirquista had been so significant that even *the* most influential person in Daryth, Queen Eleanor Daryth, had to step in. If we considered only the amount of time it took for us to retrieve our target item and return to the surface, by all accounts, we had achieved the best result possible within an unimaginably short period. And my father should know about the success.

When I get to see him, I need to tell him to keep his nose out of my marriage affairs! I vowed to myself.

On that note... "Cirquista and Daryth are probably both going crazy at the moment," I muttered.

I mean, this is the Binary Wand we're talking about! A masterpiece crafted by Lecktrikuhl, the Great Spirit of Light, and Holtgrace, the Great Spirit of Water, as a symbol of the friendship between Daryth and Cirquista.

The wand had long lost its power, but after it'd been snatched away by that magical-artifact-obsessed slime, the relationship between the two nations had deteriorated at an alarming rate. The two nations had entered a temporary alliance up until recently to combat a common enemy—the Dustour Empire—but we weren't sure how long that would last.

Whatever. Worrying about stuff like this is the job of the big cheeses at the top, not the commonfolk.

I breathed out slowly, feeling the fatigue slam into me. "Ugh, I thought I

already recovered, but it looks like I was wrong.”

My painful experience in that dungeon still weighed down my body like lead.

I was currently lying down, sinking into what felt like a soft, fluffy cloud—my bed. In a cliché story, this was about when I would start panicking in an unfamiliar room, but I *did* recognize this place. I’d been living here for the past few days after escaping the clutches of that hellish dungeon.

Indeed, I was in the Adventurers’ Guild Cirquistan branch, Arrowslitting Void, a stronghold built at the foot of a mountain range and right next to the Labyrinth of Cirquista.

Silk curtains draped across the windows, blocking out the light outside.

There was only one sound inside the darkness of my room. “A... Achooink!”

We’d fought a battle to the death down in the depths of the dungeon. I’d put my life on the line for an opening for Alicia to escape. We’d fought a ton of the monsters illustrated at the end of *A Complete Guide to Monsters* published by the Adventurers’ Guild—in the rare and dangerous category. I’d stood my ground with all my might, and...I danced with death.

“Achoooooink!”

So, uh, in short... I paid the price for my recklessness by catching a cold.

“Ah!” The door opened, and a girl with silver hair poked her head out from behind. “You’re awake.”

She was the one who had nursed me through my fever from exhaustion, and...

“Morning,” I muttered in a weak voice.

She frowned. “Master Slowe, you’re sweating. Are you all right?”

...she was my most precious girl and my retainer, Charlotte.

I shook my head hard to dispel the silhouette of my father, which still lingered at the front of my mind.

“I’m fine,” I reassured her. “I just had a slight nightmare.”

Wanting to stay by her side, I had once thrown away the life befitting a Denning descendant. Even if I could go back to the past, I would make the same choice without a second guess. *But...* I chewed on my lip. *Having such a dream must mean that somewhere deep down, I still feel like House Denning is my home and family.*

With a worried look, Charlotte leaned down to peer at my face. Her silky strands of silver spilled down and tickled my cheeks.

“How are you feeling? Have you recovered somewhat?”

“Oink...” I gave her a nod.

“Does anything feel off? Do your limbs still feel heavy?”

“I slept for too long and am feeling just a tad sluggish, oink.”

We were taking our time to recover in an inn run by the Adventurers’ Guild that sat close to the entrance of the labyrinth. The Arrowslitting Void settlement was big enough to be called a small city, and I had spent my days exploring or wandering around with Charlotte from time to time.

“You worked super hard, so please take all the time you need to rest! Lady Alicia also said that you looked after her a lot, so you must be exhausted.”

“Hey, Charlotte, do you think Alicia has arrived in Daryth City already?”

“Well, considering how fast she sped off...” She paused. “She might have.”

“Figures.” I sighed before switching the topic. “I’m craving something sweet, oink.”

“I knew it! That’s why I brought some fruit with me!” Charlotte beamed as she took out a plate. With a spoon, she scooped up a piece of sweet melon and held it out. “Here, open wide!”

“I should’ve expected nothing less from you. You know me best, oink!”

Charlotte was such a competent girl, and I’d brook no argument otherwise.

I opened my mouth and she gently fed me.

As I chewed, I couldn’t help but marvel. “Yum, this is *so* good!”

I’d been utterly spent after my dungeon expedition, but simply having

Charlotte by my side soothed my aching body, melting all the pain and exhaustion away like snow in spring. Charlotte took care of every little need I had, doting on me and spoiling me so thoroughly rotten that it left me utterly useless.

"Come on, Master Slowe. Have another."

"Oink, oink, oink!" I snorted happily.

Retrieving the Binary Wand was no small accomplishment. It didn't quite save the world, exactly, but to Daryth and Cirquista, the shock of its recovery was equivalent to learning that the sky had suddenly collapsed. Alicia was heading to Daryth's capital in my stead; she apparently wanted to report directly to the queen about our dungeon expedition.

"Open wide!" Charlotte offered yet another piece of fruit to me.

"Oink!"

You know what? I should just settle down here with Charlotte. I'm sure that here in Cirquista, people's expectations of me must be lower than in Daryth. Here, I'm not Slowe Denning of House Denning—I can be just your average Slowe and lead a peaceful life.

But well, troublemakers always showed up unannounced.

A cool and sonorous voice lowered the temperature of the room instantly. "Brave indeed, to put on such an act before my eyes."

Ugh, here she comes. The troublemaker who suddenly appeared yesterday.

"Slowe. Look at me," she commanded.

Accompanied by a towering retainer, a woman with her face schooled into a stern expression walked into my room. It was my older sister, Sansa Denning, a tall woman with raven hair that flowed down her back like a long black cape. Her charms lay in her icy aura and her stunning features. Some people even considered her a step above Charlotte.

Her steely eyes focused on me. "I know what you're like, Slowe. You made a full recovery a long time ago, haven't you?"

She took me by surprise when she'd made her entrance, so I buried my head

inside my sheets. It wasn't exactly because I had anything against Sansa in particular, I just didn't have a good impression of any of my family. A dream about my father had been enough to make me sweat buckets, or perhaps even a small waterfall. Compared to my father, my siblings weren't as bad, but I was still intimidated by their presence.

"No, I am still far from it." I swallowed nervously. "I think I need another week of rest..."

"Oh? Are you saying that you need even more time?"

I was self-aware enough to know that my family most definitely still held me in contempt. From what I'd heard, our soldiers seemed to have changed their impression of me after my recent feats, but that didn't apply to those who shared my blood. They had been there to witness my wanton life for many years. Suffice it to say, all of them hated my guts.

"L-Lady Sansa!" Charlotte cut in, trying to defend me. "Master Slowe truly is still recovering from his fatigue!"

"Interesting... Is that so, hm?" my sister muttered in a standoffish tone.

Sansa had always been strict. Not just on other people, but on herself as well. Back in my blackhearted Piggy Duke days, she'd told me off so many times that I could still hear the echoes of her cool voice in my ears whenever I thought about her. I probably was a little traumatized.

"Another week of rest, hm?" she mused. "What nonsense are you spouting? Have you already forgotten how you snuck out last night to buy and snack on sweets? You even used magic to prevent my squad from discovering you."

"Huh...?" I could hear confusion in Charlotte's voice. "Lady Sansa, what are you talking about?"

Sansa addressed Charlotte. "I am aware of your close relationship with Slowe, but don't place blind faith in him. He is a pig more devious than you think." This time, she directed her ire at me at me. "Wake up already. You can't fool me. I know full well how you make ridiculously swift recoveries. You've been that way ever since you were a child! Get up, Slowe!"

"Oiiiiiiiiiiink!" I cried in protest.

Magic robbed me of the sheets that had offered me sanctuary from the outside world. Sansa was shrewd—she used magic instead of brute force like Charlotte would. She hadn't changed at all. She navigated life skillfully with her intellect and talents, and nothing could stop her once she set her mind to it.


OHHINK

Though she acted humble about it, claiming that she was a jack of all trades but a master of none, her abilities across all fields were nothing short of impressive.

“Gah ha ha!” The towering man behind Sansa was boisterous in his laughter. “Even our young master is docile and obedient in front of Master Sansa!”

He wore the robes of a monk, and his most defining feature was his stature. His size rivaled one of the smaller giants I’d met inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista. Kokto was his name, and he was Sansa’s bouncer—*I mean, personal retainer.* In other words, he and Sansa had a similar dynamic to Charlotte and me.

“Lady Sansa...” Charlotte wasn’t one to back down, though her voice was faltering a little. “Master Slowe still needs rest, and...”

Oh! You can do this, Charlotte! In a last, desperate act of resistance, I wound my arms around a pillow on the bed like a shield.

Sansa sent a sidelong glance in Charlotte’s direction. “Charlotte. I want to speak to him in private.”

“Y-Yes! Understood, ma’am! Please go ahead!”

Um... Wow, Charlotte surrendered so quickly. But I couldn’t fault her for it. Sansa was straitlaced and always took things seriously. She couldn’t tell a joke to save her life. Her dignity demanded that she never make mistakes no matter what situation she was in; she didn’t allow herself to. That was the reputation she had earned in Daryth.

After Charlotte excused herself, Sansa dropped into a chair and began talking at an unhurried pace. “Let me say this first, Slowe. Unlike you, I’m busy.”

I scowled. “Where did that come from? Just get to the point.”

My sister, however, continued on as if she hadn’t heard me. “This time, I left Daryth of my own accord and came to Cirquista. That is unforgivable for a person with responsibilities and status. I have better things to do.”

“What does that have to do with me? I didn’t beg you to come here.”

I could hear a hint of displeasure in her tone. “You should watch your mouth.”

The direct descendants of House Denning worked around the clock. On top of that, Sansa had earned herself the rank of general, a distinguished person who had command over the military. I couldn't even begin to imagine the amount of work she had on her hands. Yet, after she'd heard that I'd headed to the labyrinth, she came over of her own volition.

I'll be honest. The Sansa Denning I remember wouldn't ever do that. Who would've expected this from the straitlaced Sansa?

"But," she continued, "Her Majesty the queen and our father have been benevolent enough to overlook my transgression. The official story is that I provided aid to your party when you retrieved the Binary Wand."

"...Congrats, sister. You've added yet another achievement to your record."

"Are you trying to make me angry?"

Until now, I'd avoided a confrontation with my family like the plague, because it was a whole can of worms I didn't want to open. They'd only nag me until I was deaf if I did. Nothing could change the fact that my blackhearted Piggy Duke days had tarnished the brilliant reputation of House Denning.

Sansa's tone turned even more solemn. "So, with that in mind, I have news for you." I stared at her in silence, waiting for her next words. She continued, "There is a reason why you suffered so much hardship recently."

A reason? More like countless reasons. Going into the Labyrinth of Cirquista with such a tiny party is absurd to begin with.

"Do you know what it is?" she prompted.

"What?" I said impatiently.

What in the world is she going to tell me? I'm honestly a little scared. She can say the most outlandish things.

"I have chosen a new retainer for you at my own discretion."

I stared at her dumbly, speechless. For a while, dead silence hung heavy between us.

She's...going to change my retainer? She should know that's impossible. We've already been together for over ten years. No matter when, no matter

what, I was always with Charlotte.

"Slowe," she began, "I understand that you place absolute faith in Charlotte, but after your expedition, I'm sure you've come to understand that your retainer's abilities matter just as much. Even if Charlotte has awakened her talents in magic, her skills remain pitiful. She doesn't stand a chance inside a place like the Labyrinth of Cirquista."

Sansa's proposal was out of the question. I wanted to laugh it off as a joke, but she looked completely serious about it. *I mean, I have never seen her* not *be serious before, and I'm her brother!*

"You should take on a new retai—"

I cut her off right away. "No. Charlotte is my only retainer and *will* always be my only retainer."

I had to admit, I had seen this coming. I wasn't completely blindsided, and I had done what preparations I could in advance. After I'd turned over a new leaf, I had made many significant contributions to Daryth, and those were my bargaining chips. Thus, I turned her down firmly.

She nodded. "I assumed as much."

Retiring Charlotte from being my personal retainer? Never, and that's final. Oink.

What she said next, however, froze my thoughts in their tracks. "Thus, I have already arranged for a suitable candidate to travel to Kirsch Mage Institute. I have full confidence that I have arranged the perfect contender."

Chapter 1: Retainer Candidate

A handsome carriage rattled down the main road, and inside it, I wallowed in despair.

“N-Noooooooooo!!!” I wailed.

“Master Slowe! Please calm down!”

“Waaaaaaah!”

Unlike the one we’d traveled to Cirquista in, this one was luxurious and eye-catching. The Denning crest gleamed from the exterior for everyone to recognize, and whenever we caught up to people and carriages going ahead of us, they respectfully made way for us to pass. Even in Cirquista, the influence of House Denning clearly held significant sway. *Well, anyone would scoot out of the way if they saw all the Denning knights escorting this carriage!*

“I wanna stay theeere!” I whined.

As you can see, my sister was bringing me back to Daryth from that stronghold. No, perhaps “bringing back” was too soft of a description. Dragging me away like a criminal was more accurate. My blood-related sister was treating me like a criminal.

Charlotte commented, “You must really like that place, Master Slowe.”

“No, that’s not it. I’m only complaining because my recuperation period ended way too early!”

Other than me, three people shared the same carriage. My sister Sansa sat across from me, and her retainer, Kokto, sat next to her. Finally, Charlotte sat ramrod straight in the seat next to me. Sansa ranked high in terms of status even within the prestigious House Denning, so Charlotte was a little jittery in her presence.

Sansa frowned ever-so-slightly. “Hey, Kokto. Though he is my brother in the flesh, this is unseemly. Hold him down.”

Kokto hesitated. “Are you sure, Master Sansa?”

“Don’t go easy on him. Use your full strength.”

“Understood, I shall.” Kokto nodded.

The burly man sitting diagonally across from me suddenly stood up from his seat. The next moment, he pulled hard on my arm.

“Wha— Ow!” I hissed in pain.

Hard wasn’t even enough to describe the brutal force he was using! I’d never been on the receiving end of such superhuman strength before, and all my will to resist quickly snuffed out. He pushed my head against the ground, which was covered with soft and fluffy carpeting. Charlotte let out a small squeak.

“That hurts, you know?! Stop it already, Kokto!” I yelled. “Get *off* me!”

“I’m only obeying the orders of Master Sansa. Young Master, please bear with it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Since I wasn’t getting through his thick skull, I called out to my sister instead. “Sansa, make him go away!”

“You just tried to escape from the window, Slowe. I say this is a rather benevolent punishment considering your actions.”

What else did you expect, huh?! I don’t deserve this! Why do I have to go back to Daryth this quickly?! I accomplished a feat that would go down in the history books! I earned my rest fair and square! Do you even know how many monsters fell by my hand?!

In the face of my indignation, Sansa crossed her legs haughtily and addressed me, sneering down at me on the ground. “If it were any of our other siblings in your shoes, they would see that as retirement rather than recovery.”

“It was clearly way too short considering what I pulled off! I retrieved the *Binary Wand*, for your information!” I reminded her. “The symbol of peace crafted by the Great Spirits of Daryth and Cirquista!”

Do these guys even realize how much I contributed to the peace of our homeland? As long as the Binary Wand was in possession of either nation, peace between these two nations, at least, was good as gold. Yet Sansa was treating me like a dirty old rag she could toss around! *Objection, firm objection!*

I even planned out Cirquista sightseeing routes I could go on with Charlotte, and all of that has gone to waste!

"Slowe!" Sansa said firmly, as if she'd had enough of my willfulness. "If Kokto had been with you instead, your mission to retrieve the Binary Wand would have been easier by far. Do you agree?"

"This *again*?! And hey, you're crushing me, big guy! Kokto, *get off me already*! Sansa, even if I go back to Daryth, what am I supposed to do, sleep?!"

"Have you already forgotten what I told you? Slowe, your new retainer is waiting for you at Kirsch Mage Institute."

"Have *you* already forgotten how many times I told you that's not happening?!" I snapped. "Charlotte is my only retainer, end of story! Can you listen to me for once?!"

That's right. A new retainer was waiting for my arrival at Kirsch despite the many times I had rejected the idea. Sansa was being way too persistent.

"I have heard reports about Charlotte, and I know that her diligence is respectable. However, there are some gaps that diligence alone cannot bridge. That matters because she is in a position of responsibility as a personal retainer of House Denning. Even if a powerful beast is willing to do her bidding, you know our rules—we place emphasis on personal power."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. *It's not a powerful beast that's willing to do her bidding, but a spirit with a strength that makes people mistake them for a monster!*

"Don't make me repeat myself, Slowe," my sister said. "Charlotte stepping down from her position doesn't mean you two have to part ways. Charlotte will be... Well, your personal maid instead. She can serve you like she always has."

"That's not the point!" I hissed. "I'm telling you to *stop* deciding my life for me without my consent!" *And don't bring that topic up here!*

"Oh..." Charlotte whispered, shriveling up like a dying flower.

See?! You made Charlotte sad! I hadn't told Charlotte about Sansa's proposal, but out of the blue, my sister had shoved me into his carriage today with the

declaration that we were heading back to Daryth. That was when she had suddenly started discussing the matter of changing my retainer. It'd put Charlotte on the brink of tears, and I had felt like I was dying inside.

Furthermore, the grumpy cat that usually sat on Charlotte's lap wasn't just a formidable monster—far from it, in fact. They were a Great Spirit. *Haaah. Sansa doesn't care about how* I *feel at all.*

My sister shrugged slightly. "Changing retainers isn't anything unusual though. Kokto, for example, is my third."

Like Sansa had said, it was a common practice in House Denning to change retainers. I alone was the exception, insisting on having Charlotte as my retainer. Anyone else was unthinkable.

"But Father hasn't changed his retainer either," I argued.

She inclined her head. "Father's retainer was special. One would be hard-pressed to find a substitute for someone of Lord Glace's caliber."

"Oh, I see what's going on. I produced some results, so you're trying to give me a retainer of your choice to keep me in check, is that it?" I scoffed. "In that case, it's a lost cause. Changing a retainer can't change me."

"Having Kokto as my retainer opened doors for me. You should know how vital talented retainers are for our future prospects."

Kokto let out a cheerful laugh. "I'm very honored to receive such words from a celebrated personage such as yourself, Master Sansa."

She was right. After assigning Kokto as her retainer, Sansa had begun achieving dramatic feats on the battlefield. In the south, the pair of Sansa Denning and Kokto was a legend among those who took pride in their prowess in combat.

"But Master Sansa," Kokto said, "the young master is a big name in Daryth at the moment, and the entire nation places high expectations on him."

"The real Slowe Denning is the furthest person from the word 'dignified,'" Sansa sniffed in warning. "Don't expect too much from him. He's rotten to the core."

“You’re as strict as always, even to your own family,” Kokto commented.

The guy was still on top of me. No, in fact, this old chap was even sitting on my back as if it were a chair. *Ugh, the nerve of him! Just you wait, I’ll make you pay once we get back to Daryth.*

Kokto was a weirdo who, out of blind faith in Sansa, had gone out of his way to travel south from the northern half of the continent. Family standing was regarded as important in House Denning, but he had climbed to the position of personal retainer despite that fact, because his extraordinary abilities had made up for what he lacked in background.

“Um... Lady Sansa...” Charlotte spoke up for the first time during this conversation. “What...kind of person is this candidate for Master Slowe’s new retainer, if may I ask?”

I had never brought up this new person even once, wanting to avoid all mention of them. Charlotte, however, seemed very curious about the candidate House Denning had selected for me.

The arrival of night brought with it a sharp drop in temperature. I borrowed a coat from one of Sansa’s subordinates and waited restlessly for dinner to be ready.

“Lady Sansa!” I heard a knight’s crisp voice ringing out. “Can I put in all the prized meats we obtained in Cirquista as well?! Young Master Slowe looks like he can’t wait any longer, so let’s cook them all in one go!”

The knights preparing our food were chucking one ingredient after another into a big pot, and it was clear that they were all experts at cooking. They worked efficiently and were full of spirit. Their supervisor must have been excellent at training troops. Charlotte was helping out too. I felt bad about sitting back and watching, so I decided to help with dinner as well. But...

“Young Master, please take it easy and rest over there. We can take care of the cooking!” a knight called out to me.

Yep. The moment I make the motions to stand up, someone stops me.

“Uh, Denilo, Sansa’s glaring daggers at us...” I muttered.

“Oh, that is just her default expression!” Denilo reassured me. “Please don’t take it to heart.”

I recognized some of the knights Sansa had brought along. After all, before I’d gone off to Kirsch, I had lived in the main manor at the Denning lands ever since I was a child. I was familiar with many of our people.

Denilo was a knight around five years my senior. Even during his trainee knight days in the Denning lands, he had always been a social person who livened up the atmosphere, and he hadn’t changed one bit. To my surprise, the knights were quite friendly to me even though I had been the black sheep of House Denning.

“Oi, Denilo!” Sansa barked. “Don’t spoil Slowe.”

“Lady Sansa!” Denilo greeted my sister immediately. “But you were the one who said we should let Lord Slowe rest, my lady!”

“I don’t remember saying anything like that.”

Denilo grinned. “Please don’t underestimate the amount of time we have spent with you, my lady! We can tell from your aura.”

Though I was a member of House Denning, I wasn’t the one with the highest authority around here. The stern woman who joined the knights in their work was the big boss. She gave brisk, concise instructions to the tough-looking men as she walked around with confident strides. Yes—that was my sister, Sansa. Though it probably didn’t sound convincing when I was the one saying it, she was one of the most brilliant people I knew.

As I sat down again, I muttered, “How much longer is this going to take? I’m starving.”

Various cuts of meat and a variety of vegetables were being thrown into the massive pot. The knights were toiling away, stirring the pot with simmering liquid, and a delectable aroma drifted my way. I felt my endurance wither away.

I sat all alone on a tree stump, waiting for dinner to be served. There was a growl. *Oh, I think that was my stomach, actually.*

“Master Slowe, you don’t have to be so restless. The food isn’t going

anywhere," Charlotte chirped. "It'll be ready very soon."

"The pot might grow legs," I muttered. "Someone might be hungry and eat my portion."

I heard Charlotte's exasperated sigh. "It really won't run away."

I'd dealt with Shuya's pressing problems a while back, so there weren't any big obstacles on the horizon. Charlotte had even returned my feelings for her, so my heart was content, allowing my stomach's protests to take over.

"Master Slowe, here is your dinner." Charlotte hurried over to me. "Whoa! You don't have to be so rushed, nobody is going to take your food!"

I blew hard on my food to cool it and swallowed a big spoonful of stew. *Good, the savory flavor of the meat has permeated the broth perfectly.* Next, I used a silver fork to pick up some meat on the plate and had a bite.

It wasn't just meat, either. Leafy vegetables, potatoes, carrots... It had a good balance of everything. With every bite, I could feel the fantastic cocktail of flavors melting on my tongue.

"Charlotte, seconds!" I said happily.

"What?! You're already done?! That was an entire plateful!"

"Charlotte, seconds!" I repeated like a parrot.

I was sitting on the stump, and Charlotte was sitting right next to me.

The Great Spirit wasn't around. They had lent a hand during our battle in the dungeon, and that apparently went against their principles. For some reason, they were rather dejected afterward. They had declared that they would take some time to do soul-searching in Cirquista.

From our spot, I could hear the sonorous voice of my sister. "Denilo, eat."

"Lady Sansa, why am I the only one who has so many vegetables? Hey, Mister Kokto, don't just laugh, help me out here! My lady, I saw you piling up Young Master Slowe's plate with meat. This is discrimination!"

"Think twice before you talk. And stop being such a fussy eater!"

Harmonious banter echoed over the clearing. On our journey to Cirquista, our carriage had been the target of thugs along the border, but we didn't have to worry about that now. The Denning crest gleamed conspicuously on our carriage, and all our knights wore the signature cape that showed off their status as Denning knights. No one in the world was foolish enough to attack us.

Sansa seemed to be having a pleasant time with the knights in her squad. Among the members of House Denning, Sansa was exceptional in her popularity with the soldiers, and honestly, I could see why. *How do I explain this? Sansa's the type who's sharp and focused when she's on duty, but she also knows how to relax when she's off duty. Just between you and me, a lot of the older knights and soldiers see her as their own daughter.*

I fell into contemplative silence as I watched Sansa chat with her knights. A memory of my past floated to the surface of my mind. Once, I had lived just like her. Though I hadn't had as many knights, my two personal knights had always kept me company—Claude and Silva. In my childhood, I used to always talk the night away with those two and Charlotte in our tight-knit circle of four.

Perhaps... In a world where I hadn't diverted from the rails of a proper Denning, I might be living a life like Sansa right about now.

"Lady Sansa is so popular," Charlotte observed.

"Hey, Charlotte. Be honest with me. Who do you think is more popular with the soldiers, Sansa or me?"

She went silent, seeming to think hard about that question.

I let out a wry smile. "You don't even have to pause to think. It's Sansa, obviously. It'd be nice if she becomes the next family head as Duchess Denning. She wouldn't have any free time to be concerned about me..."

But before Charlotte could offer a reply, a familiar voice called out to me. "Young Master! Um... I don't want to waste this precious opportunity, so may I challenge you to a duel here?"

He was a Denning knight who wore our signature crimson cape—Denilo, who got an earful from Sansa about his pickiness whenever mealtime came around.

A moment of hesitation was all it took for me to make up my mind. "Sure. I'm

also curious about the caliber of Sansa's subordinates."

"I knew I could count on you, Young Master! Okay, let's move over there, away from Lady Sansa's watchful eyes..."

Oi, Denilo, don't say that. Sansa's golden ears definitely won't miss— Oh dear, see? Here she comes.

"Slowe!" she yelled. "Did you just agree to a skirmish with Denilo?! Don't act so thoughtlessly!"

I shrugged. "I'm not the one who started it, Sansa."

The Denning knights began crowding around us. All the ones present answered directly to Sansa, and she'd brought them along to her journey to the Labyrinth of Cirquista. They must all be mighty warriors in their own right.

Sansa saw the excitement among her knights and gave up on stopping this little exhibition match. As their superior, it was her duty to provide them some entertainment every so often.

Denilo and I distanced ourselves and faced each other.

Thus, the battle began.

"Let's see whether you live up to your reputation!" Denilo announced as he brandished his wand. A *Fire Blade* surged out of the tip of his wand, flickering with the wind.

Denning knights mostly engaged in melee combat, a stark contrast to normal mages, whose offense was based around long-ranged spells.

I observed his *Blade*. *That's a very refined spell. Shuya's fire spells can't even hold a candle to him.* Even if a mage attacked Denilo with spells, at his proficiency level, he would be able to stop the blow with his *Blade*.

"Young Master! Why are you just spacing out over there?!"

"Oink? Well, I'm not exactly under pressure."

"Oh, you're on! I'll take this seriously too!"

The fire swelled and flared up, growing to a length many times Denilo's height.

My eyes grew wide, and my face paled. “Hold on. Wasn’t this just for fun?” *How am I supposed to be calm in front of that pillar of flames?! Weren’t we just playing around?! That* Blade *is strong enough to cremate everything in a straight line, be it the enemies or the environment!*

“Well, an opportunity to face you off in battle is very precious!” Not a second later, wind began coiling around his body as well, intertwining with the flames he conjured. “This is a duel with *Slowe Denning*! Turning it into a game...would be such a waste!”

As soon as he finished that sentence, Denilo lunged forward, closing the gap between us as he swung his *Blade* with all his might. What had started off as a sword of fire had been transformed into a deadly combination of fire and wind. The wind fanned the flames, boosting its force as it inched closer and closer to my body.

It wasn’t a big deal, however. A water barrier, fire’s natural enemy, was sufficient to stop it in its tracks.

“That’s a destructive *Blade* you’ve got there, Denilo!” I was rather impressed. “The last time I saw you, you weren’t able to cast spells like these!”

“Now that’s what I expect from our young master! You weren’t perturbed in the slightest!”

That’s just an act. I totally lost my composure on the inside. I thought this was all just fun and games, but he actually fought for real! But after that initial fluster, I could feel the thrill thrumming in my chest. A duel with a skilled knight made my heart race. This was different from a battle with those freakishly strong monsters in the central levels of the labyrinth—my opponent had polished skill and technique for the art of fighting, not for slaughter, and I admired such warriors.

Denilo exclaimed, “I shall make another attack! Though I know I’m facing someone of higher skill, I won’t let that faze me! *O wind—*”

He’s so fast! My eyes widened a fraction as he closed the distance instantly with one step forward. *I shouldn’t be surprised, considering the fact that he’s a Denning knight directly trained by Sansa. He used wind magic to manifest tailwind and rode on the current.*

Our gallery was just as amazed, and they began cheering. Even the merchants, who were out of their depth when it came to of magic, had realized how capable Denilo was as a mage.

The Denning knights were also hooting at us.

“He dodged that, Denilo! So much for your signature attack!”

“Don’t waste this precious chance, my dude! You should try out everything you can!”

Their commentary was at quite a high level—a big contrast to the students of Kirsch. The knights had a very accurate understanding of the battle and Denilo’s attacks.

As I sidestepped Denilo’s *Blade*, I also shuffled backward to widen the distance between us. The tactic Denilo used centered around turning his wand into a sword, and depending on his abilities, the blade could grow as long as he wanted.

“Yo, Denilo! Looks like the young master turned your own spell against you!”

“Damn it!” Denilo swore as I hitchhiked the current of the wind he had manifested.

I’m the type who makes use of everything I can, I thought, slightly smug.

That thought didn’t last long, because in that instant, I had a sinking feeling in my gut, as if something wasn’t quite right. Denilo had clicked his tongue in displeasure, but I saw the ghost of a smile fly across his lips.

I looked up. In the clear, azure sky were twenty, thirty...maybe even more ice pillars levitated and poised to strike. Their tips were sharp and pointed like stakes, and I was willing to bet that being impaled by these would hurt like hell. The biggest problem was that they were all aiming at the exact spot I would land. *No way! He lured me here!*

That was when Denilo finished with a chant. *“O foam, frost over. Afros Nova.”*

“Yikes!” I yelped, dodging that area by the skin of my teeth. Icy air tickled my neck like the breath of the grim reaper.

When I turned my head to look at the spot I had just been standing on, the

ground had turned into a pin cushion for ice pillars, and I felt goosebumps rising on my skin.

After a moment of silence, Denilo shook his head slowly as he muttered, “Just as you’d expect from the young master.”

“*Excuse* me?! I would’ve died if that hit me!”

“A member of House Denning wouldn’t die from a weak attack like that,” Denilo said firmly.

He’s a goner. Joining Sansa’s squad corrupted him completely...

I snuck a glance at Sansa, and I saw her biting her thumb with frustration. *Oh, that’s a rare sight. She only does that when she’s truly and utterly disgruntled about something. Wait, was she the one who taught Denilo this strategy?*

Though I was surrounded by the rough voices of cheering knights, there was one voice that stood out to me, pleasant like a chime. “Master Slowe! You can do this! Don’t lose to him!”

My energy grew a hundredfold, and my motivation was an infinite fountain. *All right! It’s about time I end this.*

Once again, Denilo kept me at a wide berth. It seemed that he was going to switch his tactic. *Huh, so he’s going to use...a dual-element spell of fire and water this time. Unfortunately for you, the spirits are giving away all your plans!*

“Denilo!” Sansa yelled, agitated. “Stop casting! Slowe’s spell is heading your way!”

Her warning came too late, however, because I’d already fired my spell. Light magic was renowned for a branch of magic that excelled at enhancing one’s body, but when combined with darkness magic, it could produce unimaginable results.

Denilo stood there in a daze, his expression vacant. The tension and concentration that had been present moments had deserted him. With a nonchalant face, I approached him slowly, step by step.

“Checkmate,” I announced.

I raised my wand and tapped his body. He blinked his eyes open and woke up.

“Huh...?” he muttered in a stupor.

“A dual-element spell of light and darkness, *The Butterfly Dream, Leviflam*. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

“When in the world did you...?” Denilo shook his head. “It’s my loss.”

Leviflam was a spell that stole the awareness of its target. When mages weaved a sophisticated spell, we would all channel our focus on constructing our spell. After all, if we messed up, the mana would go berserk, just like how Valjean did a long time ago when he had lost control of his dual-element spell. That was why we had to handle multiple element spells with great care. *That being said, Sansa caught on pretty quickly.*

A knight shouted, “You are absolutely amazing, Young Master! Even Denilo couldn’t put up a fight against you! Sheesh, I’m in awe! Your reputation is well-earned!”

For some reason, I got a very large serving during dinner that day.

During dinner, I found my mind wandering to the retainer replacement proposal Sansa had made. My sister led a life close to the ideals of House Denning, so the retainer she had selected likely fulfilled all the expectations my family had towards personal retainers. *I can respect that, but please don’t shove your ideals onto us.*

I’d deliberately avoided all mention of the candidate, but today, Charlotte had broached the topic.

“Lady Sansa has a very high opinion of her, so she must be inspiring...” Charlotte muttered.

During our journey in the carriage, Sansa had gone on and on about how fitting the girl was as my personal retainer. That being said, my sister had been careful about her selection of words out of consideration for Charlotte, so Charlotte didn’t seem too affected.

Apparently, this candidate went by the name “Mint.” Sansa was a strict person, but Mint had her stamp of approval. I admit, that made me a little curious about the girl.

“Hey!” Denilo yelped. “I saw that, Lady Sansa! You secretly picked out all the carrots from yours! You just berated me about my pickiness, but look at you now! You should follow in the young master’s example! See, he’s eating everything he was served! And uh, wow, that’s your tenth refill, Young Master. You really haven’t changed at all!”

Our return journey to Daryth was much more relaxing than the journey I’d gone on with Shuya and Alicia as my traveling companions. The Denning knights took care of every little thing for us. Seeing the interactions between Sansa and the knights was also novel and fun.

But when we arrived in Daryth territory, one thing started bothering me. Unlike me, Sansa was in a position of power, and she was *very* busy. I’d thought she’d ditch our carriage and disappear the moment we entered Daryth, but she kept sitting across me.

Huh? Why is she still around?

I must have stared at her for too long, because she said, “I’m here to observe whether you would accept Mint as your new retainer. Knowing you, if I didn’t stick around, you would probably make up a suitable-sounding reason and send Mint right back to the Denning lands.”

...She read me like a book.

Sansa was going to follow me to *Kirsch*. I could sigh a hundred times at the mere thought of it and it wouldn't be enough. A respectable fraction of the male students at Kirsch were going to join the military after graduation—though for some, it would only be a temporary assignment. My sister was a *general*, mind you, the highest rank in the Daryth military! *Haaah... I can already see everyone losing their minds. Sansa is a celebrity and well-loved by the people of Daryth, after all.*

"Fine, I get it. Do what you want," I muttered begrudgingly.

I knew her too well. Even if I objected, she wouldn't listen to me. That didn't just apply to Sansa—*everyone* in my family was stubborn as hell. No Denning would change their mind just because they were told to.

Once we crossed the national border, we turned to make our way to Kirsch. When we entered Denning territory, as one would expect, we stuck out like a sore thumb. For example, we stopped by briefly in a rest area along the side of the main road and people crowded around our group to get a chance to talk to us. *Well...more like a specific group of people—merchants who want to be acquainted with my sister.*

"My word... Is that Lady Sansa Denning?!" one man gasped.

"I thought you'd complain a lot more, Young Master," Kokto said, sounding amused. "But you were surprisingly cooperative with my master. Gah ha ha!"

"If putting up resistance would make a difference, I'd do it. But knowing Sansa, she's *definitely* going to Kirsch..." I sighed.

"You certainly know her very well! Now that's what I expect from her younger brother!"

"Of course I do. We're siblings."

During our travels, I had more opportunities to chat with Kokto, Sansa's personal retainer who wore monk robes. I'd never talked to him one-on-one before, so it was a rather new experience. He'd barely featured in the combat scenes of *Shuya Marionette*, but I'd heard from many sources that he was a force to be reckoned with in battle.

I shrugged and continued, “Well, when my family allowed me to go to Kirsch, Sansa mentioned she was jealous, so she’s probably just curious about the campus itself.”

“Indeed. Though she did not let it show, Master Sansa was secretly very envious of you! She never experienced the joys of youth herself, you see.”

“That’s the supposed duty of those born in House Denning. I’m sure you know that.”

Sansa Denning was a household name, and not just in Daryth, just to give more detail about my sister. In fact, back at the Cirquistan Adventurers’ Guild branch, a bunch of daredevil high-ranking adventurers had challenged her to test their abilities a few days before we set off. Naturally, she’d beaten them to a pulp.

Speaking of duels... I had the feeling that I had grown closer to the Denning knights after I’d crushed Denilo in that battle. It seemed that communication with fists and wands was the most effective when you wanted to be friends with battle junkies.

I had faced off a few other knights after that, but I didn’t have a single loss to my name. After the first few, some knights actually whipped out wild and sly spells that reeked of Sansa’s doing, but I somehow managed to evade every single hit. Seeing Sansa’s chagrin whenever that happened made for some good stress relief.

Sansa leaned forward with half of her body outside the window as she exclaimed, “Hey, Slowe! Is *that* Kirsch Mage Institute?!”

“Master Sansa, that’s dangerous!” Kokto warned. “And unseemly!”

Though the scenery was familiar to me, Sansa seemed to find it all very new and exciting.

“There’s no way I could hold in my excitement!” Sansa yelled. “Kokto, that’s *Kirsch*! I’ve wondered for the longest time about the environment our new recruits studied in!”

Charlotte and I made our glorious return to Kirsch, but our party was nothing

like the one we had started out with—the general of Daryth and a handful of Denning knights were our company.

I got off the carriage. Finally, that long, long journey was over at last. I had to hand it to the horses who had dragged us all the way here from Cirquista. Hopefully, they'd get plenty of rest in pristine, comfortable stables.

Now that we're back, I'm actually a little curious and thrilled to meet this potential retainer. What kind of person is she?

"Here, Charlotte." I offered my hand to my retainer, who was just about to climb off the carriage.

"Huh? O-Oh, thank you, Master Slowe." She shyly placed her hand on mine.

As I escorted her, I took a quick glance around the nostalgic Kirsch campus. The staff had paid a fortune during its reconstruction, and the gardens and fountain were even more breathtaking than before. *You know, seeing all this makes me feel like I've come home for real.*

"We're finally baaack!" I cheered.

"It does feel like years have gone by, doesn't it?" Charlotte remarked.

"Considering all the pains we suffered in Cirquista, I'm not surprised."

Our expedition had only lasted one month, but that one month felt as if it had dragged on forever. The memories from our journey still haunted my mind vividly. *Please, I don't want to see hide or hair of monsters ever again. I've had my fill of them. And don't even mention the word "dungeon," because I* will *go crazy. Oh, and no "slimes" either, thanks.*

Sansa stepped off the carriage next. In a stern voice, she began, "Now then, onto serious matters, Slowe. About that new retainer of yours—"

She wore an aloof expression, and her long, raven hair fluttered in the wind in a dignified dance. Only moments ago, she was cheering and acting thrilled about Kirsch in the carriage, but she looked like a whole new person now. *Wooow.*

I hurriedly interrupted her. "Um, Sansa. Where is this new...*potential* retainer,

by the way?" I placed emphasis on "potential" because she wasn't official yet. That word made a world of difference.

Sansa pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "I have already asked Mint to stand by in the boys' dormitory, but I haven't informed her of the exact time of our arrival. Knowing her, she might have waited since early this morning."

My eyes widened. "Since early morning? It's nearly the end of the day now!"

I was dragging my feet about meeting the girl, but making her wait any longer would be unfair. *Guess I don't have a choice.* As we walked across the campus, I could hear Sansa talking animatedly with the knights who were graduates of Kirsch.

"Denilo, what are those tasteless bronze statues over there meant to be?" Sansa asked.

"Lady Sansa, please refrain from calling them tasteless. Those are all the past headmasters of Kirsch."

"Huh." She didn't sound impressed. "They would look creepy at night."

Another knight joined in. "On that matter, when I was a student, there was a rumor going around that these statues would come to life at night."

"Interesting..." Sansa muttered. "That sounds fun. School rumors, I see..."

Uh, Sansa, I know you're keeping up appearances by looking solemn, but your voice betrays you. Oh well, I can't really blame her. Among our siblings, she's probably the one who most longed for a normal school life.

The knights who indulged her seemed like they were having fun as well. In contrast...

"Oink..." I shrunk into myself.

"Master Slowe, um, why do you look shorter than you usually are?" Charlotte asked.

"Y-You must be seeing things..."

Frankly, I was pretty anxious. I had submitted the application for an extended leave, but I was late by many days. In other words, I had ditched school without

permission.

“I am?” Charlotte didn’t sound very convinced, but then she hit her fist on her palm in realization. “Oh! I see! You’re worried about how you skipped class without permission, aren’t you?!”

“Ch-Charlotte!” I protested. “Don’t read me like a book, please! I mean, you’re right...”

We had actually arrived in the early evening, just in time for the end of a school day. Very soon, students would rush out of the lecture buildings like a tidal wave. The Denning knights wore their signature crimson cape, and in this environment, they were basically giant signs saying, “Look at me!” Even Sansa, one of the most famous Dennings around, was among us.

“You’ll be fine! You can breathe easy!” Charlotte beamed at me.

“How *could* I...? I mean, I’m kinda famous now. People might start making a big fuss about the return of the truant Slowe Denning.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“R-Really? They won’t?”

As we walked across the campus, I slowly realized that Charlotte was completely right. After all, judging by all the whispers around us, the students didn’t care that much about me. Instead...

“Hey... You’ve got to be kidding me, I must be seeing things, right? That’s... That’s Lady Sansa!”

“I must be dreaming... Why is Lady Sansa here in a place like this?!”

Oh, I totally saw that coming! Though my anxiety had clouded my judgment for a moment, it was no surprise that everyone’s eyes were glued to my sister instead. Sansa had mentioned that only Headmaster Morozov had been informed of her arrival.

“Why in the world is General Sansa paying a visit to Kirsch?!” a third-year exclaimed.

The students especially thrown off by her appearance were the third-years with exceptional physique—likely, they aimed to join the army after they

graduated. A group of such third-years approached us and greeted my sister with a bow. In fact, they were bowing so deep that I could almost see the back of their heads. *Wow, I can't remember the last time I saw people doing this!*

There was a tiny hint of melancholy in Sansa's voice. "Is it that strange for me to appear at Kirsch?"

The third-years, who had straightened up and were standing at attention, lost their composure at once. "N-Not at all, Lady Sansa!"

After over a year of living at Kirsch, even if I didn't know their names, I had vague impressions of the attitude of these students. The third-years who had rushed over at the sight of Sansa were usually more slackers than disciplined students, but they all wore foreign expressions as they talked to my sister. *Whoa, their backs are ridiculously straight!*

"You don't have to be so stiff." Sansa glanced at the students' posture. "That must be uncomfortable."

"I have persisted with my training every day, so this is nothing Lady Sansa!" one kid said in a single breath.

For a long time after that, we were stuck there, listening the crowd of third-years prattle about this and that.

"Lady Sansa! If you encounter any difficulties or inconveniences during your stay at Kirsch, please summon me at once! My name is Biden Isaac! I am from a noble military family that can be traced back to the former Edel territory, and __"

They just went on and on and *on*. They must be desperate to make an impression on Sansa. I got fed up pretty quickly, but Sansa seemed to have endless patience as she listened without as much a hint of boredom on her features. I almost wanted to applaud her seemingly endless patience. From time to time, she would nod or offer words of her own, such as, "I know your father."

When the third-year was done, Sansa said, "I have high hopes for you, Biden. I'm afraid that I have other matters to attend to, so let us speak later."

"Yes, ma'am! I am very honored to receive such kind words, Lady Sansa!"

Biden was only one of many. Even after he'd said his piece, Sansa had to deal with the many students that came up to talk to her on our way to the boys' dorms. Though being the center of attention was likely normal to other members of our family, I was actually rather amazed at how Sansa skillfully handled all the third-years. After a long time of being away from my family, I had almost forgotten the weight and duties that came with being a Denning, but she was reminding me of all that.

"Slowe." I could hear the disapproval in Sansa's cool voice. "You should listen to what they have to say, you know. Pay attention."

Here she goes again, another one of her lectures. The public impression of Sansa was a flawless, astute soldier, but as her family, I knew otherwise. That was only a front, a mask she put on before others because that was her duty as a member of House Denning. The real Sansa wasn't as mature as she had led people to believe. In fact, she was the pettiest person alive—nowhere near perfect.

"The third-years are only acting that respectful because they're talking to *you*, the head of the army." I shrugged. "Those future soldiers wouldn't want to waste time on little ol' me."

"I'm aware that you have chosen a different, or perhaps *improper* path compared to the rest of us Dennings. No one knows what the future holds, however. There is a chance that you might join the army one day."

"*Never*," I declared without hesitation.

She frowned. "You are a Denning, and you ought to behave like one from now on."

This time, Sansa was the one giving *me* a long, tedious sermon. Once she started preaching, she'd never stop. That was a habit of hers. As her brother, naturally, one of my best skills was to let it all go in one ear and out the other.

"Master Slowe, this is a first for you!" For some reason, Charlotte chuckled.

"U-Uh, it is?" I blinked. "Um, what is?" *Why's she laughing?*

While I let Sansa blabber on in the background, I glanced around us. *Oh, I see the boys' dorm in the distance!* Students were going in and out of the entrance.

Some spotted us, and their eyes grew wide. Among all the activity, there was one person who stood stock still, and my eyes were drawn to the girl instantly.

“Hey, Sansa,” I said, “is that girl...?”

She nodded. “Yes. She is your new retainer.”

The girl in question was standing like a statue in front of the boys’ dorm. When she spotted us, however, I could see her expression tense up and shift through several shades of anxiety, though she didn’t say a word.

What should I do? Hm, should I just tell her outright that I have no plans of making her my new retainer?

While I was having trouble deciding, Sansa took a step forward and addressed the girl. “Mint. This guy you see here is Slowe. Greet him.”

Her pink, shoulder-length hair fluttered in the breeze. She was rather petite, maybe just a little taller than Alicia. She wore shorts that revealed most of her thighs, and her attire was put together to allow maximum mobility—she seemed to be an archer. Up close, the first thing that stood out to me about her clothes were all the frills on it, but they didn’t look odd on her at all, possibly due to her soft and docile aura.

“I-I-It’s nice to meet you, Master Slowe!” Mint stammered. “M-My name is Mint!”

She’s probably, no, definitely a clumsy one. I was very certain of my evaluation.

After ditching school for a long time, I had returned to Kirsch with my sister. And not just any sister, but one of the most renowned Dennings alive. Obviously, everyone wanted to sneak a peek.

“Hey, Slowe. Many people are gathering around here,” Sansa muttered.

“What else did you expect? We’re at a mage school that’s a melting pot of nobles and commoners. Are you blind to how famous you are, Sansa?!” I groaned. “We can talk in my room. Let’s leave this place and move where we can speak more comfortably.”

Staying as a group at the entrance of the dorms would turn us into an exhibit. I hurriedly moved to the fourth floor where my room was located. I was leading the way, and I practically sprinted up the stairs.

"Oh, so *this* is the boys' dorm. The design is simpler than I thought." Sansa let out a small sigh. "Now this makes me somewhat nervous. What's on this floor? Who lives here?"

In contrast to my anxiety, Sansa was curious as a cat as she climbed the stairs. From time to time, she'd even poke her head into the corridor to take a good look. *I'm begging you, please stop!*

"This isn't a tourist attraction, you know." I scowled. "Hurry up and come to my room."

"Hey, Slowe, who lives on the second floor here?" Once again, Sansa was staring at the other end of the corridor with intrigue. Her questions were mainly about the specific people living in each room.

I wanted to shrivel up and die right on the spot. Behind Sansa was a line of muscular men with crimson capes. If the noble students on the second floor saw our group, there would be an unprecedented commotion!

"Oh, who *cares*?!" I hissed. "I'll answer all your questions later, so please, *please* hurry up and climb up the stairs! You stand out way too much!"

"Hold on. These are important questions. You were born to a powerful noble family, and you ought to make connections and have a social life," she nagged. "Ah, I remember now. From the second floor up are the noble dwellings, right? Hm, I suppose I could go around and greet them. You must have caused them an awful lot of trouble, after all."

"Just *listen to me* and follow me!" I was on the brink of a mental breakdown.

I grabbed Sansa's hand and dragged her up. *Ugh! This is why I was downright horrified when I heard Sansa was coming with me! She's always poking her nose into her family's business like an over-involved parent.*

Sansa sighed. "You're so forceful, brother of mine."

"Lady Sansa! I rarely ever get to see this side of Master Slowe!" Charlotte said

cheerfully.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Why do you sound like you're having fun...?"

"I mean, it's been so long since I last saw you dragging Lady Sansa around!" Charlotte sounded giddy. "It's a super rare sight!"

"Hm, Charlotte is right. It *has* been a long time, hasn't it?" Sansa mused. "You've grown a lot, Slowe."

"Ugh, whatever, could you stop talking for a moment? Sansa, you have feet, you can walk by yourself," I grumbled.

I had no idea why Charlotte seemed so amused when she watched the two of us. Either way, the last thing I wanted was for the students to see this interaction. My reputation as a handsome, reliable, and cool kid would crumble away into dust.

We soon arrived at the fourth floor, where only the most powerful nobles could take up residence. There was only one floor above mine, and that was reserved for royalty. Unfortunately, there weren't any male royalty attending Kirsch at the moment, so the fifth floor was unoccupied.

"Huh." Sansa muttered as she scrutinized her surroundings. "So *this* is where you live." She then turned to the Denning knights and instructed, "I'm going to have a private conversation with him as family. All of you, wait here."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The knights stood at attention in a row down the corridor. *Um, guys? Could you please be less imposing?* With a handful of Denning knights around, the luxurious fourth floor corridor suddenly felt more like a battlefield. *They're almost like knights protecting influential people having a solemn conference inside the room...*

Suddenly, Charlotte also refrained from joining us. "M-Master Slowe, in that case, I shall wait here as well."

"Why?! You're obviously meant to be a part of this conversation!" I exclaimed.

“But... Weren’t you going to have a private conversation with your family?”

“To me, you *are* my family!” I argued. “And the topic of our discussion is going to be Mint over there. Mint, please come in as well.”

The members of this meeting were me, Charlotte, Sansa, Kokto, and Mint. Until now, I’d avoided asking Sansa about my new potential retainer whenever possible. However, the girl had actually appeared in the flesh, so it would be rude to disregard her.

Then, when I entered the room...

...I let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“M-Master Slowe! What’s wrong?! Is there a monster inside?!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“Didn’t I tell you to avoid that m-word for a while?!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” She hesitated. “So, um, what happened? Did an orc sneak into your room?”

“*I* would like the answer to that question! Why the heck is my room an absolute mess?!”

My room, to put it simply, looked devastating, as if a hurricane had torn it apart. My stuff was all jumbled up in a chaotic display. *I mean, to prepare for my expedition to the labyrinth, I did leave everything lying around after I packed, but I swear it wasn’t this messy back then!*

“Did a bandit rifle through my room during my absence?!” I gritted my teeth. “Charlotte, go contact the dorm matron at once! They sure have some nerve, sneaking into *my* room of all places...”

“R-Right away, Master Slowe!”

Charlotte was about to rush out of the room when a loud, shrill voice stopped her in her tracks.

“I-I’m so sorry! I was trying to tidy this place, but it somehow ended up like this!”

E-Ended up...like this?! How? Wait, more importantly, that voice was...

I turned around slowly. There, I saw a girl cowering behind Sansa, who was still in the corridor—Mint, the retainer candidate my sister had selected.



“Oh...” My sister grimaced a little. “Slowe, I’ll put this out there first before you lose all faith in her. Mint sometimes slips up, but she has strengths that more than makes up for her shortcomings.”

Um. Sis. That doesn’t help at all.

“I’m so sorry!” Mint apologized profusely. “Um, I... When I entered the young master’s room, I saw a lot of clothing scattered around, so I tried to put them away, but it got out of control...”

“Give me a moment.” I took a deep breath. “First question, how did you get into my room?”

Mint raised her hand nervously as she answered, “I borrowed a key from the front desk...”

She almost seemed like a freshman shrinking into herself as a professor told her off. My first impression of her was a klutz, and my second impression of her was an earnest girl. *Uh, also, why do I feel like I’m a bad guy bullying a timid girl?*

Feeling a pang of guilt, my target shifted to Sansa, the person who had recommended Mint. “Oi, Sansa. Is my room a free-for-all or something?”

Mint apparently slipped up from time to time, but she had no ill intentions. I could trust Sansa, so I was willing to accept that. However, I didn’t want her to come into my room at her will.

“Mint was only...” Sansa seemed to struggle for words. “She was only trying to welcome you with the sight of a pristine, tidy room, I believe.”

“Are you for real? Look at this disaster and say that again. I dare you.” I gestured at the chaos. *This is why I can’t stand all the muscle-brains of House Denning!*

“Um, Young Master...” Mint’s voice trembled. “Have I already lost the right to be your retainer?”

“You’re disqualified. I didn’t give you permission to enter my room to begin with.”

“O-Oh no...” she whimpered. “Lady Sansa, I’m disqualified! I’m sorry, I’m so

sorry. I messed up again!”

But thanks to this incident, I have a good excuse to dismiss her. As a retainer, entering her master’s room without permission is utterly unacceptable. We haven’t even gotten to know each other. I feel sorry for Mint, but I should be firm in my refusal.

“You saw what happened, Sansa,” I said calmly. “Send her back to the Denning—”

An unexpected person, however, cut me short. “Hold on one second, Master Slowe!”

“Huh?”

“I think we should give her another chance!”

Who would have thought? *Charlotte*, of all people, was the one who stopped me!

“Wha... Huh? Charlotte?” I stared at her dumbly. “Why?”

“We haven’t seen her talents yet! For Lady Sansa to nominate her, she must be a very capable retainer candidate, so it’s too early to make conclusions!”

“No, but... I mean, you’re right, but...” My mind was in utter chaos. *Why the heck is Charlotte on their side?!* “Charlotte, do you understand the implications of Mint becoming my retainer? We would be...”

“That’s a completely different topic!”

Charlotte should understand what I was implying. If Mint became my retainer, she would lose her position. So, by rights, she *should* join me in the opposition! Why in the world was she siding with Mint?!

Sansa’s voice interrupted our exchange. “Uhhh... Can I come into your room now?”

She wore a thrilled expression on her face, unable to suppress her curiosity about the rooms in the boys’ dorm. That face looked completely out of place on a Denning and a great general of Daryth.

I led Sansa and Mint into my room. All the while, I watched my step, evading

all the textbooks and messy clothing scattered on the ground.

“Leave the exploration for later,” I muttered impatiently. “I believe an explanation about Mint is in order.”

“But...” Sansa looked reluctant. “We have all the time in the world to do that.”

“We also have all the time in the world to explore my room, Sansa. This is not up for debate.”

“D-Damn it. Fine. But only this once,” she said through gritted teeth.

“This once”? Excuse me? Priorities, much? The topic of my retainer should be much more urgent than exploring my room. Am I the one who’s wrong? No way.

We gathered around the black table sitting majestically in the middle of the living room, and I ushered the others to sit down.

Sansa finally got down to business. “You see, Father once entrusted Mint’s training to me, saying that she has promise. At first, I planned on turning her into a knight to guard Denning territory, but after I took her around a few battlefields, she came out with many achievements to her name. And here, I thought it would be a waste for her to be a mere knight.”

“Not at all, Lady Sansa!” Mint shook her head vigorously. “I’m not cut out for the post of the young master’s retainer.”

Something caught my attention. “Hey. You said Father entrusted her to you? Tell me more.”

“More? That’s it.” Sansa inclined her head in thought. “Or do you perhaps want to hear about how he came up to me on a hot day in early summer or something along those lines?”

“No, forget that.” I shook my head. “Go on.”

Father specifically requested Sansa to train Mint? But judging by her appearance, she’s clearly just an ordinary girl who doesn’t belong on a battlefield at all. Something bothers me... Why did Father go out of his way to do that?

“Of course, I never thought about assigning her as your retainer at first.

But...” Sansa paused. “You can’t stay at Kirsch forever. I thought this would be a good opportunity for you to properly consider your future prospects as a member of House Denning and appoint Mint, a powerful individual, as your retainer. If she is by your side, all combat would become much easier.”

“Did you train her from scratch?”

“I’m a busy woman. I put together a training program for Mint, and with that as a guide, she worked her way up.”

“Huh.” *Well, considering Father’s endorsement, she must be a diamond in the rough. He has a keen eye for potential—though I was first, he was the second one in House Denning who noticed Silva’s talent.* “Anyway, Sansa, can you stop glancing at my room while you talk? Take this more seriously.”

Kokto seemed to be holding back laughter. “Young Master, seeing such child-like wonder on Lady Sansa is a very precious opportunity that even money can’t buy!”

I mean, I know that. She’s way too disciplined and takes everything seriously. She has always been stubborn to a fault, but at the same time, there is a streak of humanity in her that’s a stark contrast to how mechanical she feels at times. For example, her longing for a normal school life. Among my siblings, she’s actually one of the more empathetic ones in that sense.

“Hey, how strong *is* Mint, exactly?” I asked. “Is she around the level of a Royal Knight?”

In my mind, Royal Knights were a good measure for power levels. As a group, they were a force to behold, but as individuals, they weren’t that remarkable. *Oh, uh, sorry about that comment, Professor Loco Moco. You were a former Royal Knight too.*

“She’s stronger than the average Royal Knight. Ah. I heard about that dragonborn you had trouble with in that dungeon. Mint is likely strong enough to defeat that monster in a one-on-one duel.”

I was speechless for a moment. “You must be joking, right? Do you need me to inform you about the strength of dragonborns?”

This girl can win against that sort of monster? No way, right? I glanced at the

girl, who was smiling ear to ear as she looked at me. *Oh.* When our eyes met, her grin grew even wider, and I could see the twinkle in her eyes as well. *Ugh. Yikes, she's sweet.*

"Um, Mint?" I prompted. "How much of that is true?"

But she only kept smiling at me serenely.

Sansa explained, "Right now, I'm considering letting your two retainers compete a little. We have to prepare for Father's upcoming visit, and he was the one who suggested changing your retainer to begin with."

"S-Sansa? What did you...just say?" I stammered. *Did I hear that right? No way.*

"I said, we have to prepare for Father's upcoming visit."

"Father is coming here? To *Kirsch*?" I let out a strained laugh. "That's impossible."

I knew it. I'm dreaming! Father is said to be the busiest person in Daryth as the current family head. Yeah, he's not coming to Kirsch.

"I shall leave the final decision in Father's hands. He will decide whether Charlotte is fitting as your retainer or not. My duty is to provide him with the necessary material to make the final call."

Chapter 2: A New Retainer

This must be a dream. *Please. Tell me I'm dreaming.*

To wake myself up from this nightmare, I pinched my cheeks hard. Unfortunately, it *did* feel painful, and my eyes teared up in reaction. *Damn it all.*

I'd interrogated my sister many times, but she'd only worn a stern expression as she replied that Father would come to Kirsch soon. She refused to dish any more details than that. *That busy old grump's gonna come here? He's going to stay at Kirsch for the sole purpose of deciding my retainer? Excuse me? This isn't funny, by the way. It'll only happen when pigs fly.*

A familiar young man addressed me. "Lord Slowe, you look rather pale. Did something happen? Did you accidentally eat stale bread?"

"I had a terrible nightmare," I said at length.

"A nightmare? Ah, I didn't know you could dream as well."

I scowled. "Valjean, I'm half-tempted to cut open your head and see exactly what I look like between those ears of yours. Ugh, come on, don't ramble. Move your hands and work your mind. Even if it's a self-study session, you shouldn't slack off."

Our lecture had turned into a self-study session out of the blue. We had been assigned a pile of homework to spend that time on, and most of the students present were squeezing their brains dry to finish it all. *Well, I happened to have finished them all very quickly,* I thought smugly. *And wait a second, I was hailed as a hero by everyone after I saved Kirsch. Where did everyone's awe fly off to?*

"But you were spacing out, so you can't blame me for doing the same."

"I'm already done, so I can do what I want. More importantly..." I hesitated. "Say, if I told you that my father is coming to Kirsch, what would you think?"

Like everyone else around us, next to me, Valjean was muttering to himself while solving numerical questions. He was decent at Practical Magic, but arithmetic and calculations weren't his cup of tea.

“You mean Duke Denning? It’s more likely for the sky to come crashing down first!” He waved his hand flippantly, as if he had never considered it in the first place. “I mean, unless he wants to turn Kirsch into a war zone, but that’s just as unlikely.”

“Right?”

My father was more devoted to the people of Daryth than anyone else. As Duke Denning, he was dedicating his very life to his people.

Valjean frowned. “Lord Slowe, your complexion is concerning. Maybe you should pay a visit to the infirmary.”

“Oh, come on. I’m not feeling that sick. Just do your homework already.”

“You’re the one who started talking to me!”

The head of House Denning had many enemies out for his neck. In fact, everyone knew of the superstition that wheresoever Balderoy Denning went, a rain of blood followed in his wake. Some of the commoners studying and working at Kirsch would likely pack their bags and hit the dirt immediately after hearing rumors of his visit. Sansa didn’t seem to have plans to make the information public yet, however. *Hey. Can* I *run, actually?*

Valjean’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Why are you staring outside the window in a daze? We should head to our next lecture soon.”

“Oh, shut up,” I grumbled. “Fine, I’ll go.”

I honestly dunno how to deal with my father. We just don’t mesh well. Oh, I guess it’s not just me. All my siblings respect him, but everyone has qualms about interacting with him. Even Sansa isn’t an exception.

“By the way, I often see a girl with pink hair going around with you recently. Who is she?” Valjean asked.

“Oh, you mean Mint. She’s potentially going to be my new retainer.”

“What? New retainer? But you already have Miss Charlotte.”

“Certain somebodies seem to have doubts about Charlotte being an adequate retainer for me. In terms of strength, that is.”

“But that pink-haired girl is a commoner, is she not? That must mean... No way, she looks cute, but is she actually hiding a monstrous strength beneath that exterior?”

“Or so I hear,” I muttered, and color drained from Valjean’s face. After all, Sansa nominated the girl, so something about the candidate must have given my sister confidence that I would deem Mint worthy in the end.

Now, as for the test my sister planned on holding... According to Sansa, the most vital ability for Denning retainers was their sensitivity to danger. Members of House Denning were constantly targeted, and our retainers needed to be competent enough to protect their masters no matter what they had to face. *I get that, I suppose.*

“M-Master Slowe! I’ll do my best!” Charlotte stammered.

“Young Master!” Mint exclaimed, sounding just as nervous. “Please take care of me today!”

Mint’s unease was probably enhanced by her guilt after practically tearing my room apart, and her movements were stilted and stiff. *Okay, it’s my job to help them loosen up a bit.*

“Guys, don’t be so tense. Sansa and the Kokto aren’t going to attack me for real.” Some small talk would likely help. “By the way, where are you from, Mint?”

“Oh, um, I’m—”

For a few long hours of the day outside my classes, Charlotte and Mint would stick as close as they could and guard me from the unannounced attacks of Sansa and her underlings. They weren’t actually going to attack us for real, they were going to stop right before the hits landed. Because of that, I thought the two girls didn’t have to be too hard on themselves.

“Hey, Mint. Sansa’s forcing you into all this, isn’t she? You know, being my retainer isn’t a good thing. I’d cause you many needless hardships, and you get nearly nothing in return.”

“Oh, I could never ask for any rewards!” Mint shook her head profusely. “I’m

already honored to have a place by the side of the noble people who dedicate their lives to this nati—”

My eyebrows furrowed slightly. “I’m not really looking for a textbook answer. If possible, I want to know what you *really* think.”

There was one thing that I was wondering: what was Mint’s opinion about becoming my retainer? I had seen her around the campus several times today. Everyone had already known that she was an associate of House Denning, so all the students had watched her warily from afar. She seemed to have trouble fitting in, and my heart had ached at the sight.

She went silent. I couldn’t read anything from it, but... *There’s a chance that she actually doesn’t want to be my retainer, but was coerced by my sister. I mean, being a personal retainer of Denning comes with terrible working conditions, to put it mildly. First and foremost, the job description basically spells out an early grave—I’ve already lost count of my father’s total retainers!*

But very soon, such thoughts were sent flying out of my mind. I had underestimated Mint, despite knowing that Sansa’s nominated candidate should be the furthest person from “ordinary.”

I was wandering aimlessly around the campus after school when Mint, on my left, grabbed my arm.

“Please pardon my rudeness, Young Master.” Her eyes narrowed. “Here they come.”

She had an iron grip in spite of her delicate, petite frame. My eyes widened as I let out a dumb “Huh?”

During my lapse of attention, with a turn and a kick, Mint swept my legs. My feet lifted off the ground, and the sky filled my vision. In the area where my head had been only a moment ago was a beefy fist. The owner of that fist must have punched with all their might, because the resulting winds whipped my face, and I couldn’t stop my eyes from shutting.



“Wha—” I yelped as my buttocks slammed into the ground with a heavy thump. From there, I looked up at the man standing there.

“Young Master,” the large man in monk robes began, “if Mint hadn’t saved you, you would be dead.”

“You...were about to kill me for real, weren’t you?” I said slowly.

It was Kokto, the man people feared as the Ogre Warrior of the North. He had lunged down from the rooftop of the lecture building, and I had been caught completely unaware.

The Kirsch student base was currently obsessed with my sister Sansa—everyone vied for her acknowledgement. Boys loitered around places she would likely stop by and pretend it was a coincidence as they talked to her. Girls praised Sansa to the heavens, for she was a woman who had climbed up the ladder of the military in spite of her gender. Everyone paid minute attention to her every little movement.

But the thing is, nobody knows that she’s tormenting me.

“Owww...” I whimpered.

Right now, I was in my room, and Charlotte was tending to my wounds. Healing them with magic was possible of course, but this was a precious moment I could spend with Charlotte.

“You were beaten black and blue because I’m not suitable as your retainer. I’m so sorry, I couldn’t help you at all...”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, I didn’t expect Kokto to strike me for real!”

My assailant had been Kokto, and Charlotte was—*though I feel guilty for thinking this*—not capable of protecting me from him. Even among the battle junkies of House Denning, Kokto was a cut above the rest. Combat wasn’t Charlotte’s forte, and expecting her to deal with him was unreasonable. The rules of the competition had stated that I couldn’t fight back, only letting my retainers do the work, so my body was pretty battered at the end.

“Ouch!” I hissed in pain.

“Oh, sorry! That must have stung.”

“I-I’m fine, oink!”

As for the question of whether Charlotte was adequate as my retainer... *Digging this up after all that time is quite absurd, don’t you think? After all, I personally named her my retainer. But some busybodies in House Denning don’t seem to agree. Sansa can’t be the only one involved. My father must have shared her opinion as well.*

I suppressed a wry smile. *Oh, the irony. When I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke, nobody placed any expectations on me, and they didn’t find fault with my choice either. But once I gained a little fame to my name, some people started nagging me right away.*

“I must say, I never knew Lord Kokto was so strong...” Charlotte muttered.

“He’s pretty extraordinary. People say that he deserves credit for at least half of Sansa’s achievements on the battlefield, and they’re not wrong. Still, why did he have to take this so seriously?” I grumbled. “If not for Mint, I’d probably be stuck in bed for over a month.”

“Yeah... Mint was awe-inspiring.”

Mint’s performance had been, simply put, stunning. Though it was only the first day of the test, I had already lost count of the number of attacks she had saved me from. Without her, I would have been stuck in the infirmary for a while. *Does she have precognition or something?* She was so good at anticipating Kokto’s attacks that I had even started raising such ridiculous questions.

I had wanted to give her proper thanks, but at the moment, she was waiting outside my room—she had volunteered to give me and Charlotte some privacy.

“Who in the world *is* she?” I wondered. *And where in the world did my father find such a gifted person?*

Speaking of family, that sister of mine popped up on the surface of my mind. I sighed. “I’m not a happy camper. How did Sansa become so popular in no time?”

That wasn't the worst of it—a bunch of student volunteers had assembled and arranged a welcome party for Sansa today. Of course, *I* wasn't invited. *Hah.* Right about now, Sansa should be partying away with a few dozen students.

I gritted my teeth in frustration. *Oh, I bet Sansa's asking away about school life here since she's so interested in that topic. She might even be fishing out details about* my *school life.*

For a moment, I felt heat gather in my cheeks. My family learning about my school activities first-hand felt embarrassing.

"Ah! Master Slowe, careful, you just spilled your food!"

"Heh...? Yikes, I didn't mean to do that!" I looked around frantically. "Miss Maid—yes, you over there—please give me a towel!"

I was currently sharing a private moment with Charlotte in the quiet dining hall at night.

How many years has it been since I last spilled my food? I thought as I wiped the table quickly with Charlotte. Then, I was savoring the honey-dipped desserts she had secretly asked the chefs to prepare as we chatted.

That was when she suddenly changed the topic of our conversation. "How is it going with Mint?"

A few days had passed since the first day of the test, but Mint's performance hadn't fallen at all.

"I can't say for sure. It's clear that she hasn't told me what's actually going on in her mind... What about you? You seemed to have accompanied her the entire day."

I'd spotted the two girls side by side several times today—during lectures, during intervals, and during lunch break.

"Oh, Mint asked me to give her a tour around school, so I took her to a bunch of places. And then..." She paused dramatically. "Please brace yourself."

"O-Okay..."

"She's downright amazing! She discovered *three* secret shortcuts even before

I told her about them!”

...W-Well, yeah, that’s pretty impressive. I’ve already been here for over a year, but even I *still don’t know the entire campus that well.*

I'd been on guard the entire day, wary of Kokto's "assassination" attempts. I hadn't squeezed out any time to sit down and have a good chat with Mint because of it. *Okay, I'll have to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her tomorrow. I have a ton of burning questions I wanna ask her—why does she want to be my retainer? How did she meet my father?*

House Denning was said to be a treasure trove of talent. All year round, young, capable people would come knocking on our door, claiming that they wanted to offer their aid. Not just nobles who took pride in their swordsmanship and magic, but also commoners. But Mint didn't seem like the type who would take the initiative to show up at our front gate.

Someone dropped down their lunch tray on the table in front of me with a clatter.

"Yo, Denning. Seems like yer up to somethin' dicey again, aye? Look around ya. Yer the only one sitting alone in this whole dinin' hall!"

This someone had a black perm and a devil-may-care attitude—Professor Loco Moco, who rarely showed up in the dining hall. Most of the professors requested for their meals to be delivered straight to their quarters, like how I used to do.

The professor plopped down with a thud in the seat in front of me. "Seems like ya have it tough in House Denning. Ya poor soul. I heard rumors that ya might have ta change yer retainer."

I pursed my lips and leveled him a sharp look.

He continued, "Ya know, fightin' really isn't Charlotte's thing, I noticed that a long time ago. If ya ask me, I kinda agree with Sansa Denning."

"You really don't have to point it out for me. I am aware. Charlotte isn't a warrior."

"When ya were a freshman, ya completely ignored anythin' House Denning commanded ya to do. I actually used to think that ya wanted nothin' to do with yer family and just wanted out. Ya seem a bit different now. Why the change of heart, eh?"

He's right. In the past, I would have abandoned House Denning in a heartbeat if the alternative meant separating from Charlotte. But... I'm just a tiny bit different now.

"Get to the point please, Professor," I muttered impatiently.

Professor Loco Moco cocked an eyebrow. "Huh. Looks like ya haven't heard the news."

"What news?"

He leaned forward and whispered secretively into my ears. "Yer dad was attacked by some unsavory people during his expedition. I hear he barely made it out alive."

I was so shocked that I had dropped my fork. It clattered to my plate with a metallic clink.

Professor Loco Moco wouldn't joke around about something like this. He was a person who didn't act unless he had reliable information. Even in the anime, he had gathered important intel through his own connections. *Well, he probably learned most of it from the headmaster, but still, the professor is astounding in this department.* One of his roles at Kirsch was being Headmaster Morozov's right-hand man, after all.

But I never expected him *to be the one to tell* me *news about the head of House Denning. And about such a…sensational event, at that.*

"Professor Loco Moco!" I stood up without thinking. "Did you just say—"

"Heeey, Denning, it's basic manners to finish yer food before ya stand up. Look." He gestured to our surroundings. "Everyone's starin' at ya. Ya don't want other people to hear about this, do ya?"

I took a deep breath to steady myself. "You're the one who dumped such crazy news on me without warning, Professor," I accused.

House Denning was a special name in the Daryth. The influence of our clan, our territory, as well as our contributions to the nation were unparalleled among the nobles. We were one of the most powerful families in the nation, and we owned a private army that made all the military might of numerous

minor nations combined seem insignificant in comparison. And in House Denning, the most authoritative member was my father.

“Well, everyone in the country knows that the duke might meet a sticky end one day, so we gotta be careful. They won’t laugh it off as a joke.” The professor shrugged.

House Denning had many people out for our heads. Not just foreign powers—there were also plenty of Daryth nobles who resented us. We were the guardians of this nation, and our work spanned many fields, including dirty jobs that was and shall ever be shrouded in darkness.

The professor was kind enough to lay out the situation for me. “First, we gotta talk about yer sister. A workaholic Denning like her is stayin’ at Kirsch, and we dunno when she’s gonna leave. That’s already a sign that somethin’ ain’t right. Yer her brother, so ya might be selectively blind to stuff like this, but as a former Royal Knight, I’m well-informed about the situation outside of the campus. I repeat, this ain’t normal.”

“That’s...”

“I know that the Dennings are concerned about yer retainer’s capabilities and all, but do ya really think that *Sansa Denning*, of all people, would take precious time out to attend to ya personally? It ain’t worth it, in my opinion. Didn’t ya think it was weird too? Yer sister is a general, mind ya. We’re still not outta the woods yet when it comes to our relationship with the empire, but a general is staying at a school without a care in the world.”

I had to admit, he had me convinced. As Sansa’s brother, I was biased and only saw her as the sister I knew from my childhood. But long gone were the days she was only my sister—now she was a soldier and leader of this nation, and she had many subordinates who were willing to die for her sake.

The professor continued, “Not only that, Denning, the attack on yer father isn’t recent. The problem is, Balderoy Denning hasn’t sent any ‘return gifts’ to his assailant.”

“Wait, really?” I frowned. “That’s odd...”

From what I knew of my father, he would counterattack immediately. His

retaliations were always so spectacular and ruthless that even other nations would hear of his wrath.

"I'll be honest. I have a feelin' that the Dennings are gonna do somethin' crazy here at Kirsch, and it's makin' me pretty uneasy."

"Charlotte! Chaaarlotte, where are you?! Where aaare you?!"

I ditched my afternoon classes and immediately looked for my retainer, searching high and low for any trace of her.

After hearing Professor Loco Moco's analysis, I had found myself agreeing with his assessment—something wasn't right. My father had been attacked, and yet my sister was dallying around at Kirsch for an undetermined duration. My father hadn't even exacted revenge, for crying out loud. On top of all that, I had a piece of information that the professor hadn't known—that my father was going to visit Kirsch soon, which was further evidence that supported his theory.

I finally found Charlotte with the maids, teaching Mint how to do the laundry.

"Master Slowe!" Charlotte exclaimed. "Shouldn't you be in class?! If Lady Sansa finds out you've ditched, you'll be in big trouble!"

I asked why they were doing this, and Charlotte replied that Mint would be in hot water if she didn't know how to do the washing in the event she became my retainer. In other words, Charlotte had done it out of kindness.

If Mint became my retainer, her role would be different from Charlotte—her duty was to fight with me, not to take care of me. However, Mint hadn't made any complaints, instead dutifully listening to Charlotte.

Huh. These two get along surprisingly well.

Once the small talk was done, I led Charlotte away from the group, and Mint must have sensed something from my mood, because she trailed after us. *Well, she's a part of House Denning as well, and even a potential retainer at that, which means she's very close to being a core member. She can join us.*

I cut straight to the heart of the matter. "Charlotte, it's an emergency. Father

has...”

Charlotte blinked. “Did something happen to the duke?”

I told her about the assassination attempt on my father, but strangely, Mint reacted faster. “Young Master, where did you learn of that?”

“Did you know about this, Mint?” I gave her a glance of scrutiny.

She said nothing in reply.

In my mind, this was groundbreaking news. But this potential retainer seemed almost nonchalant about it. On the other hand, Charlotte was so astonished that she was speechless.

After a moment of silence, Mint finally spoke up. “I am sure you are aware, Young Master, that House Denning has many enemies. Assassinations are normal for the duke.”

“*Normal*? That’s one way to put it. But House Denning isn’t your average noble household. Attacking one of ours is—” I hesitated. “—essentially declaring war. Mint, tell me everything you know. Who’s behind this?”

“Duke Denning is in good health. Though he was wounded in the fight, his injuries are not to the extent that they would affect his daily life.”

In the underworld, there were hefty bounties on the heads of any Denning member. My father should, by all reckoning, have a constant retinue of capable bodyguards protecting him at all times, just like our queen. Somehow, though, the recent would-be assassin had gotten past all of his protection.

That was the furthest thing from normal.

Charlotte was still dumbfounded, trying to process our words, and I took her hand in mine. We had to act before it was too late. “Let’s run away from Kirsch right now, Charlotte. This place is going to turn into a battlefield.”

My intuition was roaring at me that my father was considering using Kirsch as the stage for his revenge.

Charlotte gave me a strained smile. “B-Battlefield? You must be...”

“I’m his son. I know him very well.”

“The duke is a little eccentric, yes, but he wouldn’t do anything *that* extreme.”

I shook my head. “*Everything* he does is extreme. Actually, only someone that crazy can withstand the life of a Denning head. I’m half-suspecting that he has a heart made of iron or something. Think about it, Charlotte. You *know* what kind of person he is. He’d readily lead dangerous people to Kirsch without a second thought.”

Balderoy Denning believed that war was what he lived for. He dedicated everything he had to this nation—a true patriot, just like the queen and Cardinal Maldini, though he expressed it in a different way.

After a moment of hesitation, Charlotte muttered, “If your hunch is right, Master Slowe, I have the feeling that the duke has high expectations of you.”

H-High expectations of me*? I mean... Yeah. My father always had high hopes in me—too high, in fact.* Normally, selecting the next Denning head was a difficult decision. But before I fell from grace, he would have unquestionably named me the successor of the title.

“I mean, the duke has always doted on you. Presently, there are a handful of promising candidates for the next family head, most of all Lady Sansa, but in the past, you were the only one he considered his true heir. I’m sure that the duke is very happy after hearing about your change of heart.”

I gave her a wry smile. “If that’s the reason he’s gonna lure his enemies to this school, that’s a pretty twisted form of affection.”

“Well...” Charlotte faltered. “I think it’s his way of showing his love to you...”

Back then, I wanted nothing to do with the perilous life of the Duke of Denning, because there was no way Charlotte could be with me in that future. Even now, I stand by that decision.

“Come on!” Charlotte placed her hands on my cheeks and squeezed them with her palms. “Chin up! Go back to the Master Slowe I know!”

She leaned forward, her breath tickling my face. Her hair was like pristine white snow, and her big, expressive eyes shined like jewels. I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“We don’t know whether the duke is really going to lure those dangerous people here! Maybe he’s just coming to visit you! Or maybe he got hurt and wants a small vacation! I need to work hard so that he approves of me as your retainer!”

I let out an internal sigh of defeat. Charlotte was staring at me with a brilliant smile, and it had instantly blasted away all of my unease. *I never stood a chance against her, did I?*

●

From a carefully calculated distance, Mint observed the pair. Slowe had incredibly sharp perception, and avoiding detection while tailing him was no easy feat. Mint was a nervous wreck—she wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand as she watched the heartwarming pair.

“The young master is so carefree...” Mint muttered, shaking her head.

Slowe Denning and his retainer Charlotte had snuck out of their dorms at night to go on a little *date*. *That’s nice. I’m almost jealous. They’re really basking in the joys of life,* Mint thought. Slowe seemed to bend all the rules. Despite his status as Denning, he enjoyed a peaceful school life.

“Well, well, what do I do now? Looks like I don’t have a chance,” she sighed. “Nobody can tear those two apart.”

Until now, she had done what she could to sway Slowe into picking her as his new retainer. Everything had been to test the strength of his bond with Charlotte.

What a waste of my time, she couldn’t help but think.

“That aside, I never thought the young master would catch on so fast. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less from him.”

After all, he had clearly passed the test in Mint’s eyes. Separating the two would only result in disaster. There were no upsides to this plan.

“In that case, I need to use the time I have to try and curry favor with him by helping him out...”

Slowe’s father, perceptive man that he was, had also long since realized this

fact. With that knowledge, the duke was making every effort to grant Charlotte the right to be Slowe's personal retainer in the most indirect way. To make people approve of her.

Mint sighed. "A doting parent is very troublesome to those around him, Your Grace."

●

War was the trade of House Denning, and danger was our closest neighbor. Countless enemies foreign and domestic came after our lives, seeking the glory that came with defeating a Denning.

Balderoy Denning, my father, had always laughed them off as proof of our prestige. "Such is but a pittance we pay for our fame," he'd said, and that we should accept it all with a magnanimous heart.

But I hadn't wanted to be a part of that. No, all my siblings had probably shared my opinion. Why should we even bother being gracious towards the opinions of strangers?

"Young Master, you clearly aren't used to defending yourself from assassins. Hmm... I don't really like attacking people through underhanded means, but..." Kokto sighed. "We need you to fend off such attacks of this scale as if they are nothing. When you're actually on the battlefield, you won't get a second chance!"

Today, much like every other day, I'd slumped to the ground after Kokto's abrupt strike. *Damn this guy,* I cursed in my mind. I had been walking in the corridor with Charlotte during lunch break when this dude attacked me, lunging in from the window, shattering the glass panes, and delivering a solid kick to my face. *Is he crazy? We're on the fourth floor, mind you!*

"Oh, shut up," I grumbled. "I have no plans of going down the same path as your master."

"But you are a Denning, aren't you? A Denning only has one path available to them, I believe."

"That's not up to you to decide."

As we talked, my mind wandered. I was thinking about Mint, my potential retainer, the person who was trying to snatch away Charlotte from me. *She wants to be my personal retainer, which means she's our enemy!*

She was so talented that I couldn't even muster up a single complaint. Though she looked younger than us, she held an unimaginable strength within her lithe body—she always succeeded at protecting me from Kokto's assaults.

Charlotte and I both had a burning question in our mind: *How does she manage to sense Kokto's attacks so quickly?*

Surprisingly, Mint voluntarily came up to us with the answer. She offered to teach her trade secrets to Charlotte, which was no different from helping her rival. Of course we were wary of such an offer. Mint, however, was very firm, insisting that if things didn't change, Charlotte would be considered inadequate as my retainer.

Mint's forcefulness took us by surprise. In the end, we had no choice but to surrender and allow her to have her way. I invited her to my room along with Charlotte.

Mint began, "Lord Kokto has a habit of attacking you, Young Master, when you're with Miss Charlotte...and, in turn, letting your guard down."

"Huh?!" Charlotte pointed at herself. "Me?!"

"Looks like you really *were* unaware." Mint sighed. "The relationship between you two is much different than that of normal master and retainer partners in House Denning. I'll be honest, you're way too intimate."

Uh, hold on. Mint, didn't you want to be my retainer?

She gave me a very different impression from her initial timid one. In a strict, no-nonsense manner, she held a long black pointer stick like a professor and knocked the wall with it. "I'll be frank," she declared, "when you're with Miss Charlotte, Young Master, you're too distracted."

The petite girl expanded on the details with gestures for clarity. She looked nothing like the clumsy girl who had turned my room into a crime scene on the day we had met—she was brimming with confidence. *This must be her real*

personality. I shouldn't be surprised, considering she works for House Denning and has the approval of my absurdly strict sister. She must be extremely talented.

That aside... I'm too distracted? Never! Kokto's such a menacing guy, I could never let my guard down knowing he's around.

Charlotte drooped her shoulders. "What do we do, Master Slowe? I...can't argue that at all."

"You don't have to argue with her," I said gently to reassure her. "Mint seems to be on our side, after all. I'm right, aren't I?" I turned to the pink-haired girl. "You're not interested in being my retainer."

"I have the right to remain silent." Mint hesitated. "And, um, Miss Charlotte, you really don't have to note down my words..."

Charlotte had taken out her notepad and was diligently writing down everything Mint said. Before I knew it, Charlotte started treating Mint like her teacher. Mint, on the other hand, stared incredulously at her new "pupil."

Well, what she says makes sense to me, but we're pretty helpless when it comes to Kokto either way. His abilities are too extraordinary. I let out an internal sigh. *Before my sister met him, she was only slightly more powerful than your average Denning descendant, but his existence pushed her so far that she's now the leading candidate for the next family head. It's no use. This game was rigged from the beginning.*

Mint continued her lecture. "That isn't all. Lord Kokto knows the human eye like the back of his hand. He always attacks the Young Master from outside his peripheral vision. That man likely has experience as an assassin."

I almost wanted to throw up my hands in frustration. "What're we supposed to do, then?"

"Very few people can rival Lord Kokto's knowledge of the human anatomy, so in all honesty, you don't have to feel so bad about not knowing that much. As for a defense strategy, well, there are many ways you can go about it. You excel in wind magic, Young Master, so please shroud your body with wind at all times when such an enemy is out for your life. I'm sure that's all the explanation you

need.”

“You make it sound simple...” I muttered. “Cloaking myself in wind for a prolonged period of time takes a lot of skill and energy.”

The ability to focus for a long time in itself was already a rare talent.

“But you could handle something like that, couldn’t you?”

“I suppose.” I shrugged. “That aside, Mint, how in the world did *you* detect him?”

“My father was, well, a sniper on the side, and he trained me professionally in the trade. My field of vision is a little wider in all directions compared to the average person. Ah, though I know you’re a person of many talents, Young Master, I don’t think you can pull that off.”

After that conversation, Mint kept on giving tips and pointers to Charlotte. The ever-diligent student, Charlotte jotted everything down. Watching her, it bored me near to dozing off.

I sprawled out on the sofa in the corner of the living room and brought up a question on my mind. “Hey, Mint. Why are you suddenly helping me and Charlotte? Didn’t Sansa summon you personally to be my new retainer?”

And the most pressing question is, who in the world is this girl? I have a feeling that answer is really important. Mint was acting against Sansa’s will, and that didn’t make any sense.

“Who cares what my motivation and identity is? I believe that doesn’t matter to you. After all, I’m rooting for you two. Isn’t that enough?”

“No, it *does* matter. It’s highly important, in fact.” Sansa hadn’t noticed, but Mint probably had no intention to take over the position of my retainer. “I don’t like playing mind games. Father’s coming to Kirsch soon, so let’s get this done and over with quickly. You’re Father’s spy, aren’t you?”

I knew my father quite well. One of his favorite methods was planting his secret agents near his family members, to put it simply.

Mint hadn’t even tried to deny my accusation. Part of me was a little bummed

because I'd honestly thought she'd act all mysterious about it, but the other part of me was relieved that I could forgo all the deception.

After Mint left my room, I was left alone with Charlotte. I slouched on the sofa, but Charlotte, meanwhile...

"M-Master Slowe! How did you conclude that Miss Mint is the duke's subordinate?!" Charlotte exclaimed, hitting the desk with her hands deliriously.

"Well..." I paused. "I suppose my intuition clued me in."

"Are you serious...?" Charlotte pouted.

"Father likes cooking up schemes like this. He plants reliable subordinates everywhere. Many of them have deceiving looks and auras that nobody would ever expect to be associated with House Denning. Father has many such spies under his command."

Mint had declared that she was acting under the orders of Duke Denning. Then, after requesting that we keep it a secret from Sansa and her subordinates, the girl had left my room quickly without a second glance.

Moments before she had passed the threshold, I asked her why she had admitted it so readily.

"I changed my mind after seeing you and Charlotte, you see," was her answer.

She hadn't explained any further, but she was apparently going to put on the whole "potential retainer" mask again the next day. So we told her that she didn't have to be too considerate of us two as well. She seemed like she wanted to avoid Sansa finding out until the time was right.

"But... Why is she doing all this, Master Slowe? People who answer directly to the duke are *super* famous in specific circles for their extraordinary abilities!"

"Who knows? She's both powerful enough and reckless enough to earn Father's approval. I can't read her mind. I wasn't expecting her to straight up confess that she was one of Father's shadows after I confronted her, for example."

My father's direct subordinates were elite soldiers who acted on his behalf. They were somewhat similar to the knights who answered to me in the past—Claude and Silva. Despite her youthfulness, Mint had my father's complete trust, and that was a big deal. In terms of potential, she might've even surpassed Claude and Silva. *If they heard me say that though, they'd probably insist that they're stronger than her. Hah.*

Pulling myself out of my thoughts, I concluded, "Either way, the one thing we can be certain about is that Sansa doesn't know who Mint really is."

"What in the world is the duke planning...?" Charlotte muttered, sounding lost.

"Dunno. I think he's the only one who knows for sure. Unlike us common folk, whoever holds the seat of Duke Denning is one of very few who have the power to decide the fate of this nation, just like the queen and the cardinal."

As for what tipped me off about Mint's identity, well... She's capable. Too *capable, yet I had never heard about someone of such ability.* Though I might not seem like it, I had never slacked off when it came to keeping tabs on the latest information, even during my blackhearted Piggy Duke days. My future had been obscured with uncertainty, and I could only rely on myself to weather out all the storms.

"I know people say we shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but..." Charlotte muttered, "...this cover was practically a scam!"

"I totally agree." I nodded. "That girl's very strong. Maybe even stronger than me."

"Even stronger than *you*?" Her eyes widened.

"In fields she excels at, that is. From what I've seen from her, I can kind of tell that long-range sniping is her forte. If we were to hold a sniping competition, I don't even stand a chance."

Charlotte seemed to be still having trouble coming to terms with the fact that a girl younger than her was my father's elite subordinate. *Sometimes, that's just life.* In every generation, you'd come across geniuses that effortlessly overcame the constraints of their family status and upbringing. The key to success wasn't

to fight them, but finding a way to quickly convince these stars to join your own faction.

Night at Kirsch was still and silent—or at least, it had been before Sansa's arrival. Her knights patrolled the campus regularly, keeping their eyes peeled for any disturbances.

Sansa was currently one of the most influential figures in House Denning. This meant that, as a general, she had many enemies. She was constantly surrounded by a wall of bodyguards.

Walking to the school gate, I spotted a group of students outside the campus. "Oh... They're Sansa's groupies," I muttered. "My sister's quite the passionate trainer, huh?"

I'd heard rumors that Sansa was assembling hopeful would-be soldiers and running drills for them in the forest. The group that had just returned to Kirsch were all holding burning torches. They had probably gone monster hunting in the forest with my sister.

I could see the burly figure of Kokto standing next to my sister. In contrast to the exhausted students, Kokto was going around cheerfully and smacking the students' backs encouragingly. Apparently, there was a grand total of a hundred or so Kirsch graduates every year who went on to join the army. The cream of the crop among that group would be assigned to the squads under the direct command of Denning descendants. The students crowding around Sansa right now were likely desperate for a chance to join her squad.

It was common knowledge that the squads under the command of Denning members often danced with death on the battlefield. But in exchange, these soldiers and knights also had the most opportunities to shine and make a name for themselves, and these students must've kept that in mind.

I stared at them, feeling a little conflicted. *I wonder how these guys would react when they hear that Duke Denning, someone higher up on the ladder than even Sansa, is gonna visit Kirsch soon.*

Chapter 3: Let the Battle Begin

My father was a beloved hero of Daryth, worshiped and loved by all. In my eyes, he was just a stubborn man who was serious to a fault, but I had to respect him for his patriotism and all the sacrifices he had made for Daryth.

News of Balderoy Denning's visit, unsurprisingly, spread through the campus like wildfire. Hushed whispers were exchanged, often with a hint of fear.

"I saw the duke at the main gates! He was with his order of knights!"

"The headmaster welcomed him personally! From what I could hear, they're going to sit down and have a discussion."

"Did you see those knights? Their gazes were as sharp as knives... They seem way more terrifying than the Royal Knights."

I could understand their trepidation. Though hearing about my father's epic stories was thrilling, he was still a man whose closest companion was death. It was only natural that everyone wanted to keep their distance. My father had the awe of the Daryth citizens, but this awe consisted of more fear than pure respect.

As if that hadn't been enough, something else had fanned the anxiety in everyone's hearts.

"The headmaster told us to evacuate as soon as possible... Word on the street is, Kirsch is going to be a bloodbath soon."

"What's going to happen here...?"

The headmaster had issued an official evacuation notice to all students and staff at Kirsch. Everyone on site had to take refuge in the nearby town of Yoram. Due to that, the innkeepers at Yoram were crying out in joy over the booming business.

"Why did the headmaster even let the duke come to begin with? We *finally* finished rebuilding the school, but it's gonna turn into ruins again..."

"It's common sense to stay the heck away from the head of House Denning if

you don’t want to dig yourself into an early grave.”

Charlotte was walking next to me, and when such rumors reached her, displeasure marred her face. *I mean, they’re not exactly slandering my father, because they’re kinda right. Bloodshed follows closely in Father’s wake no matter where he goes. Or, to be more accurate, my father predicts where there will be conflict and heads there in advance. After seeing the roster of knights that my father brought... Yep, war is definitely coming to Kirsch.*

“Oink. Oink oink!” I snickered.

“Master Slowe, why did you start laughing all of a sudden? You’re being a little creepy...”

“You heard all that, right? Y’know, it feels like people shun my father even more than they shun me. I couldn’t help but laugh, oi-oink.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘shun,’ to be honest. They’re more scared of him than anything, in my eyes.”

We sauntered through the disorganized chaos that had overtaken the campus. *Things are pretty busy around here, but I need to check up on* that *guy. Haaah, I have way too much stuff to attend to. Hm? Who am I talking about? That guy, of course! That moron Shuya Newkern.*

He wants to join the army. There’s no way he’d miss out on a dream-come-true event like Duke Denning’s visit. What kind of reckless thing is he going to do this time, I wonder?

I went up to Shuya’s friends and asked them about his whereabouts.

“Huh? Really?” I blinked at them dumbly. “Shuya isn’t here?”

“L-Lord Denning,” the student stammered, “Shuya isn’t at Kirsch at the moment. He just went off and disappeared without warning.”

Apparently, Shuya and a few other students had vanished from the campus a few days ago. Shuya had declared that he had important business to attend to and had sprinted from the campus in the middle of the night.

Sneaking out of the campus without permission was out of the question, and usually, it would become the hottest topic among the student base. However,

Duke Denning's sudden and astonishing visit had eclipsed Shuya's little escapade, and no one paid much attention to his whereabouts.

When I heard the names of the students that had vanished with Shuya, I figured it out. *I see! It's that weapon merchant arc where Shuya defeats the illegal drug and arms trafficker!*

"Pheeew..." I let out a sigh of relief.

"You're smiling all of a sudden again, Master Slowe. Did you hear some good news?"

"Yeah. There's one less thing I have to worry about."

"Worry about...?" Charlotte repeated, confused.

Yep. Worry, unease, anxiety. That guy always keeps me on my toes and is generally a thorn in my side. And now, that's one thing off the list. Shuya's probably going to be away from Kirsch for a while if he's dealing with that weapon merchant. That arc was pretty lengthy, and he had to do some city hopping. At the very least, he won't show up out of nowhere while my father is here. Good.

"Um, Master Slowe..." Charlotte hesitated before lowering her voice into a whisper. "I'm not very knowledgeable about them, but... Rust, was it?"

"Yeah. Father must be after Rust."

Only moments earlier, Mint had told me the purpose of my father's visit since I would be involved in the proceedings. I hadn't told the full story to anyone other than Charlotte. Rust was the organization that my father and his knights wanted to end once and for all, and he planned to do it at Kirsch. Due to my status as a Denning, Mint had mentioned that I might have heard rumors of Rust. *Of course I know of them! In the anime, they played a vital key role!*

"Information about Rust is a closely-guarded secret, so not knowing about them is normal. Only Father can contact those guys because their very existence is confidential. Even within House Denning, only a handful of people know about them."

"Does that mean you were kept in the dark about them as well, Master

Slowe?”

“Pretty much. I only know the bare minimum. They are, well, how do I explain this... Ah.” I lifted my hand and pointed a finger at Sansa, who was deep in conversation with Kokto. “Look at Sansa over there. She looks disconcerted, doesn’t she? That reaction explains it all.”

My sister and her retainer were standing in the shade. For once, she wore an anxious look on her face, deep in thought. She’d been completely unaware that my father’s enemy was Rust. I had brought them up in passing during our conversation earlier, and she had paled instantly.

“But Master Slowe, if they’re a unit under the command of the duke, shouldn’t they be loyal to him?”

“Technically, Father and Rust are only partners who cooperate with each other. They’re not his subordinates. Still, considering the history between Rust and House Denning, our relationship should be close and amicable, not hostile. What in the world is Father thinking...?”

Rust had always obeyed the instructions of the Denning head throughout the generations—they took care of all of Daryth’s dirty work. Not even official records held any trace of the organization.

As we walked on, we came across a bunch of passionate third-years.

“Listen, if we earn the duke’s approval, we’re guaranteed a bright future!” said one.

“The knights who answer directly to the duke have more field experience than the Royal Knights, and they’ve escaped the clutches of death countless times,” exclaimed another.

“I hear there are commoners among his order of knights. Duke Denning doesn’t care about status or bloodlines. In the army, even minor nobles like us can climb our way up as long as we’re talented enough. If we produce results that can catch his attention even for a second, anything will do, we—”

It seemed that some of my senior students were going to stay behind and help my father. *Do they even know who they’re up against? This is Rust we’re talking about, my dudes. I bet my father doesn’t have any expectations of such*

students making a difference, but then again... Earlier, I heard people whispering that he is allowing motivated students to join him. Haaah... I really want to know what's going on in that head of his.

"Um," Charlotte hesitated. "If that group and the duke go way back, is it possible for them to solve everything through a peaceful discussion?"

I felt a wry smile pull up the corners of my lips. "That'd be the ideal solution, yeah."

But the chances are slim. My father has already decided to declare war, considering the fierce looks on all the knights he brought with him. There's one thing I don't get, though. Why did he have a falling-out with Rust? In the anime, they were good buddies to the end. Or... No way, did my father issue an unreasonable command that caused Rust to bite back at him?

"How did Mint learn about all this...?" Charlotte wondered.

"That's..." I paused to think. "It's probably because she's Father's subordinate. A very trusted subordinate, at that."

Everyone scrambled to flee the campus, seeking refuge. They had bulky bags in their hands and on their backs, as if anything they left behind would be destroyed by the time they came back. *Guys, that's overreacting. Surely the battle won't be* that *destructive.*

Among the rushing crowd, one girl suddenly appeared in front of me. "Lord Denning! May I ask for your advice on this interesting bet I'm taking part in?" It was my commoner first-year friend, Tina.

She looked up at me with her big doe eyes, and she carried a large backpack on her back. It seemed that she was going to evacuate to Yoram with her friends.

"A bet?" I raised an eyebrow. "*Now*?"

"There isn't a better time than now! The entire student base is actually secretly putting our bets on how battered the school will end up this time. And so, I was thinking about wagering a large sum—this might be my chance to win big! In your opinion, how much of the school will be left standing—"

I choked on my saliva. *Wh-What?! I didn't hear anything about this! Is this because I don't have enough friends or something? Why do I always miss out on all the coolest talk around school?*

Hearing me coughing, Tina looked at me worriedly. "Lord Denning! Are you all right?!"

"S-Sorry. That took me by surprise..."

"Well, then!" Tina clapped her hands together enthusiastically. "What's your opinion? A lot of people are betting that at least three school buildings will be razed to the ground. If possible, I want to bet on something unpopular so I can rake in the money."

Even in a grim situation like this, Tina was scheming away for methods to make a fortune. *She's such a tough girl.* Though she was a commoner, she still thrived in an environment like Kirsch. I respected her for that, and I wanted to help her if possible. *But... Hmm... I'm not sure what's going to happen. The popular opinion's that three school buildings will be left in ruins, huh? I'll be honest, that's the likely outcome. If House Denning deploys all our forces, that much collateral damage is standard.*

I stroked my chin. "If you're going for a long shot win, how about taking the leap of faith and betting that the school will be ruined to the point that it gets temporarily closed down again?"

Tina, for some reason, looked ecstatic at my answer.

I sighed after Tina and I had parted ways. "Ugh, I should have thought harder before I gave her an answer."

The school being so utterly trashed that it had to close down again was outside the realm of possibility. My father should know the tremendous amount of money Kirsch's reconstruction had burned through. *Damn. Sorry about that, Tina. I was just joking though, I hope she doesn't take me seriously. But judging by her reaction... She might have...*

That was when a cheerful voice, seeming out of place in all the chaos, cut into my thoughts. "Yo, Lord Slowe! It's been way too long! Have you been faring well?"

I had studied at Kirsch for a little less than a year and a half. In my opinion, I had adapted pretty well to the school life here, but very few people were able to talk to me so casually. *Scratch that, it should be nobody. Yeah, nobody would act all chummy with me like this.*

"Heh heh, long time no see, milord," the guy continued.

Then, he even slung his arm around my shoulder. I was aware that I was somewhat of a menace in the eyes of the Kirsch students, so it couldn't have been a fellow classmate. Normally, the natural reaction should be to ask for this stranger's name, but I didn't need—I had recognized him by his voice alone.

"It's you, Silva," I muttered, turning to look at him.

His long bangs concealed one eye, and he was filled with energy that stood in stark contrast to the aura of gloom and doom that permeated the campus. Before I'd turned into the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I had always hung out with him in Denning territory.

"Sure is!" He grinned. "And not just me! Ta-da! Even Mister Claude's around!"

I looked behind Silva and spotted Claude, who had been a professor at Kirsch until he had resigned last month. The man's attire was unadorned and humble as always, making him blend into the Kirsch campus.

"Wow, what a rare pair we have here," I commented. "It's been years since I last saw you two together. Oh, maybe more."

With a weary face, Claude said, "I was just about to celebrate my long-awaited vacation before I was deployed on emergency orders. House Denning isn't very kind to their employees."

"Aw, don't say that, Mister Claude. That means they think highly of you!" Silva buttered Claude up.

"Hm? You think so? Well, perhaps you're right. I hope that's the case."

"That aside, 'tis strange. Summoning Mister Claude's normal, but who would've thought they'd even call me here?" Silva inclined his head in thought. "I'm pretty sure that my position's closer to the royal family than House Denning recently."

We grabbed a few beverages at the dining hall before moving to the park full of lush greens. A church stood tall and proud before our eyes, and since this area was relatively far away from the residential quarters, there weren't too many people around. The entire school was a mess right now because of my father's visit, and only a select few places were quiet enough for us to settle down and talk in peace.

"Hey, Claude, Silva," I addressed them. "You know... It feels kind of weird talking as a trio again."

I didn't know how to describe it—it was as if someone was tickling my heart with a feather. In the past, these two had been my Knights of the Twin Wings. When I was a child, we always stuck together wherever we went. After turning into the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I never thought I'd ever be reunited with them. I had abandoned House Denning, and these two were a part of the past I had thrown away.

I hesitated. "You guys came with Father, right? I want to ask you something."

Though I wanted to reminisce about the days gone by with them, there were more urgent matters. In the distance, I saw my father and his knights walking alongside the headmaster and professors. A long line of knights followed this group, and they looked like they were preparing for war in this formerly peaceful school.

I gestured at the group of people. "Is that all the people Father brought here?"

There are too few knights. I recognize every single one of them, yeah. They all serve my father as his most trusted subordinates, and their abilities speak for themselves. The problem is, there are only around twenty of them, and I don't think my father has hidden a second squad in the forest.

There weren't nearly enough knights around considering that they were up against Rust. They couldn't possibly be counting on the hot-blooded students of Kirsch.

"Does that bother you, Lord Slowe?" Claude asked with a small smile, as if

he’d anticipated my question.

“Yeah, of course it does. The more I learn about the enemy, the more uneasy I grow after seeing just a handful of knights.”

“Ah, does that mean...” Silva paused. “Do you already know who we’re facing, milord?”

“Rust, right?” I frowned. “From the sounds of that, you guys know as well, huh?”

Silva raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Wow. You seem to know everything. It’s apparently super confidential info, so even though we’re participating in this battle, we were only informed moments before our arrival at Kirsch.”

“Oi, Silva. Do you know what exactly Rust is?” I asked.

“Yep. I heard they’re a dangerous bunch that has come in handy for the duke in the past.”

I turned to the other man present. “Was that the case for you as well, Claude?”

With a grim look, Claude nodded. “Everyone present, other than Silva and I, are personal knights of the duke. They seem to be somewhat aware of the group called Rust and the nature of their work, but we had never heard their name before. I never thought the duke was affiliated with such...unfortunate people.”

“Huh, you seem to be a little shocked, Claude,” I commented. “So you’ve finally learned how dirty House Denning is underneath all the glory.”

“I...suppose you could say that, yes.”

I wasn’t proud of it, but my father’s hands were black as charcoal from all the dirt and blood he had on them. “House Denning is one of the fundamental pillars of Daryth. In exchange for many of our privileges, the queen gives us numerous tasks that we have to fulfill. Naturally, some of these missions are quite foul in nature.”

I continued, “Rust is a perfect group we can make use of to do the dirtiest work. That’s why the heads of House Denning have prized them for

generations. Those guys are willing to do anything as long as they receive fitting compensation."

"That is what I heard, yes." Claude nodded. "I have heard that the members of Rust are officially considered dead, as far as records go."

"Huuuh!" Silva whistled. "The dead! That sounds cool. I see, so we're gonna fight a bunch of undead."

Claude was stern and gloomy, but Silva looked as if he didn't have a care in the world. The concept of a secret organization, apparently, had stirred a tiny bit of admiration and awe in Silva's heart. He was thrilled that he had learned of confidential information. *What a jolly guy.*

Then, Claude swerved our conversation back on track. "Lord Slowe, do you think the duke is choosing quality over quantity, perhaps?"

"That's what I'd like to know." I sighed. "What I can tell you is that based on what I know about the strength of Rust, the knights present are far from sufficient. Claude, are you sure that's everyone?"

"It is." Claude nodded. "Though I am unsure about the duke's plans, some of the knights in his order are voicing their unease as well. The knights have already clashed with Rust a few times, it seems, and they have a good gauge of the organization's strength. Most of them think that their current forces are insufficient if they want to utterly destroy Rust."

Silva folded his arms and said, "Either way, that clears some things up. I'm sure you've heard of how the duke has disappeared without notice a few times in recent months. Even your siblings didn't get any answers when they asked about his destination, milord. He would come back wounded all over, escorted by his personal knights—he must have been off fighting Rust."

I frowned. "Silva, what are you talking about?"

"Oh, didn't you know? I hear that the duke has been fighting that group for a while."

My eyes widened. "Wh-When did you hear about this?"

Silva paused. "Hmm, probably about two months ago. Ah, I believe there was

a rather big incident in Zenelaus around that time. Huh, now that I think about it, it started around the same time when Dustour suddenly suspended their plans of conquering the south."

My breath hitched, and my heart thumped loudly in my chest. *N-No way, it can't be... Did my father end up fighting Rust because I changed the fate of this world?*

Silva continued, "But for the duke to come to Kirsch, where you are present... Maybe that means he hopes to rely on you when things look grim, Lord Slowe, despite being spoiled for choice in terms of talented children."

"In case you forgot, I'm not the only Denning around, Silva," I reminded him.

"Ah! Right, I heard that Lady Sansa was here too!"

"Uh huh. Perhaps Father wants Sansa to do the honors of eliminating Rust and gain glory with that achievement. And on that thought..." I turned to Claude. "Where is Father, by the way?"

"He was heading to the headmaster's office, I believe," Claude replied. "He has already contacted the headmaster in advance, but he wishes to explain things formally in person. That is to be expected—he is going to turn this school into a true battlefield, after all."

"The headmaster's office. I see." I chewed on my lip.

I didn't think the headmaster would agree with my father's actions. But my father wouldn't act unless he knew that victory was in sight. There must be a reason he chose Kirsch, of all places.

"Actually, why are you guys just chatting around with me here?" I gave the two puzzled glances. "I'm sure you have better things to do. You don't have to stick with me. Once you finish your drinks, get back to work, you two."

My father had specifically summoned these two who weren't on his roster of personal knights. They must have some kind of special role. They didn't have time to waste with me.

Or at least, that was what I had thought, until...

"About that, Lord Slowe." Silva raised a hand casually. "We were told that

we’re supposed to take orders from you.”

My mind blanked. “Excuse me?”

Though I would have loved to talk with my old friends forever, now wasn't the right time. Our conversation left me reeling—my father had directly instructed Claude and Silva to follow my orders after arriving at Kirsch. *Why would he...?*

For the time being, I had asked them to stick with Charlotte. Before I had left House Denning, they were good confidants to her, so I'd thought it was a good idea.

"Why did Father tell them to be my subordinates? What is he even planning?"

There was something I wanted to check on alone—to be more accurate, *someone*. My sister, who seemed to be constantly absentminded after my father's arrival.

I found Sansa standing in front of the staff building. Our father was currently having a discussion with the school staff in the headmaster's office on the top floor. He'd even left my sister behind, despite the fact that she had come to Kirsch before him.

"Hey, Sansa. Did you know that Father was going to bring so few people with him?"

"Of course. But I wasn't aware of just who his enemy is."

I folded my arms and listened without a word.

She continued, "I have heard about them in rumors—an organization that the Denning heads from each generation rely on to perform immoral tasks that I don't dare speak of. What I didn't expect was that Father is fighting *against* them, not with them. I remember hearing that they were on good terms with each other, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

"What I can't believe is that Father barely brought any knights with him, even though he's facing Rust."

"Don't underestimate them, brother. Though they may be few in number, they are all legends in their own right. That being said..." Sansa hesitated.

I finished her sentence for her. "They're still going to lose. Obviously."

She said nothing for a long moment. "You could say that," she admitted at last.

We seemed to be in agreement on this front. *Why is Father fighting against Rust, though? Did averting war with Dustour cause a butterfly effect? Am* I *the cause? I know it's a big change, and I'm aware that there must be many unpredictable effects of me meddling with the timeline. For example, Shuya might not end up as strong as he was in the anime.*

After a pause, Sansa muttered, "You might be right. I heard that their most capable members are able to capture an enemy base completely by themselves."

In the anime, Rust had allied with Shuya when he marched into Dustour. At first, due to the presence of Eldred in his body, the Daryth queen had considered him an extreme threat. Rust had been deployed to "take care" of him. They'd also been the ones who had ultimately judged him as harmless. When the last member of Rust had fallen, Shuya had wept out of sorrow—they had, at least in the anime, been depicted as good-natured fellows.

"Hey, Sansa... Do you think Father decided to turn on Rust of his own accord?"

"This is just a guess, but it must be the queen's will as well. If she didn't grant him permission, turning Kirsch Mage Institute into a battlefield once again would have been blasphemous."

"Ah, good point." I sighed. "This school's full of hideouts that Rust would take a liking to. How troublesome."

The members of Rust weren't exactly warriors who overpowered their opponents in battle. They were warmongers—assassins who lurked in the shadows. Their battle tactics were completely different from ours. In other words, they fought dirty.

"Do you know about the leader of Rust, Slowe? The man known as Magna?"

I paused. "No idea."

That was a lie. I knew that the members of Rust only obeyed the words of Magna, an old man whose identity was otherwise shrouded in mystery. Between Magna and my father, they held total authority over Rust's goals and actions. I didn't know what he looked like, though, because he had never

revealed his appearance in the anime. I'd only seen his silhouette as he had talked to my father in some dark place. Apparently, Magna had always been a bit problematic, and he had been a headache to Denning heads in the past as well.

Sansa's voice tore me away from my thoughts. "I don't know how much you know, but in the past, Daryth only had two options—one was to submit to Dustour obediently. The other was to fight to the bitter end."

"I know that much."

"Father was one of the loudest voices in the resistance faction. That applies to Magna as well."

"Could you please get to the point?"

"Perhaps Magna still wishes to wage war with Dustour. Of course, this is just me speculating. I need to ask Father first..." Sansa paused. "Though from the looks of things, I doubt he will shed much light on the matter."

In the anime, the members of Rust died in battle against the most powerful warriors of Dustour, so they definitely held some bad blood against the empire. *But I still don't get why they're fighting the duke. I know I changed the future, but I don't see how that led to this situation.*

"Congrats, sister. This is your big break. If you perform well, you're going to take one giant leap forward towards becoming Duchess Denning."

She gave me an odd look. "Where did that come from?"

"Father has been fighting Rust lately, right? Previously, he only asked for the aid of his most trusted knights, but now, he's here at Kirsch and relying on your help. Isn't the implication obvious?"

"Who put such ideas in your head? Hmph, likely Claude or Silva. Though it's rather unfounded... Perhaps you are correct. It is a great honor."

It was clear at this point. My siblings had fought for days and nights on end for the seat of Duke or Duchess Denning, but now, Father had personally chosen Sansa. Rust had been my father's agent, and disclosing confidential information to Sansa must mean that he had chosen her as his heir. There was a small, faint

grin on Sansa's lips. *Yep, that's the simple-minded Sansa I know.*

That was when Kokto spoke up. "Master Sansa, the meeting has adjourned."

My father exited of the staff building, escorted by a select few knights. Among them, I spotted my potential retainer as well, directly at my father's side.

Sansa stared at her in silence. She had likely only just realized Mint's true identity. She probably had many words for the girl and for our father, but this matter was trifling compared to the war looming on the horizon.

"Follow me, Kokto," Sansa commanded. "I believe a conversation with Father is in order."

The headmaster followed after my father and his entourage. He looked absolutely haggard—I wondered what they had talked about during the meeting that could have drained him so. *Well, he was an innocent bystander dragged into the mess of House Denning this time. Poor guy. I can't imagine what he's going through. I'm really, really sorry, Headmaster.*

Shortly after the meeting concluded, I followed the headmaster and Professor Loco Moco to the professor's private quarters, which was filled with messy stacks of documents.

The professor practically exploded once we got in. "Denning, yer father's ravin' mad! The rumors were right. He's awful! Just awful, I tell ya!"

Professor Loco Moco had been present in the meeting as well. With a bitter scowl on his face, the professor slammed his desk. "He was threatenin' us! No negotiation, no nothin'! He didn't even pretend to listen to what we had to say!"

With a pale face, the headmaster inclined his head in agreement. "Slowe, I know a lot about your father, but I did not expect him to be serious when he first contacted me. Kirsch is a school, a place where students strive for a better future. The wounds in the hearts of our students are still raw after the previous incidents. I cannot believe that your father wishes to transform this place into battlefield once again..."

"Did you agree to his demands, Headmaster?" I asked.

Professor Loco Moco spat, “The duke came prepared. Ya know, we came up with dozens and dozens of excuses to refuse him, but he received the queen’s permission before he came here. How’re we supposed to say no? It’s outta our hands.”

I knew it. The queen was involved as well. But...why Kirsch, of all places?

The headmaster answered my question before I could voice it. “The duke’s enemies specifically chose Kirsch as the battleground.”

My eyes widened. “And Father accepted such a condition?”

“The queen is determined to deal with them once and for all, it seems, and she expressed her support,” the headmaster explained. “The opposing side has declared that they will not harm common folk—they will only target House Denning and its affiliates.”

So it’s Rust that picked Kirsch!

The headmaster’s lips pressed into a thin line. “You could say that they chose Kirsch Mage Institute as their grave. I hear that...the majority of the opposing faction are Kirsch graduates.”

I staggered absentmindedly back to the dorms, kicking up little pebbles as I went. The headmaster’s words echoed in my mind like the haunting whisper of a ghost.

“The queen... The queen has even declared that the destruction of Kirsch is an acceptable sacrifice if it is necessary for victory. I admit, I am horrified and morbidly intrigued about the identities of the duke’s enemies.”

In the anime, Rust had been a group of patriots that had fought and died for Daryth. Around the middle phase of the anime’s overarching plot, Shuya had infiltrated Dustour. The members of Rust had been his avid protectors in the shadows, eliminating all the Dustour assassins who had been on the prowl. Though their work wasn’t honorable in nature, they were more devoted to Daryth than anyone else.

“So...is it really my fault after all, oink?”

Armed with my anime knowledge, to date, I had done everything I could to change the future for the best as I could possibly make it. I wasn't an idealistic optimist who thought that I could save anyone and everyone. *But...ugh, how could I have known that this would happen?!*

As I walked on, I heard Sansa shouting in the distance. "Father! Why did you choose *me*?! There are many other candidates better suited for the task!"

Oh. Now that's a first for her. My sister seemed to be yelling at our father.

She continued, "My abilities will come in handy! I have proven myself countless times on the battlefield!"

Only moments earlier, she had taken pride in the fact that our father had chosen her, but that was nowhere to be seen. I didn't know what they were talking about, but our father must have given her unexpected instructions.

Uh, sis, the students are watching you. You know that, right?

A soft, melodious voice distracted me. "Yikes, I can't bear to watch this. She's practically throwing a tantrum like a spoiled child."

I turned around. "Oh. It's you."

Mint was there, gazing at Sansa with frosty eyes. *I mean, I know that my sister is acting a bit unseemly at the moment, but...* When Sansa had first introduced Mint to me, the girl had acted shy and naive. None of that showed on her face now—this must be her true self under the mask she wore.

I decided to toss a question at her. "So, Mint, did something happen to Sansa?"

"The duke has decided to dispatch Sansa to Yoram and evacuate with the rest of the Kirsch students and staff. Basically, she's going to stand by. Lady Sansa won't participate in the battle with Rust, and that is the duke's decision."

"Ah, I see. No wonder Sansa's pestering him." Though she hadn't voiced it, my sister had probably been fired up with motivation to prove herself.

Mint sighed. "You know, she should just dutifully obey her orders. It's not like complaining will change the duke's mind."

"Well, Father is just as stubborn as the rest of us." I shrugged, changing the

topic. “So this is what you’re actually like, huh?”

“Now that the duke has arrived, there’s no point hiding anymore,” she replied.

Sansa was one of the most influential people in House Denning, yet Mint didn’t mince her scathing remarks at all. *Wow. I’m impressed.*

She continued, “We are fighting Rust. Without doubt, the battle will be fierce. Standing by in Yoram is an important duty, though it might not seem like it. Giving her this post is a display of the duke’s profound trust in her, but Lady Sansa is none the wiser. Or did she have the delusion that she has earned enough of the duke’s faith for him to allow her to participate in a war against Rust, hmm? Laughable, really.”

I was a little taken aback. “Uh, isn’t that going a little too far?”

“You know what I mean, Young Master. Against such opponents, we don’t have the luxury of protecting Lady Sansa’s life during the battle.”

“Well...” I couldn’t argue against that.

“The duke is keeping her at a distance *because* he wants the best future for her.” Mint let out a small sigh. “Lady Sansa should be perceptive enough to catch on, but she’s acting like a willful child.”

“She’s just...” I chewed on my lip. “She thinks she can help him. And I personally don’t disagree.”

“In the unlikely—no, nightmare scenario where Lady Sansa falls in battle, it will be the most tragic outcome possible. The duke decided he wouldn’t involve his family in his conflict with Rust, and that was what he fought for all this time. Her death would render all his efforts in vain.”

There was no inflection in Mint’s voice as she gave me more information. My father and Magna, the leader of Rust, had opposing opinions on a certain topic. That had been the catalyst behind their assassination attempts on my father. The members of Rust hid among civilians and in places he visited on a daily basis, leaving my father to fight them in secret.

“This time, he has selected the cream of the crop among the Denning knights

as his escorts. He is serious about decimating Rust."

"Hey, uh, he doesn't want to involve his family, right? Can I evacuate to Yoram as we—"

"No can do. You are a precious military asset, Young Master. I can vouch for that."

I did a double-take. "Vouch for *me*? What in the world gave you the confidence to do that?"

"After observing your skirmishes with Lord Kokto, I concluded that you would adapt quickly enough to be useful even against Rust. Furthermore, pure power isn't your only strength. There is something only you can accomplish."

"What's that?" I asked, puzzled.

"You are the only one who can get through to the duke, Young Master."

I shook my head fiercely. "No way. Absolutely not. Impossible."

"The duke has high expectations of you. He says that you have a unique creativity and intuition that he doesn't possess."

"That's ridiculous." *Sheesh, pressure, much? I* can't. *That stubborn Balderoy Denning would never listen to me.*

"Young Master. You are the only one who has managed to continuously defy the duke's orders outright."

Ack. She's got me there.

With impassive eyes, Mint glanced at Sansa, who still didn't look convinced. "Rust won't attack civilians, but Lady Sansa doesn't fall into that category. If she's away from the campus, however, she will be safe." She turned back to me. "That aside, you're acting awfully calm, Young Master. That's odd—you've already figured out who I am, haven't you? Are you not surprised?"

Making such sharp comments about Sansa meant Mint had an extremely high standing in House Denning. It wasn't hard to deduce. "Who would've thought that Father officially appointed a new personal retainer? I *am* surprised."

"Yes, indeed. I'm the duke's personal retainer."

Earlier, in the park, Silva and Claude had mentioned in passing that the duke's personal retainer would make their debut in the battle against Rust. My father placed a lot of significance on this battle, and he was practically wagering everything he had.

"Glace, the duke's former personal retainer, was my father," Mint explained. "He was the one who taught me how to fight. I can confidently assure you that his training was many levels more rigorous than your education or that of Lady Sansa's."

"Ah... I see. To you, Kokto's attacks are..."

She finished my sentence for me. "Child's play. I am far stronger than him."

Glace hadn't only been my father's retainer—he had also been my father's teacher. His main method of attack had been long-range sniping, and I had heard that man had the eyes of a hawk. If Mint was Glace's daughter, she most certainly wasn't boasting.

When I first heard about the debut of my father's new personal retainer, I hadn't expected her to be a young girl who had yet to come of age.

"I mean... I had the feeling that you were a person who was raised in the midst of bloodshed and war, but I hadn't predicted..."

"As expected, you are very sharp, Young Master. In terms of shrewdness, Lady Sansa pales in comparison."

"Not at all." I shook my head. "I'm just much less trusting than her."

Even *I* had trouble detecting Kokto's attacks, but Mint had made evading his surprise strikes look easy. That should be absurd. It had been evidence that she had a special upbringing—but I had never guessed that she was my father's retainer. *Huh.*

"Wh-Whaaat?!" Charlotte exclaimed. "D-Did you just say *Mint* is the duke's retainer?!"

"Shh, Charlotte, keep it down."

I was back at the boys' dorm, and nearly half of the residents had already

abandoned the building. Since my father was going to make Mint's existence public, it wasn't exactly a secret or anything, but we didn't have to shout it out for the world to know either.

Charlotte had slipped up out of shock—her eyes went wide as saucers. Until now, she had seen Mint has a cute little sister figure, and the revelation left her stunned. She'd always accompanied Mint when the younger girl went around exploring Kirsch, so they'd grown rather close during the process. I could empathize.

Claude and Silva, who were sitting with us, couldn't suppress their shock either.

"Such a child is the duke's retainer...?" Claude muttered in disbelief.

"If she's just as strong as Lord Glace, she's one of the best allies one can have, Mister Claude." Silva pointed out. "In the south, Lord Glace was one of the best snipers around when he was alive and kicking. You know, she might be even stronger than you!"

Glace had been an exceptional mage. It was a pity that he had lost his life in a fruitless attempt to rescue an ally on the battlefield. Ever since his demise, my father had refused to officially appoint a new retainer. *Who would've thought that he hid such a secret weapon? But...I suppose he was forced to reveal her existence because the upcoming battle is going to be more intense than I could ever imagine.*

As the evacuation progressed, the school gradually grew more desolate. Knights patrolled the campus in place of the missing students.

An opportunity to talk to my father came surprisingly swiftly.

The knight escorting me said humbly, "Young Master, please follow me."

"You don't have to be so polite around me," I replied. "I know the way from here. You can resume your patrols."

He shook his head. "It is dangerous. Rust could be lurking just around the corner."

I let out a small sigh. “You guys have it rough, huh? Father is working you all to the bone.”

In the garden, there was a beautiful place of respite encircled by a small stream. Gravel blanketed the ground around it, adding a special touch to the nature there. It was in this little corner tucked away from the world that I found my father, sitting down beside the stream. A coat of dark forest green adorned his frame, his chest adorned with medals glinting in the light.

My father always brought a handful of knights around him wherever he went. These veteran knights had commanded the army with my father in countless military campaigns and were his most trusted aides. But it seemed that they were going to give us some privacy to talk as father and son as they left the two of us alone.

Silence.

Finally, I spoke up. “Is the sky going to crash down on us tomorrow? I can’t believe I’m talking to you like this, Father.”

“Now, don’t say that. I am so hard-pressed that I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“Huh. Another surprise. For once, you’re not acting as if everything is in control.”

“I am sure you are aware of my situation. I am only human, after all.”

A small smile appeared on my father’s stern features. *How many years has it been since I last saw him smile? Oh, but then again, I’ve been avoiding him the whole time, so I haven’t even talked to him for all those years.*

He continued, “Slowe. I didn’t expect you to appear before me without a struggle. You hate me, don’t you?”

“...I suppose.”

My heart ached. It was as if a claw was squeezing it hard.

I didn’t really want to recall my past with this man. He had tormented me thoroughly to whip me into the next Denning head. Even after my transformation into the blackhearted Piggy Duke, he still had hopes placed

squarely on me. Of course, this man's way of expressing his expectations in someone was to discipline them until they were a tattered rag.

Wary, I fell back on my manners and addressed him politely. "Father, I was under the impression your relationship with Rust was at least on the amicable side," I said. "Why are you fighting them now?"

"You are well-informed. You don't need an explanation from me, I see."

"That is because you are attempting to turn Kirsch into a war zone. A person in my position would learn of such basic information even if I don't seek it out."

I thought I would be more nervous in front of him, but words came to me easily. *I guess my mind knows that I don't have time to waste, since we're going to fight Rust.*

"You should be honored, Slowe. If you maintained your previous behavior, you would have never come into contact with such information. I know and trust that our knights have good judgment of character. They must have deemed you worthy as you currently are."

Really? Well... Yeah, his knights wouldn't have told anything to the blackhearted Piggy Duke, that's for sure. That goes for Mint and Sansa as well.

At last, my father answered my question. "It is Her Majesty's wish. The destruction of Rust is her will and decree."

I narrowed my eyes. *The queen, huh? If that's the case, my father doesn't have any other choice.*

He continued, "There is a man called Magna, and he is the head of Rust. He has been consistently pressing us to investigate Dustour. He claims that Dustour is a risk. Though Rust does take commands from me, I don't have absolute authority over that organization. Rust answers to Magna, and he is a rather extraordinary character. He has led a long life—from what I know, he was around when my grandfather was alive."

I knew it. Magna is a part of this.

My father clasped his hands solemnly. "When I inherited the position of Duke Denning, my predecessor had warned me against standing against Magna.

However, when Her Majesty learned of Magna's demands, she declared that Rust must be no more. In this matter, Rust's competence is their shortcoming. With their level of power, I am certain that they can infiltrate the heart of Dustour against our orders. Allowing that organization to make a move might result in a hostile relationship with the empire, which would be an undesirable outcome."

"Do you think you can win against Rust here on this campus?"

He paused slightly. "Decimating them is no easy feat. That is the precise reason I accepted their conditions and decided to fight them here at Kirsch. I am sure that when the battle begins, you will understand my choice of location."

He probably can't win. He only has his direct subordinate knights with him. They're not enough.

"Father. You wish to settle things with them once and for all here, don't you?"

But I can feel the strength of his resolve. I saw the ring he wore on his right index finger, and that was a testament to his determination.

"I do." He nodded slightly. "I honestly did not expect to take out the Ring of Authority so quickly after we reached a tentative peace with the empire."

The Ring of Authority was a magical artifact that had earned the Denning heads their reputation as Gods of War. Only the Denning head of each generation was permitted to use it, and wearing it meant that my father was serious about finishing Rust off here.

He closed his eyes briefly. "Seldom do things in this world ever go as planned. That much has not changed, even after I became the duke."

"Does that mean...you do not wish to fight them, Father?"

He didn't reply.

I continued, "If you do not speak, I am afraid I will have to assume that silence means yes."

My father stood up slowly. "You may assume anything you wish. I have no wish nor intention of controlling your thoughts."

Even someone in a position of power like my father couldn't go against the queen's command. *That's probably what he's implying.* "Ah, that aside, Father, why did you assign those two to me?"

I was talking about Claude and Silva. Depending on the roles he gave them, those two were actually more useful than my father's knights.

My father's reply was cryptic as ever. "Slowe, you are free to act as you wish on this matter. You may do anything you want."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I said. At this rate, the chances of a complete victory are slim. What I require is an outside element that they cannot predict. I will grant you the necessary pieces to make that possible. Do what you wish with those two."

"...Understood, Father."

When I was a child, I had been hailed as the Prodigy of Wind. I would never have earned that moniker without the support of my Twin Wings—in fact, they could take credit for about half of my reputation. The fact that my father had summoned them specially to Kirsch must mean he was investing everything possible into this battle.

"Now, then. I did not call you here to talk about such trifling matters, Slowe."

"In my opinion, it is far from trifling. You are going to sully Kirsch's campus with bloodshed," I reminded him.

He paused, but changed the topic regardless. "I wish to talk about the reason I sent Mint to your side through Sansa."

"Oh, your retainer? I was rather surprised when I received a potential retainer out of the blue."

"Mint is Glace's daughter. She is astoundingly talented. I would have preferred to keep her identity secret for a little longer, but against Rust, beggars cannot be choosers. Though it is earlier than I planned, she will play a part in this battle as well."

"I understand that Mint is your trump card. Is that the reason you summoned

me today? Do you wish for me to be her assistant?”

“No. You see, I...” He paused. “I am saying that if you have a wish you cannot give up on, you should fight to destroy all your obstacles to realize it.”

“Fighting to realize my wishes? I believe I have done that throughout my entire life.”

“In the case of House Denning, you have not. At least, it wasn’t a convincing victory. The amount of trouble you have caused us is immeasurable.”

Ugh, I can’t argue that... I chewed on my lip with slight chagrin.



He continued, “However, Slowe... If you slay Magna, I will grant you freedom.”

Wha— Wow. I...didn’t expect that.

My night that day was reminiscent of the old times—I dragged Claude and Silva, and our quartet was reunited once again.

“Well, well! Now this is what I call a lavish room!” Silva marveled. “Even in the lowest points in your life, you’re still a Denning, aye? I’m so jealous!”

“Silva, Lord Slowe is a legitimate Denning descendant,” Claude said. “Did you expect anything else?”

Silva hummed. “Looks like family standing is still one of the most important things at the end of the day, huh?”

We still had some time before Rust’s assault. Those guys wouldn’t make a move until the civilians at Kirsch had finished evacuating. The chefs at Kirsch were also going to flee to safety, so tonight was likely the last night I could enjoy a piping hot meal. I had ordered a whole feast and had arranged for the dining hall to deliver the dishes to my room. Right now, I was savoring the delightful flavors with everyone else.

I had invited Charlotte, Claude, and Silva to my room to spend the night as we pleased. Looking at the people gathered here stirred up some old memories, and I wasn’t the only sentimental one. Enveloped in the heartening atmosphere, it was easy to forget that we were going to fight a formidable foe like Rust.

“Silva, being born as a Denning isn’t exactly a blessing, you know,” I grumbled. “As you know, I’m kind of being dragged into a battle right now. Haaah... I want to go to Yoram with Sansa...”

I was with friends whom I could trust with my life, and my voice came out more lively than usual. If I took one step outside my room, the forlorn dorm bereft of its residents was the only thing that’d greet me. However, inside the confines of my chambers, joyous chatter persisted throughout the night.

“Ya know, no matter where I go, I hear rumors about you, milord,” Silva said.

“That is nothing strange.” Claude shook his head. “If Lord Slowe unleashes his true powers, that is the natural outcome.”

We didn’t have to hold anything back. I spoke my mind without reservation, and my two former knights shared their tales. Our conversation felt like it could go on forever. To put it mildly, I was having the time of my life. We simply couldn’t run out of things to talk about.

At one point, I fell silent with a frown. Charlotte was a little worried and she asked, “Is something the matter, Master Slowe? You look slightly upset.”

“Ah, that reminds me,” Silva cut in. “I hear that you had a conversation with the *duke*, milord. Poor Sansie was driven away to Yoram, which means that it’s finally your time to shine!”

“Oi, Silva!” I gave him a disapproving look. “Keep your mouth in check, will you?”

He blinked innocently. “But that means the duke chose you over Sansie, right?”

Claude shook his head slowly. “You’re the only one who would dare refer to Lady Sansa with such a nickname...”

“Aw, c’mon. I know you’re looking for juicy gossip too, Mister Claude.” Silva wriggled an eyebrow. “You won’t meet my eyes.”

“Well...” Claude hesitated. “Yes. Anyone would be intrigued.”

“Tell us already, milord,” Silva urged me. “There are no secrets between good pals like us!”

I caved. “My father said, well... He told me he’d grant me freedom if I take down the enemy leader.”

As expected, both of them were stunned speechless. For a while, no one spoke.

“Crazy, right?” I muttered.

It was ridiculous. Absurd. My father had invested so much effort into making

me the next Denning head—how could he ever offer me freedom?

Silva was the first one who came to his senses. “Milord, that’s almost too good to be true! You can’t waste this chance. Right, Mister Claude?”

“Agreed,” Claude admitted at length. “I share the same opinion. Lord Slowe, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Silva and Claude knew me very well, and they were telling me to use the battle with Rust to my advantage. I, however, felt that there was a catch. Was this really the Balderoy Denning I knew?

“You guys know too little about Father. That man is...” I sighed.

Silva suggested, “But perhaps the duke changed his mind after seeing your transformation, milord. Either way, it’s not like you to fret and be indecisive like this!”

Ah. Good point.

During our reprieve before the showdown began, I wandered around the campus. There were no students in sight, and the tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. With the decoration of morning mist, the campus almost looked like an abandoned ruin site in some remote area.

Alone, I walked without a word as I brooded. Though I had been driven out of House Denning, I’d ended up at Kirsch just as I wanted. I left everything behind. But over the course of the last few days, I felt as if I had returned to the past, in a good way. Every night, all four of us would gather and talk well into the evening.

Back when I was a kid, whenever night had come around, I had small tea parties with my knights. These had also served as good reflection sessions, and through these nightly meetings, we had accomplished many things. By the time three months had passed since our night tea parties had begun, I had started gradually making a name for myself in the Denning territory. If I remembered correctly, by the one-year mark, I had earned national fame.

Claude and Silva would report back about rumors they had heard from some unknown source, and I would execute plans to deal with the problems that I

had heard about. Occasionally, I had even snuck out of the Denning lands under the cover of night.

But when I had realized that the path my family had prepared for me—a one-track road to inheriting Denning head—would bring me nothing but despair, I abandoned everything. As a result of that, I moved to Kirsch, where I had begun my new life with only Charlotte by my side.

A stern voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Prepare the magic circles. We will finish this before the evacuation is complete.”

“Yes, sir!”

A group was making preparations for the upcoming strife, mostly consisting of my father’s knights. Third-years and second-years who wanted to join the army were helping in whatever way they could.

I sat down with a thud onto a bench and spaced out.

I fought the urge to sigh. *What am I supposed to do with those guys? Do my fellow students think this is their chance to shine or something? Wake up, everyone. You’re gonna fight Rust, an organization that used to be at the Denning heads’ beck and call. Why did my father allow them to join, anyway? My father should know Rust’s strength better than anyone else—he was the one who sent them on all their missions.*

My fellow students are digging themselves an early grave. I’m serious. Ugh. I’m so relieved that I told Claude to escort Charlotte to Yoram beforehand.

“Master Slowe, are you all right? Is something bothering you?” Charlotte sounded worried as she talked to me.

“I just think there’s a catch somewhere...” I muttered.

Something is *bothering me! My mind is in a mess! How am I supposed to be calm when the thing I crave most is dangling in front of me like a carrot on a stick?!*

“...Oink?”

Wait. I wasn’t paying attention, but that...that was Charlotte, right? I did a double-take. *Most of the people at school are evacuating! Why is Charlotte still*

here?!

I hunted around for Claude, whom I had designated as Charlotte's bodyguard. *I'm going to hound that guy for answers when I find him.*

I held full authority over Claude and Silva at the moment. The mission I had given to Claude was to head over to Yoram with Charlotte and to stand by over there. Sansa was probably having a rough time, and having as many helpers as possible was ideal.

When I finally found the man, he was with other students and assisting the construction of magic circles.

"Hey, Claude!" I stomped up to him. "Why isn't Charlotte at Yoram? Have you already forgotten my orders?"

"W-Well..." he stammered. "Lady Sansa, um, said that it is improper for your retainer to be separated from you. She also said that you don't have to worry about Yoram."

My frown slowly grew into a scowl.

He continued, "Charlotte is also determined to prove herself to the duke, so we ended up staying here..."

"Determined?!" I looked at him incredulously. "Against *those* guys?!" Even *I* was going to have a hard time against Rust, much less Charlotte!

"Lord Slowe, I believe the best course of action is to assign some kind of task to Charlotte as well," Claude said carefully.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. As I closed my eyes and cleared out all thoughts from my mind, my other senses sharpened. I could hear the fluttering of wings as little birds stopped to perch on branches, and the rustling of leaves in the winter breeze.

"In that case... I'll ask Charlotte to draw out all the information she can from that girl," I muttered.

Mint had been cooperative the entire time, and she seemed to get along with Charlotte. My retainer would be the perfect person for this job.

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In one corner of Yoram stood a house that was in mid-construction. The voices of two men echoed inside this building site.

“Be careful with these, One! These are first-class goods! One of these can fetch you enough money to buy a house with a plot of land in the best district of the capital!”

“Hee hee,” another man cackled. “Look at who you’re talking to. You think I’ll mess up?”

The first man continued, “I never thought House Denning would accept our terms! Kirsch is, after all, where we spent three entire years of our youth! I heard that it got a huge makeover recently and looks gorgeous right now!”

Curiously, there were no windows. The walls blocked out all prying eyes.

The two men dressed like construction workers, and they repeatedly walked in and out of the building with bulky lumber on their shoulders. This place was a secret hideout that served as their main base.

These two men were only two of many, and more voices joined them.

“Weren’t we meant to be House Denning’s buddies? But they just went ahead and disbanded us without a good reason!”

“We aren’t disbanded yet. Gramps and the duke don’t see eye to eye on something, that’s all.”

“Hee hee. Where did your brain go? It’s clear from their movements that they’re out for our heads, hah!”

“Gramps said that anyone who wants to live on can flee!”

“As if anyone’s gonna do that! Gramps was the one who saved my life—all of our lives. I’ll follow him even into the depths of hell!”

“Are we really going to do the duke in, Gramps?”

Among all the activity, there was only one corner of stillness in the far side of the room. One man sat on a chair, unmoving like a statue. Though everyone called him “Gramps,” he didn’t look particularly old compared to the rest of the men walking about. But everyone knew that his looks were deceiving, hiding an ancient soul within.

The man, “Gramps,” was polishing a crystal ball that someone had handed over to him, and he was mulling over something.

This was the moment the man decided to address his peers. “A piece of advice for everyone: avoid clustering up at Kirsch. Our enemy is House Denning, and they might even have access to rare tools that can track our movements.”

Only a select few citizens of Daryth knew of their existence. They had served the Denning heads from generation to generation and had dealt with the more unethical jobs given to House Denning. Having such hounds on their leash was what made House Denning so feared—this organization was what helped the household maintain their peerless influence within Daryth from generation to generation.

The man continued, “I shall deal with the duke myself. All of you should concentrate on collecting blood. Don’t be negligent. Especially you, One. Do you remember your role?”

“Hee hee... Facing Slowe Denning, right...?”

A nod. “You are the only one capable of this job.”

One cackled. “Him aside, let’s talk about the duke. Do you think he brought the Ring of Authority with him?”

“I suspect he did.”

“Hee hee hee... I can’t wait.”

The man inclined his head. “You are powerful indeed, my dear One, but you wouldn’t be able to put up a fight against the duke if he uses that ring. That being said, he is not the only one with an ace up his sleeve, of course.”

One let out another cackle. “I want a taste of supreme power. On top of that, the best thing about all this is that we don’t have to act at night.”

Another man said jokingly, “Oh, you’re so silly, One. Night is our best friend!”

“...I want to fight under the sun, hee hee.”

One thing connected the people present—their love for this nation. They understood that Daryth needed people like them. People who were willing to get their hands dirty. Each of them were graduates of Kirsch, and they all

wanted a bright future for the Country of Knights.

“Hey, Gramps. Just as planned, the students have started evacuating one after another. But there’s one problem. Some of the more motivated students are staying behind.”

“Give them a big surprise, will you?” the sitting man replied. “Killing, however, is strictly prohibited. This is a battle between us and House Denning. Let’s keep it that way.”

Students were the treasures of a nation. Snuffing out such stars was out of the question for patriots like them.

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The siege began without warning.

The enemy had appeared in the blink of an eye, almost like a gust of lethal wind. But we hadn’t faced the members of Rust, exactly.

An army of golems marched forward towards Kirsch brazenly. Some climbed over the walls, while others came in boldly from the main gates. Golems swarmed the campus like a hive of bees, trampling the magic circles the knights had set up.

Many of the students suffered injuries, but there were no casualties. However, the morale of the students present plummeted heavily.

“...I shouldn’t have joined. What was I even thinking? Why did we choose to meddle with House Denning’s battle?!”

“It’s a miracle that we even survived...”

A despondent atmosphere hung in the air. After the first clash, the students were reduced to shivering wrecks. The Denning knights went around and offered them some words of comfort, saying that this was the norm in conflict.

“Milord... They are one up on us.” Silva sounded grave.

Silva and I were at the frontlines, and we were more concerned about something else.

“Yeah. Those guys gained a foothold while we were distracted by the

golems.”

During the siege of the golems, Rust had taken advantage of our opening and had occupied an area of the campus.

It would probably help if I quickly explained the structure of Kirsch. There was a main street that stretched from the main gates to the heart of the campus. If one looked down the main street from the main gates, the education facilities were clustered on the right side. Among them were facilities such as the library, the experiment buildings, the forge, as well as several chapels—each corresponded to a different sect. Of course, there was also a row of extensive multipurpose school buildings.

Most of the buildings were connected to each other by a network of corridors, and though I had lived on the campus for over a year, I still found places with which I was unfamiliar. Actually, there were a few school buildings that were complete mysteries to me. There was even a rumor that only the headmaster knew the full structure of the entire campus.

“Milord, look at the golem standing guard over there.” Silva frowned. “Its quality is...”

I nodded. “It’s on a whole other level compared to the ones that attacked us earlier.”

Over at the enemy camp, masked men were walking around while golems patrolled their territory in a defensive formation. There was even a golem with a golden suit of armor, though it was probably just for show.

The third-years, who had started out with lion hearts, had completely lost their courage.

“You saw that golem, didn’t you?! It’s frustrating to admit, but we’ll only get in the way if we stick around!”

“The golems guarding their camp are even stronger than the previous ones! Our magic is useless against them!”

Their reaction was understandable. The golems created by Rust were of unprecedented strength in their eyes. My fellow students had probably never come across golems that would explode when they were on the brink of

destruction.

To the left of the main street was the residential area, and Rust had forced our faction to retreat there without a direct confrontation.

“So, the right of the main gates is their territory, while the left is ours,” I muttered. “Makes things pretty simple, don’t you think?”

Silva sighed. “Unfortunately, there’s a limit to the amount of territory we can defend.”

“Right.” The main street was almost like a line partitioning the two factions. “We have more things to protect on our side. The buildings on the right are much easier to rebuild.”

“Does that mean the duke deliberately allowed them to settle on the right?”

“I don’t know whether he planned that far, but perhaps. Either way, at least there’s a silver lining. My fellow students, who were honestly dragging us down, are probably going to evacuate to Yoram after this first round. The army of golems also helped us in the end.”

We wanted to end the conflict as soon as possible, but Rust could take all the time in the world. We couldn’t count on reinforcements because this was House Denning’s problem. The queen and my father didn’t have any motivation to involve more people.

When I came to that conclusion, suddenly, everything clicked. “Ah, I see. That’s why they chose Kirsch.”

Silva tilted his head quizzically. “Hm?”

“It’s nothing. Just talking to myself.”

Kirsch was surrounded by a dense forest, and therefore, it was possible to isolate this place from the rest of the world. What happened here would stay here. That was why my father had only selected the people he could wholeheartedly trust to form an elite squad. *There’s still one unsolved mystery though. I dunno why he included me.*

“Look at that.” I gestured. “Those guys sure did a number on the stuff around here.”

The wave of golems hadn't been anything significant to me. It had only been a warm-up match, so to speak. Rust had only sent in the golems to force the students away, to destroy the magic circles the knights had prepared, and to secure a foothold at Kirsch. Their goal had been obvious.

That was why we had made students group up and had assigned one Denning knight to each student party. House Denning did what we could to protect the lives of the students—to make sure they could return to their families safe and sound. Thanks to our efforts and the lukewarm attacks, there had been zero casualties. All in all, it was a wonderful achievement considering the ridiculous number of golems that had marched in.

I gritted my teeth and spat, "You think I buy that? What the hell was with that fight? It's as if both factions agreed on such a move in advance!"

...As if my father and Rust had planned this from the beginning.

Only one girl knew my father's whereabouts, and it was his personal retainer, Mint.

Locating her had been a tough job. At long last, I spotted her on the top floor of the clock tower, the tallest building in our territory. She was sitting on the windowsill and gazing down—a position fitting for a sniper. It seemed that she had looked for a place with an overlooking view of the entire campus.

"May I help you, Young Master?"

"I want to talk to Father. Where is he?"

"The duke is resting, I am afraid."

"I'm his son."

"The walls have ears. I'm going to keep his location a secret."

I resisted the urge to sigh. "You're as stubborn as a mule. Anyway, I finally figured out why you came to Kirsch as my potential retainer. He wanted you to scout out the terrain of Kirsch before the battle, correct?"

"I knew you would realize eventually. Yes, that's right. Understanding the geography of the battlefield is one of the most important things in warfare,

after all.”

That’s why she came to Kirsch earlier and wandered around so much. She asked Charlotte about the structure of the campus and confirmed it with her own eyes. She was investigating the areas that would give her, a sniper, the most advantages.

“If you insist on not answering me, I could force it out of you, you know.”

“Oh? Do you want to fight me? Young Master, are you looking down on me?”

Mint was a tough nut to crack. She wasn’t swayed at all. “In that case, can you tell me this, at least? What has Father said about the current situation?”

“According to him, that attack was nothing but a small test. They only wanted to drive the students away.”

“Sounds about right. And that’s why I’m suspecting he planned this out with the opposing faction.”

Mint’s reply was a noncommittal silence.

It felt as if we were dancing to Rust’s tune. I couldn’t read anything from Mint’s expression—she was indeed capable as my father’s retainer. Like him, a man of many secrets, she was a good con artist. No wonder she had fooled Sansa for so long.

I continued, “We aren’t going to get anywhere with this conversation. I’ll go ask him directly.”

“I just told you that I won’t disclose his whereabouts to you.”

“That’s fine. I don’t have to ask you anymore.”

After all, my ears had long picked up the sound of faint footsteps heading in our direction.

Mint’s eyes widened. “Your Grace! Why are you here?!”

“Mint. Allow us some privacy. I have not been in such a good mood for a long time.” The man who appeared held a small liquor bottle and a familiar sword in his hands. His eyes shifted to meet mine. “In exchange for Prisma, I was considering answering a few of your questions.”

My father rarely ever indulged in alcohol because of how the drug dulled one's senses. If I remembered correctly, he had strictly prohibited his soldiers from indulging in liquor before battle. But now, even though we were in the midst of war, his face was flushed red from its influence.

I almost did a double-take at him. "I heard you were abstaining from alcohol, Father."

He didn't respond to my comment, instead muttering, "I never thought I would see this sword again in my lifetime."

In one hand he clutched tightly to Prisma, the magic sword I retrieved from the Labyrinth of Cirquista. From the looks of it, this sword kept him company while he drank. After my return from the dungeon, I'd immediately arranged for the sword to be delivered to House Denning. *That was fast. He already received it.*

At long last, he finally offered some semblance of an answer. "I was having a slightly sentimental moment. It was a parting gift to Louis when he left House Denning, so I did not make any effort to reclaim it. To think that it would return to its rightful place at a time like this..."

Louis was my father's brother. Before he'd left the household, they had apparently been on good terms. If Louis had stayed behind, I was certain that he would've ended up as the current Denning head instead. They'd also shared a friendly rivalry, spurring each other on to grow. *My father was the only competitive one, really. He was the one who constantly nagged and challenged Louis one-sidedly.*

"Father, I met Louis in the Labyrinth of Cirquista. He was as chipper as always, even though he was already dead."

"...I see."

"You believe me?" *I know it sounds rich coming from me, but what I said is way too absurd!*

"Even the dead can walk among the living in a place like that, passing strange though it might be elsewhere."

I sulked a little inwardly. *Boooring. I thought he'd be more surprised.*

He continued. "Now, as for the question you raised to Mint... This is a battle between House Denning and Rust. I will not allow any outsiders to interfere. Magna shares the same opinion on this matter."

"You sound more like friends than enemies."

He inclined his head slightly. "The one who holds animosity towards them is the queen. She wishes for nothing less than Magna's heart delivered to her as proof of their destruction."

"Then... What is *your* stance on all this, Father?"

"I am the duke of House Denning. I cannot let foolish sentiments blind my eyes. Her Majesty's orders are absolute."

So it was the queen pulling the strings behind the scenes then. She thought that Rust might make a blunder in the north and fan the flames of war against Dustour.

But as far as I could tell, Rust wasn't a second-rate organization. As long as their leader was around, their agents would investigate Dustour with endless patience and caution. The problem, in the end, was a lack of trust. My father thought that Magna had perfect control over all the members of Rust, who were all eccentric in one way or another, but the queen didn't hold such faith in the organization.

In the anime, the queen had only realized the extent of their abilities after the war had begun, so perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised. The members of Rust had proven their abilities by protecting the inexperienced Shuya and making his Dustour infiltration mission successful.

I frowned slightly. "Why his heart?"

"I have only heard this second-hand from the previous Denning head, but apparently, within Magna's heart burns an eternal flame. An intriguing story, is it not? Well, since we are both here, I suppose I should tell you this much. If you even come across Magna, freeze the man before his henchmen flock over. I have now obtained the weapon that will make that possible."

My father took a swig of his drink as his grip tightened around Prisma's hilt.

"You seem very well-informed about Magna."

"This knowledge is passed down through the generations from one Denning head to the next. Freezing him is the only way to kill the man."

"Does he know that you are aware of his weakness?"

"Of course. Though it sounds simple, Magna is a cautious man, and it will not be easy to force him out of hiding. The war will probably be a drawn-out contest where we whittle down each other's military power bit by bit, but when the time is right, I will finish him."

"Did you bring the Ring of Authority for that precise moment?"

"Yes."

The Ring of Authority, the dull silver ring on my father's ringer, granted its wielder a temporary but magnificent boost in power for a steep price—a magnificent double-edged sword.

My father paused. "Slowe, why are you joining this battle? What do you fight for? In your perspective, you are only an unfortunate outsider dragged into something you have no stake in."

"I would be rather pained if Kirsch is destroyed again. That's all." *It already happened once, and I don't want a repeat of that.*

My father let out a short chuckle—or perhaps it was a scoff. "Now that you mention it, you were the guardian who protected this school from disaster, weren't you? Ah, how about this? If you defeat Magna, I suppose I can name you as my heir. Well? Do you feel...even a bit more motivated?"

"Nope, never. Cross my heart and hope to die. But if you keep that up, I might end up defeating Magna myself."

He was acting strange. To him, Magna was special in many ways. He would never hand over the opportunity of killing him to me, not even as a joke.

"I see," he said at length. "You seem very against the idea." There was the faintest of smiles tugging on the corners of his lips.

As he continued to down his liquor, my father told me more about his relationship with Magna. When my father had taken up the mantle of leading House Denning, the previous duke had informed him about Magna's character, how he should handle Rust, even the superstition that Magna wasn't human. Now, he was passing all of that information down to me, which was rather unusual for a man of many secrets like him. Tradition held that he should only tell his heir.

He's very talkative today. This is a golden opportunity. "Hey. Why did you choose me to stay behind at Kirsch, and not Sansa?"

"You are different from Sansa. If you were ever forced to pick between my life or victory, I am sure you will choose victory without a moment of hesitation."

"That's not..."

"You can. You are able to make the necessary sacrifices to achieve your goal. You...are completely different from Sansa and I."

I fell silent. I couldn't argue against that—after all, I'd done it before. Once, I had sacrificed everything I had to protect the one treasure that was more precious to me than anything else.

We held a strategy meeting that night, "we" being Claude, Silva, Charlotte, and myself.

Charlotte spoke up. "Um, Master Slowe, there's something that bothers me. Why did the headmaster allow Kirsch to become a battlefield? He cares a lot about his students."

"The queen wills it so," I replied. "She wishes for the destruction of Rust, and she is determined to see it done."

"I knew it..." Charlotte muttered slowly. "Since the duke is personally tackling the enemy, I assumed the queen played a big part."

After all, there was only one person in this entire world that could order my father around—the queen of Daryth.

"Ah, that reminds me, Charlotte. Father actually said something pretty

significant to me today. He said that he's willing to make me his heir if I defeat Magna, the leader of Rust."

"How...did you respond, then?"

"I declined his offer without a moment of hesitation."

Soon, I learned that my father hadn't been exaggerating about the intensity of this battle—no, this all-out war.

We destroyed the golems that guarded the enemy territory and invaded their half of the campus. Though we had the option of joining my father's knights and fighting alongside them, I had decided against that plan.

"Milord, are you sure we don't need any more people?" Silva asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. I prefer to fight with people I know like the back of my hand."

Silva raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Can I assume that you have full faith in me, then?"

"You sure can."

Our enemies were very good at hiding inside their territory—they dragged their feet about coming out. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, given that they were agents lurking inside the shadows who had fought their way through endless conflict. *They're probably trying to lure us into areas that'd give them the advantage.*

Silva hummed. "Wow, those guys won't come out at all."

"Well, they have all the time in the world to fight us. They're not in a rush."

After a moment's pause, Silva asked, "Do you think we can win, milord?"

"Who knows? Part of me still doubts Father's true plans and motivations. One thing I know for certain, though, is that if we defeat these guys, Kirsch won't end up in ruins."

"Good point."

"That aside..." I glanced at our surroundings. "I see. Considering that we're all

isolated here, Kirsch is indeed the best battleground they could hope for."

As former graduates, they knew this campus inside and out. Practically every corner was a good hiding spot. I wouldn't be surprised if they had set up traps for invaders. Keeping our guards up, we headed towards a school building. *Since they're playing the hermit game, I'll march right into the places they're probably lurking in.*

"Silva, keep on your toes," I warned. "We don't know where they're going to leap out from."

The campus, which was usually filled with crowds of students bustling about, was now eerily still.

"This kind of fight really isn't my thing." Silva sighed.

"Same here," I admitted reluctantly.

I rolled my shoulders with a crack. On a whim, I glanced up at the sky.

The next moment, there was a crater on the ground before me—in the place I had been standing only a second ago. I covered my nose and mouth with one hand, trying to avoid breathing in the resulting cloud of dust.

"Hee hee!" someone cackled.

This someone had approached us at an alarming speed, sprinting with their body crouched so low to the ground that they had almost seemed like a ferocious beast. When they had gotten close enough, they had aimed a kick at my face from below—an attack from outside my field of vision, identical to Kokto's signature move.

I had only barely evaded it because I had shrouded myself in wind, like Mint had suggested.

"Hee hee! What a surprise! I'm impressed you dodged that!"

The man there wore a mask that resembled the face of a wolf. I recognized it—it was a soul mask, a magic item that had a bloodcurdling effect. If someone other than the wearer took it off, the wearer would lose their face in the literal sense, leaving none of their features intact. It was a disguise that many assassins and bandits were fond of, since revealing their face in such

professions had devastating consequences.

The man cackled. “Why, hello there, my target, Slowe Denning!”

He tied his hair behind his head, and his eccentric laugh was very distinctive. *Ugh, it’s One... I know this guy very well.*

He continued, “This is so fun! This place is perfect for us, hee hee!”

One, who had been the culprit behind the first strike, chased us now like a predator on the hunt, looking for an opening to take us down. He was an acrobat that used his mastery over his body to his full advantage, leading his enemy around by the nose in battle. Among the field team of Rust, he often took the lead, or something close to it.

“Hee hee! Those few decades changed this place entirely, huh? It wasn’t this fancy when I was around!”

The agents of Rust were eerily silent when they were on a mission. However, this man now dashed across the campus like an unchained beast.

I gritted my teeth. “Let’s run into that building for now, Silva! We’re sitting targets if we stay outside!”

“Hee hee hee! Wait up, guys!”

We escaped into one of the school buildings for some cover, but that had been a mistake.

“Don’t bother with them, Silva! We’ll get out from there!”

The men after us fired off one spell after another in ridiculous poses, almost as if they were as flexible as felines. A man with a monkey mask had joined One—they seemed to be buddies—and with wand in hand, he aimed spells through the windows from outside. Though we had run into a building, the situation had only gotten worse.

“How the heck are they moving around like that, milord?!” Silva exclaimed, sounding baffled.

If this were a game of cat and mouse, we were the mice running for our lives. I could have taken the long route of running down the narrow corridor and

dashing down the stairs, but I wasn't a fool. Instead, I smashed through a glass window on the third floor. There was a moment of weightlessness before my feet reached the ground. I had cushioned my fall with magic, and I did the same when Silva jumped out after me.

"Cheers, milord!"

"Those guys are going to jump down soon! Ready, Silva?!"

Immediately, I fired off magical projectiles at the falling silhouettes. A hail of spells rained down on them. To my dismay, they skillfully predicted the trajectory of my spells and dodged them perfectly.

"They're running away!" Silva exclaimed.

"They probably think there's no merit in engaging in a duel of spells with me. A wise move."

Our pursuers didn't want to fight us head-on.

These men had unparalleled ability and a wealth of experience to draw from. They never hesitated even for a moment, making snap decisions on the spot. In battle, they didn't allow their personal emotions to distract them. Even if their orders went against their own preferences, they would carry them out dutifully. *So...*this *is the organization that shouldered the dark side of Daryth, huh?*

"Those two were crazy..." Silva muttered. "On top of that, One was sure a quirky guy with a quirky name."

The members of Rust didn't have names. After their identities were wiped from the official records, they would be assigned numbers. The smaller the number, the more capable the agent.

I turned to face my buddy. "Let's look for their headquarters, Silva. They must have set one up somewhere."

Rust was a mysterious group that only the duke could contact. Nobody knew what they did in their day-to-day life. One theory guessed that they mingled with ordinary citizens and led equally ordinary lives when they weren't on a mission, but that was only a theory.

Aristocrats who had a hand in crimes met an unfortunate end at the hands of

Rust in places away from the public eye, never to see the light of day again. And one of Duke Denning's duties was to make full use of this group.

I didn't even have a moment to catch my breath. Though I wanted to find their lair, One resumed his attack very soon.

"Milord, keep them in place with your spells!"

"I'm trying!" *But I can't even so much as scratch these pesky bastards! They're predicting where my spells will strike!*

"Hee hee, this is so fun! I'll never get to play around under broad daylight!"

Because you're always hiding in the shadows or something? Who cares?!
"Ugh, what is *with* these guys?! This is so frustrating!"

I agreed with Silva, One was pretty crazy. However, my experience from Kokto's "assassination" attempts came in handy after all. With an area of wind around me, I could boost my reaction speed. The unfortunate thing about maintaining this spell consistently was that a sphere with a radius of two meters around me was my limit. The wind couldn't attack or anything—it could only sense moving objects.

But it was effective against Rust. Thanks to this experience, I wasn't defenseless.

"So, if you become the duke, you'll need to manage people like these, huh...?" Silva muttered.

"I want nothing to do with that, thanks! Anyway, change of plans. We'll head somewhere else."

"Huh? Where are we going?"

"We're going on a treasure hunt."

I went to the west side of the main gates—the territory of House Denning. After I crossed the border, Rust stopped chasing me. *Huh, I guess they've caught on to all the enchanted traps waiting for them here.*

"So, milord, what's this about a treasure hunt? What in the world is inside this

door?” Silva frowned, looking at the sign. “It says ‘No Entry’...”

“But it’s fine to go in if you can crack the barrier.”

He paused. “Ah, you’re right, it does say that too. But, uh... Wasn’t this place the residence of the big cheeses at this school?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” I said before walking right inside.

We were at the top floor of the staff building, the headmaster’s office. It was more of a large hall than a room—all the walls of this floor had been knocked out. This was the domain of the headmaster, who was a water mage.

“Uh, milord! The plants in this room are kinda attacking us!”

“It’s the private office of the headmaster.” I shrugged. “That’s what we get for entering without permission!”

“I’ve never heard of such a dangerous place at Kirsch before!”

The plants which the headmaster had raised with love and care were attacking us, the intruders that barged into the room.

“Silva! I gotta look for something, so watch my back, all right?!”

“You’re way too easygoing!”

There was a grand office desk right at the center of the office, likely a place the headmaster frequented. If I wanted to reach that area, I had to endure the assault of trees and shrubs cultivated carefully by the headmaster—they came in a variety of species and sizes, and I honestly didn’t recognize a lot of them.

Behind me, Silva cut down the branches that closed in on us, and while he bought time, I rummaged through the drawers of the headmaster’s desk.

“Found you.”

Please forgive me, Headmaster. I’ll make sure to return this when I’m done so that you won’t find out!

The shrill sound of a flute pierced the air, echoing throughout the campus. This was one of the agreed conditions between the two factions—Rust’s flute would signal the beginning and end of every conflict. I was rather peeved that

they had full control over the length of the battles, but for now, I was glad that the fighting was done for today.

“Uh... House Denning is going to foot the bill for the repairs, right?” Silva muttered.

I stifled a sigh.

He continued, “This...doesn’t look good at all!”

We were at the rooftop of the boys’ dorm, surveying the enemy territory. Though the campus had only recently gone under reconstruction, I could now see many holes in the school buildings and numerous trees knocked onto the ground. It was evident that the clash between our knights and Rust had been brutal.

“I know this isn’t my problem, but...” I placed one hand on my forehead. “I’m getting a headache from looking at all this.”

If the coming battles were just as intense, most of the students participating in the secret bet were going to lose. It wouldn’t end at the destruction of just three buildings.

When I returned to my room from the rooftop, I found Charlotte and Claude waiting there. They gave me a report of the battle today.

“Wait... You sure?” I blinked. “That girl was the star of the battlefield?”

Charlotte nodded. “She’s very awe-inspiring, Master Slowe. I can see why the duke selected her as his retainer.”

Mint, as it turned out, had been the most outstanding warrior today. She had taken down two opponents by sniping them from far away. Apparently, her arrows had pierced right through their chests, and the two agents had died on the spot. The knights had served as a distraction at the front line while Mint had ended the lives of our enemies one by one with deadly precision. It was a simple but effective strategy.

However, I hadn’t gotten to the most horrifying part of the story yet. When the nearby knights had removed the masks to see the faces of the fallen foes,

what had appeared were two blank faces—like those on display mannequins.

Charlotte let out a small whimper of fear. “I-I hope I don’t have a nightmare tonight...”

That mask is so nasty. I mean, yeah, they have to hide their identities and all, but do they really have to go that far?

After a pause, Claude muttered, “In the past, I have heard that mysterious events happen on battlefields where the duke is present. In perilous situations, arrows would appear out of nowhere and save the life of the soldiers.” With a mix of disbelief and wonder on his features, Claude continued, “To think that our goddess of war was such a young girl...”

Huh. She’s already a goddess of war at her age? That makes me curious about how old she was when she first stepped into the world of bloodshed... Wait, this means she secretly snuck out from Sansa’s drills and rushed over to the front lines to support my father, right? In a sense, that sounds even more tiring than taking down enemies in battle.

Well, no wonder she’s my father’s retainer. I don’t want to be on the opposite side of her in conflict. Thanks to her support, we didn’t have a single casualty on our side today, which is an incredible feat for the first day of war.

This was when Silva asked me, “That aside, milord. Why did you go to that room?”

“I was looking for this thing.” As I spoke, I unraveled a rolled-up piece of sheepskin parchment on the table. *This* was why I had snuck into the headmaster’s office.

A large map was illustrated on the parchment, and when everyone else saw the moving dots depicted, there was a hitch in their breaths. Yes—these dots represented the people currently on the campus. *Yahoo for anime knowledge!*

“Th-This thing’s amazing!” Silva exclaimed.

“The only downside is that it’s not that accurate.” I pointed at one part of the map. “Look at the boys’ dorm for example. There are only two dots, but we know there are four of us here. Blindly relying on this map wouldn’t be wise, but it’ll help us keep track of their movements. What I want to know is the

location of their headquarters."

Rust knew who they were up against—the elites of House Denning. Like us, they must have prepared a respectable collection of healing potions and precious magic items. And of course, they had to store all that somewhere. If possible, I wanted to destroy their cache of supplies as soon as I could.

I looked up from the map. "Claude, Charlotte. I'll leave this with you two. I want you to locate the enemy headquarters."

The map had been crafted for the headmasters of this school. With this, they could observe the movements of their students. However, the map was roughly a hundred years old, and Kirsch had been renovated and expanded upon many times since then.

In other words, to find the enemy base, one would have to compare the enemy movements in real life with the dots on the map. And this was a job only Claude and Charlotte could do—tedious work was one of Claude's specialties, and Charlotte was very knowledgeable about the current layout of the campus.

"So, Claude. You wanted to chat about something."

Claude had asked me to come out into the corridor. Inside my room, Charlotte was staring so hard at the map that she might burn a hole in it with her gaze alone, and Silva was already fast asleep.

"I might be overthinking matters, but there was something that bothered me when the golems attacked Kirsch."

"Go on."

Claude hesitated. "Back then, we had not realized the severity of the situation. Thus, I went outside for a brief moment with Charlotte to observe what was happening, and..." Claude took a deep breath. "...when a golem saw Charlotte, I think it backed off."

Chapter 4: The Duke's Decision

A few days had passed since the real battle had begun. We were currently at a stalemate—for every step forward, we were forced to take a step back. Rust hadn't been too proactive about attacking us. Probably to show off their prowess, or at least that was what our knights had concluded. Rust were displaying their value and how useful they could be, forcing us to realize that their destruction was a steep loss for House Denning.

However, other than my father, no one knew whether that theory was correct or not.

The cathedral had transformed into the headquarters of our knights, and right now, tension and frustration were high in the air.

One knight yelled, "Are they making fun of us?! They aren't even taking the battle seriously!"

Another knight tried to placate the former. "Cool it. Overall, they've suffered more losses than we have."

Our enemies had practically reduced my father's knights into their playthings. But it wasn't because the knights were incapable or anything—I hadn't managed to defeat anyone either. Because of this, the knights were rather stressed. *What can I say? I should've known that most of my father's knights have a one-track mind for battle. I can understand their frustration, though.*

One knight clenched his hand into a tight fist. "No amount of interrogation can pry an answer out of any of them! They simply refuse to tell us where Magna is!"

Rust's members shared bonds more robust than even steel. No matter what we did to them, they remained stubbornly silent. None of them would disclose the location of Magna—according to them, even they were unaware. Their loyalty towards Magna likely overshadowed their loyalty to my father.

All the knights were doing their own thing. Some were resting in a group, while others had looked for unoccupied rooms to rest in privacy. There was

never any conflict at night, one of the many agreed-upon conditions between my father and Magna. *I call it an agreement, but it was more of a one-sided declaration those guys made.*

But what could we do other than to accept their demands? After all, it was necessary if we wanted to hunt every last one of them at Kirsch.

Rust was filled with insane people who didn't fear death. I stifled an internal sigh. *I never thought I'd end up fighting those guys.*

"Milord, Charlotte and Mister Claude sure seem to be having a lotta trouble," Silva commented.

"We wouldn't be stuck in limbo like this if it was that easy to locate their base. Silva, let's go back to my room."

Even after our battle for the day was over, the agents in the enemy territory were still on the move. According to Charlotte, who had been observing the map closely, she even suspected that the members of Rust weren't getting any sleep.

As I walked, I glanced over at the mountains of rubble and let out a strained chuckle. "Sheesh, only a few days have passed, but Kirsch is already like this... We haven't even found their base yet."

It was as if a pack of rowdy monsters had lived on the campus for a year. Kirsch was practically in ruins. I was morbidly curious about how the evacuated students and staff would react when they saw all the destruction of their newly restored school.

"But... Against Rust, this is good news for us..." I muttered.

Our enemies excelled at hiding behind cover or inside buildings. Of course, we could do the same, but Rust was superior in this aspect.

In enemy territory, there was already a school building that had been knocked down entirely. *So that's the commotion I heard yesterday. Oof, can't imagine what went on there.*

When I returned to my room, I found Charlotte and Claude staring intently at the map. They had been observing the moving dots on the map since the morning for hints that pointed towards the enemy base.

Claude sighed. “Lord Slowe, I am going to lose my mind at this rate.”

I nodded sympathetically. “I feel you, Claude. I’d never want to be stuck with such a job, but it’s worth it.”

That kicked off our nightly strategy meeting. Silva grumbled about the actions of our enemies while Claude lamented the work he was stuck with, claiming that he might go cross-eyed at the drop of a hat.

Charlotte, meanwhile, shared information she had heard from Mint. “Mint told me that at the moment, our goal is to slowly but steadily deplete their forces. They have roughly thirty agents inside their organization, a little more than what we have.”

That was more or less how this night went. My father and his knights knew that my group was acting on our own. Though a part of me thought that combining our forces would be the better choice, my father had declared that we were better left to our own devices, and his knights had obeyed him without question.

“Makes sense to me. Well, it’s not like we can win against them with a suicide squad or by deploying all our forces at once.” I shrugged.

“Not to mention, our enemy general, that Magna guy, hasn’t shown up at all.” Silva muttered.

My father hadn’t joined the front line either, but it was for a very different reason.

Claude added, “Lord Slowe, Rust’s general seems to want a one-on-one duel with the duke, but the duke rejected such an unreasonable request.”

“Yeah, I figured.” I nodded. *In the unlikely scenario that my father meets an unfortunate end...it’d be a big blow to this nation.*

I knew that he was currently reserving as much strength as possible for the eventual showdown with Magna, because he wanted to end Magna’s life with

his own hands.

“Ah!” Charlotte gasped. “I promised to go on a walk with Mint soon. See you guys later!”

“Have fun, Charlotte.” I smiled.

Mint often accompanied Charlotte during meals for the past few days. Observing the map wasn’t my retainer’s only job—I had asked her to fish out information from Mint as well. Ever since the war had begun, Charlotte had mostly been stuck inside this room. Mint, meanwhile, had stationed herself on the highest point in our territory as our sniper, providing support from there. Both of them probably felt like they needed a breath of fresh air.

Mint apparently also wanted a friend around her own age, so she had welcomed Charlotte with open arms. *Actually, those two hit it off from the beginning.* The younger girl’s identity had been a secret even from the knights that answered directly to my father. She seemed to be in somewhat of a complicated situation.

Silva frowned a little. “I’ve been wondering for a while, but why is the duke’s retainer so eager to share information with us? Don’t you think she’s a little too cooperative, milord?”

I shrugged. “Who knows?”

“She’s suspicious. Maybe there’s a catch.”

I gave Silva a disapproving look. “Hey, she’s on our side, you know.”

Looking back, the girl had been helping me ever since she had arrived at Kirsch. It hadn’t even been hard to deduce her identity.

Claude, who had placed a hand over his eyes to rest the entire time, spoke up. “I actually heard about that from Charlotte today. Mint claims that she is trying to curry favor with you, Lord Slowe.”

“...Favor?” I inclined my head in thought.

Claude nodded. “According to her, she thinks that you are the type who would repay her in double. She seems to be a calculating girl.”

By now, I had mostly figured out the schedule of our enemy's attacks. Each battle would start when the sun was at its highest point in the sky and end in the evening.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, time to beat someone up. If I come out with my hands empty again, I bet my father and the knights are going to mock me for it!"

The shrill sound of a flute, as always, signaled the start of the clash. It was so loud that it even reached the central area of the campus. *It's probably a magic item.*

"What's our objective today, milord?" Silva asked.

"We're gonna defeat that annoying wolf mask guy!"

"Oh, that sounds perfect! He keeps jumping around us like a grasshopper, and he's been getting on my nerves!"

In the anime, the man with the wolf mask had been the only named character of Rust's field team. He had been especially good at surviving, even among his peers, and he felt like a berserk warrior who was only interested in a good fight. Most annoying of all, he was tenacious! *And that guy has his sights on me. I'm not a happy camper!*

When we stepped into hostile territory, I couldn't help but stare at the devastating scenery.

After a long pause, Silva muttered, "Yikes, it's really bad over here."

"Even an outsider like you would think that, huh?"

"I can't let the students see this." Silva shook his head slowly.

"Agreed. The longer this fight lasts, the more severe the destruction."

Places where I had studied every day were reduced to a mere shadow of their former glory. The west side occupied by House Denning wasn't too affected, but the east side was unbearable to look at. Rust continued to destroy the architecture even when they weren't fighting us. The school was completely unrecognizable. I knew that Rust did this deliberately to create better hiding places by changing up the terrain.

Suddenly, Silva halted his footsteps. “Milord, please stop for a moment.” He furrowed his eyebrows slightly. “I think...something just moved over there.” He had sensed something inside the debris.

I’d sensed movement as well. Some creature was wriggling below the debris.

Without warning, the pile of rubble exploded, throwing up a cloud of dust and dirt, blocking my vision. Silva had a coughing fit. I manipulated a wind spell to blast the cloud away.

However...

“The enemy isn’t there,” I muttered, sensing an abrupt presence behind me.

When I stepped aside to dodge the knife thrown down at me, the man revealed himself with a cackle. “You dodged me again!” It was One, the man who wore a wolf mask.

He only appeared for a brief moment—after a blink, he was gone again.

I clenched my jaw, feeling rage bubbling up towards the people that had caused all this wreckage. I knew I was walking into a trap, but I chased after him into the building he ran into. After climbing up a flight of stairs, I stepped into the corridor. *Second floor.* This school building was familiar to me—I had often attended lectures here, but for a moment, I thought I had walked into the wrong place.

The windows had been shattered, and there were big, gaping holes in the walls that revealed the outside scenery. The ceiling had caved in, and I could peer into the floor above. Our knights must have fought here before.

...Wow. You know, tearing it down and rebuilding it might be cheaper than repairing the building at this point.

“Silva!” I hissed. “There are several people hiding here!”

“Milord, I sense them...in the classroom over there! Please do the honors!”

“Of course!”

I knocked down the wall violently with a spell without uttering another word. One of my strengths was my ability to cast spells of this caliber without any preparation. Through the wall, I could see the agents inside the nearby

classroom. I had likely caught them off guard by opening a giant hole in the wall.

Among them, I spotted One, who had been Shuya's greatest ally during his Dustour infiltration. With an inhuman agility, the man evaded my spell, but one of the ambushers lagged behind. When I had blasted the wall away, they had been in the blast radius and had crashed right into the far wall. I could see them clearly—an open target.

"All right, first one down!" Silva yelled as he attacked the unfortunate agent.

"Hee hee!" One cackled. "Hey, you guys are starting to tear this place apart as well!"

"Yeah, but it's nothing compared to what you people have done!" I shouted back. If I tried to preserve the campus, I couldn't fight on even footing with Rust. I had long lost such idealistic thoughts.

"Hee hee hee... You seem to be very sensitive to our presence, Slowe Denning. Have you fought people like us before?"

"I don't owe you an answer."

Our target, One, leapt outside the window in a fluid motion. I followed his movements with my eyes. He kicked the building's wall once to slow his descent before landing elegantly on the ground. Cackling, he looked at us before he slipped into the shadows.

"Milord, that 'One' guy keeps getting in our way. He's been following us everywhere."

"Yeah, it's annoying." I sat down on a desk in the classroom and let out a big sigh. "Only warriors above a certain level can stand their ground against Rust. I finally understand why Father was so obsessed with quality over quantity. If my siblings were around, they'd likely be blinded by ambition, chase too far, and end up on our casualty list very quickly."

Silva had eliminated an agent with one strike, but that agent paled in comparison to One in terms of ability. *Still, I should be proud that we managed to take down one enemy in the presence of One's interference.*

The man appeared once again when I stepped out of the building. “Hee hee... You’re not going to get any rest today, my good fellows!”

“Ah, what a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing,” I replied.

When I first met One, he had declared that I was his target. From what little information I had, my father’s knights also seemed to have specific agents assigned to them. *But something doesn’t seem right today...*

One had attacked us incessantly, sometimes even running across the wall of a building if he had to. However, he suddenly stopped stalking us like a shadow. Instead, he was running away and leading us on a chase.

“Milord, something smells fishy.”

“Right. He’s clearly leading us to a specific location.”

We quickly moved out of the residential area, eventually ending up at an open field with no buildings or trees to block our vision. If we crossed this field, we would find ourselves at a vast farm.

Kirsch didn’t solely rely on outside sources for supplies, which were transported onto our campus with horse wagons. Around half of the food we had consumed every day was produced locally. The farm area was a neutral ground—it didn’t belong to either faction.

“Hee hee, consider this a reward for surviving this long. You’ll get to meet Gramps!”

Through One’s mask, I saw his eyes glint fiercely before he vanished without a trace. Until now, Rust had avoided fighting in this area because of the lack of obstacles they could hide behind. They focused their tactic on guerrilla warfare, and this terrain wasn’t suitable at all.

“I see someone over there...” Silva said in a hushed whisper.

“Keep your guard up, Silva.”

There were several enormous ponds inside the farm that acted as sources of water. Piers connected these ponds, and someone was right in the middle of one of these bridges. He was sitting down casually and *fishing* without a care in the world. His back was hunched over like the curve of a bow, and there was a

cup of liquid right next to him.

I muttered, “I’ll head over alone.”

“Milord, is that possibly...?”

“He might be the guy we’ve been looking for this entire time.”

All students and staff of Kirsch knew that the campus was a war zone. Then, was that elderly man a civilian who had somehow ended up at Kirsch? *Hah, I’m fooling no one with that joke.* There was probably no point in trying to creep up without a sound or being paranoid about an ambush. He was clearly waiting for me.

“Magna,” I called out to the elderly man facing away from me. He was still focused on his fishing. *His subordinates are fighting the knights in the heart of the campus. What a happy-go-lucky guy.*

“Why, hello there, son of Bal. May I help you?”

●

Mint had told me that Magna was a master of disguise. Though my father had been Rust’s direct contact, even he didn’t know Magna’s true appearance. *In that case, this form is probably fake as well.*

The elderly man looked completely at ease, enjoying a lazy day of fishing. He didn’t look like the powerful villain out for the Denning head’s life.

“Make your subordinates retreat right now,” I said coolly.

“Now, don’t be in such a rush. You could at least let me introduce myself first.”

“Don’t waste my time with that. Stop them. Now.”

Does this guy know who I am? If I take him captive here, the battle will end in moments.

“Oh, don’t be so tense. You’ll scare all the fish away.”

“There aren’t any fish in this pond to begin with.”

“Ah. That’s why I haven’t managed to catch anything for the past few days. So, Bal’s son, why in the world are you interrupting the secret hobby of this old

bag of bones, hm?”

“Mind games don’t work on me. You’re so old that people say you aren’t human, you know.”

“Ha ha.”

I pointed the tip of my wand at his neck, which looked like a withered branch. If he showed signs of any odd behavior, I was going to bind him.

I wouldn’t be surprised if Magna knew that I was a mage who could cast without uttering a single word. However, if I didn’t act as if I was in control, I had the sinking feeling that the elderly gentleman’s aura might swallow me whole. Shivers ran down my spine during this entire exchange for no apparent reason.

As if to shatter the moment of stillness, Magna said, “What if I said ‘no’?”

“I’ll defeat you. Right here, right now.”

“You can’t. You can’t defeat me, son of Bal... What a pity.”

The elderly man looked so thin that he could pass for a dead tree. He wasn’t doing anything too special, either. He used his wand in place of a fishing rod and had hung a thread from it, even though there wasn’t any fish in sight. But there was something hair-raising about him.

Neither of us moved. I didn’t know whether his words were what he truly believed or a way to mislead me.

“How about you see that for yourself right now?”

“Princess Charlotte.”

My heart skipped a beat.

He continued, “See? Those two words are enough to fix you in place, aren’t they?”

My instinctive reaction was to look up at the sky, feeling helpless. “Damn it.” *I didn’t expect this old grandpa to mention Charlotte.*

“Why, you’re very honest, son of Bal. In my eyes, that’s a virtue. Please don’t lose that along the way.”

How much does this old guy know? No... Considering how confident he is, he must *know Charlotte’s true identity. But I shouldn’t panic. I assigned a capable guard to Charlotte. Claude is with her every single hour of the day.*

“If you dare make a move on Charlotte, your whole organization is done for,” I hissed.

Claude was an experienced bodyguard and a man who could adapt to any situation that sprung on him. *But at the same time, if this old guy puts his mind to it, I’m sure that he’ll kidnap Charlotte effortlessly. I mean, he’s already leading Daryth around by the nose with his abilities and disguises alone.*

In a calm voice, he replied, “I have no intention of harming you two. None at all. It isn’t even possible for me to begin with. After all, you aren’t her only sentinel—even the Great Spirit Altanger is with her. When I invaded Kirsch, I wanted to see the Great Spirit out of intrigue, and so approached them. That was when they gave me a warning: if I try to touch even a hair on her head, the spirit will kill me instantly.”

The old man then let out a hoarse, throaty laugh, as if he found the whole exchange funny.

Wait... Altanger warned him in person? That has never happened before... This Magna guy must be that much of a threat, then. And hey, that Great Spirit didn’t inform me that they came back from Cirquista! But more importantly... I didn’t expect this man to even know *about the Great Spirit of Wind.*

I stared at the man warily. “Magna, how much...do you even know?”

“I know a great many things about this nation. In fact, you could say that I am the top expert on the affairs of House Denning. You might not know this, but I was the one who told your father to raise you as heir to the seat of House Denning. I knew you were special the moment I laid my eyes on you.”

Well, damn. I have a feeling that he already knows all my goals and motivations. In the corner of my vision, I spotted Silva skipping stones on the opposite side of the pond. *I swear, nothing can faze that guy. He's so carefree.*

"Be at ease, son of Bal. I have also strictly prohibited my subordinates from getting any ideas about Princess Charlotte. Of course, I didn't inform them about her true identity."

"You think I can just take your words at face value?" I stared at him incredulously.

"I believe you have come across evidence that proves my words are trustworthy. I turned a blind eye to her before, haven't I? Did you not receive a report from your knight about the first day of our battle? No, you must have. That event happened because of my orders."

I furrowed my eyebrows slightly, recalling the incident Claude had mentioned. *So that's why... This man arranged for the golem to back off deliberately to prove to me that he has no ill intent towards Charlotte.*

I didn't reply to him, but he began moving on to the next topic. "I have a request of you," he said. "Will you please leave this school?"

"Huh. Can I assume that's your way of admitting that you can't win against me?"

"From what I have heard, until this point, you have overcome countless situations that would seem hopeless in anyone else's eyes. I'll be honest, you are the one person I can't read. I want you to leave this area as soon as you can, if at all possible. You know, there's one perfect and peaceful solution. We wouldn't be fighting if you guys stop being so hostile towards the empire."

This civil war had begun because the queen had learned of Magna's intentions. If this man made an oath to the queen that he wouldn't provoke Dustour, the queen might reconsider her decision to destroy Rust. Problem solved in a single stroke.

For the first time, Magna's hand stilled. He stopped fishing and looked at me. "If you are serious about that proposal, you disappoint me. I will have to reassess my evaluation of you." His eyes bore into mine. "A peace built on a

shaky foundation will not last. If we wait until they make the first move, it will be too late. We need to make preparations in the shadows so that Dustour does not take interest in us. My people alone can accomplish such a mission."

I shut my mouth, listening in noncommittal silence.

He continued, "Dustour is never short of causes for rebellion. One faction may wish for peace, but what if someone else with influence sets their sights on the south? Tragedy awaits. We cannot put all our eggs in one basket—we need to be prepared for the worst, even if it means exploiting their weaknesses."

The Dustour Empire was simply too vast. Naturally, there would be places that would escape the attention of the Great Spirit of Darkness, and those places would only grow in number as Dustour expanded.

There were still nations in the north that resisted Dustour's reign, and it was only a matter of time before the empire captured those territories. At the moment, the conquered nations aimed their hostility at Dustour, the invaders, but if they ever sought out a peaceful land in the south to seize and migrate to... The future Magna feared might come to pass.

"Magna, I understand where you're coming from, but I'm certain that our queen has considered such possibilities as well."

"She only has eyes for the present. It's clear that her priority is to maintain her absolute authority within the southern territories."

Okay, good point. Now that Dustour isn't a threat anymore, Daryth might fall from her pedestal in the south. The queen probably wants to focus her efforts into maintaining our powerful status. In summary, these guys want to prepare for the future, while the queen places importance on the present. I guess they were bound to butt heads eventually.

Slowly, as if to drill his words into my head, Magna continued, "If the duke truly wants the best for this nation, he should act now."

I chewed on my lip.

He inclined his head slightly. "If what I know of you is accurate... I am sure you understand what I am getting at."

Father. I can't do this. I can't argue against this grandpa. He's scarily perceptive about the true danger that Dustour poses. It's as if he has knowledge of the anime like I do. So that's why Father showed mixed emotions at times when he talked about the destruction of Rust...

The elderly man closed his eyes briefly. "Even if he has to go against the will of the queen, as Duke Denning, it is his duty to act in the interests of this country. If he cannot manage it, he is unfit for his role—worthless."

Huh. In other words, he wants Father to disobey the queen's orders. That aside, wow... I never knew there was such a shrewd patriot inside Daryth.

He looked into my eyes. "I repeat, son of Bal. I am sure you of all people would understand me. The queen is only human—she makes mistakes."

I was honestly at a loss for words.

"Can you pass on a message to Bal? Tell him to make decisions by himself—tell him to decide whether he will kill me or let me go."

I'm beat, Father. This grandpa... It's almost as if he can see the future.

My father's retainer, Mint, was at her usual spot at the top floor of the clock tower. When I arrived, two guards were standing watch while Mint narrowed her eyes as she adjusted her bow and arrow.

I only watched her without a sound. I wondered what the world looked like in her eyes as she finally locked onto her target. She drew her bow, and not a moment later, an arrow shot out from her hands, so swift that it sliced winds cleanly into two.

She lowered her bow slightly. "I missed. After the first day, our enemies seem to have grown remarkably wary of me."

Mint had always provided support during our battles from this place. Of course, when there was a sniper who always stayed at the same spot, she was bound to become a target of our enemies as well. She needed guards to ensure her safety.

She finally addressed me, but her attention was still on the unfolding battle.

Mint stood upright with her bow poised and ready. “May I help you, Young Master? As you can see, I’m pretty busy over here.”

“Well, I heard you were trying to curry favor with me, so...” I paused. “Ah, sorry, but could you two give us some privacy? Don’t worry, I’ll take over and protect her while you guys are away.”

Looking disconcerted, the two knights left the area. As for Mint, she maintained her textbook posture—only her eyeballs darted around. If I were to be blunt, it was a creepy sight. However, this girl’s spells had saved countless knights in battles. *She looks so delicate... Where does she hide all that power?*

I took a deep breath. “I met Magna just now.”

The moment she heard that sentence, Mint’s body stiffened. She turned around, grabbed my shoulders, and leaned forward with feral eyes like a cornered lion. “Where is he?!” she hissed.

“Sorry, but I can’t tell you. I promised him.”

There was a crazed look in her eyes as she scrutinized my expression.

I continued, “I was honestly curious about the man my father has been chasing in a frenzy, but I never expected him to be an elderly man with such a unique aura.”

Mint finally muttered, “I see now. That’s why the duke said it was better to allow you to move freely on the battlefield. I can’t believe you made contact with that man so quickly... So? What did you two talk about?”

“This battle is meaningless. Magna has no intention of sabotaging this nation.”

My conversation with Magna had mostly centered around lighthearted small talk. He had practically no killing intent, and I hadn’t managed to work up the motivation to attack the man. *And...I find it hard to believe that an elderly man like him shoulders the darkness of Daryth.*

“I’ve heard that Magna is a man who is apt at making people lower their guards. People who have met him in the flesh would never associate him with the leader of Rust, a group of assassins. But mark my words, that man is more

like a monster than a human. Even the queen fears that abomination."

"I have a different opinion. The queen and Magna *can* reach mutual agreement." *Uh, I know I just said that, but...it's probably impossible.* Thus, I revised my statement with a "...Maybe?"

"Could you be a little more decisive?" Mint stared at me, unimpressed.

I mean, you can't blame me for taking his side. I know the future that happened in the anime, so I understand Magna's goals better than anyone else. Dustour is a vast empire that has annexed numerous smaller nations, but because of its size, it's built on a brittle foundation.

Magna thinks we should investigate and pinpoint Dustour's weaknesses as soon as possible, and I completely agree. However, our queen thinks we can't afford to gamble with information warfare by sending spies into Dustour.

Mint shook her head. "The duke has received commands from the queen, and he could never make peace with Magna. Anyway, Young Master, tell me Magna's location. I have curried more than enough favor with you to earn that information, right?"

"Oh? For example?"

"I persuaded the duke to show support towards your relationship with Charlotte."

"Ack." *Okay, I owe her big time for that. I'll be honest—I thought my father would bring Charlotte up the moment he arrived at Kirsch. He would say that she would be baggage during this battle or that she's fired from her job as my retainer.*

However, he never talked about her, and part of the reason might be Mint's assistance. I owe her a lot if that's the case...

But in the end, I remained silent. Figuring that I still wasn't going to give her an answer, Mint picked up her bow once again and raised it. "You have it so good, Young Master. It's unfair. House Denning and those who work for House Denning never get to relish in the joys of youth."

She released her hold on the string, and an arrow flew off into the distance.

There was a scowl on her face, probably because she didn't hit her target.

I...know. The mundane joys of youth don't belong in the life of a Denning. It's the fitting price we pay for our lives of privilege. We are taught that over and over starting from the day we were born. My siblings, including Sansa, wholeheartedly believe that's the life they ought to lead.

A moment later, Mint muttered, "That goes for me, too. My father always used to say that to me. 'Serving House Denning is the happiest life possible.' If you look at the soldiers in the army, you can see that my father was telling the truth. I'm probably very fortunate since I have the opportunity to be the duke's right-hand woman. I know that, yes, but I'm still envious of you. And...in the bottom of her heart, Lady Sansa shares that opinion."

Yeah, Sansa likely does. When she arrived at Kirsch, she practically had stars twinkling in her eyes as she looked around the campus.

Mint's eyes were still trained on the campus below us as she continued, "I'll give up on asking about Magna's whereabouts for now. But allow me to say one thing, Young Master. I believe there are some things only you can achieve since you have such invaluable experience. You can accomplish things that your siblings can't."

"Where did that come from? Get to the point already."

"If possible, please prevent the duke from meeting Magna."

I frowned slightly. "Why...?"

"The duke has already decided the outcome of this war, and we are only heading there, step by step. He plans to end it in a draw—he will kill Magna and die in the process."

Those were the last words I ever wanted to hear.

Mint hadn't given me any more information after that. She had admitted that she didn't have any evidence, but due to her experience as his retainer, she had claimed that she had a good grasp of my father's way of thinking. That didn't make her claims any less credible, however, because being a personal retainer meant that her master spent more time with her than his own family. She

should understand him better than anyone else.

And naturally, being a fellow personal retainer, Charlotte was the first one who noticed that I was acting odd.

She looked at me worriedly. “Master Slowe, you seem strange today... Did something happen?”

I didn’t want to lie to her. “I... Apparently, Father has planned his own death so that he can kill Magna without fail.”

Charlotte’s eyes grew wide, and her breath hitched.

After all the battles against Rust so far, I’ve noticed something. The abilities of my father, Mint, and his knights are the best by far in Daryth. I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said that their combat prowess is enough to rival an army. But against Rust, I can’t be certain of our victory, which shows how abnormal they are.

Not a second later, Charlotte took a deep breath. Then, cheer returned to her face. In fact, she looked even more merry than she usually was as she beamed at me. “That means you have to work really hard, right? I’ll also work much, much harder!”

Ha ha ha, just like I thought, Charlotte knows me best. I have to declare this once again: she is my only retainer, and the best person for that role.

“Thanks, Charlotte. You know what? All my worries seem insignificant now.” I smiled. “And I’ve made up my mind.”

I would kill Magna today and put an end to this war. When I finished him off, Charlotte and I were officially free to do whatever we wanted. *Huh. When I put it that way, it’s actually pretty simple.* I felt as if my mind was much clearer.

Though I personally agreed with Magna’s stance, at the end of the day, I was always going to take my father’s side.

I saw my father from behind when I arrived at the cathedral. He was talking to each individual knight, likely because he knew that today was going to be the most difficult and critical point of our war.

I only stared at his back silently. After all, I couldn't just march up to him and ask, *Are you planning your own death?*

For once, Mint was in the cathedral as well. Our eyes met, and she looked away. *Maybe she hates me now. She mentioned she was envious of my freedom, of how I came to Kirsch despite the many fetters of House Denning. But... To be honest, I earned it by throwing away everything else I owned back then.*

"Oh?" Silva wriggled an eyebrow. "Well, well! You're planning something big, aren't you, milord? You have that look on your face today."

"Yeah, I am. I discovered a tiny reason I have to work hard for."

"So, what's on the menu today? Don't tell me... Are you going on a treasure hunt again? No way, right?"

"I'm going to take Magna's life."

Silva whistled, sounding impressed. "Sounds great. Let's do this."

Until now, I had paid little attention to Magna, thinking that it was the knights' job to kill the enemy commander. However, things were different today. My heart thrummed in slight anticipation, perhaps because Mint had told me about my father's grim determination.

"Silva, watch my back."

"Of course! You only have to worry about what's in front of you, milord!"

I pressed forward. One by one, I explored every building that I hadn't investigated before, looking for Magna. I had met the elderly man yesterday and had a taste of his unique aura. He was an intriguing man who was different from his subordinates, who usually only barely suppressed their killing intent. Even if his appearance was different today, I was sure that I could recognize him by his distinctive feel.

A cackle entered my ears. "Hee hee hee! What did you talk about with Gramps, huh?"

As I scouted out the enemy territory, the usual guy appeared once again. I

didn’t want to chat with him, focusing instead on the battle at hand. He rested his short spear on his shoulder, but he wasn’t as inattentive as his gesture implied. The next moment, he thrust his spear towards us. However, we didn’t back off, because I had different plans today.

He grinned savagely. “Heh! You have a completely different look in your eyes today! Now this is getting interesting!”

I couldn’t fully dodge all of his strikes. The tip of his spear grazed the side of my torso, and blood gushed out. A few injuries were unavoidable if I wanted to stop this man.

Instantly, I cast a spell without any incantation. A powerful arc of wind tore his spear into shreds. Emotion flickered across his eyes, and I could tell that there was a shift in his attitude. Since I had watched the anime, I knew that this spear was One’s favorite combat partner.

That was when I heard Silva’s slightly alarmed voice. “Bad news, milord!” Another fighter with a slender body like One joined the fray, their face shrouded with a cat-like mask. “A bunch of other agents have arrived!”

Usually, each agent stuck to one specific target, like how One had consistently pestered me. They must have shifted their attention onto me because I was charging forward without caring about the obstacles in my way.

“Keep going, Silva!” I yelled. “Magna won’t come out unless we back him into a corner! Brace yourself, we can’t avoid their poison! But don’t worry, even if you get poisoned, I’ll heal you before you die!”

So far, we had been extremely diligent about avoiding their attacks, and for good reason—their equipment was covered in a layer of special venom that even magic couldn’t cure. Before the war had begun, my father had warned us to avoid injuries as much as possible because we were going to be in it for the long haul.

Both Silva and I were well-aware of that fact, but we had a goal in mind, and we were prepared to get hurt in the process. No matter how much blood we shed, it didn’t matter.

“Milord, taking on three people at once is too much! And we need to stop the

bleeding soon!”

Ugh, I can’t dodge this attack. But if I can put two of them out of commission, it’s worth it. I clenched my jaw, preparing to strike.

Not a moment later, a trail of light sprinted across my vision like a shooting star blazing in the night sky. And then another. Then another. A hail of flashing projectiles appeared before my eyes, rushing towards the agents that faced us.

Instantly, the agents jumped aside, but they were too slow. Something pierced right through their thighs—arrows.

But the performance of light was far from finished. Arrows were fired in succession, and some stabbed the wall of the nearby school building.

“Their archer spotted us!” one agent yelled. “Retreat into cover! We’re fighting with a disadvantage out in the open!”

I whipped my head around and looked at the top floor of the clock tower, where our savior was likely standing.

“She truly is our goddess of war!” Silva chirped.

“Can’t argue with that.”

Though I couldn’t see Mint from this distance, I was heartened by our reliable comrade. Our enemy also had to invest their attention onto her, which made things easier for us.

Soon, One appeared once again with his backup short spear. “Hee hee! I can’t let you take another step further!”

He lunged forward like a beast and thrust his spear forward at sonic speed. I reacted immediately by jumping backward while constructing a spell in my mind. “I’ve had enough of you—I’ll crush you!”

I didn’t have the luxury of adding an incantation to boost the power of my spell. I faced my palm towards the man to make my counterattack. Answering my summons, several miniature windstorms manifested.

However, the man seemed to have seen right through me, and he dodged my attack by a hair’s breadth.

With a smug cackle, he stabbed his short spear at me so quickly that his arm was a blur. This time, his flurry of attacks began, and he nearly landed direct hits several times. However, Silva used his spear to parry his attacks at the last second.

"Milord, I know we've already established this, but this guy is crazy! Let's ignore him and press on!"

I suppressed a sigh. "Unfortunately, I don't think he has any plans of letting us slip by."

As I spoke, I readied my next attack—a towering whirlwind mixed with large pebble-like chunks of ice. My spell was lethal, anyone with eyes could tell with a single glance. One, however, didn't falter even in the slightest.

My ears picked up the sound of conflict echoing out from every direction around us.

"Don't lag behind the young master!" a knight roared.

Silva and I weren't the only ones fighting deep in enemy territory—most of the Denning knights were facing off Rust's agents as well. There was something different about their attitude. The knights had seen my unyielding march across the battlefield, and likely because of that, they knew that today was a critical point in the war.

Both factions had chipped away at each other's forces until now, but it was about time that grew old—the generals of both sides should make an appearance soon.

"Milord, shouldn't we wait for the others to catch up first?!" Silva yelled.

"No, this is all according to plan!"

I was aware that Rust was treating me like a particularly undesirable plague. That was likely why One had clung to me whenever I was on the battlefield. *And now, your biggest headache is deep inside your territory, Rust. You won't ever get a better chance to finish me off.*

Of course, I was certain that my target had figured out my plans at this point. I was the bait—now, I had to play the waiting game. Would my "big fish" bite the

hook?

“Silva, stop,” I barked when we arrived at a church deep inside enemy territory—the place where I had shared the joy of reunion with Claude and Silva.

A man walked out of the church. Yesterday, he had appeared as a gentlemanly old man with arms as thin as shriveled twigs and a neck that could snap if the wind blew on him hard enough. But today, he looked like a completely different person.

I fixed my gaze on him. “Magna.”

Silva’s eyes widened. “Milord, you... You’re joking, right? *That’s* Magna?”

“I know it’s hard to believe, Silva, but that’s the man we’re looking for.”

The man looked like your average hardworking farmer—a mild-mannered man, much younger than the one we’d spoken to yesterday, leading a peaceful life while working on his fields with a hoe. A man you would see anywhere inside Daryth, for the largest fraction of our population were farmers. If he walked into a town, no one would take special notice of him.

“Is that...a disguise?” Silva muttered in a daze. “No, he looks like a completely different person though... He also seems like he’s completely defenseless...”

“Don’t approach him yet. We don’t know what he’s up to. He might be hiding a weapon.”

“Good point. I have the feeling that if I get within range, he’ll kill me in an instant... Ugh, I don’t like this guy...”

My eyes locked into a stare down with Rust’s leader. Silva had been doubtful of the man’s identity because he seemed so nonchalant and unguarded, but that was actually what had clued me in.

Magna whispered something, and the agents we had fought scattered into other areas. It seemed that Rust’s grand leader was going to face us personally.

“Magna. I’ll defeat you right here, right now, in my father’s stead,” I declared.

“What a shame, son of Bal.” He sighed softly. “I thought that you, of all people, would understand me.”

I do. I really do. Knowing Rust's abilities, I'm sure that they can outsmart even Dustour. They're just that capable. But our queen doesn't want to turn on Dustour right now, and that's what matters.

But before anything could happen, a solemn voice rang out and stopped us. "Slowe. Step aside."

Commanders of a battle were meant to be stationed deep inside the safest corner of their headquarters, acting like a compass that guided everyone to victory. At the very least, that was what I had worked towards. That was why I was here today.

But he still ended up coming out. I pressed my lips into a thin line. "I thought you would act like a hermit until the end of the battle, Father."

"I heard you suddenly became enthusiastic. Thus, I followed you and arrived here."

My father wore his usual glasses and stared coolly at Magna through his transparent lenses. He came prepared—he was even holding Prisma in one hand, the sword that I had retrieved from the Labyrinth of Cirquista.

"We finally have a chance to see each other, Bal." Magna inclined his head slightly.

"It's been a while, Magna."

Once these two had encountered each other, I couldn't stop them anymore. They had been coworkers and allies for the longest time, and this was their fight. Though my father had been Magna's true target the whole time, Magna spoke as if he were talking about the weather.

My father fixed his eyes on his enemy. "You and your people are powerful. Too much power will lead to ruin. I can't let you go to Dustour."

"Eleanor Daryth is a brilliant queen. But even she makes mistakes once in a while."

A smile slowly lifted the corners of Magna's lips, looking completely out of place in a tense war zone. *He either doesn't realize that he's cornered or doesn't have proper human emotions. Who knows? There might be some other reason.*

My father shook his head slightly. “We can’t afford to provoke Dustour.”

“A pity. That aside, Bal, you seem to have an interesting item in your hands. How are you going to use it?”

“Just like *this*.” Without another word, my father made the first strike.



Damn it. I didn't want this to happen, but it happened anyway. I didn't even have time to stop them...

"Hey, the duke's pretty impressive!" Silva exclaimed.

I had assumed that my father's abilities were past his prime, but as the duel enfolded, I learned that I had been worried for nothing. My father was a diligent man who never slacked on polishing his skills. It was his diligence that had helped him climb to the position of Denning head.

Silva was absorbed in the clash. "Is that Prisma?! The magic sword that can practically do everything?!"

With every swing of Prisma, my father summoned frosty winds that lashed at his opponent. The winds were so chilly that even my father's movements slowly grew stiffer as time went on. Though we were watching from a distance, the air felt freezing. Ice began encasing the outer walls of the church in the presence of Prisma's power, even though my father never targeted them. The battle was so intense that neither of us could find an opening to join in.

Silva shivered. "Brr! I swear, it's like we're stuck in a blizzard!"

"Let's back off, Silva! At this rate, we'll become collateral damage!"

"Right!"

My father had activated the Ring of Authority, which was blessing him with a magnificent power boost at this very moment. The duel between commanders was so striking that the combatants on both sides temporarily forgot that we were enemies, reduced to mere spectators before the stunning sight.

One agent muttered, "How many years has it been since Gramps actually fought in battle?"

Another exclaimed, "Now that's a rare sight! He's really enthusiastic!"

When my father isolated himself after his arrival, he spent all his time tinkering with Prisma. Through his experiments, he could understand the sword's power better and utilize it to its full potential, or so he had claimed.

"Keep your distance!" an agent warned. "You'll get hit!"

There was a familiar cackle. “Wooow! So *that’s* the power of the Ring of Authority!”

My eyes were wide in amazement. My father was so fast that my eyes couldn’t track his movements. Even the agents of Rust couldn’t get any closer—it was as if he was a storm in the shape of a human. His attacks were so devastating that if any of his allies were in range, they wouldn’t be spared either. The Ring of Authority was such an item—it transformed the Denning head of each generation into Gods of War.

An agent raised a question. “Hey, One! Wasn’t the Ring of Authority supposed to have drawbacks?”

During one of our conversations, my father had mentioned that Magna’s weakness lay in extremely close-quarters combat. However, the man was fighting toe-to-toe with my father despite my father’s incredible speed. *You’ve got to be kidding me... You call* this *a weakness?*

“Hee hee, yeah. When it’s activated, the wielder’s breathing is severely restricted. I hear that it feels like a hellish torture, heh!”

Agony was apparent on my father’s face as he continued to fight Magna. The backlash of the Ring of Authority didn’t just kick in after using it—there was also a drawback during its activation, just as One had said.

“Young Master!” a shrill voice cut into my daze like the light of a candle in the darkness. “Don’t just stand there!”

There was a booming explosion in the air. Feeling the blast wind whip at my face, I snapped out of it. A rain of arrows descended from the heavens.

I turned around to the source of the voice. “Weren’t you supposed to be at the clock tower?!” *She’s a sniper, but she came to the front lines!*

“The duke’s power is on a time limit, so that’s why I’m here!” She gave me a determined look. “Let’s end things once and for all!”

Just like me, she had changed her strategy. She knew that this was our best and possibly only opportunity to destroy our opposition.

“Their sniper has finally revealed herself!” an agent roared.

“Revenge! I’ll make you pay for all the comrades you killed!” another voice hollered. “I’ll *kill* you!”

The members of Rust all focused their aggression on Mint and started sprinting towards her. That was the natural reaction to a sniper with blood on her hands when she was finally in range.

“Die!” one agent yelled, firing off a spell that carved into the side of her torso. Crimson blood splashed onto the ground, forming a small puddle.

Mint, however, continued to shoot her arrows as if nothing had happened. She wasn’t fazed by the pressure of our enemies, only focusing on her bow mechanically. The arrows she released formed beautiful arcs and exploded in midair. For a moment, the only thing I could see was numerous blinding flashes.

“Silva!” I yelled. “Go and protect Mint! She’s our most important soldier here!”

Going on a rampage like this was bound to attract the Rust agents nearby like bees to honey. However, they weren’t the only ones.

“The duke has activated the Ring of Authority! He’s planning on taking down the enemy leader here!” a familiar voice shouted.

One by one, every last warrior scattered around the campus assembled, whether they be enemies or allies.

My father’s sword manifested a frosty blizzard that only strengthened with every swing, snatching away what pitiful warmth we had in our bodies. Everything in our vision was encased in ice like displays in a gallery. Even the water vapor in the air was gradually transforming into tiny shards of ice, glittering like gorgeous gemstones tossed carelessly above our heads.

“Look at Gramps!” I overheard an agent say. “He’s trading blow for blow against the duke over there!”

Bellows and shouts echoed throughout the chaotic battlefield where allies fought enemies. Anyone’s movements would grow sluggish after a few minutes inside this freezing area which stiffened their joints. The source of the chilly air was Prisma, which was greedily gorging all the heat in the environment and

using it to fuel its spells. I shuddered to imagine how cold it was at the center of the clash.

But it seemed to be working, just like my father had told me. The colder it got, the slower Magna seemed to be.

For some reason, I suddenly began to feel uneasy.

Magna's weapon of choice was a sword of pure fire that he had conjured with magic. The scarlet sword left a bright red trail in the air as the man swung his blade. An explosion of heat appeared in the direction of his swing. The ground parted, and a wall of inferno was left in its wake.

The next moment, red was swiftly painted over with white as my father wielded Prisma to answer Magna's attack. They were trading blow for blow, neither of them seeming to have an upper hand.

However, the balance of the standstill was starting to tip.

"Milord! If he keeps going...!"

"Our victory is in sight!" I yelled back, finishing Silva's sentence.

Ice was the best way to kill Magna—that was the knowledge passed down from one Denning head to the next. The frosty air cooled the heat that Magna had accumulated within his core. A layer of ice began spreading across Magna's skin, evidence that my father's power was starting to overwhelm his opponent. My father must have gotten used to wielding Prisma. There was only a minute difference between their abilities, but it was enough.

"The duke just...!" Silva exclaimed.

My father coughed up blood. The sword in his hand pierced Magna's chest, and the Ring of Authority gradually dimmed, as if it had fulfilled its duty.

"Bal... Your skills haven't dulled in the slightest," Magna muttered in a hoarse voice, coughing up the red essence of life as well. His sword pierced my father's body in return, almost like a twisted reflection. Blood splattered on the ground like crimson flowers in full bloom. "But you rely on the ring too much for your own good."

My father's sword pierced Magna's chest, but it was at an angle that left

some uncertainty—I wasn't sure whether Prisma had reached Magna's heart. However, ice began climbing up Magna's body from his feet.

Completely spent, my father fell into a pool of blood.

The knights were the first to react. "Cut off Magna's head!" Almost like a tidal wave, they rushed over to the enemy leader.

Magna was the heart of Rust. If we defeated him, Rust would be no more.

Clearly, Magna was on the losing side, or perhaps even on the brink of defeat. But for some odd reason, the agents didn't lose their composure.

One of them threw something at Magna. "Gramps! We got all the blood! We have samples from all the mages here!"

On reflex, I immediately manipulated wind magic. In what little time I had, I made the wind carry the item's scent to my nose. *It does smell like blood. What's going on? What did those guys just do? Why are they reacting like that?!*

Magna caught the item in his hand—a crystal ball. "In that case... It is time to show them what a perfect victory looks like." The man had a satisfied look on his face as he gazed at the crystal covered with blood.

"My dear comrades," Magna began, raising the crystal ball high into the air, "Unleash the Blood-Drunken Crystals."

Goosebumps rose on my skin.

The members of Rust threw the crystal balls violently at the ground. I had no idea what they wanted to achieve, but soon, I felt the effects.

"Wh-What's going on?!" I muttered to myself in a panic. "The ground is...shaking?!"

I felt my limbs go limp. My body grew heavier and heavier.

No. The ground isn't shaking. It's...

On the spur of the moment, I whispered, "Run." As dread made my heart sink, I raised my voice and yelled at the top of my lungs. "*Run!!!!!!!!!*"

With an earth spell, I manifested golems. And another. I kept going until I depleted my mana reserves. *If I don't, my magic is going to become useless.* The

golems I created were incomplete crafts that lacked arms. My magic was going berserk. *It's our senses going berserk, not the world around us.*

"Try casting a spell, any spell!" I exclaimed to the knights. "You'll figure out what's going on!"

Immediately, the knights reacted and cast *Blade*, but none of them managed to summon anything respectable. Some magical blades were twisted into irregular coils, and some didn't even manage to activate the spell.

One knight yelled out everyone's unspoken question. "What's happening?!"

The knights had trouble processing the situation. However, I knew. It was the work of a magic item—one of the most significant masterpieces among the magic items that the Great Spirit of Darkness had crafted throughout her long life. When used, it would suck in the mana of a chosen target and steal their magical abilities away.

Magna's calm voice rang out. "My. You are very knowledgeable, son of Bal."

Of course I know what it is. Their crystal balls are the same thing as Shuya's!

I gritted my teeth. "Silva, take Father with you and run!"

"Can you tell me what happened to you all, milord?!"

"Save that for later! You're the only one who can move freely right now because you're not a mage!"

Due to his lack of arcane talent, Silva didn't know what was happening to our bodies. However, he always had a sharp intuition, and he instantly reacted to my command as he sprinted over to my father.

The agents of Rust knew that victory was within reach. With triumphant grins, they observed us for a while as we acted panic-stricken, but soon, they began to act.

"We're Rust, you know." One man laughed. "Did you really think we were gonna fight all honorable and proper?!"

Mint held up her bow at mid-range, preparing to resume her sniping. She made use of the bow and arrows she had materialized before our enemies had unleashed the crystals, and she was down to her last one. She set her sights on

Magna’s chest—Magna’s heart.

My impression of Mint had changed many times throughout my time with her, but even after learning her true identity, one thing didn’t change—she was the most reliable ally possible. I felt relief wash over my heart.

That didn’t last long.

A familiar cackle echoed out.

Magna’s comrade rushed in at the last moment with a shield in his hands—One, who took the blow in his leader’s stead.

“Hee hee, you idiot! I kept my eyes on you the whole time, because you’re the biggest threat here!” One grinned as he looked over at us.

With a single move...they defeated us all. I swallowed at the thought.

We couldn’t pin the blame on anyone in particular—we had all done our best in this battle. However, the grim reality was that we were battered, bruised, and completely spent. Without magic, we were at the mercy of our enemies.

That reality, in the end, didn’t come to pass, because what happened next took both sides by surprise.

Without warning, a mighty spell manifested a sandstorm around us. Sand swirled upward from the ground beneath us, lashing at our faces and obscuring everyone’s vision.

“Oi, oi, no way!” one Rust agent yelled. “Gramps! We have some surprise guests!”

Unexpected reinforcements showed up, allowing us to escape the clutches of Rust. The Denning faction—my faction—were at the center of the storm. Someone watching from a distance probably couldn’t tell, but the closer one got to the center, the wetter the sand was, weighing it down—it wasn’t a normal sandstorm.

Rust attempted to sweep away all the sand with wind magic, but they didn’t have any luck. Thanks to the sandstorm, we were able to distance ourselves.

Another agent yelled, “Be careful of that big guy! He’s using a really weird ability!”

The magical sands shrouded us like a veil and expanded to cover the entire surrounding area. Then, a wand enchanted with magic which turned it into a sword blocked someone's attack with a loud metallic clang.

"We'll protect the rear!" The dignified voice of a woman declared.

I'd recognize this combat style any day—she had a preference for using her wand as a sword. She was one of the most notable direct Denning descendants, a star with a bright future who had undergone rigorous combat training ever since she was a child.

My voice was barely a whisper. "Why are you..." *Why is Sansa here? She's supposed to be in Yoram under Father's instructions!*

She continued, "We're the best people for this job! After all, we haven't been robbed of our magic!"

Interlude: Sansa Denning

There was one absolute rule in Sansa Denning's life: she must unconditionally obey the commands of her father, Duke Denning. Like the rest of her family, she had dedicated her life and soul to her household. Going against her father was no different from relinquishing her right to become the next Denning head.

However, Sansa had still made the decision to rebel. She had decided she would take a step off the rigid path her father had determined for her.

"...He was a very mysterious student, Lady Sansa. Don't you agree?"

Sansa inclined her head slightly. "In the end... What he said turned out to be accurate. I was personally rather surprised, Kokto. To think that Rust managed to gather so many of those crystal balls..."

Though she had been instructed to stand by in Yoram, Sansa had listened attentively to every report about the situation at Kirsch. She had also received confirmation from Balderoy's subordinates that the war had been at a stalemate.

She hadn't waited around meaninglessly—she had made preparations so that she could act immediately whenever her presence was required. To do that, she needed reinforcements, so Sansa had secretly summoned her comrades to the town.

In the end, however, she had to scrap all that. Sansa had ended up heading to Kirsch alone with a single retainer by her side.

It all began with the appearance of a student.

A red-haired student suddenly barged into Sansa's temporary residence, shouting, "Please go to Kirsch right away!" He shoved an item at her. "Your enemies transported these onto the campus!"

He then explained that he had been pursuing a weapon merchant that dealt in dangerous magic items. When he saw the item which the man had gathered on the sly, he had been horrified.

These crystal balls were called "Blood-Drunken Crystals," and they were the natural enemies of mages. Even Sansa, a general of Daryth's army, had never seen one with her own eyes until this day.

The red-haired youth then added that when he gathered information about the number of crystals smuggled into Kirsch, it had matched up with the exact number of people in the Denning faction on the campus.

Time was of the essence—Sansa didn't even stop to ask for the youth's name before she hurried to Kirsch with her burly retainer.

"Hello there, daughter of Bal," a man addressed Sansa. "I admit, I never expected you to go against Bal's orders."

Silence.

The man didn't seem bothered by the lack of a reply. He hummed. "I thought you were the type who would follow his command dutifully."

Sansa was well-aware of the catalyst that changed her—her reunion with her younger brother, Slowe Denning. However, her pride meant she could never admit that her younger brother had such a strong influence on her, even if her life depended on it. He had thrown away House Denning for a life at Kirsch, and she had caught a glimpse of the treasures he had gained through this exchange.

Her brother had outright refused to follow their father's will and had stepped off the proper path of a Denning. Despite committing such "atrocities," he had still gained many invaluable things along the way. At Kirsch, he had established a new identity, a new life, and a new future that was his and his alone.

Frankly, Sansa had envied him. And such admiration was what had driven her.

"What changed you, I wonder?" the man mused.

But of course, Sansa wasn't going to respond to any of the enemies' words.

Another man wearing a raccoon dog mask was peering out of a window. He addressed the seemingly harmless man who didn't have any significant traits. "Looks like this one doesn't like you very much, Gramps. That aside, should I make some defensive measures around here? I still have plenty of mana to

work with.”

The seemingly harmless man, who had a peaceful expression on his face, asked, “Are you sure, Fifty?”

“You can definitely count on me! No problems whatsoever!”

Judging by the attitude of the agents, it was clear that this man was the central figure of the group here, though Sansa didn’t know too much about the cause of the conflict between him and the duke.

He turned to face the woman again. “It’s no use trying to escape, daughter of Bal. The tall man with you seems to be very aware of that fact.”

Sansa and Kokto’s hands were tied behind their backs with what was probably rope. However, that was it—Rust hadn’t done anything else to them. It was a rather careless way of restricting the movements of a Denning, an experienced soldier on the battlefield.

But the odd thing was, Sansa felt weak all over. She couldn’t muster up any strength. She almost felt as if her body was suspended inside water—she couldn’t even feel her own weight.

Sansa was silent, but her mind was busy, trying to deduce the reason for her condition. In contrast, her burly retainer fixed his eyes on the ground.

Though it wasn’t visible, he knew there was a magic circle drawn there. It was a very delicate spell, and Rust had hidden it expertly. If one were to fire a spell at the ground, he and his master would be freed. Mulling over plans in his head, Kokto glanced over at Sansa.

Sansa’s eyes were focused on the agents of Rust, who were sharing a jovial moment of nostalgia.

“You know, Loco Moco Highland was in my cohort.” One man sighed. “I guess family standing’s what makes all the difference.”

“Ha ha, you know that’s not true. We made it pretty high up the ladder too, didn’t we?”

They had taken off their masks, revealing their real faces underneath. They didn’t look any different from an ordinary citizen in Daryth despite being agents

of an organization that only the Denning heads could command. If Sansa inherited the position of Duchess one day, they would officially become extensions of her eyes and hands who would secretly nudge Daryth onto the path of an ideal future.

One agent shook his head. “Y’all are so silly. At the end of the day, we don’t ‘exist.’ We’re as good as dead, to be honest.”

But right now, these people didn’t seem like denizens of the shadows as they exchanged old stories from their schooling days at Kirsch.

Chapter 5: Ring of Authority

You could cut the tension inside the cathedral with a knife.

“I am afraid to say that I disagree with the duke’s decision!” one knight exclaimed. “Lady Sansa was fully prepared to face the consequences of her actions!”

Once, gloom and anxiety had cast a shadow over Kirsch when monsters had overrun our campus—and again when a black dragon had appeared in the sky like an omen of doom. And now, the situation was just as critical. We had to *do* something.

Each and every one of us present were one-man armies, but we felt just as helpless as the students had during the monster invasion. In truth, all of us had laughed in the face of death and despair countless times, achieving victory in what seemed like hopeless situations. But none of us had ever before lost our most trusted comrade. We’d never lost our *magic*.

“We must rescue Lady Sansa!” a knight insisted. “That is our only hope of turning the tides of this battle!”

“How are we supposed to achieve anything without magic?!”

If Sansa hadn’t come to our rescue, we would’ve been done for. My sister and her retainer protected the rear to ensure my father’s safe retreat—in exchange for their own lives.

“Those fiends are too dangerous, too powerful! Why did the duke allow them to survive until this day?!”

“Because they were necessary! There are jobs that we cannot accomplish that they can!”

I didn’t have it in me to join the heated debate between the knights. I had been utterly useless at the end of that battle. Our enemies had gone above and beyond my expectations—who would’ve thought that they had managed to obtain Blood-Drunken Crystals like Shuya’s?

The Great Spirit of Darkness herself had crafted those artifacts. However, she should have retrieved all the crystals she had made after she recognized that Dustour had no further need them. *Even if the crystals Rust gathered are mere replicas of what the Great Spirit created... I can't believe they managed to get their hands on so many.*

I could hear speculations being thrown around by the knights.

"Those fiends... They knew that we would all likely gather in the same place when the duke unleashed the power of his ring. They likely dragged out the battle for so long to finish collecting our blood samples in order to activate the crystals."

"But what are they even trying to achieve?"

"Their motivations have been consistent throughout our battles. They want to prove their worth to the duke." The knight paused. "That may be the case, but I cannot believe their audacity. They demanded us to hand over our lord. Those people should know the duke's condition, but they still insist."

Robbed of our magic, we had taken refuge in the cathedral. Earlier, Magna's subordinate One had paid us a visit as a negotiator. My impression of One was that he liked to mess around during battle, but surprisingly, not a single trace of that roguishness lingered on him then.

He hadn't wasted any time chatting, getting down to business right away. He had come with a demand from Magna. Perhaps calling him a negotiator was inaccurate—he was more of a messenger, because he hadn't left any room for negotiation.

"We cannot leave the duke in their hands in his current condition."

"The duke cannot afford to move! The price for using the Ring of Authority is bed rest for three days and three nights!"

When One had barged into our base, some of the knights had thought about taking the agent hostage. However, considering the fact that Magna had been willing to send One into hostile territory, the agent probably wasn't going to be an effective hostage against their leader. Furthermore, without magic, I doubted that we could best Rust's most capable agent even with all our

strength combined.

“Collect yourselves, my fellow knights. Keep your voice down. The duke is sleeping due to the ring’s side effects.”

After my father had heard Magna’s message, he had made a decision. In exchange for Sansa’s freedom and safety, he would place his life in Rust’s hands.

“What do we even do...?”

The knights hung their heads, looking despondent. They likely knew the bind we were in. The Blood-Drunken Crystals had changed *everything*. Even if we all came together to make a suicide attack on our enemies, it would be futile—we wouldn’t be able to overcome the gap between our abilities.

“Who in the world *is* that man? He was able to trade blow for blow with the duke, even when our lord was empowered by the ring!”

The Denning heads of each generation were feared as Gods of War when they were equipped with the Ring of Authority, and for good reason. My father had fought with all his might against Magna, but the man had nimbly evaded my father’s attacks without so much as breaking a sweat.

“He *cannot* be human...”

Whoever said that, I totally agree. I struggled to find the exact words to describe the strength of our enemy leader. Calling his arcane abilities extraordinary was putting it mildly. Not only that, but the man hadn’t seemed to fear the legendary ring at all. *I know that due to the backlash of the ring, the user’s attack patterns will become more predictable, but the extensive power they receive in turn more than makes up for that.*

“The time limit is one night. If we don’t do something, they will kill Lady Sansa immediately!”

“I know! But our hands are tied! We do not even know where they are holding Lady Sansa captive!”

Sansa... I never thought she’d defy my father’s orders. In my memories, my sister follows my father’s directions dutifully. But I’ve got to admit, she had

perfect timing.

"We cannot let the duke go alone! Ridiculous!"

"If we do not fulfill their demands, they will kill Lady Sansa!"

"I am well aware of that!"

Will Magna try to persuade my father until the last possible moment? I know that he aims to convince my father to rebel against the queen out of a sense of duty as Duke Denning. But my father wouldn't be swayed by them. Never.

I heaved a sigh. I had come outside for a breath of fresh air. Unlike the suffocating interior of the cathedral, the air outside was refreshing and cool.

A park of emerald-green lie before the cathedral, elegant and relaxing. In this world of verdant foliage, a girl was sitting on a bench. The sun had long shied away from the sky, leaving behind only a moon that glowed in the darkness. The girl craned her neck, looking up at the gentle, pale moon.

Mint hadn't chosen to mingle with the other knights. She was alone. *Maybe she's just like me—she couldn't stand the doom and gloom inside.*

"Oh boy..." she muttered. "I *knew* this was going to happen."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why are you so calm?"

"I mean, no matter how much our enemies struggle, our victory is set in stone."

"*Victory*? They have held Sansa hostage, and Father is completely out of commission. How could we win from here?"

"Either way, the queen will achieve her objective. We haven't informed the knights, but Magna has claimed that he will dissolve Rust in exchange for the duke's life. Rust will disappear after this battle one way or another. See? Ignoring the sacrifices, the queen's demands will be fulfilled, right?"

"...I see."

"The queen wishes to disband Rust. That is her top priority. I'm not kidding you when I say that she's really obsessed with that idea. In fact, she doesn't

care what state Kirsch ends up in, as long as Rust is destroyed in the end. She has given the duke a magic item for that purpose—something that can explode Rust *and* a good chunk of the campus. I'm sure that the duke will take it with him when he heads to their lair."

So the queen has already taken the possibility of our loss into consideration, huh...? Kirsch is a perfect place then. We can easily evacuate the civilians here and turn it into Rust's grave. That's why she was willing to accept Magna's condition.

There was an aura of resignation around Mint, and she looked much older than she should be, almost like a world-weary sage. "The duke already prepared himself for the worst before he went into this battle."

"Yeah. I sensed that too."

My father had acted completely out of character. That was what tipped me off. He had indulged in liquor before battle and had been immersed in nostalgic sentiments of the past. These were, as my father would normally put it with scorn, "complete wastes of time."

That didn't make sense, because he had been the most well-informed person about Rust, so he of all people should've expected this battle to be a grim and fierce one. He'd even offered me the chance to kill Magna and to fulfill the queen's orders in his stead. *That's not the Father I know.*

"Is that it? You're not angry at all?" Mint asked. "Your father, your own flesh and blood, is planning his own death. Rather coldhearted of you, Young Master."

"Not really."

It wasn't anything unusual. Denning heads always went to an early grave, that much was common knowledge. In fact, considering the amount of warfare my father had been a part of, one could say that he had led a surprisingly long life.

I changed the topic. "That aside, is my father still unconscious?"

"Well, the price of using the Ring of Authority is steep. Normally, one would need three days and three nights of rest, but in the duke's case, he can probably shake off the worst of it after a single day. However, the Blood-

Drunken Crystals are affecting him as well, so I can't say that for sure. So, what are *you* going to do, Young Master?"

"I'll do as I please." *That's what my father instructed me to begin with.*

Mint shook her head slowly. "You've lost your magic. I doubt you can do much."

From this moment on, it's my *turn in this war.*

I returned to my room and found myself engaged in a drawn-out glaring contest with the map I had retrieved from the headmaster's room. Like always, little dots were constantly on the move in the enemy territory. In contrast, most of the dots on our side were clustered in the cathedral.

Silence was my only companion inside my room. I had wanted to contemplate something by myself. Several ideas appeared in my mind, but none of them would deal a decisive blow to our enemies.

I sighed, frustrated. "Well, I'm stuck."

I know that this is meaningless. Even if I locate Magna's lair now, it's too late, because they have held Sansa captive. We lost our magic and were reduced to a group of people who have some skill with the blade. We're at a dead end with no way out. So this *is what it means to go against Rust...*

But at the same time, our enemies hadn't come out of our last conflict unscathed, either. Due to the efforts of my empowered father, Mint, as well as the knights, we had managed to severely deplete their forces.

A voice distracted me from my thoughts. "Slowe."

What seemed to be a black silhouette jumped in from the ajar window—the Great Spirit of Wind, who had gone on a rampage to relieve their stress inside the Labyrinth of Cirquista. They seemed to be a little slimmer and smaller than they usually were. Their expression, however, was the same aloof one as always, as if they were declaring that they couldn't care less about the conflict between humans.

"Ah, that reminds me." I turned to Altanger. "I heard you went up to Magna

and gave him a warning."

That was what Magna had told me on the pier. *Ugh, why didn't they inform me when they came back from Cirquista?*

"I sensed some bad vibes from that guy, meow."

"Hey, Great Spirit, could you gimme some advice?" I said, half-jokingly.

I knew I was grasping at straws. Of course, I didn't think that the Great Spirit would offer me any help. They had taken on the role of being Charlotte's pet for a long time, but they had always kept other humans at a wide berth.

With a small sigh, I muttered, "Nah, just kidding."

The spirit didn't say anything in reply.

Charlotte wasn't in danger this time. Magna had deduced Charlotte's true identity and had received a warning from the Great Spirit. Harming Charlotte wouldn't do Rust any good, so I doubted that the spirit would involve themselves in that regard. The Great Spirit also seemed languid and contented, probably satisfied after their adventures in Cirquista. They wouldn't act unless provoked.

I thought the spirit was just going to ignore me, but very soon, they surprised me by opening their tiny mouth. "You can use Charlotte and that man, meow."

"Huh?"

"I mean that potato-like man, meow."

Claude and Charlotte hadn't participated in the current conflict as combatants. I had asked them to locate the enemy headquarters with the map instead.

The spirit continued, "Did you think those two were lazing around when all of you were fighting? Big mistake, meow."

I searched for the pair right away. I wasn't exactly placing my hopes in Charlotte's combat abilities as a mage who still retained her magic, and the Great Spirit likely didn't think her magic would change the tides of the battle against Rust, either. They must be referring to something else.

However, I hadn't found the pair right away. I had assumed they were standing by in a different room nearby, but they seemed to have gone outside. The Great Spirit wouldn't joke around in a situation like this—Charlotte and Claude must be important.

It was late at night when the two finally returned.

When I saw the two, I asked slowly, "Where did you two go?"

Charlotte apologized, and Claude seemed somewhat thrilled.

"Please allow me to explain, Lord Slowe." Claude cleared his throat. "As per your instructions, we have observed this map tirelessly. That was when we realized something."

I had tasked the pair with the mission of locating the enemy base. However, they hadn't managed to do that before my father's final confrontation with Magna, because Rust had taken great pains to hide their headquarters. *No, maybe they never settled down in one specific spot in the first place.*

Claude continued, "As long as we have this map, it is possible for us to sneak around unnoticed in the enemy territory. For the past few days, we have been infiltrating the enemy territory while you and the knights fight their men. It was too difficult to locate their headquarters only with information we can garner from the map."

Charlotte hung her head. "I'm so sorry, Master Slowe, but we couldn't just sit around while all of you risk your lives."

For a moment, I had the urge to shout at them. *That's insanely dangerous!* But the next moment, I swallowed my instinctive rage and forced my head to cool. I knew Claude and Charlotte well enough to know that they should be fully aware of the risks. They had likely kept me in the dark until now because they had known I would stop them.

Claude took a deep breath. "I shall start with our findings. They are hiding Lady Sansa and the crystals sealing with our mages' magic inside a watchtower in their territory. I have confirmed that with my own eyes a little earlier."

I felt a headache coming on, and I placed a palm over my forehead. *Do these two really know how dangerous that is?*

Claude continued, “There are many secret passages within Kirsch that one would not know of unless they live here every day. If not for this map and Charlotte’s familiarity with Kirsch’s campus, locating that tower would have been an arduous task.”

Charlotte and Claude came back with the most crucial information we wanted. They had risked their lives to gain it, and I couldn’t reproach them for their actions.

Claude turned to the map laid out on the desk and pointed to one specific area. “Lady Sansa is on the top floor of the watchtower. Please take a look, my lord. There are several stationary dots inside the tower. They represent Lady Sansa, her retainer Kokto, and the guards.”

Furthermore, there were also a handful of dots moving in the vicinity of the tower. *The watchtower, I see... I think there were spiral stairs along the interior walls that led to the top floor.*

I took a deep breath to compose myself. “Well done, you two.”

The mana they had sucked out from us was inside the tower. Shuya had stored his crystal ball with utmost care for good reason—the Blood-Drunken Crystals were delicate.

“Lord Slowe, we are aware of our current situation.” Claude looked into my eyes with grim determination. “We are your subjects, and we are always prepared to fight for your sake.”

I didn’t even have to say it out aloud. They already knew what my next words were going to be. It was a risky gamble, but these two were the only ones who stood a chance.

Rust knew that most of our faction had lost our magical abilities, and that knowledge would lower their guards. They would never expect us to consider rescuing Sansa with such a handicap. However, this map and Claude, who could still use magic, wasn’t enough. He might come across unexpected crises.

I closed my eyes briefly, inhaled, then looked at them both square in the eyes. “Charlotte, Claude. I ask that you save Sansa and destroy the crystals.”

Before our conflict with Rust had begun, I had never even considered sending Charlotte into the midst of battle.

I stared up at the night sky and was muttering things to myself. When I looked down on a whim, I saw that the Great Spirit had appeared some time into my brooding and was staring up at me from beside my feet.

“It’s dangerous, meow.”

“I know.”

“I saved you in that dungeon, so I won’t save you this time, meow.”

“...I know.”

In the anime, Rust had captured Dustour soldiers, rendered them helpless, and had fished out as much information as they could. I knew how they liked to operate. To release Sansa and her retainer, we only had to destroy the transparent magic circle etched on the ground. And...it was possible for Charlotte, who was a light mage. I had already taught her the method.

As I walked, I let out a long exhale. I had a different job to attend to. To increase the chances of success for their rescue mission, I would lure the agents away from the tower. Only a big ruckus could achieve that.

Sansa was held captive, so she should be aware of the state of affairs. She would know that our top priority was destroying the crystals and regaining our magic.

Mint’s soft voice entered my ears. “Ah, Young Master... Where did you disappear off to?”

“Had some business to take care of.” I gave her a vague reply. “That aside, sheesh, the atmosphere in there is still pretty awful.”

“Can’t be helped. We’re at a dead end.”

“Huh. Everyone is still awake.”

“I mean, did you expect anything else? Tonight will decide whether the duke lives or dies.”

The interior of the cathedral was still a picture of gloom. A mage who couldn't use magic was worth less than an average soldier. Being Denning knights, they were equipped with swords as well, but the absence of magic was that significant of a handicap.

The knights inside likely knew that we had no chance of victory at this point. And they also knew my father's personality, so they probably felt even more powerless. *He's a stubborn guy who refuses to listen to other people once he decides on something.*

"Hey, Mint. Can you take me to where my father is?"

She paused. Then, she finally said, "Sure."

This time, she didn't try to stop me.

I found my father lying on a bed inside a private room in the depths of the cathedral. Moonlight filtered through the colorful stained glass.

The room was so still and silent that my ears could pick up the feeble breathing of my father. Due to the backlash from the ring and the lack of his magic, my father wasn't doing so hot.

I peered at his face. He looked peaceful for once, an expression I hadn't seen on him in a long time.

In a low voice, I mumbled out aloud, "You know, I think you did a great job."

The title "Denning head" came with a crushing weight and responsibilities that would suffocate any lesser human. It was probably much more unforgiving than I could ever imagine. I had heard that my father had fought against Rust many times before he had come to Kirsch, and I had been completely none the wiser. He'd been thrown into conflict in the shadows of a lively city, fighting silently so that no one would notice his struggle.

Then, my father opened his eyes ever so slightly. "Slowe," he rasped, "run."

"Huh. You were awake."

"I have never felt so horrible in all my life..." he muttered.

"Well, yeah. I heard the backlash of the ring is pretty rough." I shrugged.

Furthermore, my father had been robbed of his magic. Since our last battle, I had felt an unusual sense of sluggishness weighing me down. My father had to deal with two sources of agony.

He tried to sit up. Frowning, I said, “Hey, don’t push yourself.”

He probably couldn’t bear to show such weakness in front of his family, but luckily, he gave up right away.

“Never before have I felt this vexed...” my father whispered, sounding a little self-deprecating. Perhaps this was his way of admitting that our enemy had been several notches above him.

Rust had completely outclassed us. After they captured Sansa, they probably had enough troops and stamina to keep going and to invade our territory. Without magic to aid us, they could easily kill us all like taking candy from a baby.

“Slowe, I take back what I said before.”

“What *did* you say again?”

But he didn’t answer, instead repeating what he had said to me when he opened his eyes. “Just run...”

Then, there was silence.

I never thought my father would say such things to me. He was staring up at the vaulted ceiling with faraway eyes. *What is he thinking? What does he want?*

The relationship between my father and Magna seemed strange to me. They looked like they even trusted each other somewhat, and his personal retainer had admitted that she didn’t know the details either.

Instead of voicing my doubts, I asked, “Where am I supposed to run to, huh?”

“I know that you have a list of nations and places to flee to stashed away in your room. You probably made such preparations for an emergency, and I believe the current situation classifies as one.”

“Wow,” I said slowly. “You’re a nasty piece of work.”

He rummaged around in my room without asking me first? I’m willing to give

him the award for "Worst Father of the Year." He probably did that when I was away in Cirquista. Oh, that reminds me... Didn't Mint turn my room into a mess?

That's not the only crime on his list, though. He tried to force me into an engagement with Alicia! I've been wanting to give him a piece of my mind for that. I completely forgot because he dragged me into his fight against Rust.

I opened my mouth, but then shut it quickly. *Ugh, how am I supposed to say anything when he's in such a feeble state?*

My father sighed. "I am past my prime. My body has worn down with age."

Balderoy Denning wasn't a man who liked to show his vulnerable side. Though I was his son, I had never seen him so frail before.

"Just... Stop talking," I muttered. "You'll open your wounds. And you've already done more than enough."

He had used his ring despite the steep price he had to pay. He had done everything he could and had driven Magna into a corner—he had only been one step short of piercing Magna's heart.

"Slowe, I would like to retract yet another statement I said before."

I pressed my lips into a thin line and waited for his next words.

"I..." he trailed off. "I said that you were a person who can make the necessary sacrifices to achieve your goal. That you are very different from Sansa and me."

"And you're exactly right."

"I used to think that it was your biggest shortcoming. But recently, I have started reflecting on my past judgment."

I stared at him, not offering any replies.

"You should be proud. It is your strong point."

Then, before my father fell unconscious, he pointed at the table and left me with the words, "Take that and leave this land..."

There was a piece of paper on the desk. Though I was faced with a blank page, I could tell that my father had signed his name on the other side hard enough to

make a mark on the paper.

I took it into my hands and read it.

When I went outside the cathedral, I shivered as the chilly evening air brushed against my skin. Winter was just around the corner. *I need a coat in this temperature,* I thought absentmindedly.

The pair on a mission were likely already on the move.

I looked over to Mint, who was still sitting on the bench outside. “Hey, Mint. Father gave me this.” I raised my hand which was holding the piece of paper. “What does he mean by it?”

“Oh, you must have read it, then...” She sighed. “I actually helped with readying that thing.”

It was a written mandate addressed to me with my father’s signature. However, the content of the mandate was unusual. As Duke Denning, he was sending me off on a special mission with an indefinite time limit. He would only tell me the details of the mission verbally, and during this mission, I was prohibited from receiving instructions from anyone else—even the queen couldn’t order me around.

If I looked at it another way, in a sense, I had gained freedom the moment I had received this piece of paper. I crushed it into a ball with my hand.

Mint explained, “If you kill Magna, Young Master, the duke will openly acknowledge your contribution to this nation. But if you don’t, he will give that to you. He made preparations so that you can become independent no matter how this battle ends. Your father really dotes on you. And now... Congratulations. You’re free.”

“...I’ve told you so many times that I’m never going to become the next du—”

“You’ve got the wrong idea.” Mint declared, cutting me off forcefully. “The path he prepared for you is a different one. If he won, he planned to give the credit to you so that the queen can’t meddle in your affairs in the future.”

I gritted my teeth. *Damn it. He didn’t have to interfere. It’s none of his*

business. I know, okay? I know that as long as I live in Daryth, the queen will eventually start sending me on "special" missions. She will need someone to replace Rust—to take care of the dirty work in this nation. In the back of my mind, I predicted that there's a chance she might turn me into her odd-job man.

Mint continued, "The duke seemed especially determined after you retrieved Lord Louis's Prisma. He wondered what Lord Louis would have done in his shoes. How would his brother handle Magna in this situation?"

"Louis..." I hesitated. "Louis probably wouldn't try to exterminate Rust."

Knowing my uncle, he would have sought out a different path. Rust had wanted to act for the benefit of this nation, but their plans had clashed with the queen's will. Therefore, she had ordered their execution. My father knew that the organization Magna led was filled with patriots who were willing to dedicate their lives for this nation. They had accepted their status as ghosts and had still fought for Daryth. Louis would never let such people die if he could help it.

Mint's voice was calm. Almost too indifferent. "We will hand the duke to them, and that will be the end of the story. We may have lost the match, but we won the war. Or perhaps the other way round."

I clenched my hands into fists.

"What are you going to do, Young Master?"

My nails dug into my palm. Maybe I was even drawing blood. *He* used *me. That bastard's using his own death to convince me—no, to force me onto that post.*

"Let me tell you something, Mint," I began, almost casually. "I'm a sore loser."

I waited for Silva inside the cathedral. When I had paid a "visit" to the headmaster's office, I hadn't only nabbed the map. Earlier, I had requested Silva to fetch something from my room: a small box I had taken along with the map. It was filled with numerous rings.

"Milord! I have the goods with me!" Silva announced his arrival. "I've got to say, this is a magnificent sight."

“One of Headmaster Morozov’s hobbies is crafting weapons,” I explained. “Only a handful of people know about that, though.”

The knights inside the cathedral glanced over at us with perplexed eyes when they heard the commotion we were making. *Okay then, time to raise my voice so that I can attract those guys’ attention.* I gave Silva a look, and he nodded—a signal that he had understood my orders.

“But milord!” He yelled. “Are these really weapons?!”

I took out a ring of ice from the wooden box. It was light, almost weightless. *Let’s see, the code word should be... “Daybreak,”* I chanted.

With one word, the ring sitting on my palm transformed into flowing water. It brimmed over, but it didn’t splash on the ground. Instead, it transformed into a sword of ice.

“Whoa, it turned into a sword! You were right!” Silva said excitedly. “Can I test it out, milord?”

“We don’t have the time for that. Get used to it while we’re fighting...is what I would like to say, but I’ll let you test it out once.”

“Yes, sir! Got it, just once.” Silva accepted the ice sword and swung it.

There was a large tear in the sturdy cathedral wall Silva had slashed at, revealing the scenery outside. There was a stir among the knights.

Silva blinked before turning to me. “Well now, how did you know such items were hidden in that room?”

“You could say that I’m a walking encyclopedia.”

After the destruction of Kirsch at the hands of monsters, the headmaster had changed his stance: the best defense was a good offense. He had slowly amassed equipment over time. When push came to shove, students could defend themselves with these weapons, which were perfect for us right now since we had been robbed of our magic.

Headmaster, sorry, but I’m going to borrow your collection for a bit.

“All right then.” I nodded to myself. “Shall we head off, Silva?”

“Sounds good! We gotta save Sansie, after all!”

The ice swords specialized in long-range attacks. The headmaster had likely prepared all these to protect his students. These swords were connected to the plants in the headmaster’s office and drew mana from them—we could only use these swords, which were enchanted with water magic, on campus.

And just as I had expected, a solemn voice stopped me from leaving. “Please wait, Young Master. By that, you mean that we have a chance to turn the tables, is that correct?”

The knights were all seasoned warriors, and they knew how despairing our situation was. But when there was a chance of victory, no matter how low the prospects were, it would become the brightest hope in our hearts. These knights had protected my father so many times that I couldn’t count them on both hands, and I had faith in them.

I told them the full story. Claude and Charlotte were on a mission to save Sansa, and our job was to lure all of the Rust agents away from the watchtower.

Everything went according to plan—there was a shift in their eyes.

We crossed over the invisible boundary and charged into the enemy territory. At first, only a handful of agents appeared to deal with us. *Most of them are probably still lurking around that watchtower. This isn’t nearly enough. We need to distract most, if not all of them, or else those two won’t have an opening.*

A knight yelled, “Young Master! We shall be the vanguard!”

“Don’t bother with me!” I yelled back. “Focus on your enemies!”

Even people without arcane talent could use these magic swords. However, the mana that manifested the swords wasn’t infinite. The rings were made from the plants in the headmaster’s office, and when activated, they turned into swords of ice without scabbards.

Depending on the arm strength of the wielder, the amount of mana drawn from the plants was different. In the hands of seasoned knights, who had overwhelming physical strength compared to students, each slash of the sword was powerful enough to make even the Rust agents keep their distance.

“Report back to Gramps!” one man shouted. “These guys prepared weapons!”

“Don’t let the attacks of those swords hit you!” another man roared. “It’s infused with poison!”

But, um, one thing. Headmaster, were you serious about giving such dangerous weapons to students*?!*

We marched down many paths and arrived at a junction between several school buildings. Usually, this plaza would be overflowing with students who used it as a place to relax, but now, it was filled with Rust agents. They were actually *drinking alcohol*, probably toasting to each other in celebration over their victory.

Wow. We haven’t surrendered or anything, but these people already think they’ve won.

The masked men tossed away their glasses of liquor and rushed over to us.

“Would you look at that!” one of them shouted. “The losers are trying to attack us!”

“Hee hee!” A familiar cackle echoed in my ears. “We meet again!”

Okay, we managed to draw this guy out, so we aren’t too far from the finish line. One had tormented us from the very start of the conflict between two factions. If I managed to defeat the man immediately, it would provide a great boost to our morale.

I faced him. “Tell me. Where is Magna?”

“Who knows? I dunno either! He’s probably off on one of his usual strolls or something!”

“Huh. Your boss is quite the carefree guy!” I shouted.

“Hee hee hee! Not a problem, because either way, we’re going to win!”

“Hmph. I wonder about that,” I said, lifting a hand.

His eyes widened a fraction before he let out his signature cackle. “Well, well,

what do we have here? The Ring of Authority! Since you're that duke's son, you can use this ring too! Hee hee, perfect! I wanted to fight against that power at least once in my life!"

One waited patiently for me to activate the ring and for its blessings to take effect.

I honestly never expected to use this power either. For all my life, I've been running away from the shackles of House Denning, and it's simply wrong for me to use it. But...this is the only card I have.

An agent yelled, "One! Are you fine by yourself?!"

"Hee hee, don't meddle in my affairs, okay?! He may have the Ring of Authority, but he still can't use magic!"

He was confident, no, *overconfident* in himself. The possibility of losing probably never even crossed his mind. The man stood there and cackled. "Slowe Denning, come at me when you're ready."

"You better pray you don't end up regretting those words."

My heart was fluttering. My body was trembling. All it took was one drop of my blood on the ring to activate it.

I let out a long exhale and did exactly that.



My heart raced faster and faster. My senses became sharper. It was almost as if I were in a foreign body.

My eyes were still fixed on One. *I don't have time to waste on this guy! I'll finish him in an instant!*

"Hurgh!" I let out a battle cry. My emotions flared up in my chest and I leaped forward without a moment of hesitation.

There was some distance between us. I had thought I needed to take ten steps forward to reach him, but two sufficed. I ran behind his back.

"Hee hee, you're fast!"

He reacted, but he was too late.

His comrade shouted, "One!"

Someone fired a spell in my direction. I could ignore it and defeat One now, but I could tell that it was a lethal spell. Killing One now wasn't worth sustaining such a major injury. He wasn't that valuable.

I decided to jump out of the way. *Let's try this again.*

One roared at his comrade, "Don't interfere! It's my fight!" Then, he looked at him, gritted his teeth almost audibly before he grinned. "Hee hee, why are you smiling?!"

"Because I'm having fun, One!" I exclaimed.

It felt as if my time was being stretched to the extreme. Everything moved in slow motion. My vision began distorting with One at the center.

"Hee hee, same here!"

In this world, I can fight him. I can track all of his irregular movements. With this—! I didn't fall for any of his feints—I grabbed his face without a moment of doubt. I felt as if my body was shouting at me in alarm over the strenuous overload it was handling. The ring was boosting my every movement.

Without a moment's delay, I allowed my power to take over, and I slammed his head into the ground.

There was a deafening crack.

One let out a sound somewhere between a cackle and a whimper of pain. Everyone inside the plaza whipped their heads around to look at us, and they all grimaced.

“One! Are you okay?!” an agent yelled.

One didn’t move. He *couldn’t* move. With the boost of the ring, I had superhuman strength. I had the feeling that I could make a crater in the ground with a single punch.

“You better not start calling me a filthy cheater,” I muttered.

There was a muffled voice from the ground. “Hee hee... Wh-Why...are you able to move...?”

One seemed to be shocked. I was, too, though for a different reason. *He’s still conscious? Wow, his body is way too tough.*

But I decided to give him a brief answer, since this man had risked his life for Shuya in the anime. “Because...I’m having fun, I think.”

“Y-You know, you’d be perfect in Rust...”

Oh. So that’s why I felt a sense of kinship with these people. Why I can’t hate them wholeheartedly.

Most of the candidates chosen as Rust agents were warriors who had accomplished heroic feats to save their comrades on the battlefield. These people were willing to die for their comrades and for a better future for this nation. Once, I had thrown away everything for a future with Charlotte. *It’s not the same, but we’re just a tad similar.*

“Look at the young master!” A knight shouted. “We must not lag behind him!”

“Milord! Are you okay?!”

I didn’t know the reason myself. But...since the moment I had spurred the knights into battle inside the cathedral, I had been feeling an odd sense of exhilaration. A smile was probably stuck on the corners of my lips right now.

It had all started when my father had dragged me into this conflict. Now, we were so hard-pressed that I had been forced to dispatch Charlotte into the perilous zone of war. Everything about this whole situation should frustrate me.

But when I look back... I never realized I was slowly regaining all the things I once abandoned. When did that happen, I wonder?

"I'm not done yet..." I muttered. The second most troublesome man next to Magna was now out of commission. Now, our only job was to start a riot in this place. I took a breath to steady myself and to harden my resolve.

However, an ear-splitting sound interrupted me.

"What?!" My eyes widened.

Everyone froze on the spot and looked over at the source.

Someone exclaimed, "Wait... That tower collapsed!"

The source of the sound was the watchtower that Charlotte and Claude had gone to. There was a deafening rumble as it fell down.

"Yikes, we stored—"

I heard the panicked voice of a masked man, but it was too late for them to do anything. Rubble was sent flying into the air around the fallen tower, and the tower's impact resulted in a storm of sand and dust.

Sansa and the others destroyed that place. They're so reckless... But I'll be honest, I knew that once they were free, Sansa and Kokto would pull off something crazy like that.

"Hey, someone head over and check on the tower!" an agent shouted. "Don't forget, we put—"

Good job, Charlotte, Claude. You did it. You managed it so quickly.

I knew that their mission was a success, because I could feel my magic thrumming in my veins.

I could feel my magic returning to me—but I didn't even have a second to catch my breath, because an explosion of light ripped apart the dark canvas of the night sky.

One of the Rust agents gasped. "What is it this time?! What's going on?!"

There was a giant explosion before my very own eyes, and light rained down on us like a meteor shower. I turned around to look at the place where the girl behind all this was likely standing. Though I couldn't see her, I was certain that she was there with her bow drawn. She had likely waited patiently for this exact moment.

Claude's words flashed across my mind. *He's right. Mint, you truly are our war goddess.*

"Knights of Denning!" My voice boomed. I almost didn't recognize it—*am I really the one shouting so loudly?* "The Blood-Drunken Crystals have disappeared! You have just witnessed the evidence that proves it!"

I felt shocked at myself. *You know, I've always passed myself off as calm and rational. I can't believe I'm reacting like this. But one thing is clear—this is our chance to strike. It's our best and only chance to win!*

"How are you still moving?!" A member of Rust yelled. "You should be suffering the backlash of the ring!"

"Young Master...!" A knight called out to me. "Please do not push yourself any harder! You will feel its effects soon!"

"Don't waste time worrying about me!" I yelled. "We've turned the tide in our favor, so ride on it and defeat them!"

Everything had gone according to my calculations. After the boost of the ring ended, I would regain my magic. *With this, I...I* can *still move.*

"The young master is right!" a second knight shouted to his brethren. "Show them our power!"

Our morale was at an all-time high, and the knights quickly overwhelmed the agents of Rust. In fact, the warriors of House Denning thrived in chaotic battles where allies intermixed with foes, so everything was working out in our favor.

But soon, someone appeared and put a damper on the charge of the knights.

A knight frowned. “Surround him!”

One agent stood out on the battlefield—his movements were distinctly different from the other agents. This man was taking down one knight after another as if he were swatting flies.

You’ve got to be kidding me... With one kick, he sent that knight crashing right through the building wall! His abilities were a cut above the other agents, and his identity was clear by this point. The enemy commander had finally appeared, and everyone braced themselves.

“You have used the Ring of Authority. Yet, you stand defiantly on this battlefield,” Magna said. “Is that because you regained your magic, I wonder? Or...”

Once again, I activated the ring on my right index finger.

“...is there some other reason, perhaps?” he mused.

I took in several short and shallow breaths. Using the Ring of Authority was a symbol of my resolve. “Knights, listen up!” I shouted. “Stay away from me!”

I will end things right here, right now. Those two created this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me, and I can’t let that go to waste.

I inhaled.

Without a moment’s delay, I felt a burst of strength in my body. The ring was blessing me with its powers once again. I took a step towards Magna. It was only one step, but I felt as if I were flying, because my stride was unthinkably long.

Through gritted teeth, I yelled, “Ice...is your worst enemy, isn’t it?!”

I hurled a spell in his direction. It was meant to be a simple action, but for a moment, my mind stuttered, and my vision went black.

But soon, I regained my awareness to see Magna dodging my spell. My spell, instead, struck the school building behind him, transforming it into an iceberg. The ring didn’t just enhance my physical abilities—I received a tremendous magic boost as well. I summoned wind, and the resulting storm overturned the

soil in the flower beds and knocked down all the trees in the vicinity. *Sorry to whoever works on reconstruction after the battle is over. It's going to be a tough job.*

"Ah. So he told you about my weakness."

I didn't reply. I *couldn't* reply. I preserved as much air as I could in my lungs. *I can't even waste a second of time against this man. His constitution is out of this world.* Blood rushed to my cheeks—I was probably turning bright red from the lack of air.

He sighed. "What madness. Only the truly insane would use the ring twice in succession."

Well yeah. I have to fight insanity with insanity. My opponent is downright crazy. And I'll be honest, my physical combat abilities are lacking compared to my father. In other words, I'll make up for my inferior technique by improving my raw strength and speed.

There was a short laugh. Or maybe it was a scoff. "Indeed, you are mad."

I felt as if I was sinking into the bottom of a dark ocean. My father had suffered similar effects. We would become less aware of our surroundings no matter how much we resisted. My world narrowed down until only Magna and myself remained.

"You must be in agony."

I felt pressure on my throat—my hand was pressing against my neck. But I needed to climb back onto my feet. The world was spinning, spinning... Almost like a kaleidoscope. But I was still able to keep track of Magna's rapid movements.

"Son of Bal, you are too reckless."

I prepared to make my final attack. I pumped in every last bit of strength and mana I had.

In the back of my mind, I sluggishly realized that someone was shouting something.

My spell manifested ice that spread and spread. The water vapor in the air

crystallized into snow and fell down on us like a shower of petals. Ice began enveloping the world around us, and Magna and I were at the center of the ice field. White magic circles manifested everywhere inside my vision. One after another, ice spells shot out from the arrays.

Someone was talking. Someone was talking to *me*. *Don't come any closer, Silva, Father's knights. Please, I'm begging you, stay away.*

A shout. Then another. *No, a lot of people are shouting something.*

Only Magna's voice echoed clearly in my ears. "Ah, you are losing your grip on reality. An expected outcome."

My vision grew dim, and my mind was hazy.

Someone was talking.

But all I could feel was agony so extreme that I nearly fainted. My head was throbbing with a dull ache. My most fundamental instincts were warning me to stop. *I can't. I need to press on.*

I didn't even know how or why my body was moving. I wasn't as skilled as my father. *So I need to be more reckless than him. I need more. Deeper, dive deeper.*

I couldn't breathe. The ring was an item that answered the call of an unwavering resolve, so I could draw more from it. I needed to.

"I admit, I am slightly envious."

I...can't see anymore. Nothing in my vision was registering. With one exception—there was a black dot—my enemy, Magna. My entire body was screaming at me, telling me that I was near my limit.

"Bal has found a magnificent heir. However..."

In my mind, I roared at myself. *Is this all you've got?!* I remained standing on sheer willpower. My body was slowly drawing nearer to death.

I had relinquished my body to this suffocating power for a reason. But even that reason was fading away and slipping through my hands like sand. My consciousness sank deeper and deeper into an abyss.

“The outcome of this battle was decided from the beginning, I am afraid. There isn’t any necessity for you to try so hard.”

●

The pair wasn’t strong enough to get past all the guards and complete the rescue mission, or so Altanger had thought. They had to admit that the cursed sword of that potato-faced man—his face was gaunt and bony—held an extraordinary power within, but even with such a treasure, the spirit had concluded that Sansa’s rescue would end in failure. The reason for their confidence was a certain type of magical construct that didn’t appear on the map—golems.

But now, they had to reassess their earlier judgment.

Sansa Denning and her retainer Kokto were in the middle of pulverizing golems around the fallen tower.

“Well now, who would’ve thought that the young master’s retainer would be our savior? She has gotten one up on us, Master Sansa!”

When Charlotte and Claude had first arrived, they had stumbled across a hair-raising scene: hundreds of golems patrolled the area around the watchtower. Golems that they hadn’t expected because such creatures didn’t appear on the map. For a moment, the pair had been dumbfounded at the sight of these surprise enemies, but they had hardened their resolve in mere seconds. They were in a race against time, after all. They knew that well.

Kokto’s merry voice echoed inside the ruin site. “After all this, are you still going to persist with your opinion? Is that girl still unsuitable as the young master’s retainer?”

Altanger had known that in theory, the pair *did* have a chance of success. Rust’s guard golems were of similar dispositions to the initial wave of golems that had stampeded through the school. They would only attack opponents they deemed as threats. And in their eyes, Charlotte was just like the Kirsch students—she didn’t fit the “threat” criteria.

However, it would still require an impressive amount of bravery for her to scale the tower by herself. The situation could have gone in any direction.

“Stop nagging me, Kokto!” Sansa was filled with chagrin. “You should know when to keep your mouth shut! She passed her test!”

The Great Spirit had waited nearby, ready to leap out at any moment. However, they hadn’t needed to do such a thing in the end. When Altanger had seen Charlotte on the top of the tower, they had thought, *Huh. The little girl I once knew has grown up so much.*

•

“The outcome of this battle was decided from the beginning, I am afraid. There isn’t any necessity for you to try so hard.”

He’s right. Why am I fighting so desperately? In the past, the only thing that mattered to me was Charlotte, so why has that changed? Is...Charlotte safe?

“Yes, that is exactly what you should do.”

There was the taste of iron in my mouth. My mind was ringing in alarm. *Don’t press on,* it said, *it’s dangerous. Just relax and let go.* Numbly, I thought, *Oh. Is it okay for me to let go?*

“Ah! You’re awake.” Charlotte’s voice echoed in my head. *“You worked super hard, so please take all the time you need to rest!”*

She had definitely said that to me before. *I see what this is. My life is flashing before my eyes.* Faced with the harsh, grim reality, it seemed that my mind had finally given out and was resorting to escapism.

“Here, open wide!”

Because Charlotte wouldn’t say that to me if she saw me now.

“Um... Lady Sansa. What...kind of person is this candidate for Master Slowe’s new retainer, if I may ask?”

Then, Mint had appeared at Kirsch as my potential retainer... Unlike me, who had tried to drive her away, Charlotte was quite amicable to the girl.

“And not just me! Ta-da! Even Mister Claude’s around!”

With the arrival of my knights, I had regained those halcyon days of the

nostalgic past. Though I had been in a site of conflict, the little moments we had shared as a quartet had soothed my very soul. *If I can relish in these memories...maybe staying here like this isn't so bad.*

"Isn't it obvious? That's why I tried to butter you up so much. I want your help."

I'm sorry, Mint. I don't think I can grant your...

Suddenly, a voice pierced my mind, almost like a fist banging violently on a door. *"Oi. Cool your head a little."*

The voice was rather clear, which seemed odd among all the other hazy voices in my memories. *Who's that?* I thought with irritation. *I was getting to the good part, you know.*

"That girl isn't powerful like you, but she accomplished her mission, you know."

Silence.

"But now, look at you. Are you sure you want to be so pathetic?"

Oh. Oh, that's right.

"She has a message for you, so listen."

She's the reason we regained our magic. Charlotte carried it through.

"'Let's have a big party with all four of us again,' she said."

...Oh.

"My princess says that this time, she wants to talk through the entire night."

My eyes grew hot the moment I heard that. Once, I had thought that we would never reunite as a quartet again, that our night tea parties would only be something in my memories. *So I wasn't the only one who cherished and loved our time together.*

"I'm sure you don't need me to spell it out for you, Slowe. You know what you need to do."

There was a gust of wind, and I opened my eyes.

Light entered my vision, and the world gradually focused. Though it only lasted for a brief moment, my mind cleared. And in that moment, I saw everything around me.

“You aren’t alone, Young Master!”

I was surrounded by allies. They were squeezing out what little power they had left to protect me.

The entire world was frozen over. Snow was falling. Sheets of ice covered the ground beneath my feet, and the flame Magna wielded seemed like an insignificant lamp in comparison. It was as if Kirsch had transformed into a hellish glacial landscape.

“Milord, use us! Rely on us! We’re not exactly up to your standard, but we can keep that guy distracted for a little while!”

It was as if I was putting together a puzzle in my head. Who was here? Where were they? What were they doing? And soon, everything clicked into place.

I saw the knights. I saw Silva. I even saw the girl who was still aiming her arrows at the enemies.

“You need to connect everyone, meow.”

Thanks, Altanger. I know what to do now.

My consciousness floated up from a dark abyss.

“Ah. I thought you were dead, Son of Bal.”

One had fought like an acrobat on the battlefield. His movements had seemed inhuman, but right now, I was capable of replicating them. I took a step forward, and sheets of ice manifested beneath my feet. My eyes were wide open—I had forgotten how to blink as I chased Magna’s form.

“Oh? Your movements are completely different.”

The human body was a construct, and I forced it to twist and bend beyond its limits to pursue the man. I wasn’t even thinking about winning. *I’ll freeze him.* If I made physical contact, the power of my spell would be on a whole other level. To do that, I grabbed the wind.

“Now that’s a surprise. The amount of talent you possess amazes me.”

I pulled on Magna—more specifically, the air around him. Even I didn’t know what I was doing. But this was the blessing of the Ring of Authority.

For the very first time, my hand tightened around his arm. “Caught you,” I rasped. His skin felt like frost, and I shuddered.

“What about it?” he said. There wasn’t even a hint of tension in his voice.

However, this was enough. This created an opening for her to strike. Though I couldn’t see her, I leaned aside slightly. An arrow whizzed by where my head had been only a moment ago and pierced Magna’s thigh. In an instant, one of Magna’s legs was encased in ice.

“Young Master! Stay still!” the sniper shouted.

A rush of ice arrows followed the first strike. But calling them arrows was perhaps misleading—they looked more like deadly ice spears. To my knowledge, there was only one person who was capable of such a godly performance. My father’s personal retainer had stationed herself on high ground and was aiming right at Magna. I couldn’t help but laugh out loud, remembering the arrow that narrowly missed my head. *Mint, you’re way too ruthless.*

“I see.” Magna’s eyes widened. He hadn’t shown much of a reaction until now, but the circumstances had put a crack in his composure. Nearly his entire body was covered in ice. In fact, it was harder to pick out places that were still exposed. However, his lips were pulled into a smile. Even such damage was perhaps far from fatal to him. He continued, “So? Anything else?”

I whistled at him, half impressed, half in trepidation. *This guy’s a freak of nature. Common sense doesn’t apply to him at all.*

An arrow flew past my head and impaled his forehead. In the blink of an eye, ice started to take over his face as well. The agents of Rust were shouting something I couldn’t make out. The knights were making a frantic effort to keep them in place.

“Please tell me one thing that I’ve been curious about. Why?”

The ring on my finger was still shining. *I can't breathe.* The moment I sucked in fresh air, the power that ran through my body would disperse like mist. I didn't have to test it to know that was the deactivation key.

With what little air I had, I whispered, "I...caused so much...trouble to my family..."

Defeating this man wasn't even close to atoning for my sins, far from it. *But if I can make amends to my family, even slightly, I'll do it.*

"You..." Magna didn't finish his sentence. "Ah, I see."

At that moment, I heard what resembled a chuckle. *Is he blind to the fact that he's backed into a corner?*

The man then shoved me away with inhuman strength. He muttered, "You were aiming for an opening this entire time."

His arm slid out from my hand. *No. I finally caught him. I can't...*

A dignified voice resounded in the snowy landscape. "Listen, Slowe!"

The world moved sluggishly under the effects of the ring, and something shot across my vision as if it were tearing this world into two. It was my *father*.

Prisma, the sword I had retrieved from Cirquista, pierced Magna's chest.

My father yelled, "I don't know what I was thinking when I to leave him to you!"

About time you showed up. Once we regained our magic, we could force our bodies to go beyond our limits somewhat. I, for example, had activated the ring for a second time. Even a lesser warrior like me had managed to move despite the odds. *There's no way you'd lie down and let other people do your job, Father.*

What remained on the battlefield was Magna, who was completely covered in ice.

"Do you have any last words?" my father asked.

"...Marvelous," Magna sighed.

Wait, is this for real? Why is that man smiling? I could see his face through the

transparent ice crystal. *His entire body is frozen over, so how can he talk?*

"Relax, Slowe," my father said softly. "It's...over."

With a swing of his magic sword, my father beheaded the ice statue.

●

My utterly exhausted body collapsed onto the ground. The chilly ice should feel pleasant against my feverish skin, but it was *too* cold. I had to suppress a sneeze. I finally got a good look at the aftermath of our battle, and my eyes widened. I let out a dry laugh. "Wow, what the heck? Yikes."

The windstorm hadn't died down—it was still razing the surrounding area in the world of ice. The school building nearby had turned into an ice sculpture, and it looked like the apocalypse. What could I do but laugh at this scene of devastation? *The Ring of Authority's power is no joke, huh?*

I watched on in silence. Now that their leader had fallen under our blade, the Rust agents all fled from the scene, the knights chasing them hot on their tails. *It's over. Not just the battle, but the long relationship between House Denning and Rust—we ended an era with our own hands.* Though it had been the queen's will, House Denning's decline was likely inevitable.

"It's over," my father muttered once again.

"Hey, Father. How much compensation do you think we will end up paying?" *I think someone said that House Denning will foot the bill for all the damages during this battle. From the looks of it, um... The final number might be astronomical.*

"Stop right there. I don't want to think about that right now."

My father stuck around. He had sat down and was handling Prisma.

“I have been wondering for a while... Father, I heard that after you became duke, House Denning started suffering from a financial crisis. Is that perhaps—”

“It is exactly what you are suspecting. I have been rather self-indulgent.”

Oh. Wooow. I can’t believe this guy. “I know that we have just won, so I shouldn’t ruin the excitement, but...are you sure that was the right choice? Without Rust, House Denning’s performance will decline. Rust’s existence should have been a big supporting pillar of our household.”

In the distant past, a Denning head had defeated Rust’s leader, Magna, who had then agreed to serve our household. That was the beginning of our relationship with Rust and the rapid rise of House Denning’s status in the aristocracy. Rust was a mighty trump card up our sleeve.

“It’s fine. There’s absolutely no possibility that our family will decline.”

“I mean, I guess most of their actual agents are alive, but Mint told me that they only obey Magna’s orders.”

“Her loose tongue is her shortcoming. She also tends to be too invested in people she takes a liking to.” My father sighed. “Rather odd, since her father was quite the taciturn man.”

“Please answer me. Why are you so certain that we will be fine?”

“Magna is still alive, you see.”

I blinked. “Isn’t he clearly dead? His body was frozen over, and he was even beheaded.”

My father shifted and turned to the man we were talking about. “Hey, Magna. If you mean it as a joke, you have poor taste. Stop playing possum.”

What is he thinking? Why’s he talking to a dead guy? I was incredulous, but the next moment, I thought my eyes had failed me. The frozen body had thawed sometime during our conversation and Magna lifted his torso without warning.

Next, I suspected my ears were failing, because I heard Magna’s voice. “Though I protest that two people ganging up on one person is unfair, I admit, it is my loss. I had fun, Bal.”

The lips on his decapitated head were moving. His eyes were rolling around.

My father replied, “We were facing an inhuman existence like you. How is two versus one unfair in any way?”

There was something stretching out from Magna’s neck—they looked like plant roots. *No, tendrils.* The tendrils wriggled and writhed around, as if looking for his body. Finally, they grabbed their target.

It was a ghastly sight. I was speechless. *Wh-What is that? It gives me the creeps!*

My father explained, “Magna isn’t human. His true identity is a magical artifact that has gained its own will.”

Skillfully, and almost artistically, the tendrils began connecting the head to the body. I was so grossed out that I wanted to look away.

“Son of Bal, this is a secret that is only passed on from one Denning head to another. Even Eleanor Daryth is completely unaware, so please keep it to yourself. I am but a mere tool that adores our Country of Knights,” Magna stated in a matter-of-fact voice.

There were so many things I wanted to say, but I swallowed all of it down. I chose the most pressing question I had. “Does that mean...you two were on the same side all this time?”

My father was the one who shed more light onto the truth. “I have no intention of severing our ties with Rust, and I needed to deceive the queen. For that purpose, putting on the performance of a battle to the death had been necessary—a battle so fierce that we destroyed the entirety of Kirsch’s campus. Look around you, Slowe. We survived in all of this destruction. No one would doubt the legitimacy of our victory.”

I fell silent. *Seriously? So...I was basically dragged in as their tool?*

And soon, my father went quiet as well. He didn’t take the initiative to talk to me. Meanwhile, Magna, who had restored his body, began talking about the damage Sansa and Kokto had dealt in their rampage to destroy the watchtower. *Huh. I was pretty surprised when the crystals were crushed so quickly. So that’s what happened.*

At the end of his speech, my father spoke up. “Before I forget, Slowe. There’s something I would like to ask you.”

I tensed up. I lifted a hand and shut my eyelids with them. I braced myself for whatever shocking words he would throw at me. *Maybe he’s going to demand that I become his heir. I mean, I learned Magna’s secret and all.*

A second seemed to stretch into infinity before I heard him ask, “Hey... Do you want freedom?”

What’s with that question? It was vague and abrupt. *Freedom... Do you even have to ask? I don’t want* anything *to do with you guys anymore...*

Final Chapter: Departure

Several days after the knights of Denning left Kirsch, the students were finally permitted to return to the campus temporarily. Shuya Newkern was among the returning students, and he was greeted with the sight of a mountain of rubble. Part of the campus lay in complete ruin.

“Hey, Shuya...” a shrill voice called out, shaking. “Help me out here. How in the world did the school transform into *this*...?”

“Asking me won’t get you anywhere, Alicia... How’m I supposed to know?” Shuya’s eyes swam.

The staff had announced that the school would close for an extended period of time once again for reconstruction. Thankfully, the dorms were spared from such a destructive fate, which was why the students had been allowed to return and pack their luggage.

Alicia sounded numb as she muttered, “Don’t you think this is worse than the time those monsters attacked our school?”

“Stop looking at me. I’m just as clueless as you are, I swear...”

The girl sighed. “You’re so useless. Anyway, I think Kirsch really might be cursed. We had to close our school *twice* in the span of one year. That’s not normal. Maybe I should ask for a refund of my tuition fees.”

Alicia and Shuya weren’t the only ones reeling from shock at the sight. Everyone present was rendered speechless.

The truth behind the battle at Kirsch had been buried inside the shadows, and very few present knew what had happened here. However, they didn’t let their curiosity get the better of them, because Duke Denning had been involved. Every noble knew House Denning’s terrifying reputation.

Alicia raised an eyebrow. “Tell me. You seem to be kind of in high spirits. Is that because you got to meet your beloved idol, Lady Sansa?”

“I-I’m not grinning like a fool or anything!”

With a harrumph, Alicia pointed an accusing finger at his hand. “If that’s the case, what’s that letter you’re being so protective about? I’m not blind. I see the Denning crest on the seal and an elegant signature! I am perfectly aware that Sansa Denning stayed in Yoram for a while.”

“Th-This is, well... Ah, Alicia!” Shuya pointed at something. “Look at that! That’s crazy!”

However, there was one person among the students that had an inkling of what had gone on: Shuya. In Yoram, Sansa Denning’s subordinate had passed on a letter addressed to him from Sansa. In the letter, she wrote, *You helped me a lot. If possible, I want to thank you in person when I have an opportunity.*

Alicia’s eyes widened. “It’s... The entire thing is frozen. What in the world happened? Why would they freeze a whole school building?”

The pair’s destination was the dorms, but they had been making detours along their way like tourists. Now, they were both looking up at the building of ice.

The battle had left many “souvenirs” around Kirsch—the conflict had carved scars into the campus that still hadn’t disappeared. One of these souvenirs was a frozen school building, and a large crowd of students were craning their necks along with the pair.

Apparently, no matter how much heat the staff tried to apply to the ice that encased the building, it wouldn’t melt. Due to that, no one could get inside, and it was causing a big headache for the staff.

Some students were even casting spells to melt the ice, since it wouldn’t hurt to try. Shuya directed fire spells at it as well, but he didn’t have any luck.

Shuya frowned slightly. “Alicia, this... This is probably Denning’s work. That’s what my gut is telling me.”

Then, someone loudly declared that this *must* be Slowe Denning’s spell, and there were many voices of agreement. Slowe’s name held a curious persuasiveness to it—everyone that saw the ice monument seemed to be convinced.

Once again, the pair resumed their journey to the dorms. This time, they came across a group which was making a commotion. They were standing in a circle facing each other and were peering at several sheets of paper.

“Yay! I won big! With my current savings, I might even have enough to buy a house!” Among them was a commoner girl who was having the time of her life. She let out a drawn-out, elated sigh. “Gods above, spirits above... Lord Denning, you’re the best!”

Intrigued, the pair asked one of the people present about the stir. Apparently, many students had participated in a bet about the extent of the destruction after House Denning was done.

Hearing that, Alicia placed a palm on her forehead. “Nothing can faze the students at this school...”

“You know, I think stuff like this only started happening after that guy turned over a new leaf, don’t you agree?” Shuya muttered.

“...What has?”

“Uh, well... It’s gotten less boring around here, I guess? I’m struggling to find the exact words, but I’m sure you know what I mean.”

“If you look at it another way,” Alicia said, “the school only started suffering so much destruction after Slowe regained his senses.”

“Okay, you have a point,” Shuya admitted. “But I think I’m not the only one who thinks that way. Listen to all the students around us.”

All the students present were sharing conversations similar to the one Shuya and Alicia just had. Some of the student base was even celebrating—after Slowe Denning changed for the better, influential people started showing up at Kirsch, and there was a lot more spice in their life. A select few even had smug looks on their faces as they put on the air of someone with insider information and revealed that Slowe Denning had been exiled to a distant land since he had been forced to take responsibility for this battle.

Slowe’s private room on the fourth floor of the dorms was now nothing but an empty husk, or so the gossipers whisper. In his mind, Shuya applauded the brave soul who had dared sneak into Denning’s room.

“Denning’s now long gone, huh...?” Shuya muttered. “But knowing that guy, no matter where he is, he’s probably having fun.”

“Yeah. I don’t know about the rumors, but I’m sure about that.” Alicia nodded.

●

The wind was like the breath of frost—I felt as if the cold would reach the innermost organs in my body.

I wailed out loud like a child throwing a tantrum. “It’s cold! It’s freezing! Charlotte, wait up! Don’t leave me behind!”

I had heard that winter in the south was nothing compared to the harsh climate of the north. However, I hadn’t expected the weather to be so different here. Though we were only barely into early winter, the chill I felt on my skin was more biting than even the most extreme temperatures in the southern winter.

“Oiiink... Oiiink!” I cried. Layers upon layers of clothes were wrapped around my frame, and I was hugging my own body with my arms.

Charlotte and I were trekking across a snowy mountain. With every step, our feet plunged into the thick snow as we advanced on. After hearing my wretched snort, Charlotte turned around with an exasperated look on her face.

“Oiiink!” I sulked.

“Please don’t make such strange noises, Master Slowe! For a moment, I thought a wild beast or monster was around.”

“How are *you* doing so well, Charlotte?” I grumbled.

“I’ve already gotten used to it! And don’t forget, we’re heading further north. If you’re already in agony from the weather here, you won’t last the journey,” she reminded me.

“It’s going to get even *colder*? Help, I think I’m going to cry...”

Dustour had announced that it was going to hold a grand event, and the empire had sent invitations to all the major powers in the south. But well, the host was the infamous Dustour Empire—we couldn’t predict what kind of

trouble the participants would be dragged into. Thus, the nations in the south had all chosen people who could survive and adapt even if the worst-case scenario happened.

And yeah, I was chosen by Daryth. Not willingly, mind you. They shoved this undesirable role onto me.

"That bastard... He forced me to do such an annoying job..." I spat.

"Aw, don't say that! The duke mentioned that he chose you after careful consideration! I agree with his selection!"

I sighed. "You're so positive, Charlotte. In my eyes, he definitely saw it as a good excuse to throw me out."

My job was to be Duke Denning's representative during this event and to learn more about Dustour as a nation. In other words, we were going to carry out Magna's plan in the end—he had insisted that we should investigate Dustour, after all.

"That aside, Master Slowe. I know we're headed to a town, but what is it like?"

"It's the southernmost town in Dustour, and there are rumors that yetis live there..."

"Yetis!" Charlotte's eyes lit up. "That's so exciting!"

I have no idea why she's happy about it, but okay. I sighed. "They told me to record everything that happens along the way. Ugh, I can't be bothered..."

It wasn't like I had anywhere else to go, though. The school had practically been razed to the ground. I couldn't just show up in front of all my classmates without a care in the world. Not to mention that I had turned a school building into an impenetrable ice monument. I wouldn't be surprised if the staff were cursing my name.

According to my father, such a grand scale of destruction was necessary if we wanted to deceive the queen. At the moment, she probably wholeheartedly believed that we had killed Magna. *At least I think that's the case.*

I groaned. "If this event was a few weeks earlier, there would still be carriages

around for us to travel on."

"But this is fun too!" Charlotte argued. "I really like snow!"

"Oh, you're so optimistic.... I wish I could be the same."

In the end, my father had dispatched the agents of Rust to the north, just as Magna had wished. Some of the agents had already arrived at the town we were heading to and were doing some investigation. However, he had set one condition in exchange for fulfilling Magna's demands—the agents weren't allowed to move around freely. They needed a supervisor. *And as you might have guessed by now, I'm that supervisor.*

My father had dragged me into the battle to test my compatibility with the agents. According to him, he had also sent in assistants, who would help me with overseeing all those agents. *But who in the world did he send, huh? If their purpose is to be my assistants, then come assist me in this mountain! I'm suffering from all the walking I'm doing!*

"He's a terrible parent." I gritted my teeth. "He only gave us a meager amount of funds before telling us to travel across several mountains and head to Dustour. This isn't any different from an exile!"

"I'm sure he's doing this because he trusts that you'll do a good job," Charlotte reassured me. "It's proof of his faith in you."

"You really think so? My pet theory is that he went broke because he spent all his money on restoring Kirsch..."

The finances of House Denning were under a lot of strain due to the compensation money we had to fork up. *Still, this is going too far! We're traveling on foot, mind you. If we had money, we could have afforded to hire vehicles that can travel in this snow in the place of carriages... I* do *hear that they cost a fortune, though.*

I sighed for the umpteenth time. "In the end, everything went according to Father's plan."

My foot sank deep in the snow. I was stuck. An uncomfortable chill crept up from my feet to my upper body, and I even sensed chills running up my spine.

“Hm?” Charlotte turned around. “Why did you suddenly stop?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about something.”

For most of my life, I had been looking for a solution. For a place where I could be with Charlotte without qualms, for a place where I had freedom for the rest of my life. *Even in my wildest dreams, I never expected that my father would give that to me.*

I shook my head and turned to Charlotte. “Anyway, I need to thank you.”

She blinked before she blushed a little. “That came out of nowhere.”

“I mean, you never thought that I’d be dispatched to the north, right?”

Inside this distant nation, I would carve out a new future for myself. My duty was to learn about Dustour in a place filled with foreign faces.

The “freedom” my father had talked about was sending me to Dustour. I would be lying if I didn’t say I missed some things about my life in Daryth, but well... *Shuya’s still back there, and he’s matured magnificently compared to before, so I probably don’t have to worry about things on that end.*

Charlotte beamed at me. “What else did you expect? Did you really think I was going to leave you alone? More importantly, look over there! I think I finally see the lights of the town!”

“Wait, really?”

“Hurry up and come over here, Master Slowe!”

I walked down the mountain trail and stood next to Charlotte. An ocean of tiny lights in the distance gave us a warm and stunning welcome.

●

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Carina had noticed something—recently, her mother was in a fantastic mood. She sifted through her memories, and she realized that she had never seen her mother walking around the palace while humming a tune before. But now, she had.

Her mother seemed to be fully confident that she hid it very well, but Eleanor was a woman who seemed to have a different mood every day. All of those

years with her mother gave Carina a sixth sense for her mother's feelings, and the difference was clear in the young woman's eyes.

Therefore, Carina approached a certain boy to ask about the reason behind her mother's merriment.

Lectrikuhl, the Great Spirit of Light, was in his shrine as always, surrounded by walls covered with books. The boy nodded to himself. "Ah, that. I persuaded her, you see."

"You...*persuaded* her, Lord Lectrikuhl?"

"Yep. I managed to convince her. I share the same opinion as the opposition, after all." As the boy talked, he flipped through a seemingly blank book with nothing on the pages. "Basically, they acted out of love for Daryth. I am rather elated. The word patriot was made to describe people like them."

Carina didn't understand most of what he was saying, but she figured out the gist as he explained. Vessels of high rank, who were supporting pillars of Daryth, had acted against Queen Eleanor's will. Partly due to Lectrikuhl's persuasion, Eleanor had decided to change her mind. And now, the queen was in a merry mood because she had such invaluable subjects.

There was the rustle of paper as the boy continued, "Let's look forward to the day he returns, Carina. I am sure that he will leave us in awe with how much he has matured."

Though Carina wasn't too well-informed about what had happened, she knew exactly who "he" was.

•

Finally. *Finally. That took us way too long.* Charlotte and I had conquered the snowy mountains, and I felt a sense of accomplishment blooming in my heart.

My walking pace quickened with my exhilaration, and Charlotte, who walked in front of me, seemed to share the sentiment. In that moment, our hearts were connected—we had finally finished the grueling journey to the town while enduring the fickle weather here.

"Let's hurry, Master Slowe!"

Her walk turned into a sprint, and I chased after her down the snow-buried mountain trail. But the next moment, my vision was filled with an abrupt whiteness.

"Owoiiink!" I cried. *I tripped. Again!*

And this time, my fall had been spectacular. My head was buried under snow.

"Huh? Master Slowe, where did you go?!"

It's so cold... Snow had slipped into my clothes, and once again, I wanted to shed manly tears. My father had ordered me to go to Dustour, and well, I did complain a bit. However, the word "freedom" had been an effective lure, and I didn't really get too much rest before I departed for the north. *Now I'm suffering because I underestimated the winter here...*

"Maaaster Slooowe! Where are you?! Did you trip again? Master Slowe!"

I chewed on my lip. I didn't have it in me to respond.

"Please don't play such pranks on me, Master Slowe! Where did you go? You'll end up cold and dead if you get buried in the snow here!"

You know, maybe Charlotte actually feels the same way. She puts on a cheerful act, but she might be cringing at the harsh environment here as well. It was common knowledge among the southerners that life in the north was rigorous. And Charlotte was here with me on a mission with an indefinite duration—we didn't know when we'd return to the south or whether we'd ever go back at all.

I retract my earlier statement—I am *still worried about Shuya and the trouble he causes. I wouldn't mind being around as a helper when he stumbles into a big incident... Okay, should I ask Charlotte? Should I take the leap and ask her whether she wants to go back to the south after all?*

I let out a snort of determination and slowly raised my head...but then, someone's eyes met mine. *Ack. Seriously?*

"Milord, what are you doing?"

The man right before my eyes was Silva, my former knight. He had put on two layers of warm coats, and he even had fluffy earmuffs on his head. His attire

screamed, *I'm ready to rumble in the cold!* He was "armed" to the teeth and was grinning at me.

"Why are *you* here?" I muttered. "Am I hallucinating?"

"I came over to the mountain because I thought you and our little Charlotte would arrive soon," he explained. "But wow, I never expected you to travel across the mountains on foot... Now that's our young master."

I stared at him dumbly.

He tilted his head. "So, what are you doing?"

"I-I...I didn't trip or anything..." I stammered.

"Ah, I get it! You're trying to mimic a yeti! Ha ha, you've got a great sense of humor, milord!"

"Uh... Y-Yeah, I'm pretending to be a yeti. I wanted to make Charlotte laugh..." I muttered awkwardly.

Silva had fought fiercely and bravely against Rust, and when I was in front of him, I couldn't stop myself from trying to act tough.

"Charlotte! Mister Claude!" Silva waved his hand high in the air. "Milord's apparently covering his face with snow to mimic a yeti! Over here!"

Charlotte rushed over. "There you are!" She held out a hand to me. "Here, Master Slowe, I'll pull you up."

"Oiiink..." I whimpered.

With Charlotte's help, I got back onto my feet. Claude sported a wry smile as he looked at my face, which was probably covered with snow at the moment. *Wait... My father mentioned assistants. Are* they *the people he sent here?*

I looked at Charlotte and saw something in her other hand. "Um. Charlotte, what's that?"

Her face seemed a little flushed. On a second look, the object she was holding in her right hand was a plump white rabbit.

"I caught it a few seconds ago!" She gave me a big smile. "Let's skin it and eat it after we arrive in town!"

I sputtered and nearly choked on my own spit. *You're a tough girl, Charlotte. You'd survive no matter where you go. But you know, I love that part of you as well.*

During our journey across the mountains, we had run across food and shelter problems, but Charlotte had been around to save the day—she even knew where to find shelter and how to put together a bed for the night. *Thank you*. Once again, I expressed my sincere gratitude in my heart.

She continued, "Anyway! According to Mister Claude, the trip to the town is less than an hour! Just a little more to go, Master Slowe! Let's do our best!" She looked at me and pouted. "Hey! Why are you sulking like that?"

"I-I'm not sulking." I shook my head frantically. I just didn't know how to express the feelings hopping around in my chest.

But the next moment, my body started moving on its own accord.

"Ah!" Charlotte yelped. "Why did you suddenly start running?!"

Charlotte was with me. My knights were with me. And I was here, filled with thrill over carving out a future for all of us, just like when I was a child.



“...I’m just too happy, oink.”

I hadn’t realized at all, but somewhere down the line...I had regained so many things I had once lost.

Afterword

This will be the final volume of the Piggy Duke series. I'm honestly feeling emotional right now over the fact that this series has gone on for so long. When I first made plans for the published books, I thought that I would already be satisfied if I had the chance to publish around three volumes—until the arc where Slowe slays the dragon to defend Kirsch.

But look at where we are now. Who would have thought that the Piggy Duke books would serialize for this long? I'm moved beyond words. I'm especially happy that we got to see Slowe's father in the published books and managed to end the story in a good place in this volume. I would like to thank all my readers. This wouldn't have been possible without all of your support.

Originally, I started writing the Piggy Duke series as a hobby, and I plan to continue updating the story on Kakuyomu, a web novel site. If anyone is interested about what happens next, please try out the web novel as well! I tend to have an irregular schedule for my updates, but I would be elated if I had more readers on Kakuyomu.

Next, I would like to thank the series illustrator nauribon-sama, my editor-sama, as well as everyone involved in the creation of this book. Volume nine and ten had been difficult for me to write, and I hadn't managed to stick to an ideal schedule. I am so sorry about all the trouble I have caused.

The Piggy Duke manga is still ongoing, so please enjoy the manga adaptation as well!

Once again, please allow me to express my sincere gratitude to everyone. Volume ten wouldn't have been possible without all of you.

Hopefully I'll see you again somewhere else!

Rhythm Aida

(Published November 20, 2020)